

MARKETING GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BUSINESS ENGLISH KNOWLEDGE FOR THEIR FUTURE CAREERS

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Abstract. Technologically-enhanced learning solutions now have become the norm in language learning practices and are used as powerful supplement to traditional classroom experience. In a multitude of e-solutions ESP educators are always in a search of adaptable tools to meet specific demands of their target audiences. Due to its omnipresence and widespread relevance across diverse disciplines and professions. Business English has become an essential demand of different target groups. Among the available tools for ESP learners, digital portfolios have become a useful component of course work supporting multiple literacies and foreign language skills. Owing to their customizability ESP educators can harness their potential in numerous ways. While highlighting the potential educational use of digital portfolios the paper draws on marketing students' views regarding the importance of Business English education collected as part of a reflective writing assignment. The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to provide an insight into students' analytical perspective of the importance of Business English knowledge for their prospective business careers and businesses in general. Findings from the study indicate that all students perceive the key role of competence in Business English as a new job requirement and a clear pathway to career success. The challenges identified are students' frustrations and resistance to speaking the language, as well as their concerns about the lack of English knowledge as an impediment to their future career advancements.

Key words: ESP, digital portfolio, Business English, student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Within the scope of English as a foreign language (EFL) a subcategory of English for special purposes (ESP) – in our case, Business English – occupies the pedestal due to its widespread relevance across diverse disciplines and professions as a mandatory tool for communication between non-native and native or other non-native speakers in business-related contexts and intercultural business encounters. As a comparable concept Martins (2017: 62) mentions the expression

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) exactly due to its aforementioned focus on business interaction aimed at achieving mutual intelligibility in multi-cultural or *lingua franca* situations. In the light of business internationalization Geng (2017: 322) calls it 'the inevitable product of economic globalization' and as a new field of study or a special branch of learning it. Zhu, Peng, Zhang and Xi (2011: 379) claim it to be the one with the fastest development. It is continuously developed as to match graduates' needs in their efforts to work and succeed in global competition (Prasodjo, Zaki and Moksini, 2021: 1). Namely, the need for a universal language for conducting business and conversing across different cultures has been recognized of extreme importance for contemporary workforce as it increases the chances of getting a job in multinational companies and guarantees better and efficient communication playing the key role in future specializations and career advancements. Moreover, the fact is that the common use of English is a trend that cannot be changed (Grenier, 2015: 9), thus justifying language learning as an investment in human capital which enables and accelerates economic activity (ibid.: 3). The mentioned is the simple rationale behind the increasing demand for Business English (BE) knowledge referred to by Xi (2018: 11) as 'the foundation of the business communication'.

In order to speed up the language acquisition and achieve the best possible outcomes the need for educational technology solutions for the classroom is on the rise. To meet this end, language classrooms have been making use of technology with the aim to provide supplementary practices in language courses (Akyuz and Yavuz, 2015: 766). Moreover, the digital landscape has been long recognized as a prosperous language-learning platform and as such supportive of up-to-date, autonomous and transdisciplinary language acquisition and corresponding to the needs of new millennium learners at all levels of education. Speaking in favor of multimedia tools in teaching Bykonina, Borysenko, Zvarych, Harbuza and Chepur (2019: 115) claim that their application immensely changes the students' learning experience and increases their involvement in the learning process. One of the digital classroom solutions which augment the learning experience, support learner-centered learning and serve as a tool for reflection and an assessment method for educators are digital portfolios. Their real-life applicability, career relevance as well as the global need for them make them a perfect match for BE classes whereas their customizability is a solution for various purposes that ESP can benefit from.

The purpose under study in the paper were students' views about the importance of BE knowledge collected through digital portfolios, among whose multiple purposes their applicability as opinion collection platforms additionally attracts attention. Understanding students' perceptions of BE as a university course as well as its relevance for the future careers is a necessary prerequisite for understanding also their professional motivation and needs in terms of ESP education and the impact thereof on curriculum, i.e. syllabus design. Therefore,

this research has two objectives, namely, to find out marketing graduates' opinion about the importance of BE knowledge and training in general and the perception of its relevance for their prospective careers in an international workplace.

Finally, the theoretical significance of this study refers to additional information it provides for higher education authorities, curriculum and/or syllabus designers about students' current perceptions of communication ability in English as an essential workplace skill. Moreover, students' views presented in the study convey information suggestive of the relevance of BE knowledge for broader student audiences which makes it a potential course of interest across disciplines. The researchers additionally hope this research may be of practical significance for BE educators in order to further develop and boost both the quality of content delivery and also students' recognition and motivation for Business English mastery.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

English proficiency is a *sine qua non* of the 21st century workplace and is as such vital for career prospects and advancements in the global arena. Consequently, requirements for BE communication skills are on the rise which contributes to emerging needs for this specialized area of English. The world economy requires fluent English speakers whose awareness of BE importance affects the motivation for developing and improving their respective language skills in the same way as it requires higher education (HE) settings to be responsive to the aforementioned facts. Thus, this study is focused on the importance of BE from students' own perspectives, and exactly the perspectives are valuable as a basis for curriculum developers (Smythe and Nikolai, 2002, cited by Wang and Shen, 2019: 20) whose responsibility is to create curricula in compliance with labor market requirements as it is 'the major means of meeting human resource needs' (Phuong and Nguyen, 2019: 89). The mentioned justifies research like this as it has the potential to contribute to designing HE curricula sensitive and responsive to contemporary needs of the job market and improving BE not only in HE institutions for business majors but also across disciplines. Additionally, it should assist students in becoming more aware of the importance of business communication in English once they enter the business world.

There is a large amount of research demonstrating students' perceptions of various English language courses, language skills abilities, teaching methods or evaluations of the teaching reality experience in general (Kung and Chuo, 2002; Sung and Yeh, 2012; AbuSa'aleek, 2015; Jiménez, 2018; Romadhon, Hikmah and Hellystia, 2018; Kamugisha, 2021). As it can be seen in the resources, the biggest country that acknowledges the importance of business-related knowledge and launches BE undergraduate programs in universities is China, which is additionally highly perceptive of introducing specialized programs as part of

the BE programs goals, such as intercultural communication education (Guiyu and Yang, 2016; Simpson, Dervin and Tao, 2022). Recently, there has been a range of specialized studies that have examined students' perceptions of the following: English language needs (Ghenghes, Hamed and Abdelffath, 2011), BE curriculum setting including students' expectations and satisfaction with BE courses (Zhengguo and Wenzhong, 2016), teaching strategies and BE materials implemented in classes (Abduh and Sofyan, 2019), the influence of language skills on academic, professional and personal development (Hariharasudan, Nawaz and Panakaje, 2021), blog-based BE vocabulary acquisition (Ching, 2011), BE writing ability (Wand and Shen, 2019). Yet, research investigating current perceptions of the importance of BE knowledge and training is lacking; therefore, this research addresses self-reflections of Croatian students. Thus, the present study aims to fill in this gap by exploring marketing graduates' perceptions of the importance of BE knowledge for their prospective careers.

METHODOLOGY

1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted with the marketing students enrolled in the first year of graduate studies attending Business English course at the Faculty of Economics in Osijek, a city in the east of Croatia. The course offering 5 ECTS credits is a compulsory part of the curriculum and three contact classes take place over a course of 15 weeks once a week. The teaching is organized as a combination of 15 lectures and 30 practical exercises comprising individual tasks, teamwork activities, interactive activities, in-class presentations and discussions. The participants were both regular and part-time students ($n = 85$) out of which 57 female (67%) and 28 male participants (33%) aged 22–25. The cohort is characterized by heterogeneous language abilities and language learning background ranging from intermediate to advanced proficiency level. In 2018/19 academic year, the course curriculum was improved by implementing blended learning pedagogy which includes in-class coursebook-based instruction complemented by the digital portfolio project as a self-study learning method. None of the participants had ever had experience with digital portfolios used in education before this occasion. The project demonstrates the process through which the students were assigned to create their own digital portfolios using Google Sites website builder. The activities within the digital portfolio were carefully tailored to accompany the chronology and pace of in-class lessons and activities. Additionally, the entire portfolio activity was carefully designed and well-rounded and in the case of part-time students, who do not attend classes, it was used as self-sustaining learning material customizable to fit their language level, needs and employment status.

2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND PROCEDURE

This research was conducted to instigate the students to question and eventually recognize the relevance of BE knowledge for their prospective business careers in the global context. The objective of the qualitative research was to collect the subjective experiences of participants, i.e. to find out students' views and opinions about the importance of BE knowledge as well as perception of their own language performance and BE skills. Consequently, the study is supposed to contribute to creating motivating BE learning environments and university curricula that recognize BE as a career-relevant subject and a must-have course whose purpose is to equip students with a necessary 21st century skill and boost their competitiveness for employment.

The study employed a qualitative inquiry in which qualitative data were collected using reflective writing as one of the total of seven assignments comprising the digital portfolio project, the blended learning concept incorporated into the BE course. The students were assigned to read the text and watch the accompanying video from Harvard Business Review entitled *Global Business Speaks English* (2012), both of which were to be accessed electronically. The text was chosen as purposeful and motivating exactly for business students as well as promotive of their critical thinking skills, assuming it to be stimulating for them to reflect on. More precisely, 85 written reviews, i.e. reflective essays were collected in the course of two consecutive academic years (2020/21 and 2021/22), and the students' opinion was taken as data. The multipurpose aspect of the task consisted in the fact that it aimed at practicing and improving two receptive language skills (reading and listening), whereupon they were expected to reflect on the text (writing skill) and submit their reflection on the importance of Business English knowledge and skills for their prospective careers. Once finished, written reviews were supposed to be shared online with the course holder via Google Drive as part of Assignment 2 in the Digital Portfolio project. For the purpose of data collection Google Sites, a structured web page creation tool and a platform for producing, storing and sharing of students' work, self-study, self-reflection and also professional development in the form of digital portfolios was used.

The data collection was followed by the analysis of students' individual reviews for the purpose of which a thematic analysis was conducted. It highlighted everything considered relevant and potentially interesting for the topic under discussion. The categorization process involved the inductive approach in grouping the data according to similarities, i.e. the authors developed their own framework and identified the themes which appeared repeatedly in order to observe them within the research. The themes emerged from the data and were classified into three categories: (1) Universal importance of English, (2) Career-related English relevance, and (3) English value to global businesses.

FINDINGS

The authors developed their own framework of themes based on the subjective information provided by the students in form of their written reviews, i.e. opinions they hold about the importance of BE. The results of the study are presented pursuant to the three themes that emerged following the data analysis, whereby students' replies or quotes are labeled by S1 (Student 1), S2 (Student 2), and so forth.

THEME 1: UNIVERSAL IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH

Based on the students' responses it can be concluded that all demonstrate high level of acknowledging the significant benefits of what can be referred to as 'Englishization' due to its status as the fastest-growing language and a global phenomenon that we should all be grateful for (S 45). As one of the students formulated it:

I think that English will not endanger other languages and diminish their importance but will become a general instrumentality of communication that will open new doors and new possibilities for us. (S 17)

Though mostly unaware of the phrase *lingua franca* many students recognize the necessity of existence of a mutual language for human survival, i.e. functioning in the global world. The majority refers to English as one of the most famous languages in the world, a universal language, number one or leading language in the world which is becoming 'a big part of our daily life' (S 22) that has the potential to broaden the horizons both academically and professionally and 'gives us the chance to explore the world and new cultures and experience life to its fullest' (S 60). Due to its omnipresence knowing English is a must both for private and professional purposes (S 10, S 28, S 53, S 70).

A student recognizes that the importance of BE knowledge in Croatia is also on the increase (S 59), and another says: 'Wherever I turn I just see more and more content in English, and so in my Croatian country' (S 20) due to which it is necessary for the entire community to excel in it as it is 'a clear pathway to global success' (S 18). General belief is that due to its omnipresence, especially in mass media, it can be easily learned, and that it will have even bigger impact on future generations as they are likely to have more advantage over older generations (S 33). To conclude with a universal piece of advice stated by one student: 'We should use every potential of English in all spheres of life' (S 25).

THEME 2: CAREER-RELATED ENGLISH RELEVANCE

The second theme that emerged following the analysis of students' responses regards the importance of English for business purposes (here referred to

as Business English, i.e. BE) perceived on individual level as being relevant for personal growth, professional development and careers in general.

Findings from the study indicate that all students perceive BE knowledge as professional advantage and recognize its key role as a new job requirement and a clear pathway to career success necessary for climbing the business ladder. Here are three noticeable comments worth mentioning: 'The emphasis on the English language proficiency has been required in a number of globally known businesses' (S 55), 'It is impossible to imagine a manager of a globally known company who is not fluent in English' (S 44), or 'All those who want to succeed in business have to be aware that English is a must-have in their resume' (S 21).

Depending on employment status and work experience some students perceive BE as being more important than ever for their professional life, which can be supported by a student's claim that 'a day does not pass by without communicating in English with my coworkers' (S 83). Some students predict its even growing importance in the future and welcome the need to adapt to this new workplace requirement. A student stated that fluency in English is nowadays a common job vacancy requirement, especially by more serious employers (S 72), or a tool necessary for acquiring new skills needed for future careers. Two students provided the following explanations:

Knowing and learning English means opening doors that were once closed – being able to apply for jobs that require English, working with people who use English and working on improving my communication because good communication means healthy working environment and improving overall company economy. (S 83)

Knowing the English language can help me in pursuing and obtaining career opportunities, in advancing my career, and in specializing in my field since there are many more scientific resources to learn from in the English language than in the Croatian language. (S 11)

As for the English language skills and self-perception of English proficiency, in their analytical insights the students showed to be critical and aware of both their own strengths and weaknesses as BE users, and they demonstrate willingness for continuous improvements, such as of a specific skill they need to enhance. The challenges identified are students' frustrations and fears as well resistance to speaking English in situations which endanger their self-confidence. This is sometimes due to the feeling of being inferior owing to poorer English speaking skills (S 33). A common concern is the fact that the lack of BE knowledge in the workplace might be an impediment to getting a job, future career advancements or even keeping their existing job.

THEME 3: ENGLISH VALUE TO GLOBAL BUSINESSES

The last theme is focused on the business-related English relevance or the perceptions of its importance for the global workplace. As viewed by some students the issue of using English for business communication in the context of globalization is not a matter of choice but an inevitable and unstoppable process. Moreover, business existence in global environment directly depends on the stakeholders' ability to use a universal language (S 3), and this is why companies must be fully operational in English. As one of the students' claims: 'If we talk about the importance of advanced English language skills in the world of business – it is undeniably 'a crucial skill needed for international corporate success' (S 65).

Businesses should overcome language barriers if they plan to stay in the global economy, which is supported by a student's claim that 'many companies around the world have recognized the need for a unique business language that will be understandable to everyone' (S 38). 'Most companies nowadays value languages which their employees speak more than skills they have. Why? Because skills you can learn quickly but to learn a language takes time' (S 15).

The benefits of English use in international companies listed by quite a few students include: enabling effective communication, serving its customers, increasing trust, facilitating productivity and employee efficiency, speeding up processes, expanding into international markets, leading to business growth, resulting in strong business relationships and improved relations with clients, and many other benefits. To conclude the listing: 'Not knowing foreign languages hinders entrepreneurial proactivity and negatively affects business success' (S 30).

Lastly, it can be highlighted that international companies need to nurture the values of investing in employees and their qualities, and a good start is to 'raise global awareness' (S 11) and start introducing language strategies as a necessary change for business advancement and success. Yet, accepting a global language requires time and perseverance, but according to a student 'it is an inevitable change if you want to surpass your rivals' (S 77) and with many benefits in the long run (S 39). The task of senior and lower management is, therefore, to encourage the change of employee attitudes toward language learning, promote English learning as well as the use of English at work. To sum up, contemporary global businesses need to 'create language capacity for future business' (S 55) which will ultimately reflect the overall picture of the company.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The mastery of BE has become one of the standard job requirements representing an essential component of students' personal brand identity and giving them an added advantage in the global business arena. To contribute to the literature on students' perception about the importance of BE knowledge, this study evaluated marketing students' reflection on a text that was supposed to instigate their

opinion on the relevance of BE for their future careers in order they recognize their individual language needs, strengths as well as areas where improvement is needed. Consequently, the purpose of the study was to provide a reference for language educators and eventually curriculum and syllabus designers wishing to serve current students' needs in response to the requirements and trends in the job market. The findings from this study confirmed the following aspects:

- 1) high recognition level of the BE importance as a must-have competence,
- 2) the key role of BE as a pathway to career success,
- 3) awareness of the need for continuous improvement in BE skills.

Exploring students' perspective was certainly helpful to understand the motivation behind learning BE which is directly related to meeting the growing requirements for workforce fluent in English. However, several limitations have been acknowledged concerning the present study. The research was conducted only on a limited cohort. The participants were graduate students of marketing many of whom already have work-experience and their opinion might be experience-related. Thus, reliability might be slightly increased if undergraduate students were also included in the research. Additionally, the results may also display limitations unique to the professional orientations, working status as well as regional, i.e. cultural affiliation of students. Finally, students' perceptions might to an extent align with their proficiency levels, grades obtained in university or the attitude towards language learning in general.

Overall, the most important outcomes are students' recognition of career-related importance of BE knowledge, proactive attitude and long-term motivation towards continuous improvement of BE proficiency as a direct prerequisite to professional success and advancements. Furthermore, the findings of this research indicate that all participants acknowledge the importance of BE as a core business and communication requirement of the global market. This suggests that both the quality and quantity of BE training should be increased. Future research should explore whether an increased proportion of BE courses in HE would enhance students' self-confidence and mastery of this necessary work life skill that might consequently better meet the current labor market requirements and increase students' competitiveness. The above mentioned assumption additionally implies that the findings might be generalizable and applicable to a wider population of students from other areas of study and expertise. This may lead to the conclusion that BE should be taught not only to future business professionals but a wide range of students entering the future labour market. Thus, the study advocates for acknowledging BE as a necessary constituent of HE curriculum policies not only in business and economics but across disciplines. Consequently, the idea was for ESP educators to find value in the data and use it to additionally inform and motivate their students for long-term BE acquisition. Future studies could also research the perceptions of non-business students and compare potential differences regarding the relevance of BE knowledge for other possible career paths.

As regards the pedagogical implications of the method, i.e. the tool applied for the purpose of the study, digital portfolios have turned out to be a useful platform not only for continuous and autonomous learning, self-reflection but also for assessment in BE classes. An added benefit is their potential to be used as a qualitative data collection platform for the purpose of pursuing independent research into students' views and perceptions, as in our case. Due to the fact that the application of the portfolio project in BE classes started before the current pandemic and managed to facilitate students' learning during the pandemic as well, it can be seen both as an alternative and as a back-up for traditional in-class learning. This speaks in favor of adopting portfolio-supported BE or ESP classes as a method of blended teaching designed to meet students' specific needs and expectations as well as learning styles adaptable to both offline and online teaching contexts. No less relevant is the contextual authenticity of digital portfolio application as they can have real-life applicability in students' future professional lives.

To sum up, Business English is a work life skill the need for which is hardly ever going to fade and it will remain to be valued and relevant to entering and succeeding in the global workplace. Exactly this relevance has the potential to make it an ESP course in HE beneficial to students across disciplines.

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