

QUESTIONNAIRE ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING STYLES FOR BUSINESS AND ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Abstract

Our current approach offers an opportunity to analyse the trends in a wide range of educational topics, policies and best practice over the past decade and to assess the challenges lying ahead. We hope that this body of data and information will serve as a valuable source for decision makers in various education areas. Reviewing and reforming educational strategies need to be performed so as to ensure access to high quality instruction and training for all citizens, thus facilitating long-term socio-economic growth and stability. This study analyses the main young adult English learning styles & strategies used in acquiring and improving the communicative competence in English for effectively meeting the demands of the future career. The labour market nowadays is characterized by rapid changes in technology, spectacular developments, higher standards and unprecedented mobility and comfort. All these have essentially changed the way we live and communicate, generating the need for lifelong learning, not only for jobs, but also for active and creative adaptation to the rhythm of common daily life. Foreign language(s) communication competences, as well as computer skills, are indispensable for meeting the current employment standards.

Key words: business engineering, foreign language acquisition, learning styles, project work, questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

The novelty brought by the current research is the analysis of a wide range of subjects (1764) questioned on current issues in the national Baccalaureate exam, the English language test, over a decade [17]. The study aimed at giving a glimpse on the evolution of such assessment at a turning point [25], within the maturity exam, between secondary & tertiary education in our country, as a EU member.

Student perceptions were investigated, regarding the evaluation and certification of language skills [4], which were, in turn, compared to active labour market classifications, both in national and international contexts.

Relying on extensive theoretical & bibliographic appurtenances, this investigative

approach examined the degree of modernization & updating in text-books, curricula, content & methods of integrated practice for modern language skills. [8, 13, 24]

During the analysis, it became obvious that the study skills & the intellectual work styles learners use must become more flexible, more efficient, more clearly defined and more logical, shifting focus from '*what I know*' to '*what I can do*', from memorizing data to skills use.

The trend is fostering individual professional development via responsible use of two inter-related instruments, English & computers. Improving study skills and specific working methods in the studied languages and cultures will bring added value and effectiveness.

Progress can be achieved by facilitating

student exchanges that speed up liberalization of compatible mentalities on global education markets, where all academics already notice harsh competition for students and resources. [19]

The young adults will be able to learn through-out life; they will become self-confident and flexible, expressing personal views coherently; thus an informed electorate will be created, able to make constructive decisions. [7]

Hence [14] project work emerged as the best suited method for cultivating foreign skills.

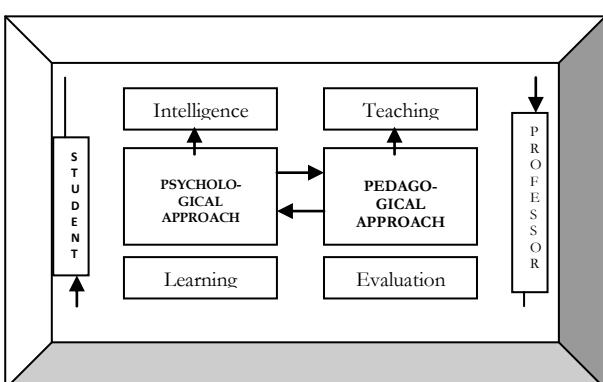


Fig. 1. Project work didactic approaches [1]

This research design intended to define the concepts used in the Romanian system and to contextualise the evolution of English testing over a decade of curriculum changes & challenges.

The purpose of the scientific investigation was to develop a framework for analysis & improvement in the national Baccalaureate exam, by synchronizing the sample of foreign language requirements with international forms of testing and certification of language skills, as well as with the Europass Language Passport standards, consistent with the prospect of its current use in secondary & tertiary education. [21]

The aim was to highlight the learning outcomes and discuss the increasing concerns on learners' mental & physical health, alongside with finding the measures to mitigate administrative stress.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method used was the questionnaire [18,

20], reporting the interlocutors' viewpoints on the realities evoked by a wide range of open & closed questions, some with multiple choice answers. The items were designed to stimulate the production of qualitative information [3, 21] on institution progress, curriculum reform and individual experience in academic & professional interest areas.

- The questionnaire yielded broad perceptions of reality, investigated by extending the scope to relevant professional fields. It was intended to ensure continuity of training in foreign languages, from college to university education, targeted to the specific jobs requirements (with feed-back involving policy makers, students, teachers, employees, and employers).

- In the whole study, of which, here, we analyse learning styles, we measured these issues:

1. performance & preference shares in various school populations: rural/urban, college/university, technical studies/humanities
2. impact of the intellectual work style on students' results and on their overall health
3. development and integration of the four communication skills in the foreign language
4. optimizing implementation of CEFR testing
5. pace of content modernization and standardized assessments implementation
6. degree of learning motivation and its limits

- The investigated sample consisted in 1764 respondents covering a wide range of categories: 74% pupils and students, employees, 5% young researchers, 9% graduates, 12% doctoral students. It covered 86% tradition & reputation universities, and 14% recently established ones.

- The results showed that pupils, students and graduates report reduced levels of interest and motivation for study and lifelong learning; they are skeptical about the prospects & employment opportunities, and often fall victim to overload, as a result of ineffective intellectual work styles or unrealistic expectations and targets they set for themselves. The collected data outline the ameliorative measures derived from the coping strategies indicated by those

questioned. The analysis pointed to significant positive correlations among stress, motivation, coping strategies and results.

- Interpretation: The rate of dissatisfaction is high throughout academia, and inadequate services persist. Targeted actions must address the problems and involve industry professionals with teaching experience.

- Needs assessment will be used as a proactive way of exploring the specific requirements of certain categories in the population who feel that school should expand, thus identifying, analyzing and preventing the dissolution of professional competence and authority, responsible for ensuring product quality from educational perspective. The analyzed data showed that a major obstacle remains the lack of economic and social support.

- According to the research objectives methodological recommendations were outlined for improving teaching, learning and assessment in foreign language education and for identifying ways to modernize and synchronize Romanian study programs with EU directives on acknowledging qualifications on the labour market, so that new professionals might become flexible and adaptable to modern requirements, in a globalised knowledge economy.

- Conclusion: the information obtained after the completion of this empirical study has the potential to support individuals, institutions and policy makers in their efforts to develop constructive solutions to such problems.

- Research limits and constraints:

- Numerous respondents
- The dimensions of the questionnaire
- Rich and varied content investigated
- Available specialists for statistical analysis
- Harmonization of technical support
- Implementing the questionnaire in time slots
- Subjectivity of individual reports
- Fluctuations in the studied sample
- Respondents mainly from the technical field
 - Research objectives:

1. Identify strategies for effective exam preparation and make recommendations for teaching-learning-assessment methodology in foreign language education.

2. Harmonising the level of foreign language in high school and in faculty with the difficulty of the foreign language exams.

3. Developing a framework of analysis and improvement for the national Baccalaureate exam in Romania, by synchronizing the sample of foreign language requirements with inter-national forms of testing & certification of idiom skills [11] and with the Europass Language Passport standards in terms of its current use in our secondary and higher education.



Fig. 2. Academic, Professional & General English levels, with their corresponding testing framework [9]

Common European Framework (Council of Europe)	A1 (Breakthrough)	A2 (Waystage)	B1 (Threshold)	B2 (Vantage)	C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency)	C2 (Mastery)
Escuela Oficial de Idiomas (Spain)		Nivel Básico 2 ^o	Nivel Intermedio 3 ^o	Nivel Avanzado 5 ^o	C1 Ciclo superior	
ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages – University of Cambridge)		KET (Key English Test)	PET (Preliminary English Test)	FCE (First Certificate in English)	CAE (Certificate in Advanced English)	CPE (Certificate of Proficiency in English)
IELTS (International English Language Testing System - British Council)		IELTS 3.0	IELTS 3.5 - 4.5	IELTS 5.0 - 6.0	IELTS 6.5 - 7.0	IELTS 7.5+
TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language - Internet Based Test)		TOEFL iBT 38-56	TOEFL iBT 57-86	TOEFL iBT 87-109	TOEFL iBT 110-120	
TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication)		10-549	550-755	756-879	880-973	974-990
ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe)	0 Elementary	1 Pre-Intermediate	2 Intermediate	3 Upper-Intermediate	4 Advanced	5 Upper-advanced
BULATS (Business Language Testing System)	21-39	40-50	51-59	60-67	68-74	75-79 80-84 85-89 90-93 94+

Fig. 3. CEFR, The Council of Europe [10]

4. Quantification of Baccalaureate relevance in relation to university studies and careers.

- Content analysis of foreign language curricula in secondary & tertiary education.
- Increase flexibility and adaptability to meet contemporary requirements in business and

technical dialogues

- Stimulate the evolution of individual professional competence and efficiency by using two interrelated instruments: foreign languages and computers.

- Outline criteria for matching qualifications recognition, ensuring graduates' free movement on internship and work platforms.

5. Presentation of optimizing perspectives drawn from the empirical research

- Improve Baccalaureate quality (reconsidering objectives, content and assessment methods for communicative competence in a foreign idiom)

- Finding solutions for meaningful practice in all communication skills in the foreign idiom.

6. Identifying additional relevant suggestions respondents found in this debate:

- Facilitating exchanges of pupils and students in order to free mentalities compatible with the global education market characterized by competition for students and resources

- Motivate graduates for further education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Here follows the analysed data for the learning styles of students focused on English acquisition and communication competence progress (Fig. 4).

When commenting upon this, we must point out that, sadly, 67% of the respondents do not learn from notes they take during class-work, which means that they:

- do not actively participate in the ongoing teaching and learning with all attention focused
- do not trust their own way of capturing and recording useful data from that presentation
- the content presented in the classroom is not perceived as useful / motivating / relevant / logical/ clear or captivating
- immaturity: the attention focus fades fast
- numerous students in groups: negative impact on discipline and on opportunities of relevant participation with personal views.
- narrowly practised intellectual work habits
- superficial in their personal approaches and data processing, just like the 'models' around
- disinterest in school & values promoted by

it

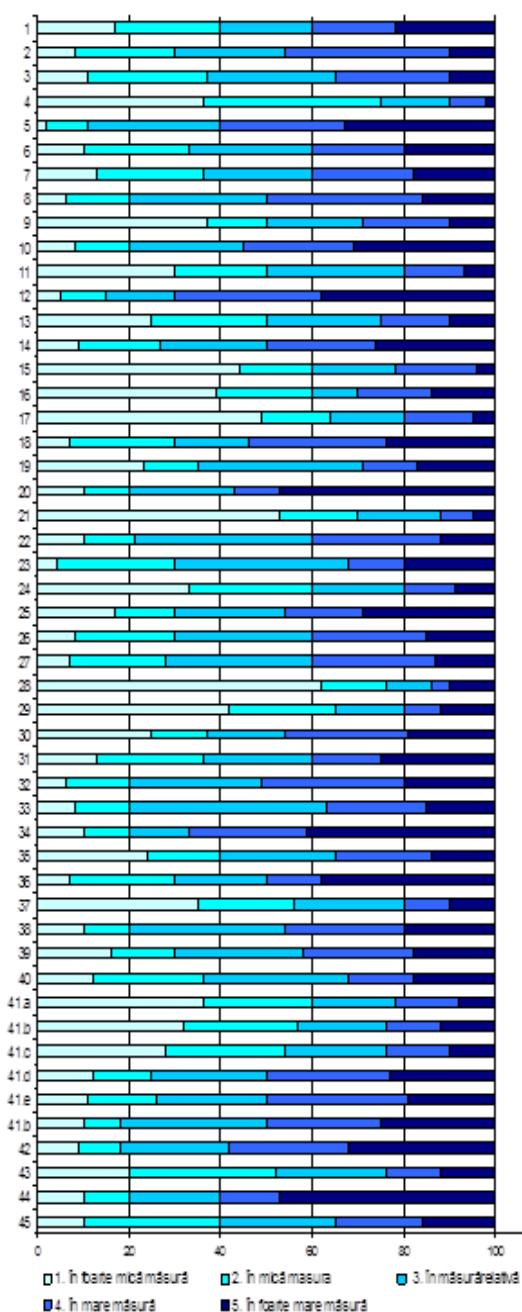
- availability of alternative information sources, which are richer & rigorously systematic
- some take notes only in the subjects of perspective interest, or those verified by tests
- not knowing the exact spelling, the student avoids writing in the foreign language
- limited personal lexis reduces understanding of concepts in the presented lecture
- in concentric teaching of subjects, if certain steps were missed, whatever follows cannot be understood, so it becomes pointless to take notes, and the student gives up
- rebellious teenager spirit
- overestimating their own intellectual potential

Although three-quarters of those surveyed perform additional documentation and research from other sources (the Internet, dictionaries, atlases, specialized studies, references indicated by teachers, tutors, parents, or peers), only 32% use fast reading techniques to identify the basic idea or the significant details.

It takes constant linguistic practice and exercise to successfully use clues from the context: text markers/logical connectors, word order, pre-fixes, suffixes, intonation. Only 18% of those questioned use such clues, the rest being trapped in the vicious circle of '*I do not use it because I do not know how / do not know how because I do not use it*'.

One third of the respondents summarize all available sources but three-quarters do not solve tasks of the same type to form a habit which will increase fluency in expression. Students consistently and constantly underestimate the contribution of personal effort to learning, and they often mistake it by innate intelligence and good memory.

43% use imagination and personal memories in data associations for easily retaining them, but mnemonic strategies (pictures, rhymes, and links) that reduce effort are used only by 14%. Only 19% of the subjects questioned actively restructure and integrate new information with previously acquired data.



1. In a very small measure; 2. In small measure; 3. In relative measure; 4. In a large measure; 5. In a very large measure.

Fig. 4. Study skills for foreign idioms

Half of them select which attitudes and cultural values they want to study and imitate, thus beginning to show increased discernment, with reference to career goals and the EU context.

Increased self confidence is present in 41%, but only 34% display common sense and practical decision-making processes. It is useful to know that the teaching strategies of teamwork and project work collaboration led to the result that half of those questioned state they yield better results when working in groups.

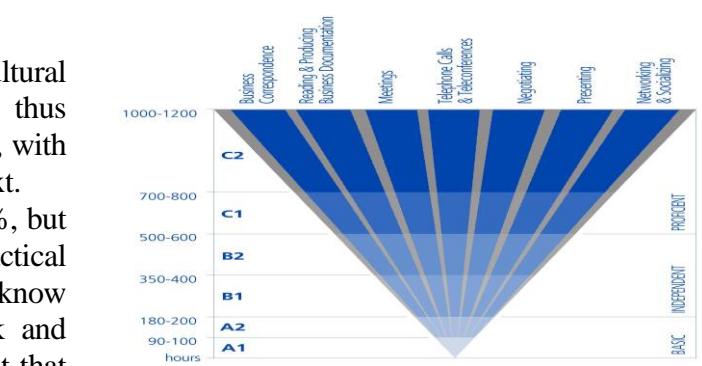


Fig. 5. ALTE levels corresponding to business uses [12]

This requires significant and almost equal contributions to the global effort, honesty in de-limiting their own ideas from others', fair play in attitude and in awarding credit for somebody else's input, elegant conduct and constructive criticism; let us hope that all these traits will eventually overcome the tense and counter-productive individualistic working atmosphere.

There is greater openness towards original approaches and intellectual courage in taking risks: only 17% prefer the well known paths. An invaluable asset of current generations is adaptability: 43% to a large and very large extent, with 28% stating that they are relatively adaptable to change and flexible in addressing problems; it seems that students got used to living in a world of negotiations quite fast.

When they fail to express the desired message, the unknown language issues are preferably compensated by approximation: mimicry 6%, gestures 9%, sentences left suspended to be completed by the interlocutor 11%, and synonyms, explanatory sentences as well as descriptive structures – almost half. In proportion of 82%, the students cannot learn or expose knowledge outside logical argumentation frame-works. Coherent presentation is managed by merely 23%. More than 3/4 of the respondents study independently; 26% learn together with someone else, either for logical, emotional, or motivational support, or for effective time management.

Students' learning styles [15] should allow a high level of autonomy in knowledge transfer [16] and in skills use for communicating practical technical approaches; to articulate an integrated ensemble of skills, the teaching must provide interactive and participative contexts, where emphasis should be placed on flexible and dynamic learning, based on cooperation and research, on exercising critical thinking, on independent acts & stimulated creativity, more useful than mere theory from the perspective of active inclusion on the job market. Textbooks are a modern study partner who teaches the student how to learn. Auxiliary materials for further education and better learning outcomes are

prioritised as follows:

The strategy shifts the focus from *knowing* to *using*, thus cultivating specialist skills (knowledge, abilities, attitudes, values) to grant the students' personality harmonious development. Effective teaching & learning & assessment will unfold when learners prove the acquisition of certain values manifested in peer interaction according to the learners' degree of participation in the training.

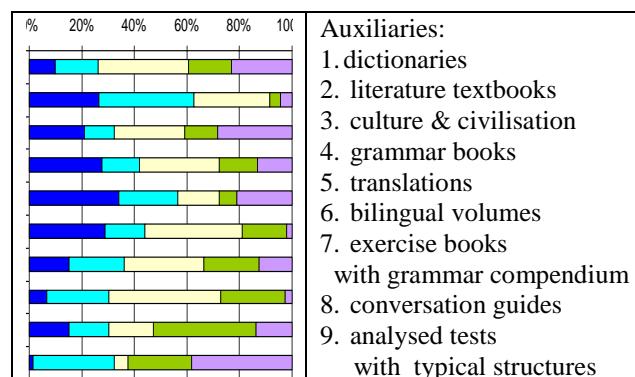


Fig. 6. Preference for auxiliary materials in the study of foreign languages

The foreign idiom curriculum for the Baccalaureate test contains enough elements of education for values, democracy and multiculturalism, seemingly compensating for other subjects (civics). Moreover, elements of unprejudiced education increase knowledge of language, history, culture and civilization.

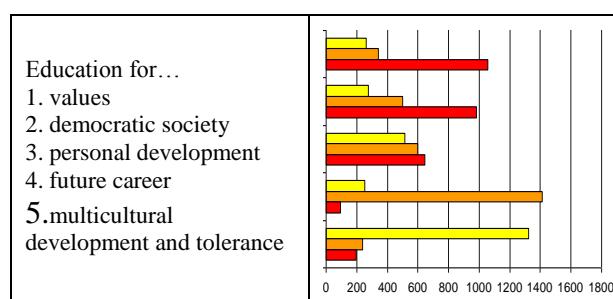


Fig. 7. Targeted educational areas

Active integration of foreign language skills developed in formal and informal areas, lead to significant increase in communication quality and professional competence at the workplace.

In order to use new methods, to enforce new curricula, and to actively teach on a communicative basis, professors need to re-train them-selves according to the challenges nowadays.

Active-participatory didactics, alongside with training and retraining of teachers in this regard will lead to generations of graduates able to meet current professional shifts and evolve by lifelong learning strategies. [22] The English exam in the Baccalaureate stands proof to the decrease of testing literature, culture, and civilization, at the same time focusing more on the components of grammar in communication and text comment with statement and argumentation of own viewpoint. Since 1991, the foreign language test in the national Baccalaureate exam has gone through various simplifications, modernizations, insertions of practical use elements, gradually giving up the areas of literature, culture & civilization; subsequently, the weight and the difficulty of the grammar tested decreased as well. The gain is fluency, but the loss is of substance & quality.



Fig. 8. Changes in the Baccalaureate English exam over a decade: 1999-2010

→ the literature, culture, and civilisation component
→ the grammar in communication component
→ text comment and own viewpoint argumentation

The reference point [23] in tertiary education English communication is the reality of the future employment/the next specialist academic program that the graduate will choose.

The work is no longer centred on the teacher, but the on student, who is actively interacting with peers, eliminating passive absorption of data; teachers' attitude towards the didactic process is altered to streamline the implementation of large-scale work in pairs, teams, role play, projects, by setting up portfolios in co-operative learning and study by discovery.

The pragmatic motivation will play a more important role in language acquisition, hence the customizing of the student group and of

the mix of resources and teaching techniques Correction can be difficult for students learning under the influence of the Romanian language, who adopt inter-language mistakes from their media exposure. Such errors originate in the status of lingua franca English holds nowadays: it is studied by many speakers who unwittingly preserve their own native language features (accent, phrasing, word order, gram-mar patterns, and idiomatic clichés); it all gene-rates new language versions, generically called Englishes [6]; pop culture globalization facilitates the process. The mistakes stem from inter language which is the transfer of language rules, patterns and sub-systems of the mother tongue into the target foreign language, sometimes with wrong transfer of learning skills. In addition to this, language acquisition strategies may be applied to inappropriate content, or unjustified over-generalization of communication skills, address, semantic & grammatical mixes with the mother tongue may occur.

A new balance emerges between inductive and deductive learning in foreign languages.

The curriculum is focused on compiling an inventory of communication functions

Extra-curricular activities will increasingly complement classroom learning

There is increased correlation between the content studied and students' maturity

	Language courses 6 months	Skill workshops 2 months	Exam preparation 12 months
CLT course levels			
C2			
C1		Business Workshops: Telephoning Meetings Presentations Negotiations	BEC Higher
B2 CEF B2/1 CEF B2/2			BEC Vantage
B1 CEF B1/1 CEF B1/2			BEC Preliminary
A2 CEF A2			
A1 CEF A1			
	Classroom instruction Online-Tutoring Self-paced training	Workshops Online-Tutoring Self-paced training	Classroom instruction Online-Tutoring Self-paced training
	Method		

Fig. 9. Sample business English study plan for young adults [2]

The curriculum must also include courses on information processing, study skills, revision planning and schedule management, as well

as self-management. Here is such a sample, focusing on business English study for young adults.

Internet used in self-access independent study Students can opt for different strategies from a range offered by manuals & teachers acknowledging that there are several correct ways to convey the same message, expressed in a flexible manner.

Current themes such as globalization will be integrated into textbooks, and tests quantifying skills and problem solving abilities will be part of tertiary education, via CLIL [5] or traditional systems, with direct impact on the psychosocial adaptation and on the motivation that directs and facilitates academic performance.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research was motivated by the need to modernize the acquisition process of wide circulation modern languages, such as English, in the implementation of the EU standards into Romanian education, for promoting linguistic diversity & proficiently trained speakers. Consistent with EU membership, our system must be compatible with the rules of CEFR – the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in the fields of learning, teaching and assessment.

Hence it becomes imperative to formally connect modern language learning offers in Romania with the labor market dynamics in line with the strategic objectives in the European Program for Vocational Education & Training Horizon 2010-2020. The design, organization and evaluation of idiom acquisition process are performed by integrating rational ways of self-reflection with modern assessment tools.

The introduction of Europass Language Passports in upper secondary and tertiary education facilitates acknowledging & labelling language skills in line with EU standards. Implementing the Language Passport streamlines communication skills assessment and optimizes certification methodologies; achieving the required skill levels will be done in close connection with

the professional environments and the job market.

Using Language Passports in higher education and adult education is motivating and effective, yielding a widely accepted benchmark for the selection of qualified staff, according to the European Language Portfolio.

In a nutshell, this collaborative research clearly possesses practical implications which will be subsequently explored by identifying additional solutions to increase the use of effective foreign language communication skills by prioritising good practice able to improve performance.

The structural and organisational reforms in the education systems have been implemented with a view to reducing early school-leaving rates and increasing access to the labour market.

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