

# EVALUATING GRADUATES' PERFORMANCE ON THE JOB IN RELATION TO THE LANGUAGE COURSE

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## Introduction

This paper is devoted to one of the areas investigated through the PROSPER Impact Study, a large-scale evaluation project carried out by a team of English teachers from several major universities around Romania. The aim of the study was to document the impact of the Project for Special Purpose English in Romania (PROSPER), coordinated by the British Council, whose main goal was to upgrade the teaching/learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in major tertiary education institutions, in order to improve the level of English proficiency of future personnel in key sectors of the Romanian economy. [1]

The study investigated the impact of PROSPER on the different categories of stakeholders in the project as well as in the ESP teaching/learning process, from teachers and students to ex-students, managers and employers, foreign languages departments and educational institutions. An important area of investigation, in relation to the overall aim of the project, was that of the impact made on the employability of recent graduates by the methodological innovations in the teaching of ESP introduced through PROSPER. The main assumption underlying this area of expected impact was stated as follows:

*As a result of attending a PROSPER language course, PROSPER graduates have increased their level of English and developed an awareness of their professional needs as well as a wide range of professional communication skills, which ultimately makes them more employable.*

This expectation was investigated through several instruments: a questionnaire addressed to ex-students - both PROSPER graduates (i.e. those who had attended

a PROSPER course) and NON-PROSPER ones (graduates who had not been exposed to the new methodology and materials); a questionnaire / structured interview addressed to employers, and a series of case studies meant to investigate the language performance in the work place of a number of graduates belonging to both categories [2].

Full credit for the design of these instruments and interpretation of the data must be given to our colleagues Ema Adam and Marinela Grănescu from Cluj Technical University and Claudia Constantin and Rodica Miuț from the Polytechnical University of Timișoara. I should also like to stress the involvement of many of our colleagues from English departments in PROSPER institutions who had a contribution in the early stages of the study, and participated in the collection of data.

## Changes in the Employment Profile in Romania

The data collected through the instruments mentioned above reflected the graduates' employability from two perspectives: (1) the ex-students' perception of their performance in job-related situations and of the role of English in their career success, and (2) the employers' current requirements regarding employment and their perception of improvements in the performance of recent employees.

In order to investigate the hypothesis concerning PROSPER impact on the employability of graduates, the Impact Study team first looked at the recent developments in the job market and current requirements for English regarding employment, which were then compared with data concerning the graduates' performance in the work place and the relevance of the ESP course they had attended. On analysing the evolution of the current job market in

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Romania, the team identified the following major trends [3]:

- Although the number of openings for recent graduates is rather limited, the job offer has been diversifying, covering today a much wider range of areas and positions than it used to before 1989.
- There is a general trend towards jobs requiring a combination of engineering and economics expertise.
- English has become an important criterion in the recruitment of graduates with a technical or business/economics degree.
- Job requirements include a variety of skills, focusing on the employees' ability to communicate orally and in writing in different work-related situations, with oral and interpersonal skills becoming a priority.
- Among the skills required in testing for recruitment, interviewing and job applications/CVs have come to prevail, but a strong emphasis continues to be laid on translation, as well.

These findings proved particularly relevant to PROSPER teachers in order to revise and redesign their courses so as to meet the new requirements of employment and recruitment. In terms of impact, the team tried to investigate whether the courses offered by PROSPER teachers had prepared graduates to cope successfully with the new employment requirements and perform better in the work place, and consequently whether they had had an impact on the chances of PROSPER graduates to be employed.

To facilitate interpretation of the data, the general assumption discussed above was broken down into several expectations, as follows:

1. *PROSPER graduates feel better prepared to cope with job requirements and have an increased awareness of their professional needs.*
2. *The level of English attained by PROSPER graduates has made them more employable, helping them get their present jobs.*
3. *The activities included in PROSPER courses develop a range of skills needed in real-life communication at work and for adequate performance during interviews and other tests for recruitment.*

The main results concerning these expectations will be discussed below.

**1 Better preparation for the job and increased**

*awareness of needs*

The results yielded by the Ex-Student Questionnaire indicate a much higher percentage of PROSPER ex-students who felt better prepared at the end of the course than NON-PROSPER ones (Table 1).

Question: *After the English course do you /did you feel well prepared for employment/ scholarship/ further study?*

Options:	PROSPER % (n = 101)	NON-PROSPER % (n = 51)
Yes	84.0	64.7
No	5.0	19.6
I don't know	10.0	13.7

Table 1: **Graduates' perception of how well the English course had prepared them for employment**

If we look at the data indicating the graduates' perception of their level of English before entering the course (Table 2), we note that, while the highest percentage of PROSPER ex-students (45.0%) rate themselves as intermediate, a nearly equal percentage of NON-PROSPER graduates (43.1%) consider their initial level as good. Since before the time when the study was carried out most students came to university with a lower intermediate/intermediate level (which was confirmed by all ESP teachers involved in the project), this may indicate over-confidence on the part of NON-PROSPER ex-students. PROSPER ex-students seem to have shown a clearer perception of their level, indicating a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. This can help them focus better on what they actually need, in relation to job requirements.

Question: *When you entered the course, your knowledge of English was:*

Options:	PROSPER % (n = 101)	NON-PROSPER % (n = 51)
Very good	6.0	3.9
Good	29.0	43.1
Intermediate	45.0	21.6
Poor	14.0	21.6
Very poor	6.0	7.8

Table 2: **Graduates' perceived level of English before entering the course**

The increased awareness that PROSPER ex-students

have of their professional needs comes out clearly from their answers to the open question “*What further suggestions do you have of classroom activities which should be introduced in the course and which may be useful to your profession?*”. The responses show that, whereas the largest number of suggestions coming from NON-PROSPER graduates require more teaching of technical and specialist vocabulary, in keeping with the main focus of the course they attended at university, PROSPER graduates mainly suggest more discussion and conversation, more simulation and role-plays as well as more free debates and interaction with native speakers, which indicates an awareness of the need for improved oral communication.

Case studies confirm that PROSPER graduates feel the course has prepared them well to cope with job requirements and are quite confident in carrying out the various duties which involve communicating in English: “I don’t find it difficult to use English in my work, I feel the course has prepared me quite well in this respect”; “It seemed natural to use English when I was interviewed for the job”; “I was no longer afraid to say something in English and felt confident enough to apply for jobs where English was a requirement or where the interview was in English”.

As for NON-PROSPER graduates, they state that the course was useful in a rather general and indirect way, but its relevance to job requirements is quite limited: “The course was relevant only indirectly in the sense that it provided a contact with the language”. As a result, NON-PROSPER graduates feel less confident when using English for the job, and production is more difficult than reception, either in speaking or in writing: “When I speak, I sometimes stop to search for words, words whose meaning I know if I see them in a written text, but when I have to actually use them, I sometimes find it difficult.”

The Employer Questionnaire also provides useful data for assessing the employees’ performance in job-related situations requiring the use of English in recent years. Of the range of skills required in the job, we note that performance is considered adequate with regard to *reading faxes, telephoning, and socialising*. The results indicate that employers consider that, since 1995 (the year of the first generation of PROSPER graduates) the applicants’/employees’ performance has improved in areas such as *being interviewed, writing application forms/letters, reading comprehension, initiative, confidence*.

These results were supplemented with data collected through case studies, in order to relate the findings to the PROSPER course. Some relevant conclusions are

as follows:

- a) There has been an improvement in *writing business correspondence*, which appears as adequate in 2 PROSPER cases versus 1 NON-PROSPER case, but inadequate in 1 NON-PROSPER case.
- b) *Writing e-mail and faxes*, as well as (*weekly*) *reports* are mentioned as adequate in 3 PROSPER cases.
- c) *Interpersonal skills*, particularly the ability to work in a team and to deal with Romanian and foreign partners have improved with PROSPER graduates, as shown by 3 PROSPER cases.
- d) *Initiative and confidence* have also increased, as confirmed by 2 PROSPER cases.

Here are some examples from the case studies, which substantiate these findings:

a) *Writing business correspondence*. One PROSPER graduate states: “When I first started, my letters were supervised by my boss, but he soon decided to just give me some hints on what they should be about and I write the letters without any further supervision.” Some of the NON-PROSPER cases, on the other hand, reveal weaknesses in the employees’ writing performance. One NON-PROSPER graduate’s written performance necessitates correcting by his boss, particularly as concerns “grammar and certain old-fashioned words which are no longer used today in the English language”. Another case study carried out in an international bank in Bucharest, with 10 NON-PROSPER engineering and economics graduates, revealed another weakness of a lot of Romanian staff: the style of writing, marked by “a tendency to produce more complex and complicated sentences which blur the message”, rather than being clear, simple and concise. As the employer who responded to this case study put it, these employees are not aware that “it is necessary to move away from long paragraphs to what we call ‘bullet points’.”

b) *Writing e-mail, faxes and reports*. Referring to a PROSPER graduate, her boss states: “Mona [name changed] communicates with our customers mainly by e-mail. When problems arise, she never gives up. It’s the highly abbreviated style of the American or English e-mail that gives us headaches. But she’s very clever and resourceful and after carefully looking at the message received, when everybody has given up, she cries ‘Eureka! I’ve got it!’ and tells us what she managed to decode. The abbreviation issue is unpredictable and she can cope with it quite well. She’s our expert and occasionally my ‘dictionary’, when I’m in need for a word.” Referring to several NON-PROSPER graduates, another employer pointed

out that “sometimes there are problems related to reporting. We must produce some written output and this is where the problems of the level of English arise.”

c) *Interpersonal skills.* One PROSPER graduate is characterised by her employer as having “very good interpersonal skills” and being “very successful in her direct contacts with foreign partners”. NON-PROSPER graduates, on the other hand, still “need the encouragement to work as a team”. One employer-respondent highlighted some cultural aspects that are involved in this, and which have to be overcome: “In my home environment, we are much more ‘go-getters’. Often here there is very little horizontal communication, people expect a top-down approach, which I think has to do with the old regime. That’s how I explain the difficulty of working in teams, of sharing information, in order to adopt common views.”

d) *Initiative and confidence.* Referring to another PROSPER graduate, her boss states: “she has more initiative than her colleagues, who tend to wait for me to tell them what to do and how to deal with things.”

**2 Better chances of employment due to the level of English attained**

This issue was investigated by looking at several sets of data. Thus, the figures indicating whether employers are generally satisfied with the applicants’ level of English (Table 3 below) were correlated with the results showing the extent to which graduates themselves considered that the level of English helped them in being recruited (Table 4).

Question: *Do you get enough applicants with a sufficient level of English?*

Options	frequency %
yes	63.8
no	34.0

Table 3: **Proportion of graduates with a sufficient level of English, from the employers’ perspective**

Question: *Did your level of English help you to get your present job?*

Options:	PROSPER % (n = 101)	NON-PROSPER % (n = 51)
Yes	56.0	52.9
No	17.0	39.2
I don’t know	25.0	7.8

Table 4: **Graduates’ perception of the relationship between their level of English and their being recruited**

It should be noted that, although only a slightly higher

percentage of PROSPER graduates consider that their level of English contributed to getting their job, the percentage of NON-PROSPER ex-students whose level of English did **not** help is more than twice as high as that of the same category of PROSPER ex-students.

In order to get a more detailed picture of the situation, these results were correlated with the information provided by the case studies. As shown above, the case studies confirm that English was essential for getting the job and for promotion, as well as for participation in international events and research programmes. One of the case studies referring to a recently employed PROSPER graduate explicitly states that her level of English greatly contributed to recruitment: “Alexandra [name changed] has been working in this job for about three months, following a competition in which she proved the most competent. She was tested in English, relative to the others and she proved to be the best.”

**3 Activities preparing for real-life needs**

In relation to this area of investigation, the study examined (1) the extent to which classroom activities and English language courses are regarded as useful for real-life communication by PROSPER ex-students and (2) the extent to which these activities prepare students to perform on job interviews and tests. The results were triangulated with data obtained from the Employer Questionnaire, referring to improvements in the graduates’ performance at work.

The responses to the Ex-Student Questionnaire show that the PROSPER classroom focuses on activities with more real-life relevance, which are meant to develop skills needed in real communication, as well as contribute to the classroom atmosphere (*discussion/debate, listening, oral presentations, letter-writing, role-play, brainstorming, information transfer, etc.*), whereas the NON-PROSPER classroom included pedagogic activities, which are not directly relevant to real life (*composition, reading aloud*).

Certain activities are regarded as useful by both PROSPER and NON-PROSPER graduates (*discussion/debates, oral presentations, translation, writing letters, reading for general and specific information*). The relevance of the classroom activities for present job performance is however seen differently by the two categories of graduates. Top of the list with PROSPER ex-students are ranked *discussions and debates*, followed by *writing letters*, while NON-PROSPER ex-students see *translation* and *oral presentations* as the most important (this may be related to the fact that a fairly high percentage of the

NON-PROSPER respondents now work in tertiary education).

*Translation* is an item which needs special attention, as it is also regarded as quite useful by PROSPER graduates. As mentioned previously, 37% of PROSPER graduates and 33% of NON-PROSPER ones were tested through a text translation before recruitment. Also, as both the questionnaires and the case studies indicate, translation is an important job requirement. Here are some examples taken from the case studies: "I read and translate documentation for equipment"; "My duties involve writing standards for equipment, translating and adapting standards produced abroad"; "...contracts are written in Romanian and translated into English". It is clear that future ESP courses should include a larger translation component, based on samples of authentic materials, developing translation/interpreting as a skill, rather than using it to check grammar structures or specialised vocabulary.

The results concerning the activities which characterise PROSPER and NON-PROSPER classes were correlated with those referring to the needs for English in relation to job and recruitment requirements, indicating that PROSPER courses focus more on activities which develop precisely the kind of skills graduates need for the job. The case studies also enable us to relate the findings to the PROSPER course. Here are some statements made by the PROSPER graduates interviewed:

- "The university course helped me very much through the development of oral skills, and with learning the specialised vocabulary of economics and business."
- "It was the first time in my education (...) that we were encouraged to work together in teams"
- "The discussions during the English classes and the listening practice have been very useful".

The NON-PROSPER respondents, on the other hand, pointed out the lower relevance of the course they had done to current job requirements:

- "The course I did was good at the level of the years 1988-1992. It offered a foundation of specialised knowledge, but was of little help as regards interactive skills."
- "Although the course was well-structured, it included no free practice activities, like role-plays and simulations, debates, etc. and is of little relevance at present."
- "We had no oral communication activities, there was too much emphasis on the specialised terminology, most of which is useless at present -

the vocabulary needed can be picked up on the job."

It is interesting to note the opinion of the English course held by two respondents to the case studies, who experienced both a NON-PROSPER and a PROSPER course. Referring to the course that he did at University (NON-PROSPER), one of the graduates states: "It helped a bit with reading the English bibliography for the graduation paper, it helped in an indirect way, I can't say to what extent. But here I hardly ever use the specialised terminology we studied at university. Vocabulary of everyday, General English is more important". On the other hand, he has continued to improve his English, both through individual work, and by attending a (PROSPER) course at the PROSPER-ASE Language Centre, where "the materials used are more interesting, the methods are more interactive, drawing on [the students'] knowledge and taking into account the students' needs and their opinion of the course."

The other case is one of a graduate who did the compulsory English course in years 1-2, before the start of the PROSPER Project, and decided to do an optional course in year 5. By that time, PROSPER had already started, and some of the teachers (including the one responsible for the optional course for fifth-year students) had received training in the communicative teaching of ESP, as well as appropriate materials and equipment. Here is how this graduate felt about the changes that had occurred in the course: "I went back to the English course, as my first job was a part-time English teaching job. I was very interested in teaching techniques and in improving my proficiency. I discovered great differences between my classes and my generation's behaviour in class in the first two years, and the extra course I enrolled on (both the teacher's approach and the students' response). Materials and equipment were different and I think they were very important for the vivid atmosphere in class. I appreciated the attractive textbook, and the listening section was extremely attractive." And she concludes: "My colleagues at work want a course run by PROSPER teachers and we hope we will get one as part of the company's Professional Development Programme."

#### **Areas of Limited Impact on Ex-students**

Although PROSPER has clearly exerted an influence on students and graduates, there are certain areas where the impact of PROSPER has been rather limited. Thus, the data from the Employer Questionnaire and the case studies indicate that,

although weaknesses and needs for improvement are more often mentioned in NON-PROSPER cases, such aspects as *writing reports* and *accuracy* (in spelling, grammar and pronunciation) need to be improved by PROSPER graduates, too. An important aspect revealed by one of the case studies is the need to develop the graduates' *interpersonal* and *intercultural skills*, highlighting some aspects which may affect communication between people working in an international company: "The way people from Western companies perhaps give an impression that they are busy is they shut the door. We're having a meeting, the door shut and there's somebody outside wanting to come in. Then the phone rings and I say 'I'm in a meeting' and the secretary says 'Yes, I know'. And that's a good example of the difference in culture, because that would be very unlikely to happen in the UK and the States, because a door shut means 'I don't want to be disturbed.' So we requested some specific training for the secretaries, on the DOs and the DON'Ts, to know when you should or you shouldn't interrupt, etc"

At the same time, it should be noted that it was not the employers only who identified certain inadequacies in the graduates' performance. The ex-students themselves, whether PROSPER or NON-PROSPER, proved to be aware of their level of English, and felt there was still room for improvement: "There's a great need for improvement, as well"; "I feel the need to use the language constantly"; "It's essential to keep up and improve your English".

### Conclusions

The PROSPER Impact Study has revealed several significant aspects concerning the employability of graduates. While providing information on the extent of PROSPER impact on the graduates, the results also help us to draw an outline of the PROSPER graduate profile, as compared to the NON-PROSPER one. Thus, PROSPER graduates - i.e. graduates who have benefitted from the methodological innovations introduced by the PROSPER project - are generally

more aware of their professional needs and feel better prepared at the end of the English course to cope with the requirements of the job. The level of English attained on the course has improved their chances of employment and contributed to their recruitment. On the job, they are more confident in using English, show more initiative and perform better in various situations, displaying in particular much better interpersonal skills.

In relation to the changes in the job market, the ESP course in PROSPER universities has been adapted to meet the new requirements of employment and recruitment. The course focuses on developing communication skills, and is appreciated as useful and professionally relevant by the graduates, particularly as regards oral skills, document writing and the emphasis laid on team work, while more attention is now being paid to developing the skill of translation as a real tool for communication.

The impact of PROSPER on the employability of graduates cannot be separated from the socio-economic and educational changes that have occurred in Romania in the last years. One respondent to a case study sums up the employers' viewpoint in this respect, which we believe very much reflects the reality: "There's always a mix between the personality of the person concerned and the type of training he or she has received. I think [this employee] was fortunate to have graduated from International Economic Relations, so she knows the context in which she's working, she can situate herself and she's not scared of not having a clue. Personality-wise, she is a very correct person, she knows how to handle herself with other people. If it comes from the changes introduced in her curriculum or from the more general transformations in Romania, I wouldn't know."

Finally, it should be remembered that the study has also revealed some weaknesses in the performance of graduates, which are an indication of areas where the English course needs improving. Despite these limitations, we can nevertheless conclude that PROSPER has had an impact on its graduates, whose increased awareness of professional needs and improved professional communication skills may ultimately have made them more employable.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For a full description of PROSPER see 'What is PROSPER?' in BARDI et al. (eds.) *Innovation in Teaching English for Specific Purposes in Romania - A Study of Impact*, Bucharest, The British Council, Cavallioti Publishing House, 1999 (pp. 5-10)
2. A detailed description of the instruments and of the sample of respondents is given in 'PROSPER Graduates' Employability', in BARDI et al. (eds.) *Innovation in Teaching English for Specific Purposes in Romania - A Study of Impact*, Bucharest, The British Council, Cavallioti Publishing House, 1999 (pp. 92-95)
3. MĂGUREANU, T. et al. - 'Changes in the Employment Profile in Romania - Findings of the Impact Study', in *PROSPER Newsletter*, No. 11, 1999 (pp. 23-29)