

THE MULTIFOLD TASK OF TEACHING ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SEEN THROUGH THE STUDENTS' LENS

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Abstract

Few students seem to agree on what business communication entails and many rely on their teacher's expertise to select specific elements of business communication to focus on during the classes. At the same time, more and more students are becoming aware of the complexity of communication in the business environment and expect their ESP teachers to help them enhance their skills not only from a linguistic perspective, for instance by providing them with strategies that would improve their ability to speak fluently, express themselves accurately and adapt the degree of formality to the context, but also from the perspective of non-verbal and behavioral aspects that are a prerequisite of effective communication. This article aims to analyze the expectations and perceptions on the ESP teacher's role expressed by several groups of undergraduate and post-graduate students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and to show how these expectations reflect trends in the business environment.

Keywords: business communication; effective communication; ESP.

1. Introduction

The role of communication skills for effective interaction in academic and professional life is widely acknowledged nowadays. It has also become common knowledge that communication – irrespective of the focus on the mother tongue or a foreign language – entails more than knowledge of words and grammar structures and involves a varied range of abilities. This understanding of communication skills has also affected people's perception of how the academic environment can help students hone their competences.

It has been more than a decade since practitioners and researchers, as well as students and employers reached the conclusion that academic studies should help them develop not just their theoretical knowledge, but also a series of soft skills that would improve their employability, as well as their chances of performing well with colleagues, business partners or customers. Just to give an example, in a study on the teaching of business communication skills published in 1988, Lewis,

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Woodward and Bell were building on previous literature in the field to emphasize the idea that the communication trainers' attention shifted from transmitting knowledge to encouraging students to become active participants in their own learning process. According to the authors of the study "instructors have become interested in doing more than disseminating information and having the students parrot it back on exams. They want students to learn to think and communicate well" (Lewis, Woodward and Bell, 1988: 67).

In previous articles, I expressed my confidence that an integrated approach to teaching and learning communication skills in English is the best way to encourage students to take an active role in the process and to understand that learning a foreign language and performing well requires more than just being familiar with vocabulary and grammar. In an article published in 2008, which was mainly based on the Master's dissertation written after graduating the Master's program in English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, I highlighted ways in which English language teaching can develop both language skills and critical thinking competences (David, 2008). I also think that students themselves should be encouraged to analyze their own needs and expectations. I discussed in several studies the results of surveys among students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and I suggested strategies that ESP teachers can make use of during Business English classes to support students in their continuing struggle to become more effective communicators in English (David, 2013a; David, 2013b; David, 2014). Overall, I consider that it is important to strike a balance and try to integrate the trainers', the students' and the employers' requirements in the foreign language teaching-learning process. After all, the final outcome of the students' academic experience is for them to have increased employability opportunities.

Following the same line, Conrad and Newberry (2012) highlight the necessity of adapting the communication teaching curricula to the requirement of the business environment by building a bridge between the "academics' emphasis on theories and models versus practitioners' emphasis on skills and abilities that produce practical outcomes" (Conrad and Newberry, 2012: 113). In their extensive study, which is the result of a comprehensive analysis of existing literature in the field of business communication competences, they propose the division of these abilities into three main categories: organizational, leadership and interpersonal communication skills. Each of these three sets is comprised of several communication-related activities, which are summarized below:

Organizational communication skills include a) initiating open discussion, b) resolving conflict, c) creating information networks, d) teaching important skills, e) using information technology, f) providing performance feedback, g) negotiating, h) writing business correspondence, and i) making convincing presentations; Leadership communication skills include a) arousing enthusiasm, b) being a change catalyst, c) creating group synergy, d) building team bonds,

e) expressing encouragement, f) being persuasive, and g) building optimism; Interpersonal communication skills include a) active listening, b) building rapport, c) demonstrating emotion self control, d) building trust, e) relating to people of diverse backgrounds, f) demonstrating respect, and g) building relationships. (Conrad and Newberry, 2012: 114)

Conrad and Newberry (2012) also address two issues that can be held accountable for the academic environment's failure to provide students with the communication skills that would help them integrate more effectively in the business environment. One of the aspects brought forth by the two researchers is related to the issue of trainers being so concerned with teaching theoretical aspects that they simply overlook the necessity of also developing students' soft skills, not just their knowledge. The second aspect covers the academia's claim that specific communication skills can and should be developed by students on their own in the real world, not through simulated situations in the classroom. Conrad and Newberry respond to the two obstacles presented above by emphasizing the great relevance of effective communication skills for all future professionals, especially managers, and by clearly stating that all the skills identified in their study are "teachable and learnable" (Conrad and Newberry, 2012: 119).

Hill, Gurinder and Hynes (2014) are also concerned with the gap between graduates' communication skills and employers' expectations. Like Conrad and Newberry (2012), they refer to the teachers' role in supporting the students' development of communication competences. However, unlike the two researchers, Hill, Gurinder and Hynes claim it would be unrealistic to expect the academia to fill this gap on its own. Referring to writing, which is the communication ability they focus on in the cited paper, they build on claims made in a previous study by Hines and Basso (2008) and underline the following:

Many business leaders complain that recent college graduates lack the fundamental communication skills, especially writing, necessary to gain success in the business world. The leaders place this problem on the universities' professors and administrators. However, the problem goes beyond the professors and administrators (...)

Business communication professors, as well as other writing professors, have to review basic writing rules briefly and move on to other topics such as presentations, research, writing emails, letters, reports etc. that have to be covered in the course. The limited classroom instruction time mixed with the need to introduce students to a variety of written communication in different media leave little time to actually "teach" a business student how to write effectively and efficiently in a semester. If students do not have the use of basic grammar, then they are not going to have fundamental communication skills (...) (Hill, Gurinder, Hynes, 2014: 278)

Both the literature in the field and the actual interaction with the students during business communication in English classes reveals the need for a more comprehensive approach to teaching, which includes more than helping students become aware of language structures. However, I wanted to check whether my students themselves are aware of the various facets of communication skills that they are supposed to master. The data collection methods and the results of the survey are presented in the following sections of the article.

2. Methods used to collect data

As the main purpose of the article is to highlight the students' views on the precise communication skills they hope to develop with the support of their teachers of business English, it is obvious that the students themselves represented the main source for gathering the required information. The participants in the study were selected mostly among both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Due to logistical reasons, i.e. access to specific groups, most of the respondents were undergraduate students. Thus, I collected replies from 75 students enrolled in the first year of study at the Faculty of Business and Tourism at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Nevertheless, there were also Master's students that participated in the survey. Although the number of respondents – 15 – is much lower than the number of undergraduate participants, I consider their responses should not be overlooked. I will come back to this idea later in my article to support my position.

The methods used to gather the information varied. The undergraduate students were encouraged to work in small teams of 3 to 5 people and answer the following question: "Which three communication skills are you most interested in developing?" This activity produced 27 completed forms, whose results will be presented in the following section of this article. The group of Master's respondents, 15 students enrolled in the Master of International Diplomacy at the Faculty of International Business and Economics, were asked to work in groups of 5 and design a poster on "The Dos and Don'ts of Effective Business Communication in English", with a focus on the communication skills they were interested in developing.

The survey was conducted at the beginning of the second semester of the academic year. The Master's students, whose experience with language learning and self-awareness are obviously more developed than that of their undergraduate colleagues, had already participated before in activities meant to help them identify their own learning needs and expectations. In the case of the first year students, although they had participated in seminars of Business Communication in English in the first semester, it was the first time they were required to provide this type of needs analysis. Among the reasons why the task was suggested to them in the

second semester rather than in the first one I can mention: the students' initial reluctance to express their opinions and their preference to simply following the teacher's guidance; the students' limited experience with communication skills in English, since during high-school many of them spent their foreign language classes reading texts out loud or solving vocabulary and grammar exercises; or the students' refusal to express themselves in English in front of their colleagues. At the same time, I consider students need to have time to get accustomed to the academic environment for better understanding what is expected of them both in terms of content learning and in terms of soft skills required to perform well. I noticed that whenever I conduct surveys among first year students at the beginning of the first semester the results are very general and mostly highlight the students' desire to communicate better in English – with no or very little mention to what this would entail or learn specialized vocabulary – once again without mentioning specific fields of interest. All these were issues that had to – and were to a large extent – dealt with during the seminars from the first semester before the students could be expected to expand their knowledge on communication skills and be able to set their own learning objectives in this field.

The task was presented to both groups of students in very general terms. I did not want to direct their attention towards a specific area of business communication, so I specifically encouraged them to just think of what effective communication means to them, based on their experience during our previous seminars, during their classes with other teachers or based on knowledge acquired from their readings or observation of the business environment, and then to identify three main skills that they need to develop to become effective communicators.

Encouraging students to work in teams to identify their language learning priorities had the major disadvantage of obtaining a more limited number of responses in terms of completed forms – in the case of the undergraduate participants, respectively posters – in the case of the Master's students. However, this method of collecting data had a series of advantages which in my opinion outweigh the negative aspect previously mentioned. The survey was conducted during one of the seminars, so my intention was to make it an interactive activity in which the participating students get the chance to actually communicate in English, brainstorm ideas and negotiate with their colleagues until they come up with a list that reflects their needs as a group rather than individuals. I also hoped that the discussions with their colleagues would make them take the task more seriously, as well as make them think twice about their own expectations in terms of language and soft skills learning, since for this specific task to be completed they were supposed to explain to their colleagues why they want specific abilities to be added to the list, as well as listen to their colleagues' explanations and compare those to their own views.

3. Main findings – undergraduate students

Since most of the undergraduate students participating in the survey were at a relatively low level in terms of language proficiency (A2, B1), I expected their answers to reveal their interest especially in developing their vocabulary and grammar. However, their responses revealed they are also interested in more subtle aspects of communication. As shown in the image, they think their seminars of business communication in English should help them boost a series of soft skills that are not necessarily related to their use of the English language.

Thus, the main target skill that the responding students are interested in acquiring – and one that tends to be overlooked in many language teachers' lesson planning – is a confident attitude – mentioned in 10 of the 27 collected forms. Active listening competences – referred to in 9 of the forms – come second, followed by the ability to control body language – included in 7 forms, a competence which, just like the first one on the students' list, is not part of the core syllabus designed by/ for foreign language teachers. The fourth ability on the list also came as a surprise, since it is related to the respondents' wish to improve their empathy level. The list continues with competences which belong to a greater extent to the area of communication skills in a foreign language. Knowledge of the language and fluency were each mentioned in 4 forms. Then, being able to use a broad range of vocabulary items was referred to in 3 responses. The same number of references were made to other two skills whose development is not necessarily perceived as the traditional task of the ESP teachers and their students: being able to control emotions and minimize stress and being flexible. Competences as using accurate grammar, speaking clearly and loudly, and improving accent and pronunciation were each mentioned in two of the submitted forms.

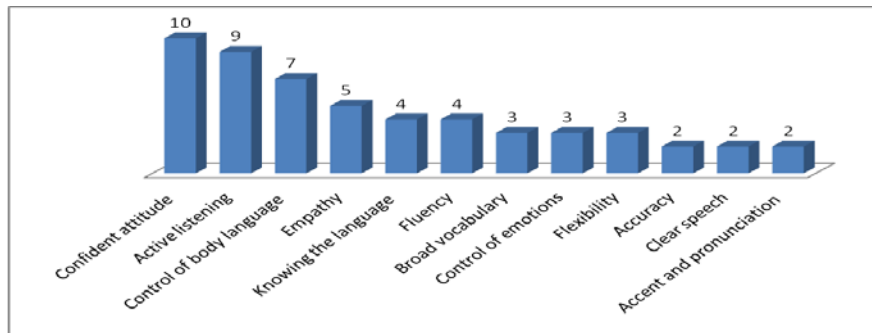
It is worth mentioning that there were many clues which showed that the students took the task seriously. Although they were required to discuss and produce a list of the three communication skills they perceived as relevant, without being specifically asked to provide any additional information, many of the teams also provided useful explanations. As regards the confident attitude, some responses highlighted that this type of attitude makes the speaker seem more prepared, helps him to convince the audience that the message transmitted is the right one and to gain their trust. Regarding the active listening competences, some respondents mentioned that listening can help them to learn the language faster, to show the other speaker that they are interested in the message, to gain respect and be considered polite because they do not interrupt, or to avoid misunderstanding the other person. Two teams also defined active listening, stating that in their opinion it involves understanding not just words, but also how the speaker feels, or listening both to what words are spoken and to how they are spoken. The ability to control body language was described as a helpful tool for reinforcing the verbal one, as

well as a very important means of communication for people who have trouble making themselves understood through the spoken language. The respondents also offered interesting information about empathy, irrespective of whether they used the term itself or referred to the ability of encouraging people, making them feel welcome and appreciated or to emotional awareness, described as the ability of relating to other people. Some of those who actually used the terms “empathy” in their responses defined it as the ability to place yourself in another person’s shoes, understand their position and adapt your speech accordingly. It was also interesting to notice that in several cases suggestions were made for improving specific skills. For instance, the members of one team stated that knowledge of the language can be enhanced through practice, reading books, getting in touch with native or non-native speakers of English, watching movies, listening to music in English, while students from another team identified several means of enriching their vocabulary: practice, reading scientific articles, listening to business talks on the Internet or on television to be able to use language adapted to the context and avoid using jargon in situations which do not require it. Fluency, control over one’s emotions and improved accent and pronunciation were perceived as facilitators of better understanding of the message. Last but not least, being flexible was described as the possibility to adapt to the context and the audience, for instance by using formal or informal language appropriately.

As shown in the previous paragraph, and as the image clearly illustrates, 5 of the 12 communication skills identified as priorities by the students challenge the traditional perception of the role of ESP teachers. Rather than being satisfied with receiving support for developing the four core communication competences – i.e. listening, reading, speaking, writing – the students enrolled in business communication in English seminars are concerned as well with other soft skills. The question that remains unanswered – at least in this article – is to what extent the ESP teacher can help students boost competences as self-confidence, students’ ability to control their own body language and their emotions, empathy or flexibility, whose development lies in the area of personal self-development rather than in the field of academic performance.

Apart from the skills mentioned in at least two of the sheets of paper where the students recorded their responses, there were several other skills – each of them mentioned only in one of the forms. I grouped these skills in two main categories:

- a) Personal development and critical thinking skills (7 references): accepting criticism; being yourself; being honest; being patient; being persuasive; being creative; knowing how to develop a subject and support a point of view.
- b) Social skills (5 references): being open-minded; treating people fairly; knowing how to get and maintain people’s attention; encouraging the other speaker; being ready to learn from others.



Undergraduate students' target communication skills

4. Main findings – Master's students

As previously stated in this article, the approach adopted to identify Master's students' expectations was different. Unlike their undergraduate colleagues, who were asked to identify their target communication skills in English, the postgraduates were encouraged to draw posters highlighting their perception of what effective business communication entails. The group of 15 students produced 3 posters covering the topic of "The Dos and Don'ts of Effective Business Communication in English", which are illustrated in Appendices 1, 2 and 3 and which I will briefly present in the following paragraphs.

The creators of the first poster – a copy of which you can see in Appendix 1 – described the entire communication process as a tree. During the presentation of their design, they explained that, just like a tree, good communication requires several basic skills which can be seen as the root of the process. If the root is not healthy, then the branches cannot survive either. Applied to their drawing, they said that if people do not respect the dos they drew at the bottom of the tree, then the result will be a negative one, which they illustrated in the top section of their image.

In their opinion, the rules of effective communication that should stay at the basis of the entire process are: being concise, being diplomatic, being curious, being respectful, being sociable, having good negotiation skills, having good body language skills, being serious, being a good listener, being friendly and sociable, being confident, being honest, being loyal or having an "Oh, tell me more!" attitude. Obviously, most if not all the competences mentioned in the list can be acquired and developed by the students themselves out of the classroom rather than during their ESP seminars.

The lack of good communication skills leaves room for the appearance of attitudes that most likely result in communication breakdowns. In the analyzed poster, the lack of a solid basis leads to a situation in which the participants in the

communication process are mean, irresponsible, uninformed, stubborn, rigid, quiet, bored, never in the mood, refuse to listen and keep interrupting the other speakers. Just as in the case of the abilities presented in the previous paragraph, these competences are part of the students' self-development plan rather than something that can be introduced in the ESP's teacher lesson planning.

The second poster – included in Appendix 2 – identified the following rules as prerequisites of effective business communication:

- Speak respectfully;
- Have a clear message;
- Give feedback;
- Be confident;
- Have eye-contact;
- Use the right tone;
- Consider other opinions.

On the other hand, the attitudes that should be avoided due to their negative impact on the effectiveness of communication are:

- Don't be rude;
- Don't patronize;
- Don't lie in your own interest;
- Don't talk too much;
- Don't overreact;
- Don't dominate the discussion;
- Don't stare;
- Don't change the subject abruptly;
- Don't avoid answering questions.

It is obvious that the group of students who designed this poster are aware of the relevance of verbal and non-verbal skills that require knowledge of the language, as well as the ability to adapt language to specific situations. At the same time, they showed their interest in developing soft skills that would help them keep an open mind and maintain friendly relationships with the people with whom they interact.

Poster 3 – which can be seen in Appendix 3 of the article – also reveals the creating team's confidence that attitudes are more relevant for the success or failure of communication processes than the actual words one uses to share opinions and express points of view.

The Dos, as presented by the group of students, are:

- Lobby;
- Work well in a group;
- Be serious;
- Be inventive;

- Be punctual;
- Be responsible;
- Show curiosity;
- Sociability.

The Don'ts are the following:

- Don't have a critical attitude;
- Don't just target your own interest;
- Don't be impatient;
- Don't be immoral;
- Don't be nervous;
- Don't be impulsive;
- Don't be reticent;
- Don't be radical;
- Don't be temperamental;
- Don't be selfish;
- Don't be possessive;
- Don't be antisocial.

The Master's students who designed the last poster presented in this article made a lot of mistakes, especially in terms of spelling. However, even though they were aware of the obstacles they might face because of the low familiarity with specific English words, they still considered other skills to be more relevant for the success of their professional interactions.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to highlight once again the idea that according to the literature in the field of business communication and to the numerous studies carried out in this area, the university graduates' ability to communicate effectively is one of the most relevant competences that employers are looking for. As proven in this study, students themselves are aware of the need to develop these abilities. At the same time, they seem to have understood that communication in a foreign language requires a complex set of skills that go beyond familiarity with the language itself. Thus, the results of the survey presented in the article clearly reveal that students expect their ESP teachers to help them enhance their skills not only from a linguistic perspective, but also from the perspective of non-verbal and behavioral aspects.

Although some members of the academia may perceive these expectations as too high, it is obvious that teachers of business communication in English cannot ignore their students' needs and expectations and do their best to support them in their efforts. They should become facilitators and encourage their students to become familiar with new content (e.g. specialized vocabulary, language structures

adapted to specific situations) through activities that also help students develop soft skills. Debates, role-plays, team projects or simulations are only some examples of language learning methods which improve students' abilities to adapt not only their language, but also their attitude to the context, as well as to the other participants in the communication process.

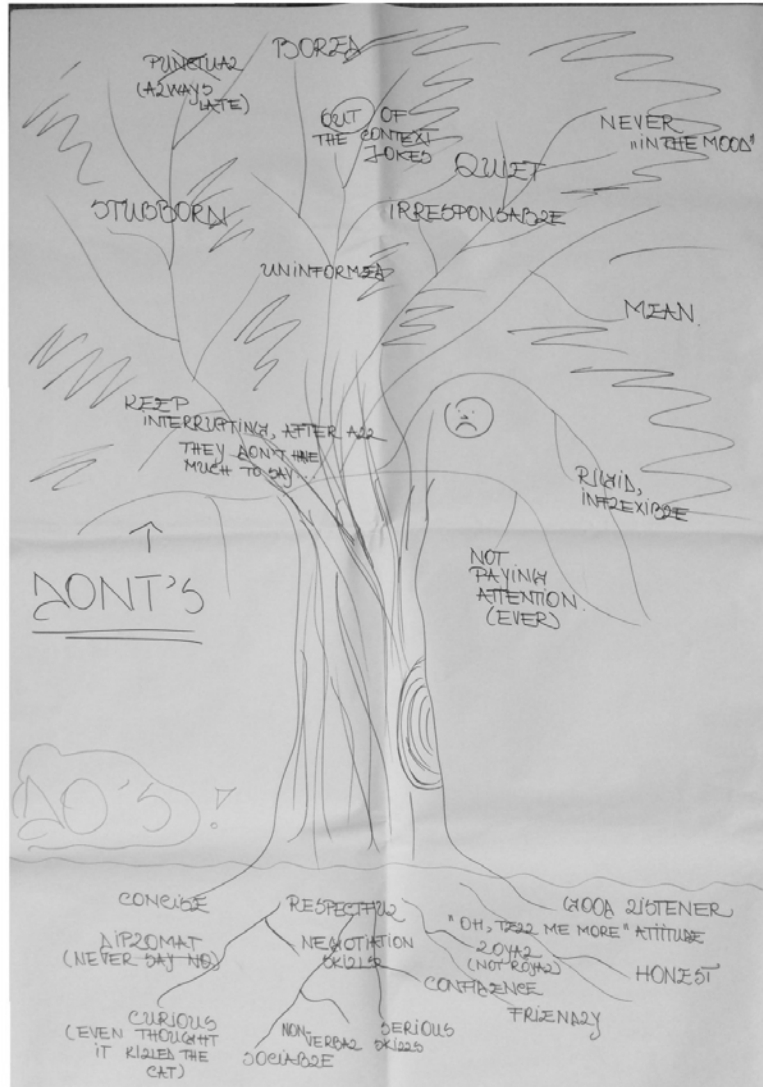
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Appendix 1



Appendix 2



Appendix 3

