

IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL SKILLS IN BUSINESS LANGUAGE EDUCATION

© Cecília TUSA
(University of Pannonia, Veszprém, Hungary)

tusacecilia@gmail.com

Foreign trade relations of Hungary demands evermore sophisticated business language skills of experts in the fields of economics, finances and tourism. Beside language-understanding the culture-understanding become more and more important, and cultural appreciation will assist the business language teaching. As the European Union prescribed, the European Higher Education Community should be achieved till 2010. This requests not only convergence the higher education systems inside the border of the EU but also sets the requirements of the university / college graduates to own proof, in the business life usable communication skills, cultural knowledge and preferably work experiences from abroad at the moment of receiving their diploma. As several innovative institutes, the Faculty of Economics at the University of Pannonia recognized this tendency and its importance, and initiated between September 2006 and June 2008 a new model for Business English and Business German education.

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The necessity of business language teaching in the 21st century

At the time of the economical migration, business language is becoming more and more important. Official documents also argue for this. The founding document of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was signed in 1997 in Lisbon (Portugal) with the aim that studies in different countries become comparable and can be accepted in the whole of Europe. The Lisbon Recognition Convention has been signed by all 47 member states of the Council of Europe and entered into force on 1st February 1999. However, studies abroad require not only basic and general language skills but also language knowledge with special register. Language skills with technical terms are not enough to be able to handle successfully on the international labour market. The labour force needs to dispose of personal skills and characteristics such as empathy, acceptance, cultural awareness but also cultural openness and sensibility.

Hungary has already been the arrival point for western investments, according to its central location in Europe. Although the new investment tendency mainly obtains China or India and simultaneously the willingness of the capital expenditures in Central-Europe decreases, we can still notice a

sharp attendance of the foreign capitals. Hungarian companies tend to invest and work abroad, but also foreign companies, about 28 thousands invested in previous years in Hungary involving Hungary and its labour force into the international economic bloodstream. Foreign countries represent about 10 thousand billion HUF in investments, and they invested 375 thousand billion HUF only in the capital city of Budapest between 2001 and 2003 (by Hungarian Statistical Office, Investments in the region of Central-Hungary, February 2006). Hungary with the EU membership is more included in the international cooperation on the fields of politics, economics and environment protection.

A new tendency already exists on job interviews, the first contest for a job seeker. Not the paper based knowledge is important as it was earlier, so not the amount of diplomas or certificates count, but the knowledge itself. Nowadays, it is common that during the job interview the HR manager suddenly breaks with the conversation in the mother tongue and continues in English with the sentence "Let's talk in English" or in German "Können wir auf Deutsch fortsetzen?" perhaps in French "Est-ce que vous parlez français?"

The European Commission proposed an Action Plan for Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity for the period of 2004-2006. The Action Plan admits the different histories of the countries but forces a common future:

"The peoples of Europe are building a single Union out of many diverse nations, communities, cultures and language groups; it is a Union built around the equal interchange of ideas and traditions and founded upon the mutual acceptance of peoples with different histories but a common future." (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52003DC0449:EN:HTML>, p. 4.)

The action plan has three main aims: first of all language learning should be lifelong (life-long language learning), and not only one foreign language is requested, but the EU recommends to speak two major and 1 minor foreign languages. Member states have to ensure language learning in early childhood because in this age the key attitudes towards language learning and foreign cultures are formed. Language teaching quality should be raised (better language teaching), from the book-based teaching method we have to change for the communication oriented and culture mediating language teaching methods. Especially in Hungary, language teachers' preparation processes should be developed and made multifarious. In the last 20-30 years, language teachers of primary, secondary and higher education were all prepared for language teaching with the same methods. They learnt the same teaching methods and of course had a lot of problems with these common methods and were not successful. The Action Plan calls our attention on the difference between language learning in primary school, in secondary school, in higher education, for adults and for people with special needs. This article is calling to interpret the language learning and teaching in the higher education. The Action Plan gives the University Colleges and Universities huge responsibility, by declaring them as key actors in promoting multilingualism:

"Higher Education institutions play a key role in promoting societal and individual multilingualism. Proposals that each university implement a coherent language policy clarifying its role in promoting language learning and linguistic diversity, both amongst its learning community and in the wider locality, are to be welcomed. [...]University language policies should therefore include explicit actions to promote the national or regional language. All students should study abroad, preferably in a foreign language, for at least one term, and should gain

an accepted language qualification as part of their degree course." (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52003DC0449:EN:HTML>, p. 9.)

Last but not least we have to create a favourable environment for language learning by keeping diversity of languages (building a language-friendly environment). It means that every language that is spoken in Europe has to be accepted and the production of learning materials have to be encouraged, even if they are regional or minority languages.

However, these requirements are not far from the attitude of the Hungarian Higher Education. Nowadays it is impossible to receive a diploma without any language skills or foreign language certificate. The language requirements are diversified, some institutions are satisfied with one general language exam on B2-level, others acquire language skills with special register on B2 or C1 level. It depends on the syllabus of the majors. Generally, economical, engineering, health care and law subjects expect language exams with special register.

Business language teaching as preparation for situations and tasks in the business life

On my opinion, Higher Education does not have only the aim to impart knowledge on an advanced level but also the preparation for the working environment. Young job seekers often suffer from the unknown situations like job interviews, applying for jobs, negotiations, company presentations. The preparation for these tasks is not often an obligatory part of the curricula on the Universities. This gap could be filled by the language education.

Students will have to participate as young managers or flexible labour force on company visits by existing or potential business partners. They have to know about the culture of their business partners, to be sensible for their cultural background and they have to be able to handle according to the cultural expectations. Several students already wish for greater challenges during their studies and thus they travel abroad to participate on an internship or foreign language study programmes abroad.

Nowadays, it is even more the case that the management of a global player consists of leaders from different countries to share the knowledge and cooperate on the whole world. Top managers are often delegated to subsidiaries to coordinate the working process. These delegations need a long preparation for the candidate to ensure his / her successful integration and protect him / her from the culture shock.

While earlier we mainly were used to a few management styles, today management styles have common features but they can differ from each other as well. They are varied according to the different strategies of the companies (integration to the host country - localisation, semi integration - glocal thinking method, globalisation) (Welge/Holtbrügge, 2003) of the companies.

Requirements in the business language education

Business language education does not only mean teaching of certain courses in a foreign language, or improving of the vocabulary with special register or the subject terminology. It involves a lot more: the language learners' preparation for business situations and tasks in a foreign language, the improving their presentation and negotiation skills and also the cultural mediation.

Foreign trade relations of Hungary demand evermore sophisticated business language skills of experts in the fields of economics, finances and tourism. Earlier business communication occurred with cost demanding translators, interpreters or with help of paper-based language knowledge, that was acquired with more or less success in the school. However, at the beginning of the 21st century - thanks to the increasing possibilities and effective methods for language learning - business sphere rightly expects from their agents to be able to communicate fluently in foreign language(s) with their business partners without any help of a third mediator.

Beside language-comprehension the culture-understanding is becoming more and more important, and cultural appreciation will assist the business language teaching. It should put focus on the practise. Students have to get the first breeze of business sector and the first impression on companies with a foreign language. They should learn how to make relationships in business life and they can learn it with the help of factory visits. Best student should get the possibility to study abroad financed by scholarships or work abroad with an internship programme to collect international and authentic language experiences. Less talented students can have the possibility to collect information and use their language knowledge in groups during study tours. Teachers should break away from language books they should experiment freely with authentic business documents like bill, contract or order, or with authentic business situations like job interviews or agreements where students can prove themselves in imitated real-life situations. They can work with case studies where they can learn from real company stories, like from the interview with J. Ackermann, the chief of the German Bank (Deutsche Bank). If teachers have contacts with several German factories, it is not difficult to get hold of authentic documents in a foreign language. Exactly that is why teachers should have good relationships with companies.

Business language education needs three main components: good language teaching methods according to the latest requirements of the labour market, well prepared language teachers and motivated, in the best case linguistically talented learners.

However, from these three aspects, the main aspect is the teacher with his / her personality and knowledge. A good teacher in particular can develop a successful programme and can motivate the students for learning and achieve success with them even if they are less talented. Therefore in the focal point of the following analysis the requirements for the teacher will be detailed.

In Hungary, some universities recognized the needs to teach foreign language with special register. However, the problem is, that the practice goes ahead of the teacher training. Teachers, who were equipped with old methods of language teaching and had more or less successful practice experiences felt themselves addressed to teach Business German, legal terminology or languages with special registers on other scientific fields. Mostly they did not have enough preparation for this, because they did not own any knowledge about the specific field. They also lacked the information about the newest trends on this field. They were used to teach

the same topics for long periods of time and they did not have any connection to the experts or representatives of the field.

These teachers tried to impart knowledge for their students but could not explain what they teach. They mostly concentrated on general topics like environment protection, European Union, labour market, but they did not have the courage to explain a letter of credit or to discuss the incoterms. These teachers mostly kept concentrating on the grammar and the language exam tasks without improving the students' communication and negotiation skills.

I consider it very important that the language teacher e.g. for business language owns the theoretical business knowledge, even better, if he or she is an educated economist. The students' motivation for participating on lectures and work hard for the language learning can be only reached if they get information or knowledge on the lesson that are important for their later working life and that are current and interesting topics. That is why teachers should have up-to-date knowledge, and have to know not only the theoretical issues but also the every-day news of the business life. It presupposes the teacher's interest on the field he / she is responsible for and the almost daily contact to the specialist area. The language teacher for professional jargon has to mediate the dynamism of the field and has to function rather as an expert of the area who can also explain the grammar and the finesses of the language.

Intercultural aspects

Multicultural situations are not the product of the 21st century. Israel declared itself in the early 1960s multicultural because of the sephardic and oriental jews' presence, in Britain emerged a multicultural society with South-Asians and Afro-Caribbeans. Canada and the United States declared themselves multicultural and set the multicultural education on its way in the 1970s, because a huge asianization process was noticeable (Bhikhu Parekh, 2006). The famous multicultural situations in Europe exist in France and Germany, the latter one had to face the so called guest-workers, who did not want to go home after their work-period in Germany, because they liked the life of a well-off country, and their family members followed them. Strangely the number of the immigrants increased after labour force requirement ban in 1973 in Germany because the Greek and Turkish guest workers invited their family members from their homelands to share the wealth with them. Hungary got the possibility to become a multicultural area two times in the last three decades. First with the political change in the 1990s, when Hungary had a leader role in the opening of its western borders. Second, with the opening of its borders to the member states of the European Union. But Hungary has to face another type of multicultural situation, it certainly finds itself in a multi-ethnic situation, with the cultural diversity of the different ethnic groups like Gipsies, Germans, Slovaks or Serbians.

The above mentioned examples prove that even in Hungary intercultural aspects are as important in the every-day life as in the business sector.

There are some intercultural features that are important also during business language education, like tolerance, empathy, stereotypes, prejudices or cultural sensibility. Tolerance is one of the most important characteristics but Auernheimer, a German expert from the University of Cologne recommends the using of the concept acceptance, because he thinks that behind the word tolerance a force exists in Faucault's sense (Auernheimer,

2007). Empathy means that you can theoretically put yourself in other people's life-situation. Stereotypes and prejudices are concepts mainly based on information from other people but not on own experience. That is why they are often unfounded, but nevertheless they could become persuasions. Intercultural pedagogy (in German and French literature) or how it is called in the English literature, multicultural education has the aim to destruct stereotypes and prejudices and to show people how they can handle with others' prejudices. Cultural sensibility enables people to recognize the cultural diversity of the world, of their countries and their life or work environment. They have the skills to understand these cultures or accept these cultures without understanding them entirely. They can transfer their fear against the foreign features of a culture into careful curiosity. They do not have an ethnocentric way of thinking, but an ethnorelative.

As Simonis said: "Every individual lives in more cultures than one" can we be sure that we hardly can find in the 21st century people with only one-culture features. (Simonis, 2009) Everybody lives within the characteristics of different cultures even if he / she is not aware of this. Our cultural identity is like a layered cake within some filling to make it more multi-coloured. So, the cultural pluralism exists on both levels, on the society and the individual level. It should be emphasized that cultural identity is not the same as citizenship. We can think on the Hungarian minorities abroad, but unfortunately we often forget about that gypsies have their own cultural background or a mixed one even if they have Hungarian citizenship.

Role of intercultural attitude in business language education

As above mentioned intercultural aspects can and should appear in business language education. Study programmes abroad are important because students have the possibility to collect international experiences, that is why we support internship programmes in foreign countries. There are successful European organizations that give financial support for studies and internships like Erasmus, Comenius, DAAD, Bayhost, Leonardo. Our students do not have to have good achievements only on national competition but they should participate on international competition because competitions become more and more worldwide. Student should learn how cooperation functions on an international labour market and how they can obtain to be accepted by their business partners. The international labour market forces even more cooperation between nations and representants of nations, continents. Intercultural work should happen in the schools, it is called intercultural pedagogy, but it should happen in the business life, in the health care and in the environment protection too. There some common aims and tasks for every people of the world, like common welfare, healthy earth, sustainable development and developing environment protecting and alternative energy using methods for maintaining our life circumstances. The achievement of these aims is not imaginable without international cooperation, that is even not conceivable without intercultural attitude. Intercultural attitude means a human behaviour that should be developed with help or without help in every individual person but it can not be coerced by regulations or laws. It is a personal adjustment to be open, to think cultural-relativ, to base cooperation on cultural understanding. Intercultural work has an other necessary part, the intercultural knowledge. It means historical, geographical, cultural knowledge, to own information about traditions and customs, written and unwritten rules of the cultures.

Business language has within this last mentioned part a lot of tasks. It has to impart language knowledge within explaining the grammar rules and checking the internalized vocabulary, it has to teach cultural knowledge minimum of the target language and has to make sensible for cultural curiosity and openness. Intercultural aspects can contribute the success of job interviews, the negotiation processes and professional advancement.

Successful business language sample model at the University of Pannonia

As several innovative institutes, the Faculty of Economics at the University of Pannonia recognized the above mentioned tendencies and its importance, and initiated between September 2006 and June 2008 a new model for Business English and Business German education.

The aim of the model is to prepare students for successful business communication and tasks by teachers, who are qualified both as language teachers and economists. These teachers held communication-oriented and culture-conveyed seminars in little groups thanks to their staying couple of years in mother tongue countries and their appropriate overview about the economic life.

The model was tested with about 100 students in industrial engineering and human resource management within 4 semesters. In the first semester we adduced the fundamentals of business language and improved students' vocabulary. The focus was put on the explanation of the basic concepts in micro-and macroeconomics and the students's sensibilization for the current economical trends in Hungary, Europe and in the whole world. In the second semester students organized a factory visit by a German speaking company in Hungary and they received a presentation in German mostly by a native speaker person and they got insight into the production processes. They got to know a little from the German company culture in a semi-authentic environment. After the factory visit they hold a presentation about the company they visited and their experiences during the visit on the so called project day. Their presentations skills were improved before with little speaking tasks and presentations during the lessons about a chosen topic and another about a certain topic. They had to follow the main aim: to speak fluently, without reading their notices, only with the help of a Power Point presentation about an economical topic. At the end of the semester they had a filter exam where the students were selected who were well prepared for the later native courses, hold by native speaker German professors from the TU Darmstadt (e.g. International Management, International Logistics, International Financing, Introduction to the taxation). This filter exam contains both forms, written and oral tasks and was on the level of an intermediate language exam with special registers.

In the third semester students were prepared for the written language exam and they organized the second factory visit. It was important that - after they got to know in the earlier semesters, how certain official documents are alike as CV or application, contract - they practise these forms and they had a lot of tasks and homeworks for writing such documents. As they have not written a CV or an application before the first task was to explain them how these documents look like and what is the aim with them, how can they be successful and attention attracting. Simultaneously the preparation for listening tasks happened. It was the most problematic task for the students not only because they mostly have not been successful in this field and the task was really difficult for them, but they also hated this task because of the

mentioned aspects. So, the first assignment was to oppose their fears and hate towards this language exam task. In the last semester the preparation for the oral language exam followed with the second company presentation. The course focused on the oral tasks as the examinee's experience and study oriented introduction, subject-specific situation as negotiation, order, job interview, complaining, answer-back for an order and summarising of short article with about current economical occasions. It was not necessary to speak about the exam topics again because students could adopt these topics during the four semester. Normally language exam prearing courses requests the elaboration of the exam topics and it is not a popular task for the students, they consider it as a boring and time consuming task. The students in the model heard constantly a lot of information about the topics, they prepared small presentations about them so they were familiar with them and did not need extra preparation for the exam.

Requirements and challenges within the model

The model set huge requirements for both students and teachers. The prerequisites for teachers were the profession of a language teacher with a University degree, but also the qualification as an economist or the willingness to begin with the studying of an economical subject. They were expected to own experiences on the language area, it was minimum two years. They should know and be able to practice communication oriented teaching methods and project work.

Students with language exam on an intermediate level were allowed to participate in the lessons or if they did not own such a document they could prove their language knowledge with a grading test. If they achieved more than 60 % on this test, they had the possibility to participate on the language lessons, otherwise they should take care themselves on developing their language skills to the expected level. If they had a language exam on an advanced level or they owned a graduation diploma in German, they were exempt of the lessons and got automatically the possibility to achieve the specific courses held by German native professors.

The model created some challenges for the participants. Students were in the first academic year, mostly without any specific knowledge on the field of economics (only a few students visited before specific classes with economical courses). They had a narrow perspective about the current economical, social and political issues in Hungary and abroad. They had no experiences with presentations, organising factory visits and successful teamwork. They were adjusted for passive listening on the lessons, they did not even have the courage to ask any questions if they did not understand anything. They had to face a lot of tests and exams, presentations and the task to speak in a foreign language for about 30-40 people. They got a lot of tasks to do at home, to organise and the best students got the possibility to apply for scholarship and internship programs, that they have never done before. There was a strict working speed and they were steadily motivated for working hard. They had to learn how to cooperate successfully with each other but simultaneously what a fair competition means. They needed a change of their attitudes, because they were forced for active work and the lessons were created very interactive. Students had to listen to news, they should be in the know about the current economical events. This brought information generated the basic for the warming-up exercises and discussions at the beginning of the lessons. So, students become from a

passive listeners to an active "designers" of the lessons and the co-work between teachers and students.

Results of the model

This last part of the interpretation shows what can be appreciated as results and how was the feedback from the students and the economical sphere.

We organized first a study tour for the student to the company Continental AG to Frankfurt where they got insight into the life of a German company in Germany. After it 10 students applied for a scholarship by the German organization DAAD and won the whole financial support for a 12 days study tour, where they got a 3-day-block seminar in the field of Supply Chain Management, they visited the company ZF in Schweinfurt and the university college there. They visited a lot of museums, parks, castles and participated on German festivals to become acquainted with the German culture.

Two students got the possibility the first time to participate on an internship programme at the company Continental in Frankfurt, two students won a scholarship to study in Germany and Austria. The students' attitudes changed because they learnt how to work in a fair play competition and how to cooperate and help each other in a team work.

We only worked with authentic material with the aim improving intercultural communication skills. Students learnt to cope with their speaking anxiety, mostly they could not recognize that they participate on a "speaking situation" because situations shadowed real-life situations like job interview and they could understand it as a game whilst they participated a lot. At the end it came to light that students demand for knowledge and experience exchange not only with students but with professors abroad. It was a normal situation that after the blockseminar student invited the professor for a lunch and they talked the whole evening or it is normal that they speak and write e-mails to me only in German.

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