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NOT JUST FOR SUPPORT: FITTING UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE COURSES TO BUSINESS NEEDS

Abstract

Workshops targeting the development of so-called soft skills have in common the understanding that the prerequisite for being considered employable and, therefore, being able to be developed further professionally in soft skills, is a working knowledge of business English. In view of the difficulties many foreign language programs have been subjected to at universities across Central Europe, it is time to reposition ourselves in our university curricula and ask business to support us. To do so, we need data and hard facts. The article discusses one idea for moving educators in Hungary in the right direction.

Keywords: L2 teaching, curricula, Business English, competencies

We live and work in what is known as the Digital Age. In other words, many of the activities that inform, shape and make our modern lives have simply become impossible without computer skills. Modern companies would be unthinkable without digital technologies. Globalization is also nothing new. In fact, international trade has been around since Neolithic times, a fact to which countless archeological finds attest. Throughout time, as now, the use of foreign languages was indispensable for ensuring one's livelihood - if not one's survival. In today's Europe, HR managers, headhunting companies and managers from across business sectors are telling us in education what many of us have long known: the job search for the graduates of today and tomorrow will be harder than ever without those graduates possessing solid IT and foreign language skills. (Grosse, 2004; Swaffar & Urlaub, 2014) Even our students realize this, but oddly often lack the courage and/or the disposition to actually pursue the honing of these essential skill sets. As Czeller & Hajdu (2014: 156) write, "Language teaching also has to move with the times, and modern technology and its methods need to be adjusted to the expectations of the age. The tool treasury of language teaching is constantly being enriched by the Internet, at the same time allowing for the application of new language training methods." While Europe's digital economy is growing seven times faster than any other sector (Munkaerőpiac, 2014), the lack of IT skills in job applicants is leaving vacant posts unfilled across the continent. (Eurostat, September 2015). In Hungary, we see this as well. Whether in the capitol of Budapest, in Debrecen, Pécs, Győr, Szeged, Miskolc or Székesfehérvár – wherever one looks in a city of any notable size - the IT sector is developing dynamically, huge business centers are being built to house companies active in IT-related sectors and seeking to employ thousands, and yet, the lack of the critical competencies of IT skills and foreign language skills prevents many job applicants from making it to the first round of interviews. Where is higher education and why have the statistics released by such companies about their inability to fill open positions gone unheard?

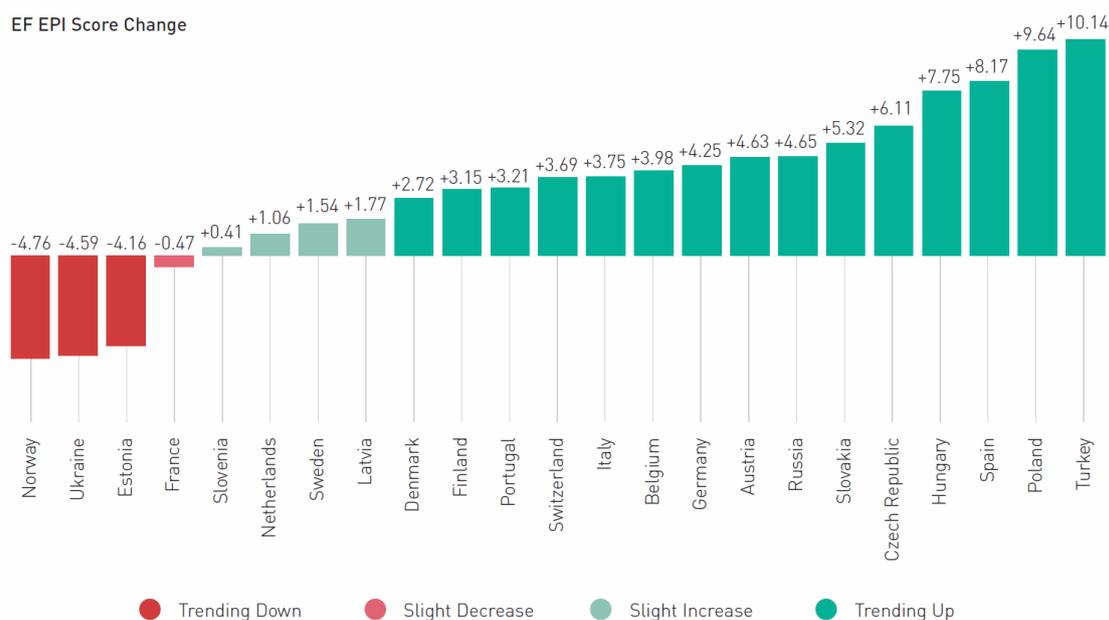
For any employer or employee in a role requiring business communication with foreign partners, customers or even suppliers, the ability to communicate clearly and convincingly in English is a necessity. Obviously, time is money and miscommunication can be an expensive error. Moreover, and even more onerous for the businessman or woman, there is the weight of

the first impression on one's ability to win over new business contacts. The importance of a proper first impression cannot be understated; potential investors, purchasers or clients meeting new business partners who are suffering with difficulties expressing themselves in English – and this includes problems such as being unable to use proper vocabulary, misleading grammar mistakes and speaking with an accent which hinders easy understanding – will be viewed as being less reliable partners than self-confident English communicators with a good command of the jargon of the economic sector in which business is being conducted.

In Hungary, which I can speak for, foreign language skills not only remain far behind the averages for Europe, but for Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. The 2012 Eurobarometer survey revealed that one in five Hungarians is able to have any conversation in English with 40% of those prepared for only the most rudimentary situations, such as understanding if a customer wants coffee or tea. Moreover, only 12% of the Hungarian population could understand English language news – whether from TV or a newspaper. In contrast, the populations of every other Member State joining the EU in 2004 have higher percentages of their citizens able to communicate in English. As the best example, Slovenia boasts an admirable 59%.

The Eurobarometer figures show that this is only a problem of the older generation of Hungarians, as even pupils and students are severely lacking in English language skills. Only one in four of Hungarians aged 15-34 speaks “good” English. This dismal result does not bode well for the future of business, much less for job prospects for these youths. This problem is even more striking when comparing Hungary to its neighbors: except for the Czech Republic, every country shows a higher proportion of young English speakers, with 32% in Romania and Poland. However, just under one-third is hardly a good performance, either. While the younger generation is clearly behind its – still - underperforming regional competition for jobs on the EU market, the crisis in English language learning is even more abysmal for middle-aged Hungarians. Because it is exactly this generation of citizens who make up the majority of the workforce, one might expect that companies have looked after their employees' language skills, in order to remain competitive. Unfortunately, this is definitely not the case. The Eurobarometer figures reveal only 11% of those aged 35-54 possess a higher than basic level (B1) of English, while only a shocking 3% of those over 55 even reach B1 level.

Now, under the present government, there has been some signs of change: the latest survey by Education First (EF) published in 2014 indicates that Hungary's English proficiency index (EPI) measuring the level of English language skills increased by 15% between 2007 and 2013, at least among those who filled out the online test of the global language school network. But even with this improvement, Hungary still ranks only 6th among the eight Central European EU members surveyed. In comparison, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had somewhat lower scores.



Source: EF EPI English Proficiency Index. 2014, p. 20. www.ef.com/epi.

L2 education at colleges and universities offers a unique opportunity to prepare future employees in a range of competencies, all within a single classroom and subject environment. It should be noted here that any competency is more than simply what one understands to be knowledge and skills. Rather, a competency encompasses one's ability to live up to complex demands by utilizing and activating a set of known/learned resources (i.e. skills and attitudes) in a specific context. Seen within the context of communication, as only one example, one's ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may require an individual's knowledge of a specific (L2) language, even requiring the simultaneous use of applied IT skills, as well as one's attitudes towards those with whom communication is taking place (i.e., the application of interpersonal or even intercultural communication skills). This raises the question of what the difference between a competency and a skill is. In short, seen within today's economy, which emphasizes employee flexibility, there is practically no difference. The concept of what a skill may be has changed from the definition of a skill as, e.g. the technical knowledge and skills required by a particular job or occupation, to an understanding that includes a variety of wide-ranging - as well as personal - aptitudes and attitudes. Within communication, a competency is viewed as a necessity for entry to and staying in the job market. This ability is neither determined by level of education, nor type of work. Defined, communication may be understood as an effective use of spoken and written (foreign) language skills in variously demanding situations. Indeed, communication is an essential tool for functioning appropriately in society, in an educational setting, in a workplace or even in doing business with an administrative office or in doing one's shopping. In other words, communication involves our actually participating in effective dialogue with others.

In today's European job market, communication skills are seen as crucial to the success of the growing service sector. Communication manifests in both the ability of a worker to interact with customers and how they communicate with their fellow employees from other areas of the same company, i.e. what is known as the internal customer. In the service sector,

communication and L2 competencies may even take precedence over technical qualifications in hiring of new staff. This is because service sector work requires more than just technical skills, but effective social skills – forcing workers to look and sound right. In other words, the worker in the service sector is a professional communicator first, and then e.g. an IT expert, a salesperson or a hotel receptionist.

Should a job applicant not possess the right communication competencies, especially as related to the job sector skills required to actually carry out job-specific tasks, then this lack may have direct and negative economic consequences for the company deciding to hire him/her. Although communication skills are equally vital to the effective operation within knowledge-based manufacturing enterprises, whether in various automotive industries, telecommunications industries or the travel industry, employers face the problem that, while such skills are of ever-increasing importance in the workplace, the so-called “soft” skills are more difficult to train. Applied skills in foreign and especially special purpose languages, i.e. public speaking, negotiating, assertive communication, customer care and communication, as well as intercultural communication, all involve intensive, expensive and rigorous training over time.

Individual employees simply need to be able to engage with others on their own. Furthermore, they will invariably encounter people from a range of backgrounds, depending on the company and sector they work in, so it is also imperative that they are able to interact in heterogeneous groups. At many multinational companies, group work is indeed the preferred option utilized for the development of oral communication, problem-solving, leadership training, assigning responsibility and decision-making.

Just this spring, the website *Jobline* published that research shows that less than 10% of IT sector posts can be filled without solid foreign language skills. Knowledge of two foreign languages or proficiency in so-called smaller European languages are a tremendous advantage. The site further reports that without knowledge of foreign languages and computer skills, the ability of graduates from across the higher education curriculum to find full time employment will be even more difficult than ever from next year, with companies now willing to import new workers or relocate current employees from other countries, if necessary. "I often meet general idea of our candidate that the candidate is aware of how important IT skills and knowledge of foreign languages, yet still reflecting on how you can cut them in learning," reports Dobar Attila, executive director of the labor mediation and temporary employment group *Job Kft.*

How are universities to respond? English language learning at Hungarian colleges and universities is largely focused on the requirement that students in the majority of degree programs pass one of a total of 22 accredited, formal, foreign language examinations, in order to receive a diploma at the close of their studies. Currently, some 50,000 university graduates cannot get their diplomas due to their lacking language exams certificates. Equally unfortunate, the test-focused system of foreign language teaching means that students are often taught to pass a specific test, but otherwise left to their own devices when it comes a student needing to determine whether he/she actually possesses hireable foreign language proficiency in their

chosen field. ESP courses exist, but these are not always available to students in a manner that is degree-specific. Moreover, many ESP courses are, as mentioned, test-focused in nature.

Indeed, the methods of foreign language testing in use at any time tend to reflect the view of a foreign language and the way it is understood as being used at that time. However, this view is still seen through a prism of devising and running a testing program, which inherently means that a potential corpus of necessary vocabulary and expressions must be pared down to small portions of content. What from the huge range of 'Englishes' is considered to be worth actually being tested and the kind of task or item type chosen as a means of testing are all highly subjective choices made by the test item writer. The problem is that otherwise excellent English teachers used to write test items do not often possess any actual knowledge of real world English competency requirements for any particular job sector. In other words, the tests the Hungarian students are taking do not necessarily reflect the needs of the job market.

How did this happen? As we know, communicative language testing evolved out of a shift in language teaching/learning theory and methodology, away from a predominantly structural focus, towards one that emphasized the importance of language in use. Numerous textbook series were published with just this subheading - language in use. Language departments worldwide jumped on board and their intentions were good. However, no running dialogue has been established with domestic commerce and industry to check the applicability of the English being taught to students for the jobs they were to seek.

Presently, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages contains a model of language ability. Essentially, this model may be understood as being a European policy statement defining communicative competence: communicative competence (sociolinguistic, linguistic, pragmatic) is a form of general competence that leads to language activity (interaction, production, reception, mediation) using tasks, texts and strategies in four principal domains (public, occupational, educational, personal) in which arise situations, consisting of locations, containing organizations that structure interaction, persons with definite roles, objects (animate and inanimate) that constitute an environment, events that take place in it, and operations that are performed (compare Chapter 4, Common European Framework document).

Authenticity is a criterion which, by definition, requires continual updating. The notion of authenticity is not new in language teaching theory and methodology. Since the late 1970s, the notion of authenticity has been extensively researched, in order to devise a principled approach to using authentic documents and texts in both the teaching and testing of language skills. Widdowson (1978) and Bachman (1990) conceptualize authenticity as existing at two levels, the situational level and the interactional level:

Situational authenticity refers to the degree to which the test method characteristics of a language task reflect the characteristics of a real life situation where the language will be used; in other words, the extent to which the task is an accurate representation of some language activity which occurs naturally in everyday life. In designing a situationally authentic task, it is necessary first to identify the critical features that define the task in the target language use domain. It is then possible to design test tasks which have these critical features.

Interactional authenticity denotes the interface between test task and test taker; it entails test writers and developers utilizing texts, situational contexts and tasks which simulate ‘real life’, without attempting to replicate life exactly; it also means the attempt to use situations and tasks which are likely to be familiar and relevant to the intended test taker at the given level, and it clarifies the purpose for carrying out a particular task, together with the intended audience, by providing appropriate contextualization and make clear the criterion for success in completing the task.

When selecting texts and designing items to accompany them, it is therefore important to give some thought to whether the tasks are situationally authentic and whether the processes candidates are being asked to think through and then perform on the basis of the selected texts represent the kinds of processes that actually reflect what will be expected from them later in their careers.

Nonetheless, the discussion is still only focused on testing. Below, I will now focus on what needs to be considered instead, if education is to supply the job market with suitable candidates with relevant English language competencies:

From a job seeker’s point of view, the following problems are common and require action by schools, colleges and universities:

- schools do not prepare students for working in / with foreign languages
- those who earn their language exams at a younger age are either not motivated to maintain their language knowledge or even shut out of language education altogether, leaving them to forget the foreign language long before they actually need to use it in their careers
- Hungarian language exams are not accepted by foreign educational institutes and employers
- employers have no sources to get relevant information about the applicants’ language skills
- most headhunters do not have professionals to evaluate language skills properly

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From the employer’s point of view, the following problems are common and require action by schools, colleges and universities:

- job portals, Europass and EURES do not contain up-to-date, electronic language portfolios on applicants
- language exams obtained years ago give irrelevant info about applicants’ actual language skills at the time of application
- headhunters use pre-filtration techniques that are not always reliable and professional
- too much time is wasted on first round job interviews, which a proper database could remedy
- deficiencies in employees’ language knowledge may lead to significant business losses
- employee language knowledge has to be developed from the companies’ own resources

In response to all these needs, together with colleagues, I will be active in the launch of a new format to better link foreign language education and labour market demands. Recently created is a new online platform called M-ELBA, or the Hungarian Employment Language Bank, to give both potential employers and job candidates the opportunity to

- upload and create CVs just like on social network sites
- get job offers requiring foreign language knowledge
- answer job ads and offers
- sit for certified M-ELBA® business language placement tests, min. twice a year in various languages
- make M-ELBA® video interviews generated by the system and give future employers an insight into one's language knowledge
- participate in M-ELBA® online job interviews, conducted in the target language

Employers will be able to

- access the database
- search in the database in minimum 2 languages (CVs, portfolios, references, certificates, job experience)
- use the opportunity to advertise jobs requiring high level language knowledge or unique languages
- access video language interviews of those registered in the database
- use the opportunity to invite applicants for online job interviews, either using own questions or database questions, in various languages
- access recorded interviews in real time or any time after download

What does this new database mean for educators? Specifically, the ever-expanding database will offer real time feedback on the English language requirements of the sectors of the job market, on the performance of their graduates and those from other national educational institutes. English language competencies will be tested via an actual formal job interview process, which may be reviewed and used to adjust teaching materials, language test materials and test questions and types. Authentic, English language communication abilities of job seekers will be available, reflecting these candidates' public speaking, professional communication, intercultural communication and special purpose language usage abilities, together providing a more realistic understanding of the all-round English language abilities of students entering the job market. Results can be used to build bridges to employers - locally, regionally and nationally – and these bridges can then be used to further enhance and improve teaching materials, both to ensure accredited language examination success and the more important success of having our graduates being hired at companies offering competitive salaries.

Many foreign language programs have been hit hard by cutbacks in staff members and total classroom hours at universities across Central Europe. Now is the time to reposition ourselves in our university curricula and ask business to support us. However, in order to do so, we must meet business needs in a targeted manner. While there have been improvements in the levels of English language knowledge in Central Europe, there is still much to do to ensure that this knowledge is relevant and applicable in real life. The new platform mentioned above is one

step in the right direction. What remains to be seen is whether this tool may be truly utilized to construct a mutually beneficial information exchange network to promote skills development to assist Central European economies to grow. Soft skills, such as foreign language skills, not only help individuals thrive at work and become assets to their employers, but they can also improve abilities to enhance careers, while saving businesses money. Targeting the development of English language skills means understanding how ESP proficiency is a true prerequisite for being considered employable at any serious company seeking to function in an international business environment. A working knowledge of business ‘Englishes’ in each of our students requires consistent, hard work from educators. The rewards, however, are limitless.

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