

AN APPROACH TO THE PROSPECTS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH LEARNING

Ruxandra VASILESCU, Assoc. Prof. Ph.D.
Spiru Haret University

Abstract

The future of English as a global language has widely been discussed for over 10 years, starting with David Graddol (1997), a language researcher and lecturer at the Open University in Britain, in his famous work 'The Future of English', to so many other language researchers, so much inspired by Graddol's book. Whether English will keep its supremacy as THE tool of communication in the future world is still debatable, fact is that English is still the language of business and information technology and it shall stay so for quite a while, in spite of the challenges coming from Spanish, French, German, Russian and... Mandarin. Once we acknowledge that, the question is: how can the teaching/learning process be improved in the future for a better and faster acquisition of English as the language of choice in the business world?

Key-words: *Business English, global English, globalization, information technology, sustainable development, universal language, neutral universal language, international language*

Overview on the universal language

The awareness for the need of a universal language goes far back, to the Biblical legend of the Babel Tower. 'All spoken human languages are descended from a single ancestral language spoken many thousands of years ago' (source: Wikipedia). As the legend goes, there was once an Adamic language (the language spoken by Adam and Eve – *Book of Genesis, 2:19*) and then with the Fall of Man, something happened also at the language level, a total confusion and a separation of languages. And yet the need for a unique tool of communication persisted so one by one, a few languages claimed dominancy in time, for various centuries in Europe. Latin was a universal language in the Middle Ages (mostly for literature, in justice), Greek (mostly for commerce). With the decline of Latin, the concern for a universal language revived. The failure of a vernacular language to become universal, the only tool of communication, resulted in the concept of a 'constructed language'. Therefore, at the end of the 19th century, several constructed languages drew some interest, among which Solresol, Volapük and Esperanto. The latter became the most popular, 'in an attempt of facilitating the transition to a global society'.¹

The creator of Esperanto, L.L. Zamenhof (*Unua Libro*, 1887, the birth certificate of Esperanto) intended to provide the world with a neutral and easy to learn language 'as a universal second language to foster peace and international

¹ 'Making a commitment to a universal language and a common script' in the 1995 statement by the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations: <http://statements.bahai.org/95-1001.htm#III>

understanding'. Although Esperanto has approx. one thousand native speakers and an estimated range from 10,000 up to 2 million, no country has adopted it officially, because Esperanto turned out to be not as easy a language as its creator hoped it to be. Criticism against Esperanto refer to its artificial sound and look, the vocabulary and grammar are based on major European languages, therefore, it is not universal, it is not culture-based, the vocabulary is too large. So, it seems that all attempts to have a neutral universal language have failed so far, mainly because of the artificiality of the created languages on the one hand, and because of the lack of *economic and political interest* in the existing vernacular languages claiming supremacy on the other hand.

Global English and the driving forces that propelled it

The need and wish for a global language remained, to enable communication. In 1997, Graddol (*The Future of English*, p. 3) predicted the forthcoming 'universality' of English: 'According to many economists, cultural theorists and political scientists, the new 'world order' expected to appear in the 21st century will represent *a significant discontinuity with previous centuries* (our underlining). The Internet and related information technologies, for example, may upset the traditional patterns of communication upon which institutional and national cultures have been built. We have encountered *a period in which language and communication will play a more central role than ever before in economic, political and cultural life* (our underlining) – just at the moment in history that a global language has emerged'. Graddol announced the major restructuring of the world language hierarchy, though he drew the attention on the forthcoming threat coming from the challengers Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, Arabic – mostly in point of the number of speakers of these languages.

Nevertheless, English is spoken now by 400 million native speakers and 700 non-native speakers worldwide (British Council survey, 2000), less than Mandarin or Spanish, but the latter has the global distribution of English. Another famous linguist, David Crystal found that non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers by three to one. On the other hand, as compared to Esperanto, the projected 'ideal' universal language, English is flexible, a language that may constantly be changed, which makes it very alive, attractive, interesting. English is the language of commerce, finance, international law, global media and sports, and it is here to stay!

Language theorists identified two forces that brought English in the forefront:

- technology;
- globalization.

The Internet has imposed a new way of life and its absence has become unconceivable – and it came to our lives through English. However, French, Spanish and Russian have gained field in this respect lately, due to wide scale translations of the Internet facilities. On the other hand, 'the current enthusiasm for English is closely tied to the complex processes of globalization.' But English is now much more than the key tool of communication in the 'global village'. It 'is redefining national and individual identities worldwide, shifting political fault

lines; creating new global patterns of wealth and social exclusion and suggesting new notions of human rights and responsibilities of citizenship' (David Graddol, *op. cit.*).

In spite of the doubts expressed by Graddol in relation with the future supremacy of English over other languages – an opinion that we do not share –, his book summarizes a few trends in the use of English worldwide, which actually come to contradict his doubts:

- the global spread of English raised not just linguistic, educational and economic issues but also cultural, political and ethical ones;
- the key drivers of change were demographic, economic, technological and long-term trends in society;
- the relationships between English and globalization was a complex one: economic globalization encouraged the spread of English but the spread of English also encouraged globalization.

The influence of English goes beyond the immediate needs of communication, it has changed mentalities and English competency is seen as a *sine qua non* condition for any socially active individual. On the other hand, the use of one global language threatens linguistic diversity, the aim of the European Commission. The EC is concerned with the fact that English tends to push European national languages to a corner. It is argued that the ability of speaking two or more languages will give the Europeans economic and technical advantages over the monolingual America.

Future approaches in teaching/learning Business English

English has already been included into the curriculum of the learners worldwide and it will soon cease to be a foreign language for many. In some countries, Romania included (2007), there have been proposals of adopting English as additional official language with immediate benefits in the stimulation of business and cultural exchange. Some companies have already adopted English as their official language, so that English competency is no longer an advantage, it is natural. Workers of the (near) future will need to be competent in more than two languages to be competitive.

Business English is by far the most popular form of English for Specific Purposes and it is taught both in private settings and in official institutions. Lately, the world of language teaching has changed dramatically and UK Business English providers reported a difficult year, with the volume of business falling (www.businessenglishonline.net). The courses taught in private settings are customized and involve the financial support of the enterprise. With the current financial crisis, courses of English, or of any other type for that matter, are no longer a priority. While before the crisis (early 2009) there was a trend of paying for individual lessons or for more skill-based micro-courses sometimes focused on just one skill, now learning Business English in school is more welcome and the interest for Business English in the classroom will revive as it does not involve supplementary fees or time. With the revival of classroom learning, new approaches are imperative for an efficient acquisition of Business English matching

the needs of the new international citizens. The current focus on language models, the situation-based curriculum and the focus on language accuracy is no longer relevant or useful for the learners. The needs analysis may reveal certain needs with learners, which may differ greatly from one learner to another. So, the endeavour of conceiving a curriculum is a difficult one.

Business English has been and is still taught as a continuation of teaching standard English, incorporating specific vocabulary, topics and contexts that are relevant for the learners; the learners approach the study of English through a field that is already familiar to them and this used to be deemed sufficient for the completion of the learner's language training.

A change of approach in dealing with Business English is required as a result of the society changes. We should start from the fact that Business English is used in business schools, therefore we should consider first the future of business schools and the course design in business schools. Or in business schools there has arisen lately an interest in a more holistic approach of skills. Two types of skills are gaining more ground: *behavioural* and *societal*.²

Behavioural skills are related to the ability to communicate effectively, to work in a team, to have a multicultural background, to develop entrepreneurial skills. All these skills need to be reflected in the curriculum, and they have been in most of the aspects listed above, except for the 'multicultural background' which is still approached as a generous concept, but hard to achieve. Raising awareness in multiculturalism through courses of culture and civilization in business schools may be much more educational than 'targeted skills' in particular situations, which restricts approaches and the learner fails to grasp the whole image. Such courses may be challenged at first, but they have actual benefits in the long run for any learner, in any environment they may work, considering that no learner/student is certain of his/her future line of business!

On the other hand, the *societal* skills refers basically to dealing with ethics and ethical values and sustainable development. These values are not easy to teach, but they definitely should be included in any curriculum of the 21st century. One might argue that it is difficult to change behaviour of learners who have reached the age of college education and that ethics is not the function of business schools, but as behaviour and society values are a constant in everyone's life as socially integrated individuals, they should be present in any curriculum and long life learning programs. The current focus on subject specialism is no longer enough to perform efficiently in a work environment.

Business English course design

In the late '90s there was a concern that education would eventually become virtual with the classroom-based model of education becoming obsolete and useless because of the ICT revolution and the need to provide global solutions of education in faster delivery time. There has even been a growth of interest in

² Hawawini, Gabriel, *The Future of Business Schools*, "Journal of Management Development", vol. 24, no. 9, 2005.

delivering course materials to iPhones and other mobile devices. In Japan, elementary education by means of robots is experimented, basically for cost-cutting reasons. At some point globalization and IT will join forces and will bring about a radical change in education. The school of the future is likely to become a network for lifelong learning, a knowledge and learning network.

But all these new forms of teaching and learning are still experimental, they have not replaced traditional classroom models but only complemented it.

It is common knowledge that communicating well in English means now gaining a competitive advantage in the ever more demanding world markets. But while for the school of the future, customized courses will be the best solution, for the current school the changes in curriculum design should consider the relevant business purposes and basic communication skills. The mobile employee of the near future working across cultures should develop a range of communication strategies and styles to meet various expectations. The focus should be placed on the acquisition of knowledge on the types of discourse, language register, cohesion and coherence to enable the learner to listen effectively, to speak clearly, to manage conflict, to give feedback, to exert influence in their environment and have an impact on the business partners. Language accuracy is less relevant, people can communicate and understand each other without being accurate. Strategic competence in English is becoming more and more important than language competence. An approach that leaves behind the learning modules, language accuracy and learning language in contexts and situations and focusing instead on language strategies and on ethics is more relevant for the learners of today.

Conclusion

While English dominant position as the international language is challenged, the need of only one key tool of communication is uncontested. Globalization and IT have propelled English in its top position and as long as English is the basic language of business, IT, media, law, it is here to stay! Business English, as the most popular branch of English, needs to adapt to the new trends and to be approached differently in the school setting. A strategic approach of the language is more likely to be effective for the learners than an approach from the language accuracy point of view. Notions on type of discourse, language register, communication strategies, ethics, societal values may add better to the profile of the future competitive individual.

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