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General English Attrition and Its Significance for Business English Teaching/Learning of Prospective Economists

Summary

This article summarizes some of the findings of a large-scale study of the foreign language needs of economics students (Čepon 2007). It focuses on the rationale behind the lengthy period of disuse of general English (GE) during economics students' first year of undergraduate study. The article presents evidence for processes of GE attrition that slowly set in and are deemed to be particularly detrimental to economics. It is also important to determine exactly which language needs are essential for the future professional development of the economics graduates. It is hoped that this will spur foreign language policy renewal.

Key words: business English, needs analysis, language attrition, language teaching, economics

Obraba splošne angleščine in njen pomen za učenje/poučevanje poslovne angleščine pri bodočih ekonomistih

Povzetek

Pričujoči članek povzema določene ugotovitve iz večje raziskave, za potrebe katere smo opravili več vrst analiz potreb in tako pridobili podatke o jezikovnih potrebah študentov ekonomije. V prispevku navajamo rezultate iz raziskave o začetkih procesov pozabljanja tujega jezika pri študentih ekonomije, zato je poudarjena resnost slabega vpliva eno-/večletnega obdobja nerabe angleščine v 1. letniku, ko na fakulteti ni organiziranih predavanj iz tujega jezika. Članek se zaključuje s priporočilom o uvedbi pouka tujega jezika že v 1. letnik, saj bi s tem omogočili prepotrebno stalnost v učenju tujega jezika.

Ključne besede: poslovna angleščina, analiza potreb, obraba jezika, poučevanje jezika, ekonomija

General English Attrition and Its Significance for Business English Teaching/Learning of Prospective Economists

1. Introduction

The impetus for carrying out this study arose from the one of the author's experience teaching English as a foreign language. The Faculty of Economics at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (FELU) has no organized foreign language instruction for first-year economics students, which means that business English (BE) students spend a year not using general English (GE) before BE instruction starts in the second year. This paper deals with this issue primarily within BE teaching/learning. It first briefly examines the study of English as a foreign language in the Slovenian environment from the viewpoint of language attrition. It then focuses on possible consequences of GE attrition for the BE students at FELU – that is, prospective economists. A major part of this paper focuses on a study conducted that included several types of analyses of BE students' linguistic needs. Its findings yielded useful information for all participants in the BE program and the potential improvement of that program.

The literature provides much more information on language acquisition and learning than attrition. Nonetheless, it seems that, in recent years, the research focus has shifted from *'successful language learner'* to *'successful language maintainer'*, or to studying effective recall of the language learned. In some countries there are even second-language maintenance programs (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999).

Experts refer to the processes of forgetting a language in various ways. The term used in this article is *'language attrition'*. The literature offers various terms for gradual language attrition processes, however, these often refer to the same or similar phenomena. The most common terms used for language regression processes that could affect the understanding of language attrition include language regression, language loss, language shift, language death, language obsolescence (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999), language decay (Dressler 1982) and language transformation (Dressler 1988).

The most frequently cited definition of the language attrition phenomenon is that it is *'loss of any language or its part by an individual or language communities'* (Freed in Weltens 1989, 1). The factors and situations affecting language attrition are very diverse, which is why the literature draws attention to the fact that a good knowledge of all the factors is very important. These factors can be psychological (e.g. intelligence, general recall features), social and psychological (e.g. an individual's motivation and orientations), or linguistic (e.g. the relationship or distance between two linguistic systems) (see Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999).

The fact that the findings in specific areas of language attrition research contradict findings from other areas is not particularly surprising because research areas can be quite diverse. Moreover, all these obvious contradictions depend on the fact that experts do not yet have a reliable way

to measure language attrition; this is why various types of studies and measuring instruments are used. So far, the focus of language attrition research has been on syntax and vocabulary loss. However, there are still no satisfactory instruments for observing processes of forgetting phonological, pragmatic, and discourse language skills (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999).

Currently, the main language attrition research focuses on four areas. The first area relates to the possible existence of a learning method that hinders later language attrition (the method effect) and, with regard to attrition, the importance of individual maturity level, level of achieved foreign or second language literacy, real emphasis on individual language skills, and intensity of the foreign or second language programme.

The issue of prior knowledge and its influence on later attrition processes is closely connected with seeking the best learning method. With regard to attrition, researchers are still in doubt. Some believe that at all language knowledge levels, from lowest to highest, individuals are equally subject to language attrition (Weltens et al. 1989, Bahrck 1984). In contrast, others conclude that individuals with a high level of foreign language knowledge are much less subject to language attrition (Bahrck 1984, Godsall-Myers in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999). Some studies of individual maturity level and the level of achieved foreign language literacy demonstrate smaller language attrition in individuals that are more literate or have developed better reading and writing skills (Ohlstain in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999).

The second language attrition research area relates to the different effect of language attrition on language skills (the skills effect). With regard to language skills' susceptibility to attrition, language attrition studies consistently confirm a smaller degree of forgetting of receptive language skills in comparison to productive ones (Spolsky 1998, Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999), and the comprehensible theory that recall is more subject to attrition than is recognition (Weltens 1989), or that productive language skills are more subject to attrition than receptive ones.

The retrieval failure theory of language loss emphasizes that forgotten information is never lost forever, but is merely temporarily inaccessible because individuals cannot find the right key to access it (Loftus & Loftus in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999, 11). The critical element is the processing time because one of the early signs of decreased retrieval ability is the increase in time needed for retrieving the right information in a foreign or second language (Olshtain in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999, 11) or the use of various techniques of circumlocution, hesitation and repair behaviours, and progressive retrieval when the individual initially remembers or retrieves the wrong form, before retrieving the correct one after a certain amount of time.

Language attrition experts have dedicated attention also to the issue of the intensity of the foreign language program: individuals learning foreign languages in more intensive courses should acquire language faster than those in less intensive programs with the same number of hours. Attrition researchers have thus inferred that higher or lower program intensity encourages stronger and weaker language acquisition, which is consequently reflected in various processes of language attrition (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999).

The third language attrition research area relates to the onset of the second language forgetting curve (the typical forgetting curve effect) and the method of combating language loss. The findings in this area correspond completely with Ebbinghaus's findings (in Marentič-Požarnik 2000, 14). Ebbinghaus proved the existence of a forgetting curve, according to which forgetting occurs quickly and always within two years after the study process, whereas later attrition recedes more gradually. Bahrck (1984) emphasized that memorizing is stronger with a higher level of acquired knowledge or material that individuals have learned well or learned for a longer period of time.

Other studies do not confirm immediate attrition after the study process, but show that forgetting occurs somewhat later – in adults this then proves to be the initial phase of the normal forgetting curve (Weltens et al. in Weltens & Cohen 1989, 130). In other words, according to these studies, a few years after the study process, during the period known as the initial plateau, the material learned should seem safe from the forgetting processes, though only in adult individuals with a relatively high level of acquired foreign or second language knowledge is this the case. Ecke (2004) emphasizes the fact that students who did not start learning a foreign language for a long time forgot more structures than students that started learning a foreign language sooner.

The fourth language attrition research area relates to the possible existence of a typical attrition order (the typical attrition order effect) with regard to which the regression theory (or hypothesis) is used as a theoretical background. The regression theory is the most widely used theory for describing the nature of language attrition at the level of interlinguistic skills (Bahrck 1984, Weltens 1989, Yoshida et al. in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999) and the level of morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. It is derived from Jakobson's claim (in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999, 9) that attrition is a mirror image of language acquisition. In other words, we quickly forget the language structures we learned last, and remember the ones that were learned first (Ecke 2004).

This regression statement proves to be correct in the case of receptive language skills, which individuals acquire first but forget last (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999, 9). However, at the level of morphology, syntax, and vocabulary, the regression hypothesis is much more difficult to study and prove. It seems that some authors have succeeded in doing this because they conclude that the basic syntactic patterns that were learned first were remembered the longest (Kuhberg in Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999, 9), or they describe examples of attrition of the language that the speakers learned last before being no longer present in a foreign language environment (Cohen in Weltens 1989, 6).

2. The study

2.1. Problem definition

As a target language in the Slovenian-speaking environment, English is not naturally present to the extent that would justify studying English in Slovenian schools. In Slovenia it is spoken rarely, or only on special occasions, and most frequently with non-native English speakers. The lack of natural English contact outside the classroom and in social environments in Slovenia thus

presupposes self-initiated improvement of English outside the formal educational environment, while also generating considerable differences in prior knowledge between foreign language students. For students at the FELU, this situation is even more difficult. Since they do not have the opportunity to attend foreign language instruction in the very first year some students may, if they fail classes in the first year, spend a year or even more not using and thus learning the language uninterrupted. Here the fact is important that, during the transition from secondary school to the university system, students do not simply continue learning GE but encounter BE, which differs from GE in terms of linguistic competence (e.g. vocabulary range), discourse competence (e.g. discourse features of various categories of BE letters) and intercultural competence (e.g. relationship dimensions significant for BE). In addition, taking into account the survey results, BE teachers feel that the GE knowledge of an average second-year English student – that is, after one or more years of almost complete non-use of English – is lower than the formal grades obtained on various secondary-school leaving exams the previous year.

In the second, third, and fourth years, the students at the FELU attend BE classes which are heterogeneous with regard to prior English knowledge and composed of students from various study tracks grouped alphabetically. Also, Faculty management formally does not demand evaluation of prior GE knowledge before the start of BE instruction in the second year, and BE teachers therefore do not perform such tests.

An extensive study was conducted in order to obtain deeper insight into the events in foreign language study during this special transition period, when several years of studying GE changes into studying BE and when secondary-school students become university students. This transition period is marked by at least one year lack of formal foreign language instruction, which causes problems to students (and BE teachers) as in the second year of their study the foreign language instruction focuses on BE language contexts which can differ substantially from that of GE in terms of language activities. Many findings from the study indicate that foreign language non-use, all the factors mentioned above, and especially the unstimulating language environment in the first year, can cause a lack of real internal and external motivation for learning a foreign language among the students. Indirectly, this contributes to language attrition processes.

2.2. Methodology

The study was divided into a quantitative and qualitative part. For the quantitative research, data were collected from October 2004 to January 2005, and for the qualitative research data were collected from the beginning of November until mid-December 2005. In the study, it was decided to use five sources and three methods in the expanded method of triangulation by sources and methods. The quantitative research thus included:

- a) second- and third-year students from FELU in the 2004/05 academic year (111 respondents);
- b) Faculty graduates (54 graduates from the FELU's business school and economics program in 1999 and 2000);
- c) Faculty's BE teachers (8 respondents); and
- d) other subject matter teachers/professors (16 participants).

The data was obtained by using questionnaires, checklists, numerical evaluation scales, and a grammar test.

The qualitative research was based on the following three sources:

- a) Faculty's BE teachers (8 respondents);
- b) Faculty graduates (12 respondents); and
- c) first-year students (18 respondents), and

the following three methods:

- a) individual interviews;
- b) group in-depth interviews, and
- c) a journal on English use.

The study combined various instruments. The data were processed using the SPSS 11.0 statistical package. Software for calculating frequencies, a χ^2 test and a bivariate analysis were used. The main quantitative research areas included the determination of prior knowledge quality and the method of using GE during studies at the Faculty with an emphasis on one or more years of English non-use in the first year. In addition, the study addressed processes of general English attrition and the areas subject to this, self-initiated language (non-)study and dedication, and reading English professional literature, newspapers, and magazines. Furthermore, the study analyzed students' feelings about their own knowledge and the current method of BE instruction at the FELU. Opinions about the applicability and usefulness of the Faculty's BE teaching activities were also obtained from all of the other study participants.

The qualitative research focused on English (non-)use in the first year at the FELU – that is, during the time when there is no organized foreign language instruction. More precisely, the study addressed students' evaluation of their own English knowledge, their talent, their English language skills, their expectations regarding BE study, their awareness and feelings about the process of forgetting English, and (non-)study of GE during the one-year hiatus in foreign language learning in the first year.

Given the extensive analyses and the number of findings, the outcomes of the study will be presented in a narrative form in the next chapter.

3. Findings

The findings of the study were obtained by conducting several types of analyses of student needs at the Faculty. The results of the target situation analysis and the analysis of anticipated professional English needs indicate that, in Slovenia, future English (non-)use for professional needs greatly depends on the students' future professions and jobs. Due to the great span of professional situations and various jobs available to future economists, carrying out these analyses was highly demanding because it was not possible to determine the final goal of studying business English, the target performance repertoire, and the underlying competence. In other words, what is meant here is the indefinability of the selection of anticipated

language skills and knowledge (of the most frequent language structures, functions, specialized vocabulary, and typical discourses).

For a long time, experts (e.g. Littlewood 1984) have emphasized three basic conditions for learning language: individuals' language skills, the true inner motivation for learning languages, and sufficient opportunities to use the language. Unfortunately, students at the FELU do not meet two of these conditions because, in addition to generally lacking true motivation, they also lack sufficient opportunities to use English in Slovenia. Taking into account the results of the current situation analysis and the analysis of prior GE knowledge, the majority of students do not learn the language through their own desire to learn a foreign language; they believe that BE instruction is useful only because of potential indirect benefits for their future profession. Furthermore, the outcomes demonstrate that all the respondents believe that there are many opportunities to use foreign languages as a prerequisite for good language knowledge; in contrast, language non-use was indicated as an obstacle in obtaining good foreign language knowledge. Nonetheless, the majority of students mistakenly believe that a hiatus in studying English in the first year is a welcome help, relief, and a well-thought-out gesture on the part of Faculty management, which should provide them more time to study other business subjects.

The results of the present situation analysis, analysis of prior GE knowledge, and deficiency/lack analysis indicate differences in prior GE knowledge among the students, i.e. possibly an insufficient number of hours of foreign language instruction in Slovenian elementary and secondary schools (depending on the student's home region). This may cause problems to students and teachers of BE when BE instruction in the second year begins.

However, as expected, none of the analyses indicated serious language knowledge problems, probably due to students' relatively high level of foreign language knowledge. According to the findings, the majority of students are at the level of language independence (i.e. B2 level according to Common European Framework) (2001) prior to second-year BE instruction – that is, as individuals they can communicate authentically, spontaneously and fluently in English, while being able to argue effectively, defend, and discuss their opinions, and even showing the ability to correct errors.

In addition, many findings of deficiency/lacks research indicate limited opportunities for English communication and development of spoken English skills in the natural Slovenian environment, in elementary and secondary school, and the first year of study at the FELU. All these facts presuppose that students improve their foreign language knowledge on their own initiative; however, this is made impossible due to economics students' lack of motivation to learn a foreign language. The deficiency/lacks analysis confirmed that students do not review their GE knowledge and do not use available opportunities to maintain and improve their English when there is no BE instruction. In the one-year (or multi-year) period of English non-use in the first year, fewer than half of the students decided to independently review GE and English grammar; the majority (54.9%) did not. In addition, they generally do not learn new words, do not read English study literature, newspapers, and magazines, do not use

dictionaries (see also Vrbinc 2005), and do not attend foreign language courses. The outcomes also indicate that more talented students, and those who are employed, forget the language less because they tend to use English at work, and the fact that some students mistakenly confuse the process of forgetting the foreign language with the process of forgetting the study material learnt in their mother-tongue.

The findings of the deficiency/lacks research confirm that the first-year students are aware of the fact that they start losing their spoken and written communication skills, which causes uncertainty and dissatisfaction with their own foreign language knowledge. Taking into account the findings of language attrition theory (Weltens et al. 1989), the subjective feeling of uncertainty and the lack of self-confidence connected with foreign language skills reported by the students is the most important indicator of the onset of the language attrition process. Students perceive their own written English communication as the most demanding and problematic aspect. They also find that they have problems recalling certain English words and that they consciously speak so called '*simplified and simplified English*', as well as tend not to bother with certain '*more difficult*' English grammar (e.g. past perfect, future continuous and future perfect, sequence of tenses in reported speech, if-clauses and 'I wish' and 'If only' structures). The students believe these problems make them use less demanding vocabulary and simpler language structures from previous, earlier periods of learning English. The theoretical background for these statements is the regression theory, which draws attention to the fact that acquired language skills disappear in the opposite order to those in which they were learned.

Furthermore, the failure to distinguish between productive and receptive language skills is emphasized as a problematic phenomenon found among Faculty students. This causes the students to equate relatively good reading and listening language skills with comprehensive English knowledge. Language attrition studies consistently confirm a lower degree of forgetting receptive language skills as compared to productive skills (Spolsky 1998, Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999). The regression statement proves to be correct in the case of the receptive language skills that individuals learn first and forget last (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige 1999).

According to the survey, students mistakenly believe their productive skills remain as good as their receptive skills if they merely maintain contact with English by keeping up with the media, watching films, and using the Internet. Also, the findings of the study reveal that students do not read English professional literature, newspapers, and magazines. Strangely enough, the reason for that is not their insufficient reading skills, which for the majority of students are relatively well developed, but rather the students' unwillingness to read in English as well as the fact that, with the exception of one subject, the obligatory study literature in the fall semester of the first year (the 2004/05 and 2006/07 academic years) did not include English professional literature either in the business school program or economics program.

The findings regarding students' subjective needs and wants demonstrate that they expect BE to be useful and to learn a great deal of business vocabulary for the needs of their future profession or job. Only certain students' expectations were evaluated as plausible; for example, a desire to

improve their grammar knowledge, to obtain practical BE knowledge, to practice participating in meetings and business negotiations, and to maintain English business correspondence.

The findings of the learning situation analysis and, within this, the analysis of students' study patterns and strategies, indicate an inability to independently eliminate the essential and interesting parts of information, and to focus on details in language learning, which presupposes a great deal of support from BE teachers. The students perceive the study material as a whole and process information from the top; they remember the total experience better than the details and find it easier to study in situations in which ideas and concepts occur. Because they remember more things if they are active, they need a concrete language learning experience, interaction with individuals, and contact in English with the outer world. To students, language learning represents establishing new contacts (role playing, dialogues) and as active an approach to language learning as possible (short presentations, group presentations, etc.) with clearly structured and useful tasks and a great deal of pictorial material. Organizational skills and systematicity are of key importance, as are clear ideas, overviews and visions on paper, using sketches and structural diagrams, learning through doing, and a gradual linear method of presenting study material due to remembering information in steps. In addition, gestures, slow speaking, and an encouraging class environment are very important. Reviewing all the study material in advance and before individual BE classes, forming possible questions and answers, and using internal dialogue while studying result in faster BE learning.

4. Discussion and conclusion

BE teaching/learning is extremely important for the future professional life of students at the FELU because, as the findings of this study have demonstrated, in the Slovenian environment students will undoubtedly use BE for the needs of their profession and job. However, the outcomes did not demonstrate to what extent this is true.

This study has clearly demonstrated the onset of language attrition processes among students at the Faculty. These processes can especially be perceived in students' subjective feelings about incipient loss of spoken and written language skills, and forgetting English grammar, and in their reports about having problems recalling *'more demanding'* English words, as well as their admission of consequently returning to their *'elementary-school'* levels of language knowledge. These findings lead to the conclusion that one of the reasons for the deficiencies and lacks mentioned above is the disappearance of the main factor of successful BE learning – that is, a logical structure of prior GE knowledge. In the authors' opinion, this is a result of a long period of English non-use, which renders the students' acquisition of new BE knowledge more difficult on the basis of the prior GE knowledge already obtained.

At first glance it seems that dividing students according to their study tracks – and not according to the alphabet, which is the current case – would contribute to a more stimulating class atmosphere because language study seems more plausible in groups with equal, similar, or related interests (Black 1995). However, the authors feel that forming groups of students based on

their study tracks is not necessary. Focusing on typical discourse in BE teaching/learning would be somewhat premature, because prospective economists must normally learn the method of foreign language communication that is typical of the profession they will engage in – regardless of the content of BE classes during their studies. The Faculty selection of BE instruction activities thus cannot be used for a specific purpose or with reference to students' future profession, but must focus on foreign language learning. This study has shown that target English language use for future professional students' needs is practically indefinable. In the authors' opinion, this is why the Faculty's BE teachers must focus on all of the deficiencies and lacks in the students' knowledge to the same extent. They should be addressed without any set priority, since they are all equally likely to cause problems for students in the future.

Among other things, this means that BE teachers avoid especially strong emphases on individual language skills to the detriment of others (e.g. on spoken skills). According to the Faculty's graduates that participated in this study, combinations of two or three language skills are the most frequent in everyday practice; for example, writing-reading, or speaking-listening. The vast majority of graduates still remember well how they felt they were forgetting English during their first-year studies and believe that language attrition processes were one of the main factors that impeded fast and easy learning of BE.

It can be concluded that, in the first year, when students are left to their own self-initiated language study, they neglect the development of their foreign language productive skills. The findings demonstrate that the majority of students do not consider changing their non-existent or inactive method of studying general or BE and, even if they do, this only involves minor changes because they are generally satisfied with a superficial approach to maintaining their knowledge. To most of the students, their acquired English language knowledge seems adequate for their needs, i.e. passing the exams and browsing the Internet. Also, they only take the receptive language skills of reading and listening into account.

A little (foreign language) knowledge is a dangerous thing in the harsh business reality of our globalising world. According to a study of 2000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and 30 multinationals from 29 European countries (CILT 2006), it is possible to assess the impact of foreign language knowledge on the effectiveness and the profitability of modern businesses – 11% of SMEs from the study lost what had been assumed to be concluded business deals due to the lack of employees' foreign language knowledge. Considering the fact that not all SMEs from the study were willing to reveal the true value of the lost business deals, the study researchers' estimated that the more accurate figure for 37 SMEs could be between 8 and 13.5 million Euros, in other words, about 945,000 European export SMEs in the whole EU region are likely to have lost their business due to inefficient or non-existent employee foreign language skills, which on average amounts to 325,000 Euros per business in three years' time.

Since the majority of experts in foreign language study still believe that active teaching by a foreign language teacher encourages processes of foreign language learning it can be concluded that first-year BE instruction would have a positive effect on students' foreign language knowledge. In

other words, at the beginning of studies at the FELU, when students are still susceptible enough and motivated for everything new due to adjusting to their study program, would internally motivate students to learn a foreign language and primarily prevent them from forgetting the language they have already learned.

Greater contact, and as early contact as possible, of students with (business) English would possibly improve their foreign language knowledge because, with an additional 60 to 90 foreign language hours in the first year, their knowledge would come close to the standards recommended for Slavic foreign language students (see Čebroň 1998). Better foreign language knowledge could, in turn, result also in fewer business dealings lost on competitive global markets for the economics students' prospective employers.

It seems reasonable to dedicate potential first-year English instruction to an easy transition from general to BE, expanding BE vocabulary, and practicing all (not just spoken) skills in addition to occasional reviews of specific areas of grammar, but only as needed and, most importantly, in smaller groups. By prompting an individual approach, such small groups would allow BE teachers to work more easily with students who have weaker or incorrect external motivation for BE learning.

One of the major deficiencies of the change proposed is that it is impossible to expect that, at the beginning of their studies, students will bring any business experience or carrier content knowledge into the BE instruction process. In the first year, students are pre-experience learners or, in other words, are not yet developed experts, but are in the midst of obtaining professional and theoretical knowledge. They lack empirical knowledge because their business knowledge is not yet practical and personalized, but theoretical, incomplete, and obtained merely from books.

In the case of introducing first-year classes, the Faculty's BE teachers would thus have to bear not only all of the burden of teaching pre-experience learners without any professional knowledge, but also the burden of teaching foreign language learners among whom (following this study's findings) it is already possible to perceive the beginnings of language attrition or the attrition of real content that is the prerequisite for BE teaching/learning.

In addition, the Faculty management and the Faculty subject matter teachers/professors should also contribute their share to facilitating the transition from GE to BE teaching/learning after the hiatus of one or more years – the latter with demands for regular reading of English professional literature, and a wider and more binding selection of obligatory study literature in English, and the management by introducing formal evaluation of students' prior GE knowledge, and organizing first-year classes in foreign languages, which would provide vital continuity in foreign language learning.

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