

COMMUNICATION SKILLS WHICH INCREASE STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY: ARE WE TEACHING THE SKILLS THEY NEED?

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Abstract: *Communication skills are among the top generic (soft) skills required by employers today worldwide. The major question this paper strives to answer is: what are the real work related communication skills that university students need to develop? It also focuses on determining the extent to which these needs match the objectives listed in the ESP for Business courses syllabi offered at the Language Centre (LC) at the South East European University (SEEU) in the R. Macedonia. At present at the LC at SEEU the same syllabi and the same teaching materials are used for teaching Business English to full-time undergraduate students with no previous working experience and to part-time undergraduate students, majority of whom are employed and have previous working experience. Currently, most emphasis in these courses is placed on developing speaking as a skill at the expense of slightly neglecting the development of business writing as a skill. This paper summarizes and reports on the findings from a small scale field research surveying the work-related communication needs of 20 employed undergraduate part-time students attending basic skills English courses at the LC at the SEEU as preparation for subsequent ESP for Business courses. An anonymous questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument. The survey revealed that interpersonal oral communication was ranked as number one priority by the participants. This practical research paper rooted in the author's daily teaching practise should be of interest to ESP for Business teachers constantly revising and improving the syllabi striving to create an ESP for Business course tailored to their students' real needs.*

Keywords: ESP for Business; communication skills; soft skills; SEEU; employability

1. Introduction

Being able to fluently and competently communicate in English has become an essential prerequisite for getting a job. Consequently, developing transferrable generic skills and competences relevant to the labour market, with special attention to communication as a skill, has become an important target for higher education institutions worldwide.

At present, at the Language Centre (LC) at South East European University (SEEU) in the R. Macedonia the same syllabi and teaching materials are used for teaching Business English to full-time undergraduate students with no previous

working experience and to part-time undergraduate students, majority of whom are employed and have previous working experience.

This paper summarizes and reports on the findings from a small scale field research surveying the communication needs of working undergraduate part-time students attending General English courses at the LC at the SEEU, before attending ESP for Business Courses in subsequent semesters. The major question this paper strives to answer is: what are the real work related communication skills that university students need to develop? The study also focuses on determining the extent to which these needs match the objectives listed in the ESP for Business courses syllabi offered at LC at SEEU.

The findings from this survey and the input from the already employed students shall hopefully not only shed some light on the issue, but also be fed into subsequent ESP for Business Courses, which would help to revise the present syllabi and improve the teaching materials currently being used to better prepare the inexperienced full-time students for their future and make them more competitive on the job market.

2. Literature review

The literature suggests that generic, soft or employability skills are different from technical, professional or hard skills. They are considered complementary to the technical skills which are required for successful completion of tasks related to certain working posts. In other words, generic skills are the very skills essential for obtaining employment, performing successfully and retaining employment. Audu (*et al.*) point out that "unlike occupational or technical skills, generic skills are common in nature rather than job specific" (2014, p.40). Generic skills are transferrable and applicable in a wide variety of business lines, business sizes and job levels, starting from entry all the way up to senior managing positions. Down (2012 in Audu *et al.* 2014) points out that generic skills are in fact not related to technical or academic performance but are more related to the traditional notion of intelligence and emotional intelligence. Among the top such skills are communication and interpersonal skills, managing resources, team work, problems resolution, obtaining and retaining a working post. The generic skills enable ethical, reflective, innovative and proactive operation in the globalized world.

Kallioinen (2010) reports that in Finland, which is considered a leader in the field of education in general not just in higher education, the generic competences aimed to be obtained in undergraduate studies are specified at national level and include: studying, ethical, communicative, social, organizational as well as internationalization competences.

Regarding the skills required on the Macedonian labour market, in a study conducted by the World Bank, Rutkowski (2009) points out that the employees lack more "soft" rather than "hard" or technical skills. He recommends that this gap should be filled in primarily through reform in the education system so as to reduce unemployment. This study lists communication as one of the soft skills which is

missing. Apart from communication, the study recommends developing the following soft skills: responsibility and reliability, motivation and devotion, care for customers, literacy, team work, problem solving, using information technologies, planning and organising and foreign languages. Developing these soft skills is required to enable the students to be competitive on the labour market.

The whole Bologna process and the on-going reforms in higher education are directed primarily towards enhancing graduates' overall employability. The primary goal of Universities today is producing skilled workforce tailored according to the needs of the labour market. In fact, the efficiency of higher education depends on the cooperation between education institutions and the labour market. The concept of the so-called *smart specialisation* echoes throughout the process of reforming and restructuring higher education not only in the Republic of Macedonia but in Europe in general with the main aim to ensure solid knowledge and skills applicable in practice. Smart specialisation, promoted by the European Commission as part of Europe's 2020 strategy, is based on a firm partnership among the business, public sector and knowledge institutions with the aim to design and implement research strategies and innovative investment strategies. The cooperation among the three parties involved (business, public sector and knowledge institutions) offers clear and relevant information and guidelines for attaining the required characteristics of future graduates dictated by the labour market (for more details on *Smart Specialisation* see *EU Science Hub* at <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/research-topic/smart-specialisation>). These guidelines and information should be reflected not only in the curricula and syllabi but also in the teaching process at higher education institutions.

3. Field research

This section of the paper focuses on the small-scale field research conducted at the Language Centre (LC) at South East European University (SEEU) and offers details about the participants, data collection instrument and context where the research was conducted. The results from the field research are also presented and discussed in this section.

The major question this paper strives to answer is whether the same books should be used for pre-work and in-work students who have professional working experience. This is the case now, but the question whether the book used really matches the part-time students' real work related language needs remains unanswered and under-researched. The paper attempts to resolve if the soft skills, primarily communication skills, we teach at SEEU are relevant to the needs dictated by the job market.

The research was conducted with the aim that the findings could provide useful guidance for materials selection and evaluation for future ESP courses thus help students improve their communicative competence.

3.1 Participants and questionnaire

Participants in this survey were 20 employed, undergraduate, part-time students who were attending a General English course at the LC at the SEEU in the summer semester of the academic 2018, before attending subsequent ESP for Business courses. The syllabi and main coursebook used for ESP for Business courses attended by part-time students are identical to the ones used with the full time, unemployed students.

The main coursebook used is *Business Result Intermediate* published by Oxford University Press which is advertised as a book for both pre-work and in-work students. The book is considerably more speaking oriented at the expense of slightly neglecting the development of business writing as a skill. Reading and listening are not dealt with as skills since the main task of the reading and listening passages is to introduce the topic and present new target vocabulary in context. At first glance, the book appears to be primarily intended for students who already have some working experience since in the speaking and experience sharing exercises it asks them to discuss their present employment experience. However, most, if not all the questions, can be easily adapted to pre-experienced students. In each unit of this coursebook there is a *Business Communication Skills* section in which key expressions for socialising, attending meetings, exchanging and presenting information are presented. Under *socialising* the language for introductions, explaining what one does, welcoming visitors and planning future contacts is presented and practised. As far as *meetings* are concerned, the language needed for updating and delegating tasks, presenting and discussing plans, making suggestions and recommendations, participating in discussions, appraising performance and setting objectives as well as useful language for reporting back is presented and practised. The useful language for *exchanging information* is focused on exchanging contact information and discussing leisure, making and changing arrangements, placing and handling orders and discussing problems. Under *presenting* useful language for explaining how something works, comparing old and new, explaining changes and asking about them and giving a formal presentation is covered. The key expressions presented in this section of the coursebook are intended to help students learn to clearly express themselves in work related situations.

The main data collection instrument used for this research was an anonymous questionnaire that consisted of 11 questions. The questionnaire, which was designed for this specific research, aimed to establish the nature of the workplace communication for the employed part-time students and sought information on the importance of communication, the people the respondents communicate with and the forms that communication takes in the workplace. Questions 1-4 were designed for gathering demographic information about gender, years of working experience and area of employment, while questions 5-11 focused on the frequency of the target language use, ranking the four language skills by importance, specifying the most common communication partners, specifying the main language tasks required from the participants and personal ranking of the four language skills according to their level of difficulty.

The questionnaire used with the answers given is presented in Appendix 1.

3.2 Results and findings

11(eleven) out of the 20 (twenty) respondents who participated in the study were male and 9 (nine) were female. In terms of years of working experience, equal number of participants, more precisely (7) seven, had from 1-3 years of working experience or more than 5 years of working experience; 4 (four) of them fell in the less than a year working experience group and only two (two) students had from 3 to 5 years of experience.

It was not insisted on ensuring an equal number of participants from each gender and years of working experience were also not equally distributed in the total number of respondents since these two variables were not considered important factors for gaining an insight into students' real, day-to-day communication needs at work.

In terms of the line of business, four of the respondents reported working in catering, three in a police station, two respondents were employed in the government/parliament, two in healthcare (one nurse and one in dentistry), two in trade companies (one for clothes and one for food); two in production companies (for clothes and technical equipment), one respondent was in accounting, one in a secondary school, one in marketing and communications, one in a market research agency and one in a public transport company.

Majority of respondents, 13 (thirteen) all in all, reported actively using English at work. More precisely, six (6) reported using English every day and seven (7) claimed using English sometimes.

When asked to rank the four language skills by importance, most of the respondents hesitated between speaking and listening and were asking if they can rank two skills under number 1, which is understandable since when involved in communication they are both speakers and listeners.

The respondent whose job involves applying for grants listed writing as top most important skill to be developed. Apart from vocabulary, this book is not of much use and assistance for this particular student. Luckily, he is a minority in the group surveyed. The vast majority of the respondents, more precisely sixteen (16) out of twenty(20) ranked speaking as their number one i.e. as the most important skill for the work they perform.

Most of the respondents reported communicating primarily within their own company with colleagues at the same level on the hierarchy ladder (n=15); communicating primarily with clients from other countries (n=17), both native and non-native (n=14). In five of the cases English serves as lingua franca since these respondents communicate in English with speakers whose native language is other than English (German, Turkish, Greek) .

In terms of specifying the forms of workplace communication, almost equal number of respondents reported talking to clients face-to-face (n=14) and speaking on the phone (n=15); 10 (ten) listed making business presentations; 9 (nine) reported being involved in business correspondence; 6 (six) stated participating in meetings with colleagues; 3 (three) claimed to be socializing in English and one (1) added

applying for grants. Most frequently used form of workplace communication turned out to be interpersonal communication, both face-to-face and on the phone.

With reference to the last question, which asked respondents to rank the skills according to their level of difficulty, seven (7) respondents listed speaking as the most difficult skill, eight listed writing as number one on their personal list whereas five ranked listening as their number one. None of the respondents ranked reading as their number one i.e. as most difficult skill to deal with.

4. Conclusion

Although small-scale, this field research has provided invaluable data on the required workplace communication skills of employed part-time undergraduate students. This research discovers that the oral performances are central in daily practices of the respondents surveyed, which implies that students require instruction in oral skills, primarily interpersonal communication. It is also evident that all respondents who participated in the field research are aware of the importance of speaking and place greatest attention to speaking as a skill.

The main coursebook used in this specific context does not develop the communication skills most of the respondents need, with the exception of writing which is neglected as a skill. Half of the respondents interviewed, nine (9) who reported having to correspond in English and one (1) respondent having to apply for grants would need to rely on additional, supplementary materials to learn, practise and develop the skills required in their working posts.

Even if the book was a complete match with the students' needs which is almost never the case with any ESP course, it is preferable to include the students' working life reality as much as time and other course specific constraints allow. Students themselves with all their know-how and first-hand experience should be included in the selection of supplementary materials. The main coursebook should only serve as framework teaching material whereas the supplementary materials such as documents and other realia should be provided by the students themselves. The real-life, work related materials can better serve not only for increasing the proficiency level but also for developing the essential business related generic skills.

It is up to us, lecturers, to raise students' awareness of the vital importance of generic skills, especially communication and communicative competence. In general, part-time, work experienced students tend to take a more serious approach to learning English when compared to their inexperienced colleagues. They also display greater understanding of the importance of their personal involvement and contribution to the language learning process. Consequently, they should be more eager to actively participate in the materials selection and in general decision making regarding the learning process.

This kind of survey, asking students to reflect on their specific work related needs, should serve as a beginning of course needs analysis. Having specified the needs,

as a follow up the students should reflect on the best ways for matching the needs identified which automatically enhances their learning and helps develop autonomy that positively affects both personal and professional development and growth. Provided they are willing and interested, students should be actively involved in the process of materials provision and selection.

Although the generic skills are considered to be easily transferrable, their transfer from one context to another can be demanding and challenging especially in contexts where people from different cultural and social backgrounds must work together, as is the case in international businesses nowadays. It is best if the development of generic competences can be directly linked to a real employment context (Kallioinen, 2010). This can and should be achieved in the ESP for Business courses at the LC at SEEU since the main coursebook used supports adaptations, the class size allows for modifications and the online component of courses at SEEU realized through Google Classroom enables using a variety of supplementary materials and assigning individualized, tailor-made tasks and assignments for students.

The findings obtained from this research and the input from the already employed students will hopefully be fed into subsequent ESP for Business Courses at SEEU and used as guidance for revision of current syllabi and improvement of teaching materials to better prepare the inexperienced, undergraduate, full-time students, help them develop communicative competence and thus become more competitive on the labour market.

5. References

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Appendix 1 Questionnaire with answers provided

1. Gender: a) Female **9** b) Male **11**
2. Are you employed? a) Yes **20** b) No **0**
3. How long is your working experience?
 - a) less than 1 year **4**
 - b) 1 to 3 years **7**
 - c) 3 to 5 years **2**
 - d) more than 5 years **7**
4. Which area are you employed in:
 - a) Government/Parliament **2**
 - b) Ministry (please specify which _____)
 - c) Municipality (please specify which _____)
 - d) Police (please specify: **station**.) **3**
 - e) Healthcare (please specify: **1 nurse;1 dentistry**) **2**
 - f) Trade company (please specify: **clothes; food**) **2**
 - g) Production company (please specify: **clothes, technical equipment**) **2**
 - h) Agriculture
 - i) Accounting **1**
 - j) Education (please specify: **secondary school**;) **1**
 - k) Marketing and Communications **1**
 - l) Market research **1**
 - m) Catering (hotel, motel, restaurant, café) **4**
 - n) Public Transport **1**
 - o) Other (please specify) _____
5. How often do you use English at work?
 - a) every day **6** b) once a week **2** c) sometimes **7** d) rarely **5** e) never **0**
6. Which skill is most important for your work?
(Please rank them from 1 to 4; 1=most important and 4= least important)
 - a) Speaking **ranked as 1 by 16 respondents**
 - b) Writing **ranked as 1 by 1 respondent**
 - c) Reading **ranked as 1 by 1 respondent**
 - d) Listening **ranked as 1 by 2 respondent**

7. Who do you usually speak English with? (more than one answer is possible)
- a) colleagues at the same level as you **15**
 - b) colleagues who have higher position in the company than you **7**
 - c) colleagues who have lower position in the company than you **2**
8. Who do you usually speak English with? (more than one answer is possible)
- a) colleagues from your company **4**
 - b) colleagues from other companies **4**
 - c) clients from your country **4**
 - d) clients from other countries **17**
9. People you speak English with are:
- a) native speakers of English (English, American, Australian) **1**
 - b) non-native speakers of English **5**
 - c) both **14**
10. When communicating in English which of the following do you do: (more than one answer is possible)
- a) Making presentations **10**
 - b) Business correspondence (writing letters , faxes, e-mails, memos, agenda, action minutes and reports) **9**
 - c) Participating in conversations / Socializing in English **3**
 - d) Participating in meetings with colleagues **6**
 - e) Talking to clients face –to-face **14**
 - f) Phone conversations **15**
 - g) Other (please specify): **Applying for grants**
11. When using English, what do you have most problems with? (Please rank them from 1 to 4; 1= most difficult and 4= easiest)
- a) Speaking **ranked as 1 by 7 respondents**
 - b) Writing **ranked as 1 by 8 respondents**
 - c) Reading **ranked as 1 by none of the respondents**
 - d) Listening **ranked as 1 by 5 respondents**

Thank you for your cooperation!