

# **E.S.P. : IDENTIFICATION OF THE LINGUISTIC FOREIGN LANGUAGE NEEDS IN THE BUSINESS WORLD**

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## *ABSTRACT*

Contrastive analysis of the linguistic needs of Spanish export enterprises, as seen by business professionals, Business College teachers and students, with regard to the use of foreign languages.

In view of the results collected the writing skill appears to be one of the major aims to be pursued in the teaching of foreign languages in Business Colleges.

## *INTRODUCTION*

This article aims at summarizing some of the results obtained from a project which consisted basically in identifying the linguistic needs as far as foreign languages in the business world are concerned. Our desire to make the research undertaken as thorough as possible accounts for the fact that its scope comprises three segments (i.e. Spanish export businesses, and teachers and students of Business Colleges) which, when contrasted will help to give a wider and clearer picture of the situation. In fact, the final objective pursued is to provide a kind of corpus that could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Spanish Business Colleges current foreign language syllabuses, contents and activities, specially in relation to the extent to which they meet the students' occupational needs.

The main stimulus that moved us to poll Spanish export businesses on their linguistic needs when using foreign languages was the fact that we consider that the opinions of people working in the business world should become one of the basic filters used in the identification and analysis of students' needs. However, another underlying reason is our firm intention not to keep our teaching or research tasks detached from the real world.

On the other hand, the essential reason that moved us to search the students' opinion was our conviction that in that way we could have an assessing tool that would enable us to appraise how adequately our efforts match the basic approaches students consider we should follow, and in doing so, we would be closer to fulfilling their wants. This fact will, in its turn, serve to increase our students' motivation.

Obviously, one of the basic reasons that moved us to poll teachers' opinions on this topic was our desire to contrast their perception with that of their students, in order to detect the most outstanding differences and, later, be able to suggest solutions or hints that could help to bridge the existing gap and, subsequently, being able to better respond to the demands of Spanish export companies.

## *IDENTIFICATION OF THE LINGUISTIC NEEDS OF SPANISH EXPORT BUSINESSES REGARDING FOREIGN LANGUAGES*

### *Technical Data:*

Scope: Spain.

Population: Spanish export businesses.

Selection of sample: at random.

Survey error: a maximum of 8.7 % for finite sets.

Type of measuring instrument: *ad-hoc* mail questionnaire, structured, not-disguised, self-administered.

Statistical procedure used: DBase III Plus, SPSS.

Type of information collected: qualitative and quantitative.

Sample collecting date: first term of 1991.

The analysis of the results obtained from Spanish export businesses provides us with the following information: English is used for foreign trade contacts by 99% of the businesses surveyed, French by 89%, German by 76%, Italian by 68%, and Portuguese by 59%, while other foreign languages are very little used. The frequency with which these foreign languages are used is the following: the highest degree corresponds to English and French, and the lowest one to Italian, German and Portuguese in that order, while the degree of use of the rest of the languages is not significant at all.

Spanish export businesses seem to be deeply aware of the importance of having personnel fully qualified in the use of foreign languages, as can be inferred from two circumstances: first, the fact that 83.8% of the companies that answered the questionnaire have linguistically qualified staff available to carry out their international commercial relations, and secondly, the interest and care they show in training their own staff. Thus, we see that 43.8% and 10.8% of

them pay for English and German classes respectively, and the most common and widespread procedures and methods they resort to in order to train their employees in the use of foreign languages are the following : 1st., paying the cost of attending regular lessons (40.8%); 2nd., granting permission to attend regular lessons during working hours (24.6%); 3rd., paying for intensive courses in the home country (23.1%); 4th., hiring a teacher to give lessons on the business premises during working hours (21.5%).

According to the opinion stated by the businesses surveyed the effort they make to provide their employees with the training they need in foreign languages is as follows : high (13.8%), medium (38.4%), low (20%), none (25.5%). However, in spite of all the efforts made, it is clear that the businesses surveyed still suffer from some shortfalls in this field, as proved by their need to hire translators (24.6% of the companies hire them for German, 22.3% for English and 16.9% for French) but they also hire interpreters, though the latter to a lesser extent (9.2% for German and Italian, and 8.5% for English).

The opinion of business people as regards the importance of the foreign language skills in order to accomplish foreign trade relations is as follows: reading comprehension occupies the first place, written and oral production (both with very similar percentages) come after it and, finally we have listening comprehension.

The list below shows which are the most outstanding activities, involving the use of a foreign language, that companies have to carry out, and it also includes a reference to how they rank in importance:

<i>Activities</i>	<i>very high</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>medium</i>	<i>low or none</i>
Understanding business correspondence	53.8%	34.6%	7.7%	1.5%
Writing business letters	49.2%	36.9%	10.0%	3.1%
Understanding business documents	43.1%	43.1%	10.8%	1.5%
Understanding telexes	50.8%	27.7%	12.3%	6.9%
Having conversations on topics related to their professional activities (asking for information)	41.5%	33.8%	15.4%	6.9%
Writing telexes	46.9%	27.7%	14.6%	8.5%
Taking part in negotiations and/or debates on topics related to their professional activity	30.0%	29.2%	19.2%	17.7%
Filling in and/or writing documents and/or business reports	22.3%	33.8%	26.2%	11.5%
Understanding general information, instructions and/or brochures or pamphlets	17.7%	36.9%	33.1%	10.0%
Having telephone conversations	13.8%	19.2%	23.1%	28.5%

These data support the opinion gathered from the answers regarding the importance of the foreign language skills, according to which the relevance of the written medium in its two facets, receptive and productive, stands out against the oral medium.

The linguistic areas in which participants in international business relationships encounter the biggest difficulties are the following and in the order stated : oral and written production (both with a very similar level of difficulty, 50% and 42% respectively), followed by pronunciation and command of grammar (47.7% in both cases) and finally, a long way off, reading comprehension (10.8%). In carrying out our task as teachers we should very much take into consideration this evidence, so as to direct part of our teaching efforts to helping our students overcome their difficulties in those areas.

### *IDENTIFICATION OF THE FUTURE LINGUISTIC FOREIGN LANGUAGE NEEDS OF BUSINESS COLLEGE STUDENTS AS PERCEIVED BY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS*

#### *Technical Data:*

Scope: Spain.

Population: Spanish Business College students and Business College foreign language teachers.

Sample: 813 students belonging to 19 Spanish Business Colleges and 32 foreign language teachers from 14 different Business Colleges.

Selection of sample: at random.

Survey error: a maximum of 3.5% for infinite sets in the case of students and 15% with regard to the questionnaire filled by teachers.

Type of measuring instrument: *ad-hoc* mail questionnaire, structured, not-disguised, self-administered.

Before going into analysing the perception that teachers and students of Spanish Business Colleges have on the linguistic needs of the latter, as far as foreign languages are concerned, we consider it reasonable to make a comment on the following: 84.0% of the students surveyed reveal that their foreign language teacher has not asked them about their needs in relation to the subject. Furthermore, of the low percentage of students who state that they have been consulted (just 13.5%) we see that 53.5% of them say that the degree in which their opinions are reflected in the foreign language subject is medium and 18.1% say it is high, while 12.7% and 4.5% consider it to be low or inexistent. This, obviously, runs counter to the ideal situation, since nowadays students

demand and expect a greater involvement in their own educational process.

The sources that teachers use to identify their students' needs are these: basically they ask other foreign language teachers for their collaboration (the degree of frequency of such consulting is high and medium according to 59.4% and 31.3% of the population surveyed), though they also acknowledge asking people engaged in the business world (in high and medium degree according to 31.3% of the population surveyed). On the other hand, we confirm that the frequency with which they seek the opinion of their students is strikingly lower (of high degree according to 25% and medium according to 37.5%).

In order to find out the extent to which other subject teachers contribute towards awakening in their students the need to use foreign languages in their academic setting we asked the students four questions from which the following should be noticed: only 12.1% of the students are encouraged, by other subject teachers, to consult bibliography in a foreign language, but on top of this we should add that the degree to which these subject teachers use materials written in a foreign language is very low in the opinion of 61.4% of the students surveyed, and medium according to 29.2%. This could be interpreted as a result of a vicious circle made up by two variables: low or insufficient linguistic training and limited use of, and reference to, materials in a foreign language.

Going into the analysis of the results obtained from Spanish Business College students and teachers we see that the positioning of both teachers and students, regarding which are the most immediate linguistic needs of the latter concerning foreign languages, exhibits quite a high degree of coincidence, the greatest divergence occurring in relation to the need to understand specialized foreign language texts (22.5% of the students point out these as a need, in clear contrast with 68.8% of the teachers).

<i>Most immediate needs</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
To pass the subject	60.9%	75.0%
To understand specialized texts published in it	22.5%	68.8%
To understand it when somebody speaks it on T.V. in a film, on the phone, etc.	55.7%	34.4%
To write it with a minimum degree of correctness	46.0%	71.9%
To speak it in an understandable way	42.8%	43.8%
To master it at a level which enables them to follow higher studies given in it	18.3%	21.9%
To get a level that enables them to do in company training in a business where the knowledge of that language is required	59.5%	56.3%
To reach a level that makes them eligible for scholarships	13.9%	37.5%
To have such knowledge in their jobs	56.6%	71.9%

From among all the students' immediate needs pointed out the most urgent one appears to be that of passing the subject which, in a certain way, is quite reasonable. Furthermore, we notice that Business College students' motivation, as far as their most immediate needs are concerned, is basically instrumental, being oriented towards the occupational field, a factor that teachers should take good notice of when training their students, and which, in fact, represents a real challenge for them.

Along these same lines it is worthy pointing out that 84.4% of the teachers surveyed acknowledge that, from their point of view, their subject syllabus meets their students' academic needs sufficiently, a view which coincides with that held by 86.6% of the students surveyed. However, the situation can not be termed so positive as far as the meeting of the students' professional needs is concerned as, according to 65.6% of the teachers and 56.2% of the students scrutinized, these are met to an insufficient degree.

Regarding the questions of which activities performed in a foreign language are considered essential for the occupational future of the students of Business Colleges the opinion of the three segments surveyed is the following:

	<i>Students</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Business</i>
Having telephone conversations	85.9%	96.6%	84.7%
Understanding lectures on business topics	68.5%	53.1%	
Taking notes on business topics	60.1%	56.3%	
Understanding instructions, brochures and advertising messages	73.1%	78.1%	58.6%
Understanding bibliography related to your professional activity	56.9%	81.3%	
Understanding business letters	95.8%	100%	88.4%
Understanding telexes	79.2%	93.8%	78.5%
Understanding business documents and reports	81.1%	90.6%	86.2%
Writing business letters	93.2%	84.4%	86.1%
Writing telexes	72.2%	81.3%	74.6%
Writing and/or filling in business documents	75.6%	81.3%	56.1%
Writing work-related reports	60.9%	37.5%	
Communicating orally in everyday situations (in hotels, airports,...)	80.4%	81.3%	
Having conversations on topics connected with your professional activity	78.4%	71.9%	75.3%
Carrying out negotiations and/or taking part in debates related to your professional activity	60.3%	43.8%	59.2%
Having the linguistic resources necessary to be successful when being interviewed face to face	58.5%	40.6%	

As one can see most of the activities pointed out as being essential for the occupational purposes fall within the realm of the written medium in its two facets.

In the light of the teachers' answers to the question regarding the teaching materials the following are the ones they most frequently use: cassettes (93.8%), business documents and/or authentic texts containing monographic topics related to the curriculum subject (87.5%), textbook and/or exercise book (65.6%), grammar book or photocopies from it (65.6%), and texts and exercises adapted or prepared by the teacher himself (62.5%).

With regard to the relevance these teaching materials have to meet the students' professional needs, this is judged as high by 56.0% of the teachers and as medium by 21.9% of them. Nevertheless, 9.5% and 48.1% consider this degree of suitability to be high and medium, which shows a substantial polarization with respect to the opinion teachers hold.

As for the linguistic achievements the students get they are rather dissatisfied with them. Thus, on beginning to study the foreign language chosen at the Business College their level of specific linguistic knowledge (i.e. in the field of business) is poor or non-existent according to 28.1% and 53.1% of the teachers surveyed. Yet the situation does not appear to undergo a really significant change once the students have attended their lessons for six months, as can be inferred from the answers given by the students themselves who, at the time of filling in the questionnaire, confess that their specific linguistic knowledge could be classified as follows: acceptable according to 23.1%, low in the perception of 41.6% and bad or none in the opinion of 25.0%.

The existence of some kind of failure is then underlined and, therefore, the work ahead and the efforts to be made are enormous. However, we are perhaps facing a very favourable moment for reflecting on the reasons which may account for this situation and for starting to pioneer an authentic and effective change. Indeed the fact that a reform in the Business College curricula is in the near future may work as a productive stimulus which will surely have its results, though, on the other hand, it may also turn our task into something very urgent.

We have ascertained that from the group of students under scrutiny only 12.1% of them supplement their instruction in the foreign language studied at the Business College, the most usual way of doing this being to attend lessons in other institutions or centres. We find this somewhat worrying when considered in the light of their answers to three different questions, which allowed us to infer three very highly significant points: 1st., quite a substantial percentage (41.9%) says that the number of foreign language lessons taught per week at the Business College is not enough; 2nd., in their opinion, their level in the four linguistic skills stands between acceptable and poor, and 3rd., students are absolutely aware of the fact that, even if they successfully pass the subject, the level they will have reached will meet their academic needs sufficiently, but it will be clearly insufficient to cover their professional or occupational ones.

The relevance of the situation we have just pointed out is that, if we keep in

mind that we are talking about Business College students, some of whom are likely to become managers or directors, and we do not forget that we are fully integrated within the E.E.C., the level of linguistic competence of our diploma holders leaves a lot to be desired, and even more their personal effort to it is not precisely very high. Nonetheless, fortunately, the need seen by the foreign language teachers working at Spanish Business Colleges to modify certain aspects of their subject (especially the teaching activities, the use of teaching resources, and the teaching material used) can be interpreted as a clear indication that we are really willing to respond to the demands put forward by society and students, and wish to have our own taken seriously.

The conclusions of this research could be the following: Although it is clear that Spanish export companies attach a great importance to have personnel fully qualified in the use of foreign languages (they invest both economic and human resources to that end), there is still a shortfall in this area and, consequently the responsibility of teachers working at Business Colleges becomes greater. On the other hand, students seem to be perfectly aware of the demands of the labour market, have clear instrumental motivation regarding their immediate needs and are dissatisfied with the level of achievement that is obviously insufficient to meet their occupational needs, as they themselves and their teachers acknowledge. Yet, despite all this, their personal efforts to change their situation are rather weak.

So, in the light of these thought-provoking circumstances, as well as in that of the forthcoming demands that our full integration in the E.E.C. and its corresponding mobility in the labour market will bring, and also in the light of the prospective changes that the Spanish University curricula are about to undergo, the present moment would seem to be a very suitable and crucial one for implementing a true change. Fortunately, teachers are aware of the situation and although the work to be done is enormous and will put a great burden on them, they show themselves as willing to accept and act on the need to modify their teaching activities to a greater or lesser extent. However, in order to make such changes effective they should remember that Spanish export businesses give paramount importance to the written medium in its two facets. Therefore, foreign language teachers should focus their syllabus mainly in this direction, without, of course, forgetting that people working in Spanish export companies encounter the greatest difficulties in the oral medium.

Though we lack scientific evidence, we hold the feeling that the increase in the use of telecommunication technology that is taking place in the business world (we are referring to teleprinters, computers, etc.) will bring us a higher manipulation of the written language in detriment of the spoken language in some fields within the scope of foreign trade contacts. In a wide sense, we agree with the situation described by the words of Arthur C. Clarke written in his article "The role of English in the 21st century" :

Soon everyone will be using these (new instrumentalities) for such humdrum activities as looking up flight schedules and movie times, announcing births, weddings and deaths, checking facts from encyclopaedias and Who's Who (which will always be up to date) and exchanging instantaneous electronic mail. This sort of thing will require the ability to read English, and type - or rather keystroke - it accurately. Spoken English may become less essential.

(Clarke, A. C. "The role of English in the 21st century". *ELT Documents: 128 ESP in the Classroom: Practice and Evaluation*, Oxford, Modern English Publications in association with the British Council, 1988).