
Economic Students' Perception of the English-taught Bachelor's Programme

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Abstract

The present article is based on a research on economic students' comfort degree regarding the experience of being taught in English. The survey was addressed to 150 1st year students within The Faculty of Accounting and Management Information, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies that are taught the whole academic program (6 courses and 7 seminars) in English. Although most of the surveyed students have a C1 level of English, our target was to find out the challenges of an academic program in English, whether there are any communication barriers, how comfortable surveyed students feel about being taught in English, taking into account the fact that the subjects that they study are economic ones, therefore they operate with lots of specialized terms and expressions which may unfavorably impact students' comprehension.

The present paper represents only a starting point for the research of this topic and our intention is to expand it and eventually approach it from the professors' perspective in order to get a comprehensive view of our research topic.

Key words: English-taught bachelor's programme, economic students' perception, comprehension challenges

1. Introduction

The English language can be called “the fastest-spreading language in human history” (Michaud, 2012) being “spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide - that's one in every four of us.” (Michaud, 2012) The issue of the ubiquitous spread of English can be found in the literature as well: Corcodel, Corcodel and Corcodel (2011, pp. 283-284) call English “the Latin of today”, “the main language of international trade and commerce”, “not only the language of contracts when one of their parties comes from an English-speaking environment but even when no native English-speaking party is involved” and such examples are numerous.

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So, while it is generally accepted that English is “the global language of business” (Neely, 2012), most people are fully aware of the advantages of the knowledge of this language both at an individual and economic level: “There is a general belief that success in English, beginning at the school level, is a key factor in national competitiveness and is of paramount importance to national economies in a globalized world.” (Hayes, 2012, p. 47) This awareness is valid at the governmental level as well and governments “have, accordingly, made significant investments in programmes and projects designed to improve the teaching and learning of English in state schools across the age range.” (Hayes, 2012, p. 47)

The questionnaire included in Sandström & Neghina (2017, p. 9) research regarding English-taught bachelor’s programmes (ETBs) in 19 European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries including Romania revealed the fact that “according to the professionals interviewed, ETBs were a novelty a decade ago when they were introduced but have become a relatively common aspect of internationalisation with many institutions developing more ETBs as a response to increased demand and global competition.”

It is a conviction that is transparent in the answers of the surveyed students as they all agree that the more economic English they know, the better for their future careers and not only. It is what a recent survey that was addressed to 16,344 employed adults in 26 countries like Sweden, Turkey, Great Britain, Spain, Canada and Italy concluded, namely “that people with higher levels of income or education were among the most likely to say English was most commonly used for foreign business relationships” (Michaud, 2012).

2. Research methodology

By means of the survey method we have tried to find out the students’ perception of their exposure to a whole academic programme (6 courses (C) and 7 seminars (S)) in English. The survey was addressed to 150 1st year students within The Faculty of Accounting and Management Information, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

Although it is common for every university to have programmes taught only in English, there is a lack of research on students’ feedback regarding such programmes from the linguistic point of view or of the English language challenges they face when they are, for example, first year economic students having to deal with subjects like Business Law in English or English for professional communication with foreign terms and expressions that may pose serious understanding problems.

3. Survey and findings

The survey is made up of seven questions by which the surveyed students have been able to offer their feedback regarding the English delivery of the courses and seminars of the academic programme they attend focusing on the challenges that it may pose.

The first question *“How many courses & seminars in English do you have? Please, list them”* serves as a starting point and is meant to show the wide variety of economic courses (C) and seminars (S): Business Law (C+S), Mathematics applied in Economics (C+S), Introduction to accounting (C+S), Management (C+S), Professional Office Applications (C+S), Microeconomics (C+S), English for professional communication (S).

According to the students’ answers to the second question *“Do professors read or speak English freely? Both?”*, teachers in this programme speak both freely and read courses. Teachers focus on reading especially when they deal with definitions and sometimes “they use Romanian as well to express some terms or themselves better.” Actually, the need to appeal to Romanian is absolutely natural, as: “equivalence in terms of complete identity would be impossible because languages are different and complex linguistic systems and translation takes place not only between languages but also between texts embedded in complex communicative situations.” (Chifane, 2012, p. 81)

A typical answer to the third question *“Do you interact with Romanian teachers only in English? If you do not, why?”* is: “Most of the times we interact with professors in English. I am saying “most of the times” because sometimes it is hard to translate an exact meaning from Romanian to English.” Also, “it happens to us not to know sometimes how to express a certain phrase in English at that moment.” So, their avoidance to use English is generally caused by the lack of knowledge of a certain economic term or expression or by problematic translations, cases in which they get help from the teacher.

Most answers to the fourth question *“If you do not know certain terms or expressions, do you ask your teacher(s) to clarify them?”* revealed the fact that students prefer to google the meaning of unknown economic words or phrases as this way they can find the information they need quite easily “we try to find the meaning by ourselves since we can find it quickly on the internet” or some of them are too shy to ask the teacher for clarifications and get out of their comfort zone: “I do ask them about unknown terms, but not all the time, I am too shy to do that”.

Our respondents’ answers to the fifth question *“What challenges do you face regarding the English language during the courses (seminars) taught in English? (e.g. new economic expressions, misunderstanding of terms, teacher’s stress/ fluency in English, etc.)”* brought to light some of the problems that they have encountered as speakers of English as a second language. Among these they have mentioned unknown economic English terminology (e.g. “new terms that I have to learn and accumulate fast in order to understand the lesson”), the teacher’s speed pace (e.g. “sometimes some teachers speak too fast”), albeit very sporadically teachers’s stress (e.g. “sometimes the pronunciation of some professors is hard to understand, but generally our teachers know good English, so understanding is not a problem”). In her paper, Radu (2014, p. 167) signaled the great responsibility of the teacher saying “it would be beneficial to analyze to what degree teachers using English as a medium of instruction perform their roles of facilitators in the educational process and promoters of an appropriate vocabulary and good use of English”.

But the most problematic issue of all seems to be the misunderstanding of some words which trigger serious damage to correct understanding of the respective economic content:

- “A big problem is represented by word misunderstandings, and because of that sentences do not make sense [...] or maybe my knowledge in some economic subjects (like Business Law) are too little.”;
- “The specific terms of a field can be hard to understand at first, for example, accounting terms.”
- “Some of us were not used to talk English on a daily basis, so it can be hard to keep it with the speed and the volume of economic information in English”.

The sixth question “*Do you find courses/ seminars in English useful for your English language improvement? Please, explain.*”

All respondents agreed on and even stressed the fact that English-taught subjects are of great help for their English language proficiency:

- “I do find courses/seminars in English useful for my English language improvement because of multiple reasons. First of all, by hearing and speaking English every day I get more accustomed to it and I become better at it. Secondly, I learn some terms in English that I might not have the occasion elsewhere.”;
- “Yes, I do find courses in English important because I am learning to speak English better this way.”;
- “I definitely think that they are useful for improving our English. Once we start practicing and listening to English more, we will get used to it and we will catch up in order to get the fluency of the language.”

The surveyed students were also invited to provide other relevant comments or examples and through it we have discovered that the students that have chosen the university programme taught in English have a very strong motivation supporting their choice:

- “We think that English academic programmes are more beneficial to us than those in Romanian. English is a language required by most if not by all the big companies. The fact that we know another language helps us grow professionally and personally. Whether we are talking about applying to multinational companies or communicating with people from other cultures.”

They also know they have not chosen the easy way, but they know for sure it is the better way:

- “Even if it is harder, I consider that nowadays you have an extraordinary big advantage over someone who does not know English, in your professional life, but also in your social one.”

Moreover, there is a certain enthusiasm about studying in English, be it economic English: “I really like to learn in English!”. Therefore, students learn it with pleasure, they are perfectly aware that studying economic subjects in a foreign language (even if their exposure to English is considerable) is a more difficult road to follow than studying them in their native tongue, but they also know that their efforts are not in vain. On the contrary, they will have a huge advantage on the

job market and not only: “I need to actually learn new words that will be very useful in the long run and courses like Accounting and Business Law are courses that considerably enrich our economic vocabulary.”

4. Final remarks

By means of the survey method some of our expectations supported by our direct teacher-student relationship experience were met. Absolutely all surveyed students agreed on the high importance of the (economic) English knowledge especially for their future careers and welcome the fact that all the subjects are taught in English giving them a feeling of security regarding their future and of certainty that they have made the right choice by enrolling in the respective bachelor’s programme.

Still, there are some challenges that they strive to overcome and the most common challenge seems to be the difficulty of the economic terms that inherently pose understanding problems or determine sometimes the feeling that they cannot keep up with the quantity of new economic knowledge in a foreign language (English). But all these challenges are perceived by them as being part of their preparation for their future careers and even personal development.

Appendix: Survey

1. How many courses & seminars in English do you have? Please, list them.
2. Do teachers read or speak English freely? Both?
3. Do you interact with Romanian teachers only in English? If you do not, why?
4. If you do not know certain terms or expressions, do you ask your teacher(s) to clarify them?
5. What challenges do you face regarding the English language during the courses (seminars) taught in English? e.g. new economic expressions, misunderstanding of terms, teacher’s stress/ fluency in English, etc.)
6. Do you find courses/ seminars in English helpful for your English language improvement? Please, explain.
7. Other relevant comments/ examples

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