

## **BUSINESS ENGLISH: A KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILL?**

**Luiza CARAIVAN**

***Abstract:** A basic employability skill is represented by a good command of the English language, which is required by international employers and governments. Students also realize that there are economic benefits in having a certificate to testify the levels of spoken and written English. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has created the need for speaking as many foreign languages as possible, due to the great mobility that people have, in an age of global commerce. There are a number of institutions that support businesses, governments and individuals in developing the English language skills required by employers, providing the opportunity to take an exam and have a degree that is acknowledged world-wide. Thus, foreign language trainers and teachers should aim at developing the language skills of individuals (students, trainees) who are preparing to enter the workforce or who are already employed. At the same time, creating a valuable group of teacher trainers is also noteworthy, as student trainers must have outstanding abilities to train employers/employees and the students preparing to enter this group.*

***Keywords:** Business English, employability, language skills, workforce*

### **Introduction**

Employability has been defined as “the capability of getting and keeping satisfactory work” or a person’s “capability for gaining and maintaining employment” (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). It is closely related to knowledge, skills and abilities and also to the modality of being able to present them to a potential employer. It is a term that has been frequently used since the late 1990s, as they meant the end of careers in the same company or even job security. People’s ease to relocate and the rapid pace of technological development have redefined the term underlining its duality. Nowadays, it is defined as “the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment” (Brown and Hesketh 217, 2004). It is a relative chance to maintain a certain position as it is highly subjective and contextual. What one employer may find useful, another one may not consider fit for the short list. “Employability not only depends on whether one is able to fulfil the requirements of specific jobs, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers” (Brown and Hesketh 25, 2004). It is a term dependent on the supply and demand on the labour market. The same authors

also argue that there is a clear discrepancy between students' expectations of employability and the realities of the market: "there is also a 'subjective dimension' to understanding how people approach the competition for jobs and labour market outcomes, as issues of employability are intimately connected to the question of the self and social identity" (25).

Employability skills have been defined as "a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations". "A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy" (Knight 5, 2003). These skills refer also to the so-called 'transferable skills' (because skills developed in one area of your life can be transferred to other areas) or personal skills. When speaking about career and self-development, they can be also called career management skills.

Qualifications are 'hard skills' whereas employability is one of the 'soft skills' which are usually lacking in graduates. . Companies spend a lot of time and money training staff in general and basic skills.

Brown and Hesketh define two main types of individuals who prepare to find a job: those who will do anything to get a job, called 'players'. Players assume different identities depending on what an employer seeks. The second type is called 'purists', who believe that the job market should be based on achievement. The recent financial crisis has demonstrated that a degree is not enough to secure a job. It has also led individuals to analyse their employability skills, to develop them and to convince employers that they have those skills, to redefine strengths and weaknesses both for individuals and companies. It has also changed the positions of the top ten skills employers have sought. In this respect the language skills of a potential employee have become significantly more important as employers focused not only on the individuals' degrees but also on their specific skills, including language skills. Thus, we may note that Business English has become an asset, a must in the professional portfolio.

### **Business English as One of the Main Specific Skills**

A comprehensive list of the main specific skills required on the job market may include the following: team-working, making effective presentations, action planning, decision making skills, problem-solving skills, time management, commercial awareness, spoken communication, written communication, persuading, influencing and negotiating skills, leadership skills, language skills, computing skills, adaptability, assertiveness, lateral thinking, creative thinking skills, etc. Language skills are included in this list as it is compulsory to speak at least one foreign language.

Employers look for not only for a degree but also for an extensive range of skills in graduate applicants. Many of these skills are common to various career areas: communication, working in teams, leadership, initiative, problem-solving, flexibility, foreign languages and computer literacy. Sometimes skills overlap: leadership implies cooperating with co-workers, planning, organising, making decisions and being a good communicator. Verbal communication includes speaking on the phone, making a presentation, persuading, negotiating. Developing one skill usually means improving or developing a number of other skills.

Students or trainees can no longer expect that a degree (sometimes two or three) will get them a job after graduation. It will certainly unlock doors but, no matter how relevant it is for a job, there are many other graduates who are likely to be as qualified as they are. Thus, a mix of skills, abilities and personal qualities is needed in order to get that most-wanted position. Developing language skills is one of the modalities to make a step further to that job.

However, the focus on the job-specific English skills of learners should be also the preoccupation of teachers, trainers and school leaders. This is the case in the field of vocational and business English. Language teaching means both helping students develop but also helping other teachers to develop their students' language skills.

In this respect, the design of any business English training course should start with an understanding of the needs of learners and of teachers' and trainers' abilities to help them develop these skills. Each course should be tailored to the specific context (labour market) and an analysis of the needs of the employers is significant as well. Finally, an assessment of the students' skills should be conducted, in order to find out what skills they have, what skills should be trained and what skills are to be improved.

Traditionally, Business English skills include: communicating, writing a CV or a *Résumé*, applying for a job, writing letters and e-mails, writing an effective LinkedIn profile, interview skills, as employers look for people who communicate well both verbally and in writing. The ability to communicate both verbally and in writing implies maintaining eye contact, writing appropriately, using a wide-range of vocabulary and taking into consideration the audience. Being a good listener is another skill important both in English courses and in everyday life. It implies not only hearing but understanding information. Listening is a basic requirement that results in understanding the needs of the receiver of the message. The significance of communication skills increases since business English teachers and trainers have started to include in their courses notions of non-verbal communication, of active listening, modalities of giving and receiving feedback, as well as critical thinking skills. Reading in English no longer means reading long literary texts (which is still valid for Arts and Humanities students) but it usually means reading and understanding information presented in a variety of forms (e.g., graphs, charts, diagrams), using a range of information and communications technologies, using

relevant scientific, technological, and mathematical knowledge and skills to manage information, skills that belong to various disciplines (e.g., the arts, languages, science, technology, mathematics, social sciences, and the humanities).

The majority of business English courses include decision-making role-plays and problem-solving texts that require students to gather and assess information, to select the most appropriate solution taking into accounts criteria and context. Although the ability to solve problems and make appropriate decisions is usually found in Business courses, it is not unusual to acquire these skills (which are crucial in a customer service job) during an English course. Students assess situations, identify problems, identify causes, and explore possible solutions.

Computer literacy means being able to work on a computer, not necessarily programming it. Working on a computer during a Business course may help improve computer skills, although this may not be the main objective.

Another ability that business English students gain is to be able to plan and organize effectively. In this respect, they analyse facts, show initiative, develop solutions, and evaluate processes and findings, while writing reports or proposals.

Personal development, self-motivation and confidence are also key skills, addressed in Business English courses, although they are not necessarily the target. Self-management skills are discussed along with the ability to influence others in order to achieve a target – leadership skills. Team-working skills will definitely be used during Business English classes as children learn to overcome issues and employ examples from previous work experience or their previous education. Apart from working effectively in a group situation, students are likely to be required to work on their own and take responsibility for their time and work, prioritize tasks, and meet deadlines.

Analytical skills may also be addressed during Business English classes, as students are required to gather, interpret and analyse information: such as: sales figures, supplier specifications, technical reports and financial information.

All the skills mentioned above are called transferable skills due to the fact that they are relevant and applicable across different areas. People develop such skills and abilities throughout life, at school, university, in their social life, as well as at their work place. However, these skills may be focused upon during Business English classes, as it is easier to stimulate attention by bringing them into play. Thus, learning how to write an effective CV, Resume, LinkedIn profile or a letter of application will bring out the transferrable skills that every person has and may identify their ability to perform a certain job.

Business English is needed for students to enhance their employable skills. English plays a vital role in offering students a key to access jobs all over the world. English also provides access to the information, to building networks in the business environment. A common language has always been needed in order to share ideas and explore cultural differences. In Romania only 10-15 %

of general university graduates have the right skills for immediate employment. Thus, fluency in English is one of the main advantages on the labour market, whereas Business English is one of the compulsory skills, as it has links with other skills, as we have already pointed out.

## Conclusions

The key point is that the approach of using Business English to help students learn business focus on employability skills while working in English is one of the major advantages in English classes. Being flexible in terms of learning objectives, teaching styles, learning outcomes and assessment is also part of the approach.

As we have already stated, knowledge of English is part of the skills required by the business world. Communicating in English does not necessarily mean producing grammatically correct statements. It also means having a wide range of other related skills such as presentation skills, persuading and negotiation skills and even personal and social skills. Business English courses are tailored to the needs of students so that they gain different skills from various areas in order to boost their employability.

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## NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

**LUIZA CARAIVAN** is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management in Tourism and Commerce Timișoara, „Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University. She holds a PhD. in English literature. She is the author of *First Steps in Business English* (2009) and *Writing for Business* (2011). She has also published numerous articles and studies in journals and magazines from Romania and abroad (*Orizont – Timișoara*, *British and American Studies - Timișoara*, *Romanian Journal of English Studies– Timișoara*, *Europa – Novi Sad* etc).