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Foreign Language Needs in the Workplace: The Occupational Perspective

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The existing body of research on foreign language instruction rarely raises doubts about the need to teach and study foreign languages. A key element in the efficiency of foreign language teaching appears to be the extent to which it meets the needs of the language user. A rather broad area such as workplace language use cannot simply and easily be narrowed down to classroom tasks and topics to be included in a syllabus. Teaching languages for specific purposes poses a specific challenge to language teachers by requiring the identification of job-specific target language situations when they set their instructional objectives and specify the content of teaching. A well-targeted needs analysis, however, can identify the language activities that are characteristic of work-related contexts and are typical in efficient workplace communication. Such authentic first-hand information can serve as a basis for the development of course syllabi, teaching materials and examination tasks.

Although the literature on the needs of language learners is by no means scarce, research has to keep up with the expectations of the 21st century digital-era workplace. This paper specifically seeks to address the foreign language needs of employees in business contexts. The term 'business' is conceptualised as a broad concept and encompasses working contexts related primarily to business but also to finance, tourism and hospitality. The aim of the study is to identify the most salient features of foreign language workplace communication that can be incorporated into teaching languages for specific purposes in higher education.

Foreign language proficiency, soft skills and employability

Before the discussion of the main focus of the current study of how to best meet the needs of language learners who are considering a career in business, a brief overview of the significance of foreign language proficiency in the occupational context is offered. Foreign language learning has always performed a significant role amongst the priorities of

the European Union, and, as a result, a number of insightful and informative research results have been published in the past decade related to foreign language policy. A substantial part of these findings deal with the relationship between languages, jobs and employability (European Commission, 2012, 2015). The documents highlight the significant role foreign language skills assume in the job market. Concerning the importance of foreign language knowledge in business contexts, the earlier study found that “for senior management positions in international business, at least a very high level of English is expected. For key positions within sales and marketing, multilingualism with fluency and negotiation skills in several languages is generally highly rated. For positions within production, logistics, economy and finance, there are generally no language requirements beyond English. However, the report shows that the knowledge of more than one language is often seen as a demonstration of cultural openness and adaptability (European Commission, 2012:14)”. The prominence of the English language gives it a “basic skill” status which, consequently means that the knowledge of additional languages is required and gives job seekers an additional benefit. The more recent large scale mixed-method research of the European Commission (2015) also confirms that foreign language skills are indispensable in the labour market. Whereas the findings suggest that English appears to be the lingua franca of the business world, the language knowledge of neighbouring countries, however, also constitute an important asset to job-seekers and employees.

The specific needs of various jobs are diverse but it is confirmed that the level of expected language proficiency increases with more senior posts. Language skills, however, are not sufficient without additional transferable and transversal skills for the 21st century employee. *Clarke* (2016) refers to a major study carried out in the UK and discusses the consequences of the striking shortage of soft skills on the part of new entrants to the labour market. The deficit in transferable skills is envisaged to result in serious economic losses if the situation is not attended to in due course. This predicament is not unique to the UK. The largest deficit in soft skills in the USA appears to be in writing, communication skills and organisational skills, according to the paper. *Del Vitto* (2008) underlines the importance of foreign language proficiency in addition to the need of cross-cultural “adaptive” soft skills in order to become global employees. The soft-skill vs. hard-skill dilemma, whether employers show preferences towards soft skills at the expense of hard or technical skills, poses an intriguing question. *Robles* (2012) suggests that employers in business contexts regard soft skill attributes of primary importance. She found that integrity and communication skills were regarded as the two most important soft skills by business executives. Effective communication in the workplace can increase the overall productivity of a company, “21st century organizations increasingly depend on information-sharing and effective communication to successfully run their companies” (Washington, 2014:266).

The literature reviewed above exemplifies the importance of foreign language skills in today's workplace and highlights the need to identify the specific language activities that employees need to be able to perform in order to communicate successfully and thus create value for the company. The study attempts to answer the question of what foreign language skills facilitate effective communication in the workplace.

Methods

The survey applied in the current study examines what the most common foreign language activities are and what job-related topics are frequently dealt with by employees working in business, finance and hospitality in Hungary. The questionnaire was validated on a small sample before its live on-line administration. It is in part a replication of a similar study conducted by the author in 2007 but in a slightly amended form: the original data collection instrument was a paper-based postal questionnaire. The majority of the scales were adapted from the previous research instrument with minor modifications. Additional questions were also included which reflected the changes that occurred between the first and current administration of the measurement instrument. A pilot test, in addition to expert validation, was also carried out on the questionnaire to ensure reliability and comprehensibility. The new online survey applied convenience sampling for data collection. The survey link was sent to former graduates of the Budapest Business School in addition to a number of institutions and associations that were expected to provide relevant data from the perspective of the research focus. 699 respondents completed the questionnaire with a rather patchy response pattern. As no statistical inference or generalizations were expected to be made for the interpretation of the results, all useable data were analysed even if the questionnaire data included missing values.

The survey was designed to measure three areas. Demographic questions were asked in the first part of the questionnaire to establish the work-related profile of the respondents. The final two items in this part inquired about the respondents' foreign language proficiency and the foreign languages used for workplace communication purposes. The second part of the survey instrument consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions which elicited information about the types and forms of language activities the respondents need to perform during their work. All four skills in addition to mediation activities were covered by the questions. The open-ended questions in the final part of the questionnaire comprised a mix of topics related to job-related communication. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and content analysis was performed on the open-ended responses.

Results and discussion

Respondent profile

Since the study focuses on foreign language use in the workplace, a brief discussion of the respondent profile will follow (Q1-8). A series of descriptive analyses were completed in order to examine the characteristics of the sample in the questionnaire. Respondents reported the following occupational backgrounds: 30.65% business, 37.33% finance, 27.11% tourism and hospitality, 4.91% other. The data collection relied primarily on former graduates of the Budapest Business School which offers BA and MA courses in the first three categories in addition to other, less popular specialisations. More than half of the respondents (62.59%) worked for medium or large businesses with more than 50 employees. Hungarian and multinational companies were represented in the sample by almost equal proportions. 96.8% of the respondents were employees, only 2.76% represented self-employed workers. Concerning the different positions, unfortunately, the data display a bias towards subordinate positions (75.76%), much smaller proportion of the respondents reported middle-managerial (19.88%) or top (4.35%) positions. The period of graduation of the respondents ranged between 1977 and 2015, which, for a substantial proportion of them, entailed periods of rather extensive work experience. The top three countries the respondents reported as the main business partners were as follows: 1. Germany, 2. UK, 3. Austria. The most frequently used foreign language was English by an overwhelming majority of the respondents. The next table shows the rank order of the most commonly used languages.

Table 1. Workplace language use: the most frequently used foreign languages

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	English	74.03%
2	German	19.56%
3	French	2.38%
4	Spanish	0.95%
5	Russian	0.87%
6	Italian	0.79%
7	other	1.43%

Additional languages that were mentioned are languages of the neighbouring countries, e.g. Slovak, Slovenian, Serbian, Romanian, but other languages, e.g. Japanese, Chinese, Finnish, Norwegian, and Polish were also reported. The data also confirmed that workplace language use in a number of contexts is not limited to the use of only one language.

Workplace language use

The question (Q9) which explored what the most commonly applied communication channels are in which respondents use foreign languages yielded results which are not unexpected in the new century. E-mail communication appears to be the most typical in job-related information exchange, whereas communication with the help of fax is hardly existent. Some respondents pointed out in the open-ended comments that the use of Facebook is prohibited in the workplace; one respondent reported the same about Skype. Others mentioned the use of office Skype (Skype for Business in Office 365).

Activities – both in the native language and in foreign languages are strongly related to the position of employee in the company hierarchy. This is also reflected by the frequency of communication activities (Q10). The numerical results that the ranking was based on are the weighted average results of a five-point Likert-scale on the reported frequencies of the reading activities in the list.

Table 2. Workplace language use: speaking and listening

<i>Foreign language activity: speaking and listening</i>	<i>Weighted average</i>
Work related conversation with foreign partner on business trip	2,40
Informal conversation with foreign partner on business trip	2,33
Listening to foreign language presentations	2,33
Phone/IP-based conversation with foreign partner	2,15
Work-related conversation with foreign partner in the office	2,11
Informal conversation with foreign partner in the office	2,01
Participation in foreign language meetings (3-10 participants)	1,90
Participation in in-house training	1,86
Participation in foreign language teleconferences (3-10 participants)	1,73
Participation in foreign language meetings (> 10 participants)	1,47
Participation in foreign language teleconferences (> 10 participants)	1,42
Giving foreign language presentations (< 10 participants)	1,32
Chairing a meeting in a foreign language	1,09
Giving foreign language presentations (> 10 participants)	1,06

Work-related professional conversations with foreign partners top the list closely followed by informal communication with foreign partners. Chairing meetings and giving presentations in a foreign language for larger audiences were reported as the least frequently performed activities. The results indicate that both formal and informal interactive spoken activities with short turns are more typical in workplace contexts than individual long turns.

The open question about the perceived differences between mediated and face-to-face discussions (Q11) revealed that although the amount of internet-mediated or phone conversations outweighs the number of face-

to-face communication events, the latter are used in important as well as delicate situations. Face-to-face communication is less stressful; it allows more time to the speaker to formulate, reformulate and clarify the message. Some respondents also noted that they were more accurate and thoughtful in producing their speech when they talk to someone in person. A further important advantage of face-to-face communication for the listener is that they can obtain additional, often unintended but immensely helpful information from the partner's non-verbal features, e.g. facial expressions and gestures of the listener during the conversation. Technical problems were also reported as common sources of difficulties in mediated conversations.

The following part of the questionnaire (Q12-20) adopted a skills-based inquiry which generated results about frequent activities applying different language skills and also text-types and topics language users encounter in the workplace context. Reading email messages and letters featured in the results as the most common reading activities. Paper-based professional journals are hardly ever read by the respondents which is not a particularly surprising finding in the digital era.

Table 3. Workplace language use: reading

<i>Language activity in a foreign language: reading</i>	<i>Weighted average</i>
email messages, letters	3,38
web browsing	3.09
internal communication materials	2.56
electronic professional journals	2,30
business report	2,20
marketing materials	2.07
contracts	2.03
paper-based professional journals	1.31

Mediation activities do not appear to be very common either orally or in writing. Two respondents noted that there is no need for any kind of translation because foreign language knowledge is a basic requirement in the company. An interesting additional comment also noted that poorly written texts, i.e. text written in poor English, sometimes need to be translated to avoid misunderstandings. The text types that were reported as being translated were identical regardless of the channel (written/oral) or the direction of translation (forward or back-translation). The text types include email correspondence, memos, reports, marketing materials, newsletters, product descriptions, user manuals, consumer guides, contracts, Power Point presentations, questionnaires, training materials, accounts.

Writing activities appear to be to some extent less frequent than reading activities. The ubiquity of the Internet is apparent in the workplace and impacts our communication channels, as the results suggest. Email has become the most commonly used channel of communication in writing: business communication is also one of the

areas where the electronic message has replaced traditional oral and/or written communication.

Table 4. Workplace language use: writing

<i>Language activity in a foreign language: writing</i>	<i>Weighted average</i>
email (external)	3,00
email (internal)	2,67
paper-based letters	1,82
business reports	1,45
text messages (texting)	0,91
marketing materials	0,89
business contracts	0,71
articles	0,42
press releases	0,38

Further text types reported as involving writing in a foreign language included presentations and training materials. Respondents noted that foreign language contracts were written by the parent company or by external law firms, and the same applied to marketing materials.

An open-ended question (Q18) invited respondents to specify workplace activities in which they are required to use a foreign language. The aim of this question was to tap areas that had not been covered by the questionnaire. The content analysis categorised the activities into two major groups: one which involved the use of foreign language use as the key activity (e.g. guiding or foreign language customer service) and the second, in which foreign language use only supported or was supplementary to the main activity of the employee. It is not within the scope of the current paper to list and discuss all the language activities that respondents reported but some interesting findings will be highlighted. Formal and informal language use are both necessary and have their specific role in the vocational context. Business socialising appears to be a recurrent activity that requires foreign language use as the responses confirmed. Teleconferencing and web-based meetings also constitute an integral part of respondents' daily activities. Business correspondence is still very common but, as a number of respondents noted, the email channel requires new stylistic features. A thorough familiarity with Power Point presentations is extremely important: participants indicated the need to create, summarise and even translate Power Point presentations. *"It is company policy that all internal communication should be in English"* [220], *everything is done in English*" [275], *"everything"* [413] – participants concluded in response to this question. *"No matter what nationality the partner is, everyone speaks English"* [609].

Previous answers have indicated that it is difficult to create a finite list of activities that require foreign language skills in a workplace. Similarly, the inventory of business topics that occur during workplace communication is equally vast. Yet for language teaching purposes it is still useful to make an attempt and capture the typical topics that are

dealt with in the workplace (Q19). The content analysis again revealed certain topics that can be directly associated with specific fields of study (e.g. tourism and hospitality). Such themes include tourism trends, domestic tourism, the culture of coffee drinking or room occupancy. Other themes were also directly linked to other fields of study, e.g. controlling or pricing support system are common topics in workplaces dealing with finances.

In response to the question (Q20) which elicited information about the perceived supremacy of either spoken or written communication, participants univocally and unequivocally emphasized the importance of both skills. They also added that the business world typically requires the combination of both types of communication: "*verbal agreements need to be recorded in writing*". [70] The sample statements below confirm that respondents attribute equal importance to both written and oral communication.

"The written contract is the ultimate goal, yet it cannot be reached without verbal arrangements prior to decision-making." [31]

"The two channels of communication have different functions. They cannot exist in isolation or without each other." [41]

Participants also indicated how their foreign language use had changed with the appearance of electronic communication channels (Q21). There is a consensus amongst respondents that communication has sped up as a result of the technological changes. This, in return, has led to the simplification of language use in terms of register: neutral or informal style is used, in lexis: simple vocabulary is typical, and at discourse level: simplicity and efficiency are the keynote.

"less politeness, more direct communication" [72]

"My communication has become shorter and much more to the point." [92]

"many more abbreviations in writing" [109]

"I have learnt to use the internal communication style of my company." [163]

A frequently quoted feature of an open-ended question is that it invites unexpected or surprising answers. This was the case with the final question in the questionnaire which requested participants to specify the foreign word which they use most frequently at work.

? [33]

"Are you serious?" [78]

"This is weird, but the word is ..." [245]

After the initial surprise, however, respondents provided an extensive list of common business terms which they use on a day-to-day basis. The majority of the words were in English, but other languages (German, Italian, Spanish, French, Finnish, Russian, and Slovak) were represented as well. The most commonly used English business terms with the highest frequency were as follows: invoice, check, service, reconciliation, financial,

account, statement, shipment, revenue, offer, destination, data, confirmation, tourism, tax, schedule, report, production, management, communication, budget. The most frequent word in the German term list showed a similar strong focus on finance-related terminology: Rechnung. The same word also appeared in the less frequent languages: lasku, fattura.

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to examine what the most common foreign language activities are and what topics are frequently dealt with by employees working in business, finance and hospitality in Hungary. A questionnaire survey was designed based on the relevant literature. In the questionnaire respondents were expected to describe the most characteristic features of their workplace language communication with the help of closed questions. Open questions inquired about common text types that these language users encountered while performing organizational responsibilities in a foreign language.

One of the key findings in the survey is consistent with the commonly quoted claim that foreign language proficiency is a basic requirement in most business contexts in the workplace, and that English as the main language of global communication still holds a dominant position (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2010; Kassim & Ali, 2010). The results also confirm that the heterogeneity of activities that require foreign language use reflects a diversity similar to the plethora of terms used to describe workplace communication (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2013; Keyton, Caputo, Ford, Fu, Leibowitz, Liu, Polasik, Ghosh & Wu, 2013). Further results, in line with previous findings (e.g. Gimenez, 2000; Halbe, 2012; Gimenez, 2014) indicate that electronic communication has an increasing importance and a major impact on professional communication which is apparent in certain linguistic features of business discourse. The educational goals, however, need to highlight the difference between poor language proficiency and efficient language use as well as underline the link between professional competence and effective communication as former studies also suggest (Lentz, 2013; Mascle, 2013; Washington, 2014; Ortiz, Region-Sebest & MacDermott, 2016).

Although the convenience sample of almost 700 participants does not yield generalizable results, the findings that have emerged can inform LSP syllabus and course design, material writing, test development and offers practical implications for business communication training.

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