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ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEEDS IN THE WORKPLACE A QUALITATIVE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore the English language needs in a Hungary-based Irish telecommunication company in order to help create a better match between the actual use of foreign languages in their working environment and the training of future managers at the Budapest Business School, where the author teaches Business Communication.

For graduates of the school to become competitive in the job market, they have to demonstrate possession of adequate linguistic and communication skills in two foreign languages to function effectively in an environment where the language concerned is used. These skills are tested before graduation by means of oral and written exams in both languages. English is chosen as one of the two foreign languages by the majority of students. Their second or third language is often either German, French, Spanish, Italian or Russian. Students graduating from the college have long been assessed favourably by their potential employers, however, recently, because of financial restrictions the number of language classes has been reduced considerably in the institute, which has had a far-reaching effect on both language learning and teaching. This calls for a more effective time management in the ESP classes, focusing on the target needs, wants and lacks of the students so that they could meet the requirements for recruiting and working in various organisations and companies.

The different meanings and types of needs have been discussed by a number of reseachers from a different perspective. Needs are described as *objective* and *subjective* (Brindley, 1989, p. 65), *perceived* and *felt* (Berwick, 1989, p. 55), *target situation/goal-oriented* and *learning, process-oriented* and *product-oriented* (Brindley, 1989, p. 63), as well as the *necessities, wants* and *lacks* (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 55), which have all helped the concept of needs to grow. These pairs can be seen as corresponding to a *target situation analysis (TSA)* and a *learning situation analysis (LSA).* While the former includes objective, perceived and product-oriented needs, the latter comprises subjective, felt and process-oriented needs. (Dudley-Evans and Johns, 1998, p. 124). These two approaches can be supplemented with a third one, i.e. a *present situation analysis (PSA),* from which we can deduce the students' strengths and weaknesses in language, skills, and learning experiences.

The current needs analysis is intended to find useful information for both the instructors and the students about what the learner of English needs to do in the target language situation so that he may become successful in his job.

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2. MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The principal motivation for this research is pedagogical. Students in Business Schools need to learn to communicate in business and for this, the capabilities that are required of business practitioners in their daily work have to be examined and described.

An additional reason that prompted this study was that, as a result of recent technological developments in handling the information flow, there is a need for research into the constantly changing language usage in business contexts (Holden, 1989; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996) so that the teaching materials at the Business College could be updated.

My final concern was that while there are a number of studies that systematically describe and examine business people communicating in a native speaker environment (Graham and Beardsley, 1986; Coleman, 1988) little attention has been paid to domains where English as a second/foreign language is used for business purposes.

Therefore, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- How and when do people use English at work?
- Are speaking and writing skills equally important?
- To what extent has electronically-mediated communication started to affect business interpersonal written communication?

3. METHOD

3.1. The setting and the participants

The company under investigation is Central Europe's leading competitive corporate telecommunications service provider in Budapest, which has its headquarters in Dublin. The common corporate language between the Irish mother company and the Hungarian subsidiary, where the research takes place, is English. In this sense, this setting seemed to be an ideal place to observe and analyse the communication environment and the nature of the activities. The company structure is made up of the managing director, six senior managers and thirty employees.

3.2. Measuring instruments

In order to compile a complete picture of the language needs in the workplace the researcher has used several different methods, such as ***observation*** (in which notes were taken), ***semi-structured interview*** (with the Managing Director), and ***text analysis*** (of the most frequently used form of communication).

3.3. Procedures of data collection

Since communication as a dynamic process cannot be examined without a thorough knowledge of its context, in which the ongoing situational business operations are embedded, I conducted a focused observation of the company's office. During the observation I primarily focussed on the importance and occurences of written and oral communication skills in English, which formed the basis of Business English classes in our institute. The major uses of writing and oral skills are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
The major uses of writing and oral skills

Writing skills	Oral skills
• letters, • memos, • reports, • data and document analysis, • e-mails	• presentations, • meetings, • negotiations, • telephone conversations, • problems solving

As the table above shows, among the writing skills, letters, memos, reports, document analysis, and e-mails represent the most basic requirements for written communication skills. As regards the main uses of oral English, presentation skills, meetings, negotiations, the ability to hold telephone conversations and solving problems are considered to be essential.

My intention with the observation was to see which of these or any other communications skills should be emphasized more in the future when the ESP courses are designed at our Business College. The findings of this empirical investigation might contribute to the graduates' greater success in recruitment and in their jobs.

Being a nonparticipant observer I decided to produce written notes very soon after the observation rather than record or take notes on the spot because this might have disturbed the people working there. In order to avoid any faulty inference caused by the time limit on observation, or my strong personal commitment, I felt necessary to clarify some of the issues generated through the observation in a semi-structured interview with the managing director. The interview, which took place a week after the observation, was conducted in Hungarian. (The translated questions are presented in the appendix). Then the interview was recorded and transcribed.

The above investigation was supplemented with an analysis of the most often used form of communication, business e-mails, through which a more detailed understanding of the communication demands in telecommunication business has been obtained.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the raw data collected by the observation and the interview with the managing director I will focus on several issues that emerged, which can be grouped under the following three headings: *1. language use and position, 2. language use and purpose, 3. language use and technology.*

4.1. Language use and position

In the literature as well as in Business English course books, there seems to be a tendency to consider oral skills more significant than the writing ones by claiming that they are used more frequently on the job. (Stutridge, 1981; Crookal, 1984). However, the current observation conducted in this company does not appear to support this claim. It was found that writing and oral skills were equally important but were used for different purposes (see next part). Throughout the day spoken and written communication were totally intertwined; there was hardly any activity in either mode where the other would not be present as well.

At the same time, there are two things worth mentioning as regards the language use in the flow of the activities: they are the level and the frequency of the usage of English, which appear to vary from one job to another. Let me provide some evidence for this by a couple of examples:

The receptionist displays excellent telephoning skills both in English and Hungarian. She speaks clearly and sounds polite. She uses the conventional phrases of telephone calls without any problems. (Observation)

The accountants and technical people sit in front of their computers watching the screens all day long. The former ones keep a record of the accounts using a computer software, and are mainly engaged in informal work-related discussions with the other employees in the mother tongue. The latter ones are busy with noticing any fault in the operation so that the people in charge could repair it as soon as possible. Some of the technical staff are dealing with complaints received from the Hungarian customers in e-mail or over the phone. When doing the job, excellent collaboration and exchanging of ideas among the employees can be observed. (Observation)

From the extracts above we can assume that while oral English is a top priority in a receptionist's job, it does not seem to be as important in an accountant's job. Similarly, if we set out from the use of written English, we might presume that it is more decisive in the accountant's job since his/her job also involves producing reports on the accomplished work. These reports must be synthetic and brief rather than in full text. Also, they cannot contain any mistakes because in many cases a copy of them is forwarded to a third person.

The interview with the managing director has also confirmed my assumption that the different positions within the company require different levels and modes of English. He said that

whenever somebody applies for a job in Hungary he should have a good command of English.You know it better than me that nobody can earn a degree without an intermediate language certificate these days. The expected level for English, however, very much depends on the type of job you are doing. Naturally enough, when sales representatives are recruited excellent communication skills and self-confidence are crucial, which sometimes can even compensate for their language skills deficiency. To make a professional impression they must have good presentation skills. Although the presentations and meetings are held in Hungarian they have to write their reports in English because these will become parts of my weekly report for the Irish mother company. The ability to hold telephone conversations as well as write e-mails are also very important in their jobs.

As far as top managers are concerned, they must be able to both understand and speak English at a high, near native level because they have daily contacts with the mother company. In general I would say that in certain fields of business, such as in marketing, in the financial world and in IT services where negotiations are in English, an advanced level is a minimum requirement. In other fields I think, the major requirement is to get your point across and be understood. (Interview)

Bearing all this in mind, we might conclude that an increase in the use of written English mostly for e-mail communication and reports is expected in the future, especially in the activities of those companies, which rely heavily on human contacts and communication. At the same time, during the day both oral and written, English and Hungarian communication was used in a parallel manner, which implies that neither of them can function without the other.

4.2. Language use and purpose

The purpose of the discourse activities observed in the office can be characterized as arrangements for the next week's press release, which is supposed to come out in Ireland and in the Central European countries on the same day. The languages used in the preparatory phase were both English and Hungarian. An example of switching between the two languages is as follows:

The marketing manager is busy with translating the English article into Hungarian. By so doing he sometimes turns to his colleague for help to translate some technical terminology. In order to fix the time of sending the translated article to press he is telephoning the printing firm in Hungarian. He is also talking over the phone in English with the Irish marketing manager and is

confirming and clarifying some of the issues received in an e-mail concerning the press release and the exact time of its publication. (Observation)

This extract shows clearly the recurring interplay between spoken and written activities, for example when the phone call refers back to an earlier e-mail, or just the other way round. Another salient discourse activity emerges from this observation, i.e.despite the fact that English is the official working language of business transactions, translation skills from one language into another still play an important role in doing business.

Other purposes of discourse, such as routine circulation of information or short meetings with managers of higher status at the beginning of the day all have a major role in communication. The day observed started in the following way:

In the morning at 8.30 the sales people (eight of them) come together for a short meeting, where the top sales manager distributes the tasks for the day, and the people discuss the problems. The atmosphere is friendly, the matters are dealt with in Hungarian. Twenty minutes later most of them are off. During the day I can hardly see them in the office. When they come back, they sit down at the computer, write contracts, read their e-mails, make some phone calls and leave again. On the whole, most of their communication is in the mother tongue. (Observation)

The observation suggested that the purpose and the relationship between the sender and the recipient of a business communication event determine not only the style of such an event but also its medium. Undoubtedly, the position of e-mail as a communication channel has been strengthening and is making communication more informal and personalized in many respects.

For reasons of anonymity, the automatically-generated block of sub-headings at the top in the example have been deleted, the personal names and the names of the companies involved in business have been changed.

Efficiency in the written messages seems to equate with informality and flexibility of style. The e-mail extracts provided by the MD illustrate these characteristics very well:

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E-mail 1:
Attila,
Can you please plan a visit to Dublin. Goals of visit:
1. Meet J. Morgan (re permanent MD role etc. )
2. Meet team members you do not know yet:
Richard Duppa - Budget issues (need to review projections closely
before you arrive!)
Steve Kolly - Fibre build, acquisition activities
Frank Farrel - network, customer engineering issues
3. Update me on operational progress
4. Catch up with Wendy on
5. Get to hear some Irish traditional music / sample some Guinness
Best rgds

Conny
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The language of this e-mail message contains simple, straightforward syntactic structures, showing a preference for short sentences over long elaborate ones. Customary punctuation is totally ignored. Elliptical forms provide further evidence that supports the idea that e-mail language reflects unplanned spoken discourse. The pace of events is so fast that seldom is there any time to plan or draft. The purpose of this e-mail is scheduling, and the e-mail substitutes for written notes that we would have taken in a telephone conversation. The use of the abbreviation ‘rgds’, meaning regards, and the first names for salutation all justify the claim that e-mail is more like written conversation than a piece of writing. Based on the interview, let me summarize some of the arguments for e-mail versus telephone:

I have a number of practical reasons for using e-mail more frequently than the phone. First, it is cheaper than the phone. Second, I can send large amounts of information by e-mail that would be difficult to communicate by telephone, so it saves me time. Third, unlike the telephone, e-mail allows me to retrieve my messages at any time. Fourth, I can get my message through even if the recipient is busy. Finally, I can send it at any time of the day without disturbing anyone. (Interview)

Nevertheless, from the rest of the interview it turned out that because of the impersonal character of e-mails (you cannot hear or see the other person), sometimes business people opt for the phone and use it for socializing.

4.3. Language use and technology

From the amount of time the employees spent in front of the computer it seemed obvious that the impact of new Information Technologies on business as well as on the uses of English was enormous.

Over the past few years electronic communications have encountered a phenomenal expansion, which has affected the way managers conduct business. Faxes and e-mail have replaced letters and telexes, mobile phones have freed people from sitting in the office. E-mail as a communication medium tends to make writing skills more important, moreover, it seems to have taken precedence over the phone. In the interview the managing director points out:

I spend every day an hour in the morning, at noon, and in the evening reading and answering my e-mails. I receive approximately thirty e-mails a day, out of which 20-25 are in English. Within the company instead of memos I also use this communication form to inform my employees. (Interview)

The reason why this channel of communication is preferred in business is that, on the one hand, it is close to oral communication, and on the other hand, it is concise and rapid, which allows for smooth course of business. Last but not least, it is cheaper than any other forms of communication.

5. CONCLUSION

An unfortunate disadvantage of this type of research design is that from a one-day visit the researcher cannot draw far-reaching conclusions without seeing the continuity of processes and events. Nevertheless, the richness of the data collected in one day abounds in possible topics for further research.

Although the observation method in the case of business settings does not allow longitudinal investigations, it can provide us with a snapshot of the target needs by revealing its most striking features. At the same time, it needs to be noted that the researcher's presence may have influenced the flow of activities and therefore the findings as well.

From the data available, some implications for ESP teaching can be made in relation to the English discourse activities. In this particular company, oral English seemed to be restricted to **telephone conversations** with the mother company. Many of the calls were to confirm an issue in an e-mail message, and e-mails referred to phone calls. The other types of oral activities such as meetings, negotiations, and presentations were conducted in Hungarian as this was the language that all the employees shared.

Of the writing skills, **e-mail** appeared to be the most frequently used form of communication in English, while reports seemed to be the second most often used skills. This implies that bbesides mastering the four skills in the ESP classes more emphasis should be put on the most appropriate medium of communication. Business course designers as well as teachers of written communication may need to take into consideration that business e-mail communication seems to present a challenge

to the long-established tradition of teaching "formulae writing" to business students. E-mail appears to be an established form of everyday internal communication within the organization, which offers the benefits of being instantaneous, efficient and easily distributable to one or many specific recipients. Furthermore, it provides a unified permanent record of internal communications within the company.

When compiling materials for the ESP classes authentic e-mail messages and business letters could be used, provided they are made available, and together with the students ESP teachers could analyze them to discover prevailing norms or emerging patterns. This way students can be put in contact with native speakers and provide authentic contexts and motivations for communication that teachers are always trying to supply.

As regards report writing, good **reports** rely on the ability to select information and present it in a synthetic and accurate way. Therefore, in the future more emphasis should be put on summary writing and mediation tasks in the English language classrooms as these task types can train our students to be to the point and concise. The format of the reports is becoming close to that of a presentation where one idea is one line.

In sum, my aim with this multi-faceted investigation was to obtain a realistic and detailed knowledge of language and communication skills requirements in the telecommunication business. I hope that the findings described above will be of value to course designers and teachers who train future managers at the Budapest Business College. However, further research in the field of business communication needs is still required, with a special emphasis on the characteristic features of business emails.

APPENDIX

Semi-structured interview questions

1. Does the expected level of English vary according to the position?
2. Does the company provide additional training to improve the level of English proficiency on the job, or everybody should do it on his/her own?
3. Are speaking and writing skills equally important in recruitment? Why?
4. Do the people with good language skills make good communicators? Which do you consider more important?
5. Do you expect a high degree of fluency in English, or you are satisfied if the employee can get the message through?
6. Which forms of written communication do you use the most frequently in your daily work? (e-mail, memo, report, analysis of documents or other)
7. Which forms of oral communication do you use the most ferquently in your daily work?
8. Have language needs changed with the use of new technology on the job, i.e. e-mail for instance?
9. Is there a stylistic difference between a report and an e-mail?
10. Is the standard of e-mail sent to someone for the first time different from the other e-mails?

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