

## REVISITING THE LEARNERS' LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL NEEDS IN A GLOBALISED WORKING ENVIRONMENT

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***Abstract:** Changes and challenges in modern society have an impact on the linguistic and cultural environment. Mobility and adaptability have become mundane skills while developing a multilingual repertoire is gradually imposing itself as a condition in a business working environment. The emergence of multinational companies in an already-plurilingual environment, as the region of Banat has, is currently leading to a reshaping of the learning environment. Moreover, the analysis of learners' needs, the learning content and the teaching methodology, along with emphatic behavior models, must be revisited in order to optimize both language learning and multicultural communication. The goal of the present paper is to draw the attention on some relevant language learning features of the Romanian business environment and enlarge upon the new profile of the ESP learner.*

***Key words:** ESP learner, business environment, multinational company, linguistic needs, learning skills.*

### General Considerations

The business environment is continuously changing and, as the frontiers continue to blur, language(s) and culture(s) play an ever-increasing role. The Romanian economy places itself among the emerging European economies, thus more and more foreign companies are developing their business here. The working opportunities diversify intensively and employees are brought from several countries. Many companies are aware of the multilingual repertoire of their employees while others are still unclear about which skills matter the most now, which are more appropriate within the local context, which will be important in the future, and how to develop these skills.

Unfortunately, there have been few studies of the learning process within multinational corporations (exceptions include Brannen, 2004; Fruin, 1997). Inspired by Brown and Duguid (1991) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) learning through practice, Saka-Helmhout (2007) analyses the conceptualization of the process of learning as consisting of two aspects: knowledge flow and reinforcement of change in routines. In a Romanian context, more precisely in the Banat region, we would

like to draw the attention on the emergence of a new profile of employee who unconsciously and partially benefits from the two aspects mentioned above.

### **Institutional Context of Language Learning – the case of multinational companies**

From a methodological point of view, this study represents the first part of a broader research focused on language learning in ESP contexts. Therefore, the present paper will focus mainly on the description of leading positions within multinational companies. The data supporting our analysis consists mainly of observations carried on throughout one-to-one language learning sessions.

As far as employees' language status is concerned, several factors must be taken into consideration such as:

- the number of languages the employee knows;
- the level they have when entering the corporative environment;
- the type of tasks they need to perform and the extent to which they need to use a foreign language;
- the opportunities to develop their linguistic potential if involved in project with multilingual employees;
- the number and content of language courses offered by the company.

### **Current Language Trends in the Corporate Sector**

#### **i. Employees need to brush up on their English**

Regardless of the type of company, English remains a dominant language in the world of business. Despite the growing markets in emerging economies, English is still demanded for most workers, especially for those in a leading position. In most cases, multinational employees already have a certain level of English, but they need to improve their level.

#### **ii. The world economy does not depend exclusively on English as the only business language**

Although English may appear as a compulsory language in the world of business, new language skills are emerging for several reasons. The most obvious argument is that multinational companies can better collaborate and even develop powerful relationships when dialogues take place in customers' native tongues. Therefore, the need for diversified language training is strongly related to the projects in which the company is involved, at both a geographical and cultural levels. In the Banat region, one example is the case of the French company

Auchan which opened its supermarkets in Hungary and immediately after that, in Romania. As the trainers were from the Hungarian leading positions, Hungarian has gradually entered and developed as a spoken language in the business environment of this company, even though its span remains limited.

iii. Employees need to adapt in complex linguistic environments

Taking into consideration the degrees of professional mobility at global level, employees cannot isolate themselves from a linguistic point of view. They are bound to develop flexible skills regarding their linguistic repertoire. The world of business is so dynamic that adaptation is the most demanded skill.

### **Current Perspectives in a Romanian Context**

After thoroughly analysing the data selected from our observations over a period of six months, several remarks can be made. In most cases, companies choose the option of enrolling certain employees in **intensive language training programs**, especially those which facilitate conversation practice and listening activities. The purpose is to be able to engage in dialogue with native speakers or other learners. Although online training allows greater flexibility, most employees prefer traditional classes where they can come in contact with the language in a lower-risk context.

Companies usually ask for **collective courses** for their employees if they enroll in a new multinational project or **individual courses** in order to meet the personalized needs of an employee. The majority of courses are assured for a specific period of time, before the beginning of a project or during its development, if the linguistic issues become an obstacle.

In some companies, employees with more than 5-years' experience and constantly involved in multinational projects, have developed **multilingual skills**. Although they have mostly **partial competencies** in various languages, they are able to use their linguistic baggage in order to accomplish the tasks they are demanded. They are not so much interested in speaking correctly but in managing to pass on the meaning and be understood by their interlocutor.

Consequently, the skills mostly required are **listening** and **speaking**. The employees specifically require intensive practice of these skills. In addition, enriching **specialized vocabulary** is another target of the business learner, whilst grammar should be acquired in an "implicit" manner. One may emphasize the specificity of these learners' needs in terms of learning vocabulary items. In other words, they are exclusively focused on the acquisition of words and phrases from a very restricted lexical area such as commerce in supermarkets, negotiation in mobile

telephony industry or solving problems in a call centre. This new wave of modern employees are not so keen in speaking or using English, or other languages, for general purposes, but very closely related to their daily tasks.

One of the drawbacks of this type of learning for specific tasks, and intensively in a short period of time, is the possibility of not being able to use/re-use and stock the linguistic knowledge for a longer period of time. Thus, several “emergency-courses” may be sometimes asked in order to cope with the learners’ linguistic gaps.

### **Partial Conclusions**

Fortunately, the Romanian business environment benefits from many dynamic linguistic phenomena which ensure changes and development for both companies and language training centres. However, more research is needed in order to better identify the learners’ needs and the design of flexible and efficient teaching approaches. Detailed interviews with learners, supported by class observation, may orientate the researcher to draw an accurate outline of current linguistic issues encountered in contemporary multinational companies. Moreover, the cultural aspect of language teaching cannot be ignored and it should be constantly linked to the development of multilingual learners.

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