
Mastering the Demand for Foreign Language Speaking Employees in the Romanian Companies

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This paper's goal is to analyze the roles of foreign language in business, emphasizing the importance of foreign language usage in communication and the need to develop the employee's foreign language ability. Foreign languages play important roles in the Romanian companies and most managers agree that foreign languages are very important to their businesses in order to develop a better communication with customers, other companies and suppliers. Communication is achieved through language. In many Romanian companies, having good communication skills in the native language is not enough. Knowing a foreign language is a must if a business graduate wants to get a job.

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Introduction.

Communication is very important in the business field in terms of sharing information among employees, employers and customers. In his book *English-only Europe? Challenging Language Policy*, Robert Phillipson (2003) states that languages are considered to be “the medium through which communication takes place in politics, commerce, defence, academia, the media, technology, the internet, and most aspects of life”, therefore they are definitely “central to our increasingly international world, to globalisation and to the accelerating process of European unification”.

The language plays an extremely important role in the relation

between a business and a customer. One of the most important objectives of any business organization is to gain customer satisfaction. In this view, both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are important.

The employees of a company need to use positive and friendly language to show that they understand and care for their customers, in this way learning how to meet their customers' needs. In order to communicate effectively, both parties, senders and receivers, must use concise, clear and complete language in order to be successful. Also, employees must know how to use the language properly with respect to different contexts and situations. In this way, conflicts that might happen between employees and customers can be managed and prevented.

The Romanian recruiting market after the accession to the EU

Romania became a state member of the EU in January 2007 and since then it has been continuously addressing issues like economic challenges and the strength of Romanian businesses in an increasingly global marketplace. Romania has a developing, upper-middle income market economy, the 11th largest in the European Union by total nominal GDP and the 8th largest based on purchasing power parity. [2] Many Romanian businesses have expanded in the EU and there are many investors who invest in Romania, thus there is a demand for foreign language skills.

Together with the accession to the EU, foreign labour markets opened up for Romanian job-seekers thus communication in a foreign language plays a significant role in opening better opportunities.

In a continuously changing business environment, Romanian companies can no longer afford to remain monolingual. Their success depends to a large extent on the ability of their employees to function as members of a global village whose members speak a variety of languages. Therefore, learning foreign languages is a necessity. According to Pop (2011), "[I]n the business world, knowing a foreign language gives the individual an incredible edge in being able to communicate directly with the business partner. It creates a relationship that could never be achieved through an interpreter."

Colin Baker (2007) emphasized the idea that usually bilinguals and multilinguals have an advantage in the recruitment process compared to monolinguals: "In tourism, marketing, retailing, airlines, public relations, banking, information and communications technology, accountancy, business consultancy, secretarial work, hotels, law and teaching, for example, bilingual and multilingual employees often have the competitive edge when applying for a post or for promotion." Also, the study of foreign languages encourages critical reflection on the relation between language and culture, language and thought, develops people's intellect (memorization, learning skills), builds "practical skills that may be used in other disciplines, teaches and encourages

respect for other ethnic groups”. [5]

Nowadays, in the Romanian business administration institutions and not only, many people are required to use their foreign language skills. In large cities such as Oradea, knowing a foreign language seems almost an essential aspect of urban living. Many jobs require knowledge of at least one foreign language, be it Hungarian, Italian, English, or German. Knowing a foreign language is an important asset for many foreign companies doing business in Romania and for Romanian-based international companies. Job advertisements usually state the requirement for good command of a foreign language or alternatively jobs may be advertised in a foreign language.

European Language Policy

The European Union set up a policy of promoting multilingualism, one of the objectives of the language policy of the EU being that every European citizen should speak two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. According to this policy, multilingualism refers to “languages as a source of wealth that is integral to Europe’s cultural diversity and an individual’s ability to express themselves in various languages.”[6] Also, according to the EU policy, multilingualism plays an important role in Europe’s competitiveness.

The importance of foreign language study is emphasized by the European Commission in the study *Europeans and their Languages*: “The benefits of knowing foreign languages are unquestionable. Language is the path to understanding other ways of living which in turn opens up the space for intercultural tolerance. Furthermore, language skills facilitate working, studying and travelling across Europe and allow intercultural communication.”[7] The study brings forward the reasons for learning languages and the fact that foreign languages “are becoming more and more tied to practical benefits such as opportunities to use the skills at work or to work abroad.”[8]

According to the European Commission Treaty, the EU member states must support and develop the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of EU languages: “Community action shall be aimed at: developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States, encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study, promoting cooperation between educational establishments, developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States, encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, encouraging the development of distance education.”[9]

In keeping with the European Union language policy, foreign language

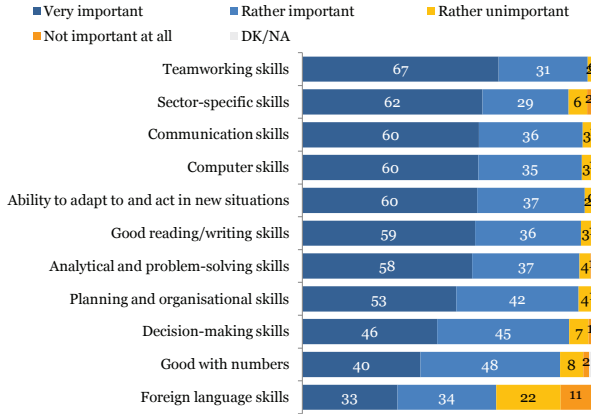
competence is considered as one of the basic skills that “every EU citizen needs to acquire in order to improve his/her educational and employment opportunities within the European learning society.”[10] In order to achieve this objective, children in the European Union member states are taught at least a foreign language starting at a very young age. “All but two countries (Ireland and Scotland) in the European Union mandate the study of a foreign language, which usually begins in primary school. With the exception of Italy and Wales, all European students must learn a foreign language throughout their compulsory education.”[11]

In private, large and highly internationalized firms, the importance of foreign languages increases, therefore these firms recruit higher education graduates who have foreign language skills. Foreign language skills prove to be one of the most important skills for future employees. According to a survey commissioned by the Directorate for Education and Culture of the European Commission in 2005 (CILT, 2006), estimates that 11% of the European small and medium exporting companies may be losing business because they are incapable to communicate effectively with their international partners. Also, the survey’s results show that more than one-third of the European population aged 25 to 64 perceives that it does not know any foreign language, whereas a slightly smaller proportion admits to know one foreign language. The most commonly spoken foreign languages are English, French, Spanish, German, and Russian (Eurostat, 2010).

The European Commission’s Report, *Employers’ perception of graduate employability*, the recruiters across all types of companies surveyed agreed that all skills and capabilities (see Figure 1) were at least rather important when recruiting higher education graduates. It is not encouraging to see that in terms of rating certain skills and capabilities as being “very important”, graduate recruiters in medium-sized companies emphasized the importance of foreign language skills (34% vs. 28%), while for those from large companies, communication skills were more important (63% vs. 60% in medium-sized companies) and being able to adapt to new situations (62% vs. 59%).

With respect to activities, the largest differences were found for the importance of foreign language skills. Graduate recruiters in the industry sector were “most likely to highlight the importance of foreign language skills when recruiting higher education graduates (43% vs. 16% in the public service. [12]

Importance of various skills and capabilities when recruiting higher education graduates – TOTAL



Q3.2. Please rate the following skills and competencies in terms of how important they are when recruiting higher education graduates in your company. Base: all companies, % TOTAL

Figure 1: Source: Eurobarometer survey on employers' perception of graduate employability, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_304_en.pdf

Foreign language education in Romania. Challenges for Romanian employees

In the Romanian education system, foreign languages education has a prominent role. Most Romanian students study two foreign languages, usually English and French and, lately more and more universities introduced German, Italian and Spanish in their curricula.

As reported by Eurostat, in 2009, 98.1% of high school students were studying English (Eurostat, 2011c), and 85.3% were studying French (Eurostat, 2011d). When graduating, students are required to demonstrate competency in one international language based on international standards in order to pass the Bacalaureate exam and be admitted to higher education. Romania has adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as means of evaluating Bacalaureate exams for exiting high school students. With increasing emphasis on foreign language, especially English, many students are taking internationally recognized exams such as Cambridge First Certificate in English or Certificate of Advanced English which increase their employment options, or pursue international education.

In Romania, job requirements do not necessarily include a language certificate. The requisite for the applicants is to speak a foreign language.

Generally, the employees of Romanian institutions speak English and some of the Italic languages are also spoken, while the others (German) have only a few speakers. The mentioned and frequently used situations are in direct connection with the purpose of activity: business correspondence, telephone conversations and booking in travel agencies. Giving information is typical in every sector.

One of the main problems the employees face when speaking a foreign language is their lack of security and need for achievement. It means that there is a demand for the practice of professional situations. There are companies that provide language training for the employees to acquire language for special purposes, refresh or expand knowledge. Also, some of the companies invite native language speakers to help improve foreign language skills in vocabulary and conversation in particular.

Yet, the majority of the employees gain knowledge in a particular foreign language during school. On that account, workplace practices should be more strongly considered when teaching foreign language business communication so that education could really live up to the expectations of the business world. In order to achieve this objective, language classes must be practice-oriented and constant feedback must be provided to the student. The tasks must be achievable and the students should experience a feeling of security and achievement so that they are motivated to use and learn the target language more.

All these can be achieved through Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), described by Wesche and Skehan (2002) as:

- “Activities that require frequent interaction among learners or with other interlocutors to exchange information and solve problems.
- Use of authentic (non-pedagogic) texts and communication activities linked to “real-world” contexts, often emphasizing links across written and spoken modes and channels.
- Approaches that are learner centred in that they take into account learners’ backgrounds, language needs, and goals and generally allow learners some creativity and role in instructional decisions.”

In this manner, the levels of anxiety regarding personal performance decrease. The students must have self-confidence in order to be successful in communication in a foreign language. If they perceive success as something unreachable, the students will be discouraged and motivation disappears. There are students who are motivated to use the target language because they want to integrate socially; others feel motivated to use the target language because of dealing with clients. Generally, students feel uneasy interacting with clients in the target language and in situations of socialising (friends and native speakers), what discourages them the most being the sense of personal failure and inhibition when communicating in the target language, as well as not having enough time to respond.

In Romanian higher economic educations, students are enrolled in business-oriented foreign language classes. Traditionally, the teaching methods of foreign languages are usually based on grammar and translation. Yet, there has been some progress in the field, meaning that the focus is on communication in everyday language use. Moreover, it is necessary for the teachers to include effective teaching approaches and strategies while teaching. Teachers are expected to use inductive materials rather than giving lectures. They should apply “communicative language teaching approaches like task-based approach since, the integrated lessons are more effective than teaching language in isolation and provide opportunities for learners to practice given language components in real life situation which could develop their motivation and performance.”

In our opinion, when learning a foreign language, the students need a lot of help and resources to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, especially when they are learning specialized vocabulary in a foreign language.

In this concern, listening and speaking are two fundamental language skills because they are keys to the acquisition of language. Most people speaking foreign languages struggle with pronunciation. It takes time to become comfortable speaking a new language; therefore business students need to listen effectively and then speak because in their future career they will have to prove confidence and proficiency in all areas of their English. For these graduates to be proficient in a foreign language, “greater emphasis must be placed on the creation of a listening environment which reflects and responds to factors encountered in the real business world.” (Pop, Sim, 2012)

Through listening and speaking, students are exposed to language, thus allowing them to apply it in a business environment. Modelling the real world, decision making in a simulated environment occurs under pressure, often including conflict, emotional factors, and difficult circumstances. Consequently, simulation creates a unique environment for developing and executing decision-making skills. The learning environment should be organized so that the students/graduates participate in more role-plays and classes in which more emphasis is given to conversation and pronunciation using language terminology specific to the field in which they work.

Conclusions

Many times, the multinational companies in Romania cannot find the foreign language speakers they need. Increasing overseas tourism to Romania has also underscored the importance of language skills. With many more European tourists, hotels and retailers will prefer to hire staff with language skills, able to communicate with these guests.

Romanian companies must find the personnel they need to compete

in export markets, and there are more and more companies which hire English-speaking foreigners rather than foreign language-speaking Romanians with poor skills. Romanian employees who do not speak a foreign will increasingly face a disadvantage in competing for some of the best jobs in the business field.

Consequently, we argue that the priority of foreign language instruction in education must be increased. The most effective forms of language instruction must include proper assessment and accountability, and the development of more immersion programs. Similarly, the education process must act in response to the dynamic challenges of a globalized world and assure competence in a range of global languages.

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