Assessing students' needs in English language teaching

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Abstract: The present article is based on the analysis of the data gathered in a questionnaire survey conducted in the selected groups of the 1st year students who began studying English at School of Business Administration in Karviná in the summer semester of the academic year 2015–2016. The goal of the study is to detect students' needs and requirements concerning their foreign language (FL) study at SBA in Karviná. The data collection was carried out by distributing questionnaires to respondents and evaluating them. Evaluation of the answers has shown that a discrepancy exists between students' awareness of what their command of English should be and what their future employers would expect and their lack of motivation.

Key words: Business English, communication skills, students' needs.

Introduction

As Larsen-Friedman (2011) states, in the period of post-modern globalization, the language and culture teaching field has moved from unity to diversity as language and culture learners do not present a homogeneous group as in the past. This situation can be explained by the fact that there are more second language users of English than there are native speakers, the adoption of English to the status an international language which is closely related to the mobility of population around the world in search of jobs or better living conditions, and an increasing number of international students who want to acquire higher education in English-speaking and other foreign countries. Obviously, language learners also differ in a number of dimensions as motivation, language aptitude, gender, age, being monolingual or bilingual, etc.

Another important question to be discussed is related to the education system and its being prepared for the demands connected with. As Skalková (2004, p. 4) lists, there is a tension between the trend of homogenisation of cultures and their plurality and originality, therefore it is vital to include the topic in education programmes. Numerous studies have shown that the system of education is inflexible and very often unable to react to the changing conditions in labour market promptly. This fact is closely connected with introducing key competencies that are required by the current labour market (Belz, Siegrist, 2001; Lepič, Koucký, 2012; Veteška,Tureckiová, 2008; Bobáková, Chylková, 2014; Heinz, 2012).

Creating an English curriculum at the above-mentioned faculty depends on the requirements provided by so called specialist departments, for example the departments of economics, finance, marketing and management, which confirms the fact that teaching foreign languages is perceived as a service. Consequently, the

role of English teachers is to design the curriculum involving skills related to reading specialist texts, their comprehension and mastering business terminology (Quantanila, 2011).

This situation shows a discrepancy between the above-mentioned requirements and the application of current new trends in teaching business communication. Moreover, it is necessary to take into consideration further factors – the large numbers of students in language classes and the fact that their level of English knowledge has been steadily deteriorating. Students' needs and analysis are often neglected although it seems to be crucial to put forward a question related to the students' expectations and their knowledge acquired during their study at various types of secondary schools. Students' needs assessment is related to collection, synthesis, and interpretation of data about learners that can help the teachers in matching student needs with the requirements, i.e. the teacher is given necessary information about how to facilitate the educational experience. This information will assist teachers in setting learning objectives, selecting appropriate technology, deciding on curriculum content, and determining strategies for effective learning. Therefore, it is possible to estimate that the students' opinions will bring a new dimension that should be taken into account when designing English syllabi in the future. It was also possible to acquire interesting data related to the level of English teaching at respondents' secondary schools. The goal of the survey is to conduct a needs analysis of students taking into consideration the changing demands of labour market and their future employability as well as changing students' attitudes to motivation to be educated.

1   Methods

The present article is based on the analysis of the data gathered in a questionnaire survey conducted in the selected groups of the 1st year students (97) who began studying English at School of Business Administration in Karviná in the summer semester of academic year 2015–2016. The reason to conduct the questionnaire survey was the very low degree of student motivation to learn English and a deteriorating level of English towards the end of the English course.

The goal of the research was to carry out an analysis of the acquired data, evaluate them, and state priorities in students' expectations towards FL curriculum using the method of a questionnaire survey. In the first stage, the described research was based on the study of foreign and home publications. Next we focused on the analysis and evaluation of the data gathered in our primary questionnaire research, and finally we compared the gathered data with the current FL syllabi and listed recommendations for changes.

Data collecting was conducted at the beginning of the semester using the questionnaire distributed to 97 students of the first year during the first lesson of English. The next step was an analysis of the data carried out by the authors.

The first question involves personal data, the second, third and fourth are related to the languages studied at secondary school and to the acquired level in English, while the fifth question focuses on opportunities for using English. The sixth question is aimed at students' expectations during their study at School of Business Administration in Karviná while in the seventh question students are asked to list obstacles preventing them from learning English. The last eighth question concentrates on the most difficult English language phenomena for Czech students (grammar, listening, writing, speaking etc.). The students' answers and their evaluation should lead to amendment of the English curriculum, however, this is a time consuming process in the Czech academic setting requiring the approval of the faculty management.

2 Results

The distributed questionnaire consists of 8 questions (see the supplement) created by the authors to get information about respondents' language background, use of English in various situations, and especially about their expectations connected with English during the university study.

Question 1

The questionnaire was filled in by 97 respondents—80 Czechs, 16 Slovaks and a Pole, 30 males and 67 females with the average age of 20.1.

Among respondents there are 34 graduates (35%) from grammar schools (gymnázium), 23 graduates (23.7%) from business schools (obchodní akademie), the other 40 students (41.2%) come from various types of vocational schools, for example hotel management and catering and technical schools.

Tab. 1: *Students by nationality and gender*

	Czech	Slovak	Polish	Female	Male
Number of students	80	16	1	67	30

Question 2

All the respondents have been learning English since primary school with the average number of years of 9.5. Only 48 students participated in German courses with the length of study of 4.6 years, 28 in Russian courses with the length of study of 3.6 years, 10 in French courses with the length of study of 4.8 years, 7 in Spanish courses with the length of study of 4 years, 2 in Italian courses with
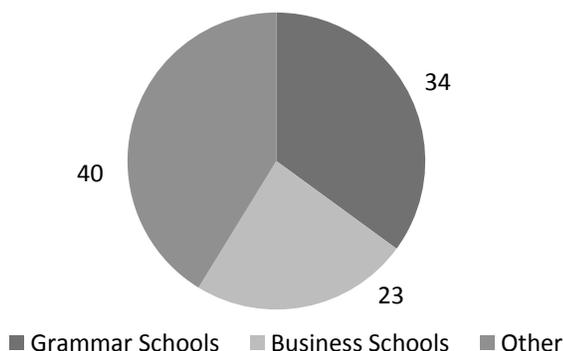
Fig. 1: *Original secondary school of graduation*

the length of study of 2.5 years, 2 in Polish courses with the length of study of 16 years, and 2 in Latin courses with the length of study of 1.5 years.

Tab. 2: *Languages studied*

	English	German	Russian	French	Spanish	Italian	Polish	Latin
Number of students	97	48	28	10	7	2	2	2
Average of years studied	9.5	4.6	3.6	4.8	4	2.5	16	1.5

Question 3

Question 3 was aimed at the level of final exam in English (maturita) where 57 students state they took the exam at pre-intermediate (B1) level and 25 at intermediate level (B2) while 15 students were not able to define their level of English exam.

Tab. 3: *Level of high-school English final exam*

	B1	B2	Unknown
Number of students	57	25	15

Question 4

Question 4 is related to the final exam results in English. Only 77 students listed their results—22 excellent, 22 very good, 24 good, and 9 satisfactory marks, which gives the average of 2.26. Data of 20 students is missing.

Tab. 4: *Final exam results*

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory
Number of students	22	22	24	9

Question 5

Answers to question 5 provide information about opportunities of using English by respondents during last 4 years. Communication at school is reported by 80 students, watching films and listening to the radio in English by 67 respondents, searching information on the Internet by 58 students, travelling by 47 students, communication with friends abroad by 38 students, and reading books, papers and magazines in English by 25 respondents. Seven students listed other opportunities, for example summer jobs abroad and computer games.

Tab. 5: *Opportunities of using English*

	Com. at school	Films and radio	Info on the Internet	Travelling	Friends in abroad	Reading	Other
Number of students	80	67	58	47	38	25	7

Question 6

In answers to question 6 respondents revealed their expectations related to the study of English at School of Business Administration in Karviná. Majority of students would appreciate developing speaking skills (84), expanding vocabulary (76), and acquiring skills in reading comprehension (59), writing (52), and developing skills related to specific communication situations, like meeting, negotiating, job interview, etc. (55). A lower number of respondents expect developing grammar skills (49), developing listening skills (47), information about culture specifics significant for business communication (26), and information about English speaking countries and their cultures (18).

Tab. 6: *English language skills desired by students*

	Speaking	Vocabulary	Reading	Writing	Specific situations	Grammar	Listening	Business	Culture
Number of students	84	76	59	52	55	49	47	26	18

Question 7

In the seventh question students are asked to list obstacles preventing them from learning English. The largest number of respondents reported lack of talent (52) and laziness (35), incompetent teachers (30), and lack of motivation (27). A small

number of students (12) list shortage of opportunities to communicate in English and only 2 students report other reasons, for example dyslexia.

Tab. 7: *The obstacles in studying English language*

	Shortage of talent	Laziness	Incompetent teachers	Lack of motivation	Lack of opportunities to com.	Other
Number of students	52	35	30	27	12	2

Question 8

Question 8 concentrates on the most difficult English language phenomena in respondents' opinions. Majority of them consider English tenses in grammar the most difficult grammar phenomenon (50). The other answers are related to skills, for example speaking (36), listening (22), writing (7), reading (4), and translation (3). Only 21 students perceive vocabulary as a problem.

Tab. 8: *The most difficult English language phenomena*

	Tenses	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Reading	Translation	Vocabulary
Number of students	50	36	22	7	4	3	21

3   Evaluation

The authors have submitted the following hypotheses:

H1: students have been learning English for more than 10 years, but are still on pre-intermediate level
H2: they are mostly graduates from secondary vocational schools
H3: they use English mainly for communicating at school and on the Internet
H4: they have numerous problems, especially with grammar phenomena
H5: they expect developing their skills in the area of speaking mostly
H6: they are not properly motivated.

H1 has been almost confirmed as respondents have been learning English since primary school with the average number of years of 9.5 compared to our estimation of more than 10 years. In accordance with the secondary school curricula studying the German language, which seems to be very popular in the Czech Republic, takes on average less than 5 years. However, the results have also proved that there is a big variety of foreign languages offered to secondary school students, for example Russian, French, Spanish, Italian, Polish, and even Latin. As far as their level of English is concerned, this topic will be developed in another article.

H2 related to the number of graduates from secondary vocational schools has been confirmed too because more than 41% of students involved in the survey attended the mentioned type of secondary school. However, it is interesting that the group of questioned students also comprises about 35% of graduates coming from grammar schools, which is a higher number than we expected.

In H3 about using English in everyday life the answers correspond to our estimation as 80 students state that communication at school, watching English films and searching for information on the Internet are the most frequent activities where English is required. The number of students who state that they need English for travelling is high, which gives evidence about increasing mobility of young people.

H4 focuses on estimated students' problems with difficult phenomena in the English language. The majority of them consider English tenses in grammar the most complicated grammar phenomenon, which is in accordance with our expectations, but students also list problems with speaking, listening, and other phenomena.

In the answers related to H5 students state that speaking should be especially developed, which corresponds to our estimation, but they also list expanding vocabulary, acquiring skills in reading comprehension and writing. It is surprising that students also expect developing skills related to specific communication situations, like meeting, negotiating, job interview, etc. A big number of students is also interested in intercultural issues.

In H6 we estimated that students do not have proper motivation, which has been confirmed only partly, as students list other important obstacles preventing them from learning English, especially lack of their talent and laziness. It is surprising that a high number of students express opinions that incompetent teachers are one of the obstacles.

4   Discussion

As mentioned above using foreign languages belongs to the key competencies of an employee on our globalized market. Syllabi at School of Business Administration in Karviná (SBA) have implemented a lot of changes and improvements to reflect all the requirements both of the market and the European Union and have been aiming to provide the students with adequate knowledge in accordance with their future profession. It means using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that students obtain B2 level in business communication after completing their 4-semestr programme in a FL at SBA.

The research has proved that students are perfectly aware of the necessity being educated not only in their degree specialization but to be able to react in specific situations in business environment using FL and various language skills—writing, grammar, speaking and listening. Despite this some disparities have occurred.

Nevertheless, they have been taught in FL for almost a decade and have passed the B1/B2 Maturita exam, yet they still do not feel confident in the grammar and other language skills which are expected from the independent user they should be. Study at SBA should implement the professional part of their FL knowledge using mostly new business vocabulary and situations. Nevertheless, it is not as straightforward as it is expected to be.

It seems to us that the following disparity exists between students' awareness of the necessity being educated in a FL in specific communication and their not having proper motivation for studying a FL. There are exceptions which are proved by their Maturita exam results or vice versa. However, this trend can be also noticed in not having enough willingness to take part in Erasmus+ programmes even if the number of interested students is increasing. In our opinion, lacking sufficient motivation can be a serious matter and challenge at the same time, and not only for teachers but also for those who expect knowledge from their employees. Employers should be more specific and demanding in their requests for FL knowledge applying CEFR classification to motivate applicants. Stating that they expect passive or active FL knowledge is not satisfactory and motivating at the same time. It is obvious that ability to speak another FL is becoming more and more desirable but employers advertise that applicants with FL knowledge except for English can have this as an advantage. We reckon that on the other side it could be difficult to find applicants to meet their requirements.

The following disparity can occur between passive knowledge of FL, proved by the research in the necessity to develop speaking skills, and the demand for active knowledge stated by future employers and required at job interviews even if it is not mentioned in the requirements. There is still one remark to be made about the position of FL in a study programme at SBA when it is difficult to implement more lessons with the necessity to be educated in other subjects related with students' degree specialization and with a large number of students in classes as was mentioned above.

Conclusion

The aim of the article was to detect students' needs and requirements concerning their FL study at SBA in Karviná to be able to implement them in FL syllabi and to reflect the current needs of European market and higher chances for their employability. The presented article was based on the analysis of the data gathered in a questionnaire survey conducted in the selected groups of the 1st year students (97) who begin studying English at School of Business Administration in Karviná in the summer semester of the academic year 2015–2016.

The submitted hypotheses have been confirmed or partly confirmed. Students are perfectly aware of the necessity to improve their FL knowledge, including their

speaking skills and proficiency in grammar, but we have to admit the big differences among students and their knowledge and attitude to the FL curriculum. As indicated in table 6, the most required and desired skills involve speaking (87%), vocabulary (78%), reading (61%) and grammar (51%). The percentages related to speaking and vocabulary are understandable while the percentage listed about business issues is surprising (27%) as students attend an economic school and is not in accordance with the market demand, what a small number of students is aware of. Moreover, the knowledge of grammar should be basically acquired in basic and secondary schools. The lack of motivation (28%) and laziness (36%)are stated as the most important obstacles preventing students from learning English.

Unfortunately, the survey results have illustrated a pessimistic view of the system related to English teaching in the Czech Republic. The survey has shown the consequences of an inadequate approach to English language skills development in primary and secondary schools, a negative impact of specialist departments related to the English curriculum design being limited mainly to business vocabulary, and a low level of students' motivation probably caused partly by the specifics of the region—a high rate of unemployment. Our findings seem to be in accordance with the views presented in literature and have proved that the Czech education system in the area of ELT is not adequately prepared for challenges in the 21st century.

Supplement

Questionnaire

for 1st year students of English at SBA Karviná

1. Nationality _____ Sex _____ Age _____
   Secondary school, name and place _____
2. What languages have you been learning and how long since primary school?
   Language _____ Number of years _____
3. What is the level of your Maturita exam?
   B1 pre-intermediate
   B2 intermediate
4. What was your Maturita exam result?
   Excellent
   Very good
   Good
   Satisfactory
   Failed
5. What opportunities have you used English for during last 4 years?
   Communication at school
   Searching information on the Internet
   Travelling

Watching films and listening to the radio

Reading books, newspapers and magazines

Communication with friends abroad

Others ⸺⸺⸺⸺⸺

6. What do you expect from your study of English at SBA?

Developing speaking skills

Developing writing skills

Developing reading skills

Developing listening skills

Developing grammar skills

Expanding vocabulary

Information about English speaking countries and their cultures

Information about culture specifics significant for business communication

Developing skills related to specific communication situations, like meeting, negotiating, job interview, etc.

Others ⸺⸺⸺⸺⸺

7. What obstacles can prevent you from learning English?

Shortage of opportunities to communicate in FL

Lack of motivation

Shortage of talent

Laziness

Incompetent teachers

Others ⸺⸺⸺⸺⸺

8. What are the most difficult English language phenomena? List three.

⸺⸺⸺⸺⸺   ⸺⸺⸺⸺⸺   ⸺⸺⸺⸺⸺

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