

BENEFITS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING - LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY CERTIFICATES – A PREREQUISITE FOR THE BUSINESS GRADUATE

Pop Anamaria-Mirabela, Sim Monica-Ariana

Department of International Business, Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania

mipop@uoradea.ro

msim@uoradea.ro

Abstract: *Learning a new language at any age is an enormously rewarding experience in many ways. Studying a foreign language helps students understand English grammar better and improves their overall communication and problem-solving skills. Beyond the intellectual benefits, knowledge of a foreign language facilitates travel, enhances career opportunities, and enables one to learn more about different peoples and cultures. In Romania, languages continue to struggle to gain the status of key learning area in many primary, secondary schools and even universities, while many countries in the European Union have adopted a policy which requires ‘mother-tongue plus two foreign languages’, introducing languages from the earliest years of primary education. This is due to the fact that contacts between people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds have increased in the past few decades, a number of factors like advances in technology – the internet, telecommunications, travel – increasing international migration and the trend towards economic globalization contributing to it. As these trends continue into the future, the need for intercultural competence will be heightened. Due to growing economic relations between Romania and various countries of the world, knowing a foreign language gives one the much-needed edge. This paper attempts to provide language teachers and language learners with accessible, concise information about the benefits of languages learning and the advantages of having a certificate proving proficiency in a particular foreign language, with emphasis on English. It draws on literature in a number of fields including second language acquisition, language education, presenting key arguments which are fundamental to supporting and promoting the benefits of languages. Also, it draws on the results of a research performed at the Faculty of Economics with 1st and 2nd year students. The research is based on the assumption that the language courses offered at the Faculty of Economics should provide students with internationally comparable proof of their language competence. This is extremely valuable for students who wish to obtain a language proficiency certificate which represents, in our opinion, a must for the Business graduate.*

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1. Introduction: Language Proficiency – General Considerations

The beginning of the 21st century has showed a renewed interest in language learning. As Met and Galloway (1992) state, “political and economic concerns play a major role in the nation’s perception of the value of learning a second language”. In addition, there is an increasing acceptance of the role that multilingual individuals can play in an increasingly diverse society, with emphasis on the academic and cognitive benefits that may derive from learning other languages.

Many monolingual speakers of English are not very comfortable with the need to learn another language. They consider that if they speak English, the global lingua franca, it means that they are lucky and do not see any reasons in learning another language, considering that there is no need for them to learn English as the entire world is learning it. However, a number of linguists and economists have admitted that monolingual English speakers will be disadvantaged in an increasingly globalized world. As English becomes the basic, ‘must-have’ skill, those who speak a second or third language in addition to English will have the competitive edge. This is being increasingly recognized in countries such as India and China, who are already moving beyond learning English to embrace other emerging languages of importance such as Spanish (e.g. Graddol 2006; Clyne 2005).

Yet, not all the students/people learning a foreign language get to the level of language proficiency. But what is language proficiency? Let’s take a look first at the word, *proficiency*. According to *Collins Dictionary*, *proficiency* means “the quality or state of having great facility (in an art, occupation, etc.) or being skilled” (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/proficiency>). In turn, language proficiency represents the measurement of how well an individual has mastered a language. Generally, proficiency is measured in terms of receptive and expressive language skills, syntax, vocabulary, semantics, and other areas that demonstrate language abilities. Language proficiency includes four domains: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Proficiency in a foreign language depends on the individual who may be proficient in a particular foreign language but not in another language. Yet, we might ask ourselves: why is there nowadays so much talk about being proficient in a foreign language? And the reasons are multiple, with cognitive, academic or social benefits. There are many companies requiring knowledge of a foreign language, but multilingual applicants have more chances of getting the position. Knowing a second language can give people a competitive advantage in the work force by opening up additional job opportunities. (Villano, 1996:45-49) Also, studying or travelling in a foreign country can be an incredibly rewarding and enriching experience. European students may enrol in Erasmus programs all over Europe. Speaking a foreign language provides additional opportunities for internships, research or service learning abroad. Definitely, advanced study of the literature, history, politics or culture of a particular country requires proficiency in a language. Individuals who speak and read more than one language have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more from travel to other countries. Knowing other language provides access to the cultural treasures of other countries, opening up opportunities in business. “The positive impact of cultural information is significantly enhanced when that information is experienced through foreign language and accompanied by experiences in culturally authentic situations.” (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004)

Then, learning a second language helps improve memory, critical thinking and study

skills. According to Pop (2011), “[s]tudying a foreign language, from kindergarten to university, provides an individual with a better understanding of grammar, which in turn will train him or her to clearly express their thoughts. It will give them strong vocabulary skills and a broader perspective in their thinking.”

Research suggests that students who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991:413-429). Therefore, many students discover that the effort required learning a foreign language might help them succeed in other academic tasks. In Curtain and Dahlberg’s opinion (2004), “[e]xposure to a foreign language serves as a means of helping children to intercultural competence. The awareness of a global community can be enhanced when children have the opportunity to experience involvement with another culture through a foreign language.” Also, academic and cognitive skills transfer readily between languages. While there may be differences in the vocabulary, grammar and writing systems of languages, all languages with writing systems have in common that the reader must learn to make meaning from the text. Concepts and strategies are easily transferred from one language to another, for example, ‘scanning, skimming, contextual guessing of words, skipping unknown words, tolerating ambiguity, reading for meaning, making inferences, monitoring, recognizing the structure of text, using previous learning, using background knowledge about the text’. (Baker, 2006:330)

Considering the aspects mentioned above, the goal of the present paper is to present the benefits of second language learning, with emphasis on language proficiency certificates. The paper draws on literature in a number of fields including second language acquisition, language education, presenting key arguments which are fundamental to supporting and promoting the benefits of languages. Also, it draws on the results of a research performed at the Faculty of Economics with 1st and 2nd year students. The research is based on the assumption that the language courses offered at the Faculty of Economics should provide students with internationally comparable proof of their language competence. This is extremely valuable for students who wish to obtain a language proficiency certificate which represents, in our opinion, a must for the Business graduate.

2. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was developed by the Council of Europe to establish international standards for Language Learning, Teaching and Assessment in all modern European languages. It provides a common basis for the drafting of language syllabuses, curriculum, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It also describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. (Council of Europe, 2013)

Since the 1970s the Council of Europe has promoted an action-oriented approach to the description of language use. One of the characteristics of this approach is that language is used to perform *communicative acts* which can be either external or social. People interact with their families, friends and colleagues, hold meetings, give speeches or lectures, write letters, publish articles or books. Communicative acts

can also be internal and private, including forms of reading and some forms of listening. Secondly, communicative acts comprise *language activity*. Language activity is divided into four categories: reception, production, interaction and mediation. *Reception* refers to understanding language produced by others, whether in speech or in writing. *Production* means producing speech or writing. *Interaction* refers to spoken or written exchanges between two or more individuals, and *mediation* (often involving translation or interpretation) makes communication possible between individuals or groups who are unable to communicate directly. Then, language activity implies *communicative language competence*, which includes knowledge of the words, sounds, and syntactic rules of the language used, together with the ability to use such knowledge in order to understand and produce language. Language activity always occurs in a *context* that imposes *conditions* and *constraints* of many different kinds. The CEFR suggests four main *domains* of language use: *personal*, *public*, *educational* and *occupational*. Also, communicative language competence includes sociolinguistic and pragmatic components. *Sociolinguistic competences* allow people to deal with the social and cultural dimensions of communicative behaviour. Last but not least, communicative acts brings about the performance of *tasks*, which make people use strategies in order to understand and/or produce spoken or written *texts*. (Little, 2006)

In the same time, language learners should be aware that it is essential to apply their knowledge in foreign languages in writing, reading and speaking. These three categories can be evaluated according to the person's level language, so that the assessment is individual but with reference to general terms. The CEFR uses some parts of its description to define language proficiency at six levels arranged in three bands – A1 and A2 (basic user); B1 and B2 (independent user); C1 and C2 (proficient user). These common reference levels are generally used for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of learning materials, and the assessment of learning results. In the same time, the progress of individual language learners can be evaluated over time according to these levels. Yet, these levels are not normative. The CEFR should rather be thought of as “a concertina-like reference tool that [...] educational professionals can expand or contract, elaborate or summarise, according to the needs of their context”. (North, 2007:19) According to Taylor (2004a), “making comparisons between scores on different tests is challenging because many of the current range of test products differ in their design, purpose, and format.” Candidates' aptitude and preparation for a particular type of test may also vary and individual candidates or groups of candidates may perform better in certain tests than in others.

3. The Benefits of Foreign Language Learning for Business Students. Is a Foreign Language Proficiency Certificate a Must?

Today, there are many institutes and universities offering a number of courses in languages, among them foreign languages like English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Chinese or Russian are now gaining ground. Information on reasons for studying languages was collected from language learners themselves, students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea by means of focus group interviews. The focus group consisted of 1st year and 2nd year BA Business students. They were asked to express their opinions on the gains they might have if speaking a foreign language and whether a certificate proving proficiency in a foreign language is an essential requirement when graduating or applying for a position in a

company. The answers to these questions were interesting and showed, to a certain extent, the common belief that speaking a foreign language is, indeed important for a Business graduate and the proof (a certificate) of their skills becomes a must. "I believe that knowing a foreign language is like having a travelling passport. Nowadays having this knowledge is very important for your own development and more and more employers have this requirement for their applicants. So, it is something that you need to know if you want to succeed in almost everything" says Nicoleta, a first year BA student who is learning English. Ioana, a first year BA student, considers that "it is important to know foreign languages because it gives you a better understanding of the world and how we are all connected by being able to communicate with people from different countries. Furthermore, I feel more confident when I can speak more than one language and it also improves my memory. Moreover, being able to speak more than one language could help us to get a scholarship and of course, is essentially for getting a job." A large percentage of students expressed an expectation that a language would be helpful to their future career goals: "I think nowadays it is more than necessary to know foreign languages because we don't live separated by the rest of the world, so we need to be able to communicate with people all across the globe. Moreover, getting a well-paid job is often conditioned by speaking at least two different foreign languages." says Florina. Others, like Cristina, take into consideration the cognitive and social benefits of language study: "Well, firstly, by knowing a foreign language or many others, you improve your own way of thinking; you learn not just to speak, but think in that certain language before speaking. Secondly, if you want to make performance, having a big company, for example, an accounting firm, knowing several foreign languages will put you in a good light for a foreign client because it is very important to make a client feel *like home* while working with you." However, in terms of motivation to study languages, the prospect of gaining an employability advantage was less important for these learners than the personal satisfaction resulting from language learning. Differently from the first year BA students, second year students become aware of the higher chance to get a well-paid job and the opportunities that foreign language proficiency can provide. Alexandra, a second year Finance-Banking student says that speaking a foreign language "offers a lot of opportunities, for example, if you want to work outside the country or if the company you work for wants to relocate." One of her fellow students, Roxana considers that it's very important for us to know at least one foreign language because nowadays this is an important criteria for our employment, so having a foreign language certificate will be a big advantage for us." Adina shares the idea: "In my opinion knowing a foreign language is very important because it helps you in your professional career. Nowadays you should speak a foreign language when you want to get a job at the shop at the corner of the street and even more when you want to get a job as an economic director at a very important company."

When asked about the importance of a certificate proving their proficiency in a foreign language, students were two-sided. For Andrada, a first year BA students, the existence of a certificate is a proof "that you are capable to communicate/collaborate with foreign people. Also, there are more chances to have a good job. It shows that you are responsible and that you want to do something in life." For Nicoleta, "having a foreign language proficiency certificate it's important because it helps you to prove your skills not only in a direct mode but also you are

able to show the proof of your knowledge. If we speak about Cambridge certificate or TOEFL or others, almost anyone knows that there are not so easy to pass.” Denisa considers that “having a foreign language proficiency certificate is important for your résumé because you’ll be more likely to be hired by a company to the detriment of a person who doesn’t have that certificate, and is also a proof of your skills.” For other students, like Florina, the certificate gives them the boost they need when expressing themselves in public. She says: “[h]aving a foreign language proficiency certificate is a great advantage when applying for a job and, personally, it gives me some courage when it comes to expressing in public my opinions in a foreign language.”

For second year students, like Marius, “knowing a foreign language is also important for our future career and offers us new perspectives in this particular aspect of our life. In my opinion, having a foreign language certificate is important only for proving an employer our knowledge.” Cătălin, a student who has travelled and worked in New York for 4 months with Work&Travel Programme, believes that speaking a foreign language “is ... a way to improve your communication skills, making new friends, learn new cultures, and, if needed, gain some help in crucial situations. A certificate in this domain could help you even more. There will be a lot of important people you don’t meet face to face, so make sure you use every opportunity.” Alexandra says that having a foreign language proficiency certificate “gives you a plus in case of a job interview, it proves that you have skills and qualities which can be useful for the company.”

Yet, there are students for whom a foreign language proficiency certificate is not important. Cristina, a first year BA student does not find a certificate “quite important, but a lot of multinational companies are asking for one.”

The answers show that the students are aware of the fact that languages promote better relationships with others (individuals and countries). Reasons for studying languages which stress the importance of relationships with people, such as cultural understanding of others, wanting to communicate, meeting people and making friends also featured prominently. We can conclude that the strongest reasons for students to learn a foreign language are the personal benefits (communication, economic, social and political dimensions, diversity, employability, globalisation, identity, key skills, language awareness, mobility, personal and social development) and enjoyment that they gain from it. A language proficiency certificate is important (for 1st year students) while it becomes a must for 2nd year students.

4. English Language Certificates

Learning a foreign language gives students an opportunity to appear for international examinations like ESOL, IELTS, TOEFL, etc. A good alternative for those who can prove their English and want to enhance their level quickly is to do English courses and prepare for these exams. These courses offer the opportunity to prepare the exam in one’s native country, so people have become more fluent and achieved the necessary level in the shortest time possible.

Several European institutions made official language examinations, some of them achieved easier, faster, while others have worldwide recognition for a lifetime. In order to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the various official English tests and equivalencies between each of them, we provide next a brief description of what we consider to be for Business students the most important examinations

and the equivalence between different language certifications (see Table 1).

4.1 English for Speakers of Other Language – ESOL

The official Cambridge exams degrees from the University of Cambridge are considered the most reliable evidence of English proficiency. The great advantage of the Cambridge exams and one that differentiates them from the rest of English exams is that the tests are valid for life. The learners have the opportunity of obtaining an internationally recognised English language professional or university certificate, which will enhance their chances to continue their education in Romania or abroad and to improve their employment prospects. (*British Council, 2013*) Cambridge exams are offered through the British Council in each country in the world. Cambridge English examinations are taken by over four million learners in more than 130 countries each year. The exams cover general English, business English, academic English and English for young learners. In Romania, learners can sit any British examination in any of the British Council's centres: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Iasi.

The exams are produced by Cambridge ESOL (*English for Speakers of Other Languages*). Cambridge ESOL is one of the world's leading educational assessment agencies, producing exams for the secondary, further and higher education sectors, both within the UK and internationally. The range of Cambridge ESOL exams includes specialist exams for business and academic purposes, covering all four areas of language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. The emphasis is on the candidate's ability to communicate effectively in English. There are six Cambridge ESOL exams:

- The *Key English Test (KET)* is an elementary level examination for learners of English. Learners are expected to have developed many of the basic linguistic 'survival skills' needed to interact socially or at work in an English speaking environment. A minimum of 10 candidates is required for this exam to take place.
- The *Preliminary English Test (PET)* tests language ability at lower-intermediate level (after approximately 375 hours of study) and is about two-thirds of the way to the very popular FCE. A minimum of 10 candidates is required for this exam to take place.
- The *First Certificate in English (FCE)* is a Cambridge level 3 exam at the upper-intermediate or 'independent user' level. FCE is the most widely taken exam and has the most widespread recognition. It is taken for employment and study purposes.
- The *Certificate of Advanced English (CAE)* offers a lower-advanced language qualification for those who need to use English in their jobs. It is mostly taken by university students and young professionals. Many universities recognise CAE as an English language entry requirement.
- The *Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)* is a top grade exam certifying that the candidate has near-native speaker ability; therefore it fulfils entry requirements in English language by British universities and many universities in other English-speaking countries and by other professional bodies worldwide.
- The *Business English Certificate (BEC)* is suitable for people aged 16 and over, who are either preparing for a career in business or are already in work.

The candidates can choose three levels: Preliminary, Vantage and Higher, considering the level that matches their level of English language skills and the professional needs.

- The *International Certificate in Financial English* (ICFE) is a high-level qualification that demonstrates that the candidate has the language skills for a successful career in international accountancy and finance. (*British Council*, 2013)

For business students and business graduates it would be advisable to sit the Business English Exam. Recognition of BEC is increasing rapidly in Romania as a growing number of companies are using the examination as a focus for in-company training courses. Also, many universities in Europe recognise BEC Higher as a suitable entry requirement for international students to business-related courses of study. The Business English Certificates are certificated examinations which can be taken on six fixed dates per year at approved centres authorised for BEC (in Romania – Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara). They are aimed primarily at individual learners who wish to obtain a business-related English language qualification.

4.2 The International English Language Test - IELTS

The International English Language Test (IELTS) is now the world's leading English language test for candidates who want to study or work abroad or in their home country. As it is advertised on the website, IELTS is "the world's most popular language test for education and immigration." (*British Council*, 2013) IELTS test is a quality English language calling for admission to the universities and higher education internationally. IELTS calls are made once a month through the British Council and the result is obtained after 13 days so it is a flexible test that can be obtained fairly quickly. IELTS is recognized by the vast majority of universities around the world and also, more and more companies use IELTS as a recruitment tool. In comparison to FCE or BEC, the disadvantage is that IELTS expires in two years. The IELTS test evaluates the level of international English (no preference for British or American English).

As a test, it has grown exponentially in recent years to almost a million and a half candidates per year. Companies and educational institutions in other countries have set standards and requirements to be completed before an individual is accepted. As a matter of fact, nowadays, the IELTS test certification has been one of the English proficiency tests taken by many working professionals and students in Romania. Taking the IELTS test is very important since it is one of the requirements an individual needs, and it is, also, an advantage to learners so that they can prove that they are globally competitive in other countries.

4.3 The Test of English as a Foreign Language - TOEFL

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a test that measures fluency and knowledge in the English language. TOEFL calls are made several times a month through internet by ETS.org and the candidates get the result after about 5 weeks. In Romania, candidates can sit the exam in Arad, Baia Mare, Bucharest, Constanța, Galați, Iași, Oradea and Timișoara. The results are based on a score and each score corresponds to a particular language level. Just like IELTS, the disadvantage of TOEFL test is that results are valid for 2 years. More than 27 million people from all over the world have taken the TOEFL test to demonstrate their

English-language proficiency. The average English skill level ranges between Intermediate and Advanced. The candidates are: students planning to study at a higher education institution, English-language learning program admissions and exit, scholarship and certification candidates, English-language learners who want to track their progress, students and workers applying for visas, etc.

The certificates provided by the test are recognized internationally, especially by educational institutions, which are those for which is primarily directed.

There are three types of TOEFL: Paper Based TOEFL (PBT). This is the first type of test set, and runs on paper; Computer Based TOEFL (CBT). This is the second set. As its name suggests, is done on a computer with a CD; and Internet Based TOEFL (iBT). It is the third and most modern of the three. It consists of an online survey, conducted, as above, using a computer. (<http://www.ets.org/toefl>)

Table 1: Equivalences between the different degrees of English certificates

University of Cambridge Exams	IELTS	TOEFL	European equivalents
CPE Certificate of Proficiency in English	IELTS 6.0 - 6.5	TOEFL(PBT) 550-600+ TOEFL(CBT) 230-250+ TOEFL (IBT) 88-100+	C2
CAE Certificate in Advanced English	IELTS 6.0 -5.5	TOEFL (PBT) 525-550 TOEFL (CBT) 195-230 TOEFL (IBT) 70-88	C1
FCE First Certificate in English	IELTS 5.5 -5.0	TOEFL (PBT) 450-525 TOEFL (CBT) 145-195 TOEFL (IBT) 50-70	B2
PET Preliminary English Test	IELTS 5.0 -4.0	TOEFL (PBT) 310-450 TOEFL (CBT) 50-145 TOEFL (IBT) 10-50	B1
KET Key English Test			A2
Beginner			A1

Source: <http://www.where-what.com/en/news/444.html>

5. Conclusion

Research has shown that second language study offers many benefits to students in terms of improved communicative ability, cognitive development, cultural awareness, and job opportunities. People speaking a second language can take advantage of the many available opportunities and resources that this linguistic advantage might bring them. For Business students, a language proficiency certificate has become a necessity if they wish to enjoy the benefits of a good position on a multinational company and not only. In this respect, we hope that this paper will make a contribution to the effective promotion of languages and to facilitating discussion on the reasons why languages are important and should be studied. Finally, it is perhaps worth remembering that there are students out there who really value languages, who enjoy them sufficiently to choose to study them and who are aware of their importance in a successful career, at least in business.

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