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The importance of English in business education in the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

The study is focused on the analysis of business English bachelor's study programs provided by Czech universities, and the self-perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program graduates in practice and their employer's requirements and evaluations. A qualitative-quantitative analysis of the data was done using three research methods: content analysis, questionnaire, and interview. The data were compared, and the results indicated both the positives and white spots of the study programs that could be of interest to methodologists and curriculum specialists in similar contexts.

KEYWORDS Bachelor's degree; business English; employees; employers; needs analysis

Introduction

As the face of international business changes continuously and business community becomes more accessible across the globe, understanding multiple languages is becoming inevitable in business communication. Though English, German, and Russian have been the most influential languages for years, other significant ones appeared due to economic shifts in the global business playground during the last few decades—Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, and Hindi. There are many factors affecting the preference of foreign languages in each culture—geopolitical, historical, diplomatic, commercial, educational, cultural, linguistic, strategic, and many others. For example, Spanish has always been highly requested in the United States (Kordsmeier, Arn, & Rogers, 2000), and there is no denying that the world's largest economy and its Hispanic population projected to double by 2050, will make Spanish increasingly important anywhere in the world.

However, the knowledge of English is inevitable to stand successfully in today's highly competitive labor market. Most companies require English from their employees as a shared communication tool in business around the globe. A total of 91% of employers in international companies stated that English is highly relevant in their performance (Martins, 2017). Business English as a part of English for Specific Purposes is a form of English suited to and used in business environments. The characteristic features of business English as compared with general English are clarity, directness, shortness, straightforward and direct vocabulary, simple grammar, and frequent use of time indicators (Spencer, 2017). Within business English study programs, the development of both language and managerial competences should be considered.

The concept of language needs identification as presented by the Council of Europe (CEFR, 2001) should serve as the priority base for creating a content to be taught. For a language user, the CEFR (2001) specifies two categories of competence and their components: general competencies (declarative knowledge, skills and know-how, existential competence, and ability to learn) and

communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences). Most often, six main categories of managerial competencies are distinguished: analytic skills, self-management, relationship management, self-awareness, goal and action management, and social awareness (Lakshminarayanan, Pai, & Ramaprasad, 2016).

Czech context

According to the first English proficiency index comparing the level of English language proficiency among adults in 88 countries from 2018, the Czech Republic ranked 20th worldwide with the classification of “high proficiency.” In comparison with other European countries, the Czech Republic ranked 17th of 32 European countries included in the index. Compared with data from 2013 and 2014 where the Czech Republic was classified as “moderate only,” it is suggested that the Czech adults have significantly improved (BD Staff, 2018).

Today, there are over 86,000 foreign-owned companies operating in the Czech Republic, which is nearly 50% more than seven years ago (<https://cfoworld.cz>). Many domestic companies also export abroad and cooperate with foreign partners. Naturally, the English language is required in more than half of job advertisements in job portal Profesia.cz (<https://www.demk.cz>) and in most multinational companies in the Czech Republic.

The Czech tertiary education system quickly reacted to the demand and has offered business English study programs since the 1990s. Seventeen universities and colleges (of 70) in the Czech Republic provide bachelor’s study programs focused on foreign languages (16 European languages and 1 Asian language). From them, nine institutions offer programs oriented toward foreign language for business purposes (named usually as English for commercial/special/professional/business practice/administration). Five of them focus on English as a target language. The other languages taught are French (6 institutions), German (5 institutions), Russian (5 institutions), Spanish (2 institutions), Polish (2 institutions), Ukrainian (1 institution) and Korean (1 institution). Only one such program is provided within the master’s degree as the bachelor’s degree is usually sufficient for the lower management positions frequently occupied by the graduates in the Czech Republic (<https://www.vysokeskoly.cz>).

Business English-oriented study programs usually offer a balanced combination of philological and business courses. Their educational goal is to graduate students with both an advanced English spoken and written competence and knowledge of management-related fields. The graduates are expected to be able to translate economic texts, conduct basic business meetings in English, or assist as interpreters at such meetings. They should be able to use their language and cultural competences for any kind of professional communication in multilingual and multicultural business contexts and environments.

The graduates can apply for a job in international companies, private companies, state institutions, local and state administration, financial institutions, foreign trade, tourism, advertising or event agencies, communication agencies, and other institutions where they can work as assistants, managers, and executive officers; start a career as translators or interpreters; or start their own business as freelancers (Portal IS/ STAG, n.d.).

Method

Content analysis

Five bachelor's study programs focused on business English are provided by five universities in the Czech Republic (further marked as A, B, C, D, and E). Only the obligatory courses of the programs were analyzed as the nonobligatory courses are usually structured according to the personal capacities of the departments and not taken up by all students as a whole. The obligatory courses (comprising different number of credits at each university) of the programs were analyzed and classified into the categories:

1. language systems (phonetics and phonology, morphology, lexicology, syntax, and stylistics);
2. language skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking);
3. literature of English-speaking countries;
4. studies of English-speaking countries (culture, history, politics, etc.);
5. translatology (discourse analysis, translation, and interpretation);
6. business (nonphilological courses focused on economics and management);
7. other (Czech language, media studies, presentation skills, PE).

Questionnaire

The graduates of the analyzed study programs currently working in business were given the questionnaire. They can be considered as job-experienced learners (Ellis & Johnson, 1994) who can perceive their strengths and weaknesses and are able to specify them. The response rate was rather high (87.6%)—120 participants from 137 returned complete questionnaires, partly because the questionnaire was self-administered by the authors to enable any queries to be addressed immediately. It was prepared in the participants' native language (Czech) to obtain their relevant demographic data—age, the length of English language study before bachelor's study, the amount of communication with English native speakers, and the amount of stay in English-speaking countries. Two items concerned their knowledge and skills they have learned during their bachelor's study and they apply in their jobs, and the knowledge and skills they miss in their jobs. The last open item enabled them to write any other comments related to the issue.

At the preliminary state of the questionnaire design, a flow chart technique was used to plan the sequencing of the questions. Then, the pilot (internal consistency = 0.89) was conducted on a group of 20 respondents with characteristics of the research sample (Appendix A). The questionnaire was then refined and redundant items and items with low reliability were removed. Then, the coding and classification system for the data analysis in a 5-point descending scale was created (Appendix B).

Interview

A semistructured individual interview with a convenience sample of 23 representatives (both Czech and English native speakers) of 23 companies (focused on information technology, finance, engineering, and automotive) in which some of the graduates (questionnaire respondents) of the analyzed study programs were employed was done. First, the research objectives were thematized and transformed into three direct form questions:

1. What skills and knowledge do you require from your employees?
2. What skills and knowledge of your employees do you appreciate?
3. What skills and knowledge of your employees do you miss?

The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format in company offices (average interviewing time was 15-20 min). The interviewers (authors) informed each participant about the purpose and conduct of the interview and asked for permission to record the responses. The interviewers considered also some prompts to clarify their questions and probes to ask participants to provide details for their responses, if needed. The participants were enabled to answer the questions in their own words and thus produced unstructured responses. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed by generating and classifying and the categories relevant for further analysis were identified and the frequencies of their occurrence were counted and regularities followed.

The previously mentioned research methods (content analysis, questionnaire, and interview) were used within the combined (quantitative-qualitative) research design to triangulate the data, to go deeper into the overall picture and answer the following research question: What is the correspondence between the structure of business English courses provided by the universities, the graduates self-perceived professional strengths and weaknesses and the employers' needs?

Table 1. The credit structure of the obligatory courses (%).

Obligatory courses	Mean	Universities				
		A	B	C	D	E
<i>Language systems</i>	25.04	34.8	22.0	18.3	27.0	23.1
<i>Language skills</i>	13.66	5.6	15.9	15.0	9.5	22.3
<i>Literature</i>	8.22	6.8	—	11.7	9.5	13.1
<i>Studies</i>	13.96	5.6	37.8	8.3	5.8	12.3
<i>Translatology</i>	12.04	14.6	6.0	22.5	10.2	6.9
<i>Business</i>	23.14	32.6	18.3	16.7	34.3	13.8
<i>Other</i>	3.94	—	—	7.5	3.7	8.5
Number of credits		89	82	120	137	130

Results

Content analysis

The content analysis of the obligatory courses contained in the analyzed programs revealed the structure shown in Table 1 calculated according to the credit value of the given courses. More than a quarter of the credits (25.04%) is allotted to the study of language systems and nearly a quarter (23.14%) to the subjects related to business. Approximately one tenth of the credit load is dedicated to each of the course types— studies (13.96%), language skills (13.66%), and transla-tology (12.04%). Literature has less than one tenth of credits (8.22%) and the rest are other courses (Figure 1). Each of the programs includes practical training (from 1 to 12 weeks), three programs within nonobligatory courses, and two programs within the obligatory courses for 7.4 credits on average. Besides that, each program has a seminar on writing bachelor's thesis included in obligatory courses.

Questionnaire

The average age of the respondents was between 36 and 45 years old, and most of them studied English before starting their bachelor's study for 11-15 years. They communicate with English native speakers (usually about work-related issues) at least once a week. Most of them stayed in an English-speaking country for several days during their business trip.

The respondents claimed (Table 2, Figure 2) that they most often (21.77%) apply English language skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening) developed during their studies. They appreciate they are able to read technical and business documentation related to their field of work. On the one hand, they use the knowledge of the English language systems (pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar) and translatology less frequently (5.38%). On the other hand, they miss

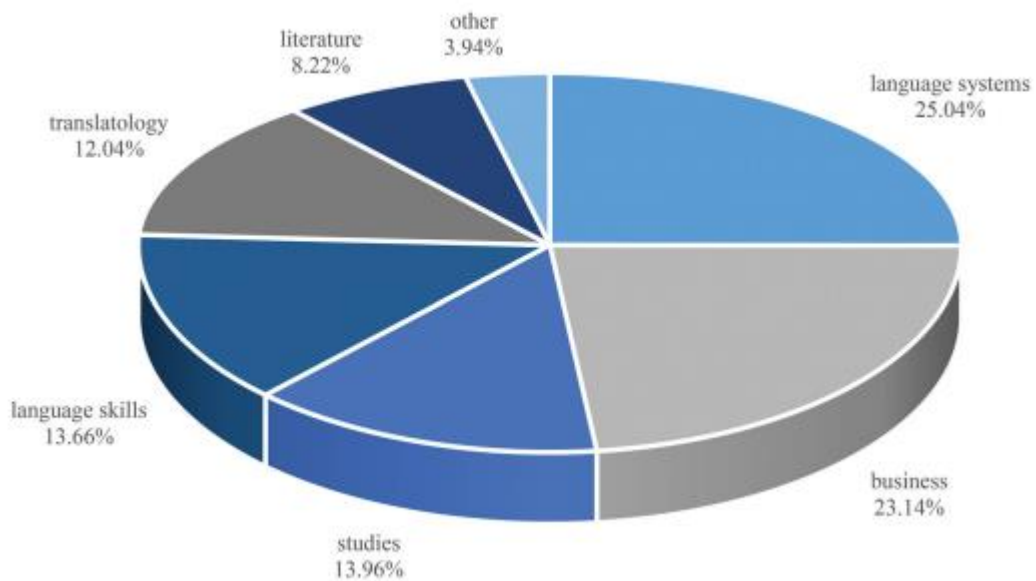


Figure 1. The credit structure of the obligatory courses.

Table 2. Knowledge and skills the employees miss and apply (%).

Knowledge and skills	Miss	Apply
Grammar	79.03	6.45
Vocabulary	59.68	6.45
Listening	30.65	9.68
Speaking	19.35	29.03
Pronunciation	14.52	8.06
Presentation skills	14.17	2.07
Psychological training	13.33	–
Writing	4.84	24.19
Reading	3.23	24.19
Translation	1.61	3.23

the knowledge of language systems most of all (30.24%)—more than three quarters of them sense inadequate ability to apply grammatical theory they learned (mostly verbal tenses and prepositions) in spoken communication. Two thirds of them miss vocabulary specific to their field of work

(marketing, logistics, automotive, production, or IT). One third of the respondents sense their English listening skills as problematic, especially during phone calls, and nearly 20% perceive their speaking skills as insufficient when talking to an English native speaker. As expected, most of them are quite satisfied with the level of their writing, reading, and translation skills. Interestingly, they miss skills and knowledge not primarily related to the English language—they claimed they would appreciate some sort of psychological training, especially on stress coping strategies and more of presentation skills including the creation of visual presentations.

Interview

On the one hand, nearly all 23 employers interviewed (91.30%) answered the first question in more or less similar way—they require excellent oral and written communication in English from the job applicants which they are mostly satisfied with (82.61%). Besides that, they consider their employees' presentation skills (both written and spoken) to be very good (Table 3, Figure 3).

On the other hand, more than half of them (52.17%) miss some readiness in spontaneous and informal spoken interaction with English native speakers, including lingual and extralingual aspects of intercultural differences (small talks, idioms, or taboos). They claimed (73.91%) that the knowledge of the specific English vocabulary related to their field is insufficient. However, they admitted that new employees usually learn this vocabulary very quickly. Surprisingly, the employers mentioned more phenomena not related to the syllabi of the analyzed study programs (44.94%)—general social overview, lack of the social and business etiquette, insufficient knowledge of Czech orthography (which is evident when translating English texts), and some sort of stage fright during oral presentations.

Discussion

The combination of three research methods (content analysis, questionnaire, and interview) shed more light on the relationship between the Czech academic reality (business English programs provided) and business reality reflected in the employees' and employers' perceived strengths and weaknesses.

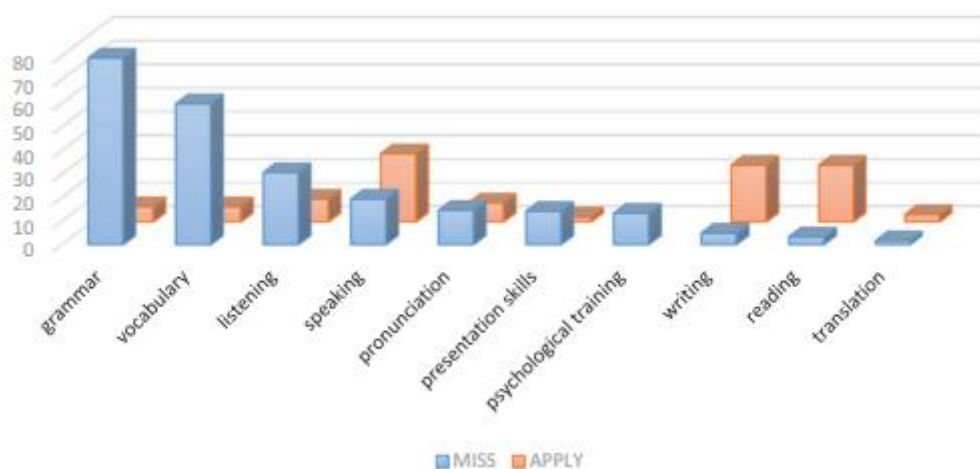


Figure 2. Knowledge and skills the employees miss and apply (%).

Table 3. Knowledge and skills the employers miss and appreciate (%).

Knowledge and skills	Miss	Appreciate
Vocabulary	73.91	—
General orientation	60.90	—
Speaking	52.17	82.61
Etiquette	43.48	—
Self-confidence	30.43	—
Writing	—	82.61
Presentation skills	—	73.91

Generally, the program structure is dominated by linguistic courses, which is appreciated by their graduates. However, it seems that they would benefit more from practical use of grammar in communication, which is in line with the required competences of a language user to be able to use language in social interaction (CEFR, 2001). Similarly, they want to use the specific terminology actively in context and are not satisfied with its description or reformulation as compensation communication strategies. Both employees and employers agreed that the field-specific vocabulary had to be learnt in service, but it was nothing unattainable. Nevertheless, for the courses it is difficult to cover each lexical field potentially applicable in practice.

Many of the graduates consider good English pronunciation a big advantage, and some of them experienced recognition in their career because of it. They state that a phonetics course and conversation classes with English native speakers were of great importance for them. Both employees and employers appreciate speaking and writing skills developed during the studies. However, the employees would appreciate more practical conversation classes, ideally with an English native speaker, not only in business English but including everyday conversation phrases and vocabulary respecting intercultural differences. Social and intercultural competence has been missed by the employers. It should be noted that intercultural training is provided only by two of the analyzed programs.

The employees consider business and translation courses very practically oriented, providing them with a manual of how to build the text of documents, reports, and emails; address clients and customers; express themselves clearly; and communicate within the company administration effectively. What is more, the graduates suggest the economic courses to be taught in English, which is not often the case, as they are taught by teachers from nonphilological departments or faculties.

The respondents considered presentation skills as the most beneficial course for their career. It provided them with useful tips how to make a presentation for business purposes, how to prepare for presentation, and how to communicate effectively both verbally and nonverbally. They admitted that giving presentations was a constant requirement during their studies, which improved their presentation skills immensely.

However, the employees still sense the need to be able to react quickly and adequately, especially in stressful situations. Some sort of employees' stage fright during presentations was mentioned by the employers as well. Psychological training is provided by three of the analyzed programs, but it is focused on the potential clients not students themselves.

Conclusions

An overall foreign language competence has several components (CEFR, 2001) and none of them should be considered less relevant. The companies' representatives naturally see the tip of an iceberg—"a good oral and written communication in English"; therefore, they did not mention literature and studies as important for their employees. Nevertheless, this does not mean they are not important, and the interview results should be treated (though not ignored) as subjective perceptions.

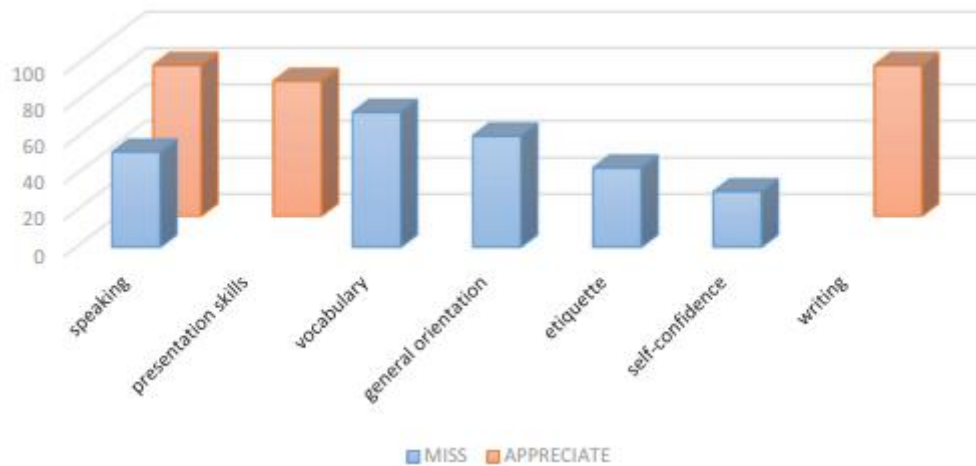


Figure 3. Knowledge and skills the employers miss and appreciate (%).

All components of the programs analyzed contribute to natural, contextual and meaningful application of the English language embedded in the sociocultural conditions (Babaeel & Yahya, 2014). More practical teaching of language respecting the multicultural reality of English as a Lingua Franca and current trends in teaching and learning foreign languages applying affective aspects to counterbalance the cognitive aspects (Foreign Languages and Higher Education, 2007) should be respected.

As it has been proved by the research results, managerial competences (Lakshminarayanan, Pai, & Ramaprasad, 2016) are no less important for both the employees and employers. Probably, some kind of psychosocial training could be considered by those who create the given curricula, as it has been proved many times to be an effective strategy coping with stress and anxiety. Psychosocial training is a nontherapeutic intervention training program of active social learning that should help individuals cope with stressful situations by developing their social abilities (sensitivity, assertiveness, empathy, communication and cooperation). It helps participants understand their own and the other people's emotions and behavior and enhance their self-confidence, acquire adequate reactions, realize the reasons for diffidence, strengthen their will and active self-knowledge, and cope with stage fright (Kralova, Skorvagova, Tirpakova, & Markechova, 2017).

The main responsibility is thus on the methodologists and specialists creating the curricula of the study programs in question who should take into mind all the relevant parameters to make tailor-made programs both attractive and useful for students and applicable and competitive within the given job market. It should be the objective to provide students with high-quality study programs, as most of them are going to universities with the primary aim of getting financially well-off. As it was expressed perfectly by one of the respondents who during his practical training in a company impressed the boss so much that he was offered a job right after his graduation: "Great study gave me a great job."

Limitations

The present study is dominantly an overall analysis of the issue within the context of one country. The findings about the Czech Republic can apply mostly to other as a postcommunist countries, as the study of “capitalist” languages had been more or less limited during the years of communism. After the transition to democracy and market economy, the boom in English teaching and learning was one of the most striking changes in such societies. This makes the education for business in these cultures specific even after decades from their transformation. Further analysis could thus aim at the comparison of more countries within the global job market. What is more, business writing has always been a discussion in the business community as students graduate with less and less ability to write more professionally which provides another important impetus for further research.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Dear Madam or Sir,

We are asking you to take part in a project on the Business English study programs at Czech universities aimed at monitoring their link to business practice. It would be highly appreciated if you would be involved in this process by completing the sheets attached and returning them to me. Confidentiality and anonymity are assured. If you wish to discuss any aspects of the project please do not hesitate to ask me. Thank you very much for your time and valuable cooperation.

Your age:

How long have you been learning English before starting your Bachelor's study?

Number of years:

Where and when did you graduate your Bachelor's study?

University: Year:

Which knowledge or skills you have learnt during your Bachelor's study do you apply in your job?

.....

Which knowledge or skills do you miss in your job?

.....

How often do you speak to English native speakers?

.....

What is the usual topic of your conversation?

working private other

How long have you stayed in any English speaking country?

Number of years:

What was the purpose of your stay?

working private other

Please, feel free to write any other comments related to the issue.

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.....
.....
.....
.....

Appendix B

Age

<i>code</i>	<i>years</i>
5	18–25
4	26–35
3	36–45
2	46–55
1	>55

Study

<i>code</i>	<i>years</i>
5	>20
4	20–16
3	15–11
2	10–6
1	≤5

Contact

<i>code</i>	<i>frequency of contact</i>
5	daily
4	weekly
3	monthly
2	yearly
1	none

Stay

<i>code</i>	<i>length of stay</i>
5	years
4	months
3	weeks
2	days
1	none