

## **AROUSING NON-PHILOLOGICAL STUDENTS' INTEREST IN LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

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**Abstract:** *Considering the degree of implication and the interest of non-philological students in learning foreign languages, they can be classified into several categories. From the categories found as best represented in the practice of teaching to economic students and not only, we identified that a valid target group for the approach of our current study would be the category proving not very much interest in, nor a propensity for, the foreign language, though quite interested in the other disciplines of specialty. The focus of the study is to find the most appropriate ways we, as teachers of languages to students at non-philological specialisations, can address the category aforementioned, as well as to identify more general and comprehensive aspects, of an administrative nature, that can effectively cause a mentality change beneficial to the typology indicated. We began with an overview of the typologies of students. We enumerated several reasons the target group may serve as arguments for their reluctance with respect to learning foreign languages with the same diligence and seriousness as any other of the specialization disciplines in their curricula. Then, we presented a series of factual exemplifications meant to dismantle their erroneously founded grounds. Next, we showed that the need of a shift in consideration of the foreign languages disciplines is becoming more and more evident and is felt to be most effective if performed at decisional levels. Traditionally, foreign languages have not been given the appropriate importance in the consideration, promotion and evaluation of academic disciplines at other specializations than the philological ones. Against the evidence of foreign languages having historically been allotted a rather secondary level of relevance, there is now a strong endeavour to raise awareness of their right place in the formation of the skills and competences necessary to a complete specialist, particularly in the economic fields nowadays. The study presents models of several beneficial changes that have occurred within the Faculty of Economics in Oradea, where the positive effects witnessed are proofs of the successful shift of an obsolete mentality. As several methods of practical class approach were merely overviewed in the final part of the study, extended analysis on such methods shall constitute the object of further research into the matter.*

**Key words:** *foreign language learning; typology of non-philological students; awareness of language importance.*

**JEL classification:** Y80; Z00; K00.

## **1. Preliminary remarks on the categories of learners**

Along our more than sixteen years of experience of teaching English to non-philological students, at the Faculty of Economics, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Sciences, the Faculty of Political Sciences or the Faculty of Textiles and Leatherwork, we have come across different students. Assessing their degree of implication and consideration of the learning of foreign languages, they can be classified into several categories. From a pedagogical view point, we shall make allowance for more typologies of learners from which the most relevant for our approach shall be identified and addressed.

### **1.1. Learners' typology and motivation**

Literature of specialty in the field of pedagogy and adult education has discussed a series of typologies of learners and implications of motivation. If some types – though very distinct in terms of manifestation – such as the goal oriented, the learning oriented, or the activity oriented types (Houle, 1961; Boshier & Collins, 1985) – are nevertheless positive ones from the point of view of the final result (the knowledge acquired), other types are rather negative from this respect – as is the reluctant learner type (Thomas, 1990: 17).

Researchers argue that in order to describe and understand the connection between students' personal characteristics and their academic achievement it is very important to examine the student motivation, considering their individual differences (Pintrich & de Groot, 1990). Motivation "refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning that language" (Gardner, 1985: 10) and is, as seen by psychologists, one of the major determinants of academic achievement and work productivity (Keller, 1987). There has been noted that there is a proportional relation between the motivation and the positive learning attitudes EFL learners have, and the effort and the progress they'll make (Dulay and Burt, 1977).

When it comes to foreign language learning we can consider as relevant the following major categories of students:

- students interested in all disciplines and thus implicitly in the foreign language – as either being intrinsically studious and diligent learners or only struggling for high grades);
- students interested in the foreign language in particular (regardless of other disciplines), this occurring either from private reasons (a need or a desire to know a foreign language) or from the consciousness of the necessity of this knowledge in the field of specialisation;
- not interested in the foreign language, perceived as not relevant for their domain, though interested in other disciplines;
- not interested in any / most of the disciplines in the curricula (the apathetic type).

Other researchers have also noticed that "many students who are non-language majors appear to lack enthusiasm and interest in their language classes. Although students are obligated to regularly attend classes, nevertheless, teachers [...] have consistently complained that the level of participation of students is relatively low as is the level of effort in class assignments" (Matinović and Poljaković, 2010: 146). In their study, Matinović and Poljaković also assessed distinct attitudes of the students, one of their preoccupation – of more relevance for our current research – being to find if the lack of effort of students is related to their negative attitudes toward English

and/or the ESP course, as they also tried “to understand attitudes among first year university students who were non-language majors toward learning English, that is, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) within the context of changes that have occurred since the introduction of the Bologna process” (Matinović and Poljaković, 2010:147).

### **1.2. A category to address most effectively**

The target group for our endeavour – the attempt to ‘convert’ learners to a more rewarding attitude towards the learning of a foreign language – is constituted from students as yet of the reluctant learner type but of an oriented reluctance, directed particularly to the foreign language learning rather than to learning in general. With regard to language acquisition, researchers noted attitude to be an important factor (Bobkina et al., 2013: 3), as being an essential component of motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

As the first two categories identified in the typological breakdown of the current study are represented by students already convinced of the usefulness of learning a foreign language while the last category described would be hard to persuade into getting down to work for any academic subject whatsoever, the target group for our approach is the category proving not very much interest/propensity for the foreign language though quite interested in the other disciplines of specialty. Besides the solid factual grounds that their opinion – of lack of importance of the foreign language for their career – is erroneous, this category of students provide actually a good potential of work, proving interested and normally above average in grades at other academic subjects, and being thus characterised, most probably, by a quite high level of volatility in altering perspectives and reconsidering subjective matters. So, the focus of the approach is to find the most appropriate ways we, as teachers of languages to students at non-philological specialisations, can address the third of the categories aforementioned, as well as to identify more general and comprehensive aspects, of an administrative nature, that can effectively cause a mentality change beneficial to the typology indicated. This ‘addressing’ process boils down to persuading and demonstrating the students in the said category that the knowledge of the foreign language is highly relevant for their field of specialty.

### **2. Dismantling of hindering arguments**

During the last ten years, working with students in economics, for instance, we witnessed a series of apathetic attitudes towards the lesson of foreign language (English in the particular case of our expertise), or towards the idea of an active implication in learning it. We could sense that students have somehow expected a more relaxed atmosphere and laxer criteria for assessment in what the classes and evaluations of foreign language were concerned.

By and large, the students considered are in their first or second year, – as it is during these years that languages are taught in Romanian higher education – so most of them are aged around 19 or 20. Their majoring is in various economic specializations, such as: Finances, Management, Marketing, International Business, Tourism a.s.o., and their level in ESL is normally B2, at least B1 (as of the CEFR).

### **2.1. Grounds for belittling**

The category that makes the object of the current research is represented by students not so keen on learning the language with the same consideration as a discipline in the field of their specialization. Among the reasons generally given by these students for their lack of participation and their reluctance to put any effort for language acquisition the most common are:

- the foreign languages classes should be only supplementary – providing relaxation and fun, entertaining activities – as a break from the serious learning;
- the foreign language only makes the curricula more loaded than necessary;
- it is useless from the point of view of what their future career may imply;
- it only spoils their average grade since they are not too good at it and they cannot start learning it now, at this level when they have so many speciality disciplines to cover and so little time;
- it's not languages that they chose to study but economics (for instance). That is why they came to this faculty and didn't go to the faculty of letters;
- they cannot see how they would ever need a foreign language in their future work and they think that if they ever get in this situation they will learn it then.

Thus it is students of this category that need to be identified and somehow made conscious of their wrong opinion and of the mistake their attitude leads them to, on a long term.

### **2.2. Assertion of the foreign languages' role in economic fields**

As for the counter-arguments, it is obviously wrong to consider any type of knowledge as not useful, let alone that of a foreign language, so, a straightforward answer to start with is the outlining of the unfounded character of the opinion of irrelevance. A foreign language can be anything but useless, especially in the field of economics. It has been proven especially in the current environment to be vital in most approaches and activities, from getting a job to working in a company, from searching simple information to getting involved in research.

From the various aspects of motivation that have been explored in research upon second language learning, specialists include the "variable of instrumentality". "Instrumental orientation or motivation refers to the practical benefits of attaining proficiency in a second language, such as obtaining a better job or higher salary" (Martinović and Poljaković, 2010: 147). Indeed, as several researchers note, instrumental motivation can well be related to language achievement (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003).

The knowledge of a foreign language comes handy in finding better job opportunities; it can be a plus for the CV of the job applicant and along the interviews in a recruitment session. Working abroad or just in an environment that is multinational, pluri-cultural or in any other form open to foreign affairs, as well as working in presumably the most insignificant firm that at a point can however get foreign contacts for a reason or another will, at some point, mean relying on the knowledge of a foreign language. Engaging in partnerships or connections on the foreign market, opening a business at international level shall require the practicality of being able to communicate in a common language, a lingua franca to ensure understanding of all aspects that can derive from such human interactions and transactions that prove necessary in establishing a connection at whatever level, be it formal or informal.

Circumstances such as documentation and research shall certainly come useful or necessary at one moment. They cannot be thorough or relevant unless considering materials published in relevant journals or in international magazines (hence in a foreign language).

So the two main categories of reasons why knowledge of a foreign language is vital for a good specialization in any field are:

- openness to international work environment;
- possibility of proper documentation and research.

It is thus on these two aspects that all didactical, administrative and psychological approaches of 'rehabilitation' of students' motivation towards more active participation to language classes and all the attempts to build and back up their willingness to put in more effort for language acquisition should focus on.

### **3. The need of a mentality shift**

A need of a shift in consideration of the disciplines of foreign language is becoming more and more obvious and it is felt to be most effective if occurring at the high levels – e.g. institutionally -, not only in the small units of the system – the class: educator and students.

#### **3.1. Curricular shortcomings**

We consider that the perception of foreign languages learning at an academic level of non-philological specializations becomes, ultimately, an issue of mentality, as, traditionally, languages have not been given the appropriate importance in the consideration, promotion and evaluation of academic disciplines, at other specializations than the philological ones. They have most often been perceived as complementary and of a lower rank and even marginalised by all layers of the system: from decision makers to academics of other specialty and – which is worst – to the students. The latter are though the ones who actually lose a great deal by this attitude, but this comes as a direct (and only logical) consequence of the approach on the higher levels, the general 'picture', that has managed to gain field and to become a 'trend' along years, depriving them of motivation. The common mentality causes them to start lacking interest and to lose the willingness to engage in any effort just for the sake of acquiring such knowledge which should in their opinion come somehow passively, through fun, entertaining activities, no effort or work and, at any rate, with high grades.

Thus, a historical handicap comes to harden the foreign language teacher's endeavour to attract students towards the study of the language as long as the latter have constantly felt it as less relevant among the disciplines in the curricula. Some of the facts they could perceive about the disciplines of foreign languages and that constituted solid grounds for their erroneous interpretation were: fewer classes, fewer credits, complementary type discipline -even optional in some cases-, of less importance if asking teachers of other disciplines or considering its position in the curricula - the last but one discipline to be studied in each semester. Against this evidence of a rather secondary level of relevance, there should be a stronger strive for raising awareness of the true place of the foreign language in the big picture of necessary skills and competences in the formation of a specialist particularly in the economic fields nowadays.

### 3.2. Curricular improvements

A change in mentality can only be achieved by addressing more levels at once: from the direct interrelation of the student with the teacher of foreign language to the more complex organizational, institutional frame of reflecting the importance of the discipline in the curricula. If the former has a mere persuasive nature being felt as rather subjective or of a personal interest, the latter shall be more effective as understood to be more significant and generalized due to its institutional character. First steps in this respect have recently been taken in our faculty and relevant results are expected to be seen soon with regard to the students' consideration of the foreign languages classes.

Very positive aspects that have occurred after the alterations produced in the curricula of the Faculty of Economics concerning the foreign languages prove to be the following:

- introducing both **lectures** and seminars of **specialised language** (for business) instead of only seminars of standard foreign language;
- consequently, the consideration of the language as a **subject of speciality** instead of complementary;
- allotting similar **number of credits** to the foreign language disciplines as to other disciplines of specialty (4 or even 5 at the level of first cycle instead of 2 or 3);
- introducing a **second foreign language** (optional: French or German) besides the compulsory English language to the specialization of International Business (the specialization most requiring languages for a good specialist in the field).

### 3.3. Class approach

New methods shall be employed by teachers of languages to students of non-philological specialization, in order to raise students' interest and make classes more appealing to them to insure active participation and at the same time to facilitate natural assimilation of the material. Introductory discussions following visual and audio materials, guided discovery through puzzle games and quizzes, all sorts of and brainstorming activities are helpful and useful as well. "Fresh, creative, sometimes unconventional methods when teaching foreign languages" (Sim and Pop, 2012: 76) have become a common practice.

Teachers are key factors in student motivation as they play an important role in students' perception of the language class as whole and their reactions in this respect; thus, negative teacher attitudes can significantly demotivate learners (Nikolov, 2001). On the contrary, teacher's use of motivational strategies can increase motivation (Dornyei and Csizer, 1998). Building empathy, "in the sense that the teacher experiences a shift from his own perspective ... to the students' perspective," (Hamburg, 2011: 5.112) and making use of disclosure by sometimes exposing some instances of private data, can represent very useful and effective approaches in the case of the students belonging to the category specified. Meant to strengthen the relationship students – teacher, such shared familiarities are sensed by the former as a sign of 'coolness' and this has the power to maintain a healthy class environment, as it is well known that "the atmosphere in the class that has to be cooperative and friendly so as to eradicate the students' fear of failing" (Abrudan, 2012: 174). Teacher's communicative style is seen by researchers as of utmost relevance and those educators who were perceived by the class to be controlling and less informative induced lower student motivation (Noels et al, 2000).

Still, limits should be very clear and sure not to be crossed as that might degenerate into anarchy, with students and teacher getting too close for the latter to be able to impose the former's respect and a lucrative atmosphere of order in the class.

#### 4. Conclusions

In order to understand and describe the connection between non-philological students' individual features and their academic achievement in the acquisition of foreign language for specific purposes, it is quite relevant to examine their motivation and to consider their way of approaching the foreign language classes, in terms of attitude and expectations.

The target group of the study was constituted by the category of students not very enthusiastic about the language classes though interested in other disciplines of their specialization. It was noted that they have various misjudgements, preconceived ideas and erroneous reactions given by a faulty perception of the relevance of the disciplines of foreign language in their curricula.

The grounds for their misperceptions were analysed and most of them proved to be of a deeper psychological nature, given mostly by some flaws at a macro level that were traditionally rooted in the collective view.

The improvements that have been brought to the curricula of the specialisations of the Faculty of Economic Sciences in Oradea are analysed and their beneficial results are emphasised. It is also strengthened that their effectiveness has to be corroborated with the teachers' modern approaches and their use of various methods meant to improve students' motivation towards learning foreign languages for business purposes. These practical class approaches were merely overviewed by the current paper and further studies need to be undertaken regarding the methodological aspects involved.

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