

## What do we Teach These Days?

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### **Abstract**

*As professors of foreign languages, namely English, French and Romanian for Special Purposes, we have always faced the challenge of finding the right balance between teaching language-related skills, such as reading, listening, writing or speaking, grammar or specialized vocabulary and teaching students more than just language. A big part of nowadays students' lack of motivation in studying languages formally, i.e. in school, seems to derive from their perception of content inadequacy. In changing times, in a changing world, in which we start learning languages, especially English, virtually from our birth, informally, from various media, especially from the Internet and a variety of smart phone applications, it is quite difficult for a teacher/professor to demonstrate the necessity of learning a foreign language in school, moreover at an academic level. In this preliminary research project, we tried to find out what our students think they need to study in a class of foreign languages, in order to feel more motivated. Our aim is to find enough data to justify further research of this issue, which will eventually trigger a curriculum change at least at the level of our institution, i.e. department.*

**Keywords:** LSP, authenticity, motivation, formal vs. informal learning, curriculum change

### **1. Introduction. Research questions**

**T**he 2019 *status quo* regarding the teaching of foreign languages, as we perceive it from our personal experience as professors of foreign languages (authors' own experience and that of fellow academics), seems to be encapsulated in the general idea of students' decreasing motivation to study foreign languages.

The paradox of our situation is illustrated by the clash between the position of the European Union, which aims to promote language learning:

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“The EU’s multilingualism policy has 2 facets: striving to protect Europe’s rich linguistic diversity and promoting language learning” ([https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/multilingualism\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/multilingualism_en)), stemming from the necessity of its citizens to travel, work or study in other member states, and that of some universities, which are cutting on the foreign language classes, as we can easily see in recent worldwide media reports, announcing that “Colleges Lose a ‘Stunning’ 651 Foreign-Language Programs in 3 Years” in the United States of America (Johnson 2019), as well as in the UK, where “Foreign languages A-level slump blamed on cuts” (Richardson 2016), or Australia, where the media warn against language courses reduction “Please, premier, don’t cut foreign language targets” (Cole, 2015). Some go even further and proclaim “The death of modern foreign languages” in the UK (Dean, 2016).

However, despite the reduction of contact hours for languages, there is an increasing number of students who study for various specializations, in English, French or German (the majority in English), which also allows the integration of international students, so we seem to witness an increase in the importance of EMI (English medium instruction).

Additionally, let us remember the reality of Romanian universities who have dramatically cut the number of hours dedicated to the study of foreign languages. Perhaps the backlash of the EU policies meant to encourage language learning starting from an early age:

*One of the EU’s multilingualism goals is for every European to speak 2 languages in addition to their mother tongue. The best way to achieve this would be to introduce children to 2 foreign languages from an early age. Evidence suggests this may speed up language learning - and boost mother tongue skills too* ([https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/multilingualism\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/multilingualism_en)),

is that, at least theoretically, college students already have a good level of at least one foreign language, in our case, English, and lack motivation to study it further.

Therefore, we came to ask WHY this is happening and WHAT can be done to stimulate foreign language learning at an academic level. What is students’ perception of foreign languages? What is their perception of how they ARE vs. how they SHOULD BE taught? – which became our research questions.

## **2. A few preliminary thoughts instead of a Literature Review**

In their introduction to *Key Issues in English for Specific Purposes in Higher Education*, Kırkgöz and Dikilitaş define English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as “a dynamic research discipline, underpinned by the fundamental question of how best to meet the needs of English learners, especially in our increasingly globalized and internationalized world” (Kırkgöz and Dikilitaş, 2018: 1) – but this seems to be a very good description of all foreign languages taught at an academic level, as they all have to deal with and incorporate professional vocabulary and content. In their introductory brief history of ESP, they speak about a “significant demand for teaching English tailored to the needs and demands of people” emerging in the 1970s (Kırkgöz and Dikilitaş, 2018: 2). To this day, these are principles we all need to observe when teaching languages at the university level. The two authors also mention a shift away from grammar (traditionally taught in all language classes) towards conversation and more communicative methods. Yet again, this seems to hold true to this day, as we tend to focus more on communication than grammar.

Kırkgöz and Dikilitaş also speak about “the growing importance of English in higher education teaching and research, along with internationalization of higher education across the globe” leading to “the emergence of a global phenomenon of English medium instruction (EMI) where the English language is used in non-native contexts to teach academic subjects” (Kırkgöz and Dikilitaş, 2018: 3). This is indeed a widespread phenomenon that is perhaps at least partially responsible for the decline of other foreign languages, although French and German are also used as a medium of instruction, but to a lesser extent (for instance, in our University, there are programs where French and German are used as a medium of instruction, at the Faculty of Business Administration in Foreign Languages, but there are far more numerous programs where English, i.e. EMI, is used).

The question though remains: all things done properly, all principles observed, why is there a growing lack of interest, or motivation, of students to study foreign languages formally, English included, especially at an academic level – if not documented in the literature, at least as perceived by fellow academics in our community?

An increasing number of authors from various fields have come to emphasize the necessity of adding extra-linguistic content to the foreign language curricula, in response to the nowadays necessities of our students. For instance, on the occasion of the *National Geographic Learning Day*,

organized by Fischer International in Bucharest, on March 23 this year, all keynote speakers emphasized current challenges of foreign language teachers (although they only referred to English taught as a foreign language worldwide, their discourse actually applies to all foreign languages currently taught in Romania) and the need to make changes in our curricula and in our textbooks if we are to motivate students to keep learning foreign languages formally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In his Welcome word, Tim Pearse, National Geographic learning representative, spoke about “a shift away from grammar”. As people learn English to USE it, they prefer to learn it interactively, by communicative methods. The key question for a teacher/trainer is thus ‘WHY do people need to learn this language?’. The different answers will translate in different needs, which must be addressed differently: for instance, if one needs to learn English for professional reasons, they are going to study ESP (English for special purposes). As 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are very keen on technology, this should also be integrated in learning as much as possible. Pearse identified teachers’ aim as the creation of global citizens, but he also spoke of making learning enjoyable and relevant, and he insisted on the need to use new and as much as possible authentic resources, so that teachers could still motivate students – thus summarizing a great deal of current literature on this issue (Pearse, 2019).

In his talk “Can There Be An Authentic English?”, Hetain Patel, a London-based artist of Indian origin, took the question of authenticity one step further, by asking questions such as: “Do you become somebody else when you speak a different language?”, or by answering “I’m not sure I own these words when I use them”, “it doesn’t feel authentic”. We must note the direct connection between students’ need to perceive their learning experience, as well as the learning materials, as AUTHENTIC and their motivation to study foreign languages and not only languages.

Last but not least, John Hughes, ELT author, teacher trainer, and series editor, tried to demonstrate the importance of integrating Critical thinking (CT) in the teaching of languages in his talk, “Make Critical Thinking an Everyday Part of Your Teaching”. Author of *Life* series, a series of textbooks of English that integrate practical CT activities, Hughes rose challenging questions in his talk, as well as in his recent theoretical book, *Critical Thinking in ELT* (Hughes, Dummett 2019). “If we have Google, why do we need teachers?” may seem an exaggerated question, but we must acknowledge the fact that 21<sup>st</sup> century teenagers are “screenagers” who

love technology, who use technology sometimes excessively and who need an answer to this question if they are to be motivated to attend our classes and study languages formally. Moreover, Hughes justifies our increasing need to teach CT by reminding us that these “screenagers” are exposed now more than ever to “fake news”, and hardly understand concepts such as “post-truth” that came to shape our lives and our learning styles. The result is an increasing number of textbook series, some from *National Geographic Learning (Keynote, Life)*, which introduce CT activities and integrate them in the language-related content.

### **3. Research hypotheses. Research method. Limitations of research**

#### ***3.1. Research hypotheses***

Our own similar perception led us to the hypothesis that, since nowadays students learn foreign languages informally, perhaps more effectively than in school, due to their use of the Internet, of smart phone applications, or computer games, which provide them with a pretty good range of vocabulary, decent use of grammar and very often excellent fluency, they are more and more reluctant to studying languages formally, as they imagine they can do it by themselves anyway, and thus reject formal learning as not authentic and perhaps not very useful. Indeed, by the age of 18, when they reach university, most of them already have decent to excellent command of English. However, this is not the case with French and other languages, less used in Internet interaction or as computer language. Hence, our research hypotheses:

RH1: Students lack motivation to study foreign languages formally, especially at a BA level, for a number of reasons: a) they may feel it is too simple, and they already speak it / or too difficult (level issues); b) their interest areas do not coincide with the themes proposed by curricula currently in use (content issues); and c) due to a perceived general lack of patience, that mirrors wider changes in contemporary society (technology and speed translated in a general impatience towards achieving aims, or results).

RH2: A curriculum change, that would include students’ areas of interest, as well as collateral skills, might generate increased motivation to study foreign languages in the future.

### ***3.2. Research method***

As a research method, we combined qualitative and quantitative methods, i.e. classroom observation and informal conversations with our students, on the one hand, and questionnaires, on the other. Initially, we aimed to include students of English, French and Romanian for Special purposes, both BA and MA level, but after informal conversations with our students, we realized that those who study Romanian as a foreign language in our faculty program APLR have a different profile, and certainly a different type of motivation, which would have distorted our results.

Consequently, we distributed questionnaires (see Appendix 1) to approximately 55 respondents, but our final sample consists of only 40 students, 32 BA level and 8 MA level, who study English and French for Special purposes.

### ***3.3. Limitations of research***

Therefore, although the method was quantitative, our research study is small-scale, so we find ourselves in the impossibility to generalize our results. However, they are worthy of consideration, as they reflect what most of our fellow academics intuitively *feel*, and sometimes based on classroom observation *guess*, is happening right now in terms of student motivation to study languages. Let us also mention the fact that it was intended to be only a preliminary study aiming to gather data that would justify a larger-scale research project, based on quantitative methods, to document this phenomenon and account for the need to alter teaching content and, thus, curricula.

## **4. Findings and data analysis**

Q1: For question 1, “Do you find studying English/French/Romanian at the university useful?”, 39 out of 40 respondents considered languages important, which seems to deny our first hypothesis. Here are a few comments: “Studying foreign languages is very useful for your personal development and for future careers”; “foreign languages are very useful in the pursuit of a good job”.

Interestingly, even students with good level find it useful to continue studying languages at the university because “otherwise I would

probably have forgotten some basic rules and lost any fluency. I missed some classes and it shows.”; “I find it useful because we take quite some time to learn it [English] in high school ... and if we do not practice it constantly, our level will diminish...”. Some are aware of the differences between what they study in high school and what is taught at an academic level: “studying at least one foreign language gives you the opportunity to broaden your way of thinking, learn specific concepts and business vocabulary”, or “we have the chance to improve our professional and academic vocabulary and also ... presentation skills [professional skills]”.

Q2: “What seems useful to you in the foreign language classes?” was an open ended question, meant to check students’ awareness, their perception of what is important in the study of a foreign language, in the absence of suggested options, which would have framed the question and perhaps influenced the answers.

Vocabulary was mentioned 16 times, it was the most numerous occurrence, closely followed by communication (14 occurrences) and, for us quite surprisingly, grammar (13 occurrences), perhaps due to the fact that, at their age and level, academic students perceive accuracy as important as their ability to communicate, i.e. fluency. Interestingly, critical thinking was also mentioned, although only 3 times.

Q3: “What do you consider not very useful to study in the foreign language classes?” was also open ended, and grammar was mentioned most, 7 times. This apparent paradox is probably justified by the fact that, although most students admit to the necessity of studying grammar if they aim to be accurate, they also find it one of the most unpleasant parts of studying a foreign language. Moreover, some respondents identify the method of grammar teaching as inappropriate: “focusing too much on grammar and not using that grammar”. As language teaching methodology advises, grammar should always be taught in context and followed by a production stage, which sometimes is missing, for lack of time.

Other “not very useful things” to study in class were projects (2 occurrence) and exercises without a context (2 occurrences) and, with only one occurrence: reading, “theoretical stuff”, listening, academic writing (not needed later, in life).

Q4: Question 4 was the last open ended question in this series, “Is there anything you would like to study in foreign language classes that you

aren't currently studying?" The most mentioned were academic skills, i.e. academic vocabulary and academic writing, with 8 occurrences, and second, with 4 occurrences, came oral skills, i.e. conversation and professional oral skills (presentations). Interestingly, one respondent mentioned soft skills, and one mentioned language history.

Q5: Question 5 was a multiple choice question, with 12 suggested possibilities (see Appendix 1). Students had to identify those competencies that they consider important to study in a foreign language class. The first to be mentioned, with 32 occurrences, were: a) receptive skills (reading, listening), b) productive skills (writing, speaking), e) vocabulary in your field of specialization, but if we are to total f), g), h) and i), that all represent CT competencies, they would be in first place with a total of 69 occurrences: f) telling facts from opinions, ranking evidence (for research purposes) – mentioned 11 times, g) evaluating your sources (when doing research) / evaluating an argument / identifying bias – mentioned 11 times, h) arguing in favor/against an issue (for research purposes) – mentioned 23 times and i) problem solving / lateral thinking puzzles – mentioned 24 times. Quite interestingly, the next one was d) grammar, with 28 occurrences. Then, l) professional skills (oral presentations, negotiations, meetings) were mentioned 20 times and c) academic writing (for research purposes) and j) soft skills were mentioned 18 times. K), team/individual projects were last, with only 11 occurrences.

These data seem to suggest that our respondents are well aware of the importance of practicing their general competencies, such as reading, listening, speaking, or writing, or professional competencies, namely, vocabulary in their field of specialization, but they also identify the focus on accuracy as very important, as well as the CT competencies, such as evaluating one's sources, identifying bias, or arguing.

As a big number of our students are pretty vocal against the teaching of grammar in schools, we assumed that they would not mention grammar as one of the most useful, or important, items on their lists. However, they DID identify it as both useful and necessary to study in a foreign language class, but, as some comments to previous questions show, they want it studied in context and they want to be given the chance to use it in context, so that they can perceive it as useful.

Moreover, critical thinking is not commonly studied in Romanian schools in general. In our university, CT courses have only recently been



introduced in our curricula, first at a graduate level (in the EDURES Master program, English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics, starting with 2006), and later at the undergraduate level. Yet, students could clearly identify CT competencies as useful, especially for research purposes.

Q6 and Q7 were follow up questions to Q5, meant to check which of the listed competencies students found useful to study (Q6) or important to study in the future/not studied before (Q7). Among the already studied/practiced skills that were considered useful we could count, again, receptive (28), productive skills (23), specialized vocabulary (27) and grammar (20). CT was hardly mentioned (only 8 times arguing) as well as academic writing (only 9 occurrences) or soft skills (8 occurrences).

Academic writing was identified as important to study more in the future by 15 respondents, so it came in the first place, closely followed by soft skills (14 occurrences) and CT competencies (i.e. problem solving and lateral thinking puzzles – mentioned 11 times, evaluating one's sources – mentioned 10 times and ranking evidence – mentioned 8 times).

Q8. "Would you welcome a curriculum change, to integrate more than language-related skills in the teaching of foreign languages?" We found that 31 respondents would welcome a curriculum change, as they claim "I'm interested to learn new things", or because they want it "to be flexible", or because "It is not only important to learn language grammar or general vocabulary, but a specific one related to your field of study" and would appreciate the "chance to understand how the business world works in reality at a multicultural level" and "to improve certain soft or argumentation skills nevertheless needed when conducting business". Only 4 wouldn't, as they consider "the curriculum is okay the way it is right now." And 5 respondents chose the option "I don't know".

Q9, our last question was related to motivation "If that happened [if the curriculum were changed], would you feel more motivated than you are right now to attend these classes?". 4 said they wouldn't, 10 chose the answer "I don't know" and 1 answer was not clear. Of these last 14, some claimed "I feel motivated enough to attend all classes".

Of the 31 respondents who considered a curriculum change welcome only 25 confessed to be more motivated, which suggests that student motivation also lies in other aspects, different from, or rather,

additional to, level or content adequacy. (Actually, in additional comments, Q10, some students mention teaching style and a friendly, relaxed atmosphere as key motivators: “a very good mix between serious ... and nice, which makes the class very enjoyable and still productive”).

Interestingly, language is perceived as part of a culture, so the cultural element is also mentioned as one important aspect: “I would like very much teachers to consider not only teaching that specific language but also focusing on [the] improvement of business related skills as depicted in that culture”.

Finally, among those who would welcome a curriculum change, some justify their answer by saying “it is interesting to attend classes which cover topics that we have chosen”, or, about the curriculum “the more adapted, ... the better”, thus making clear the importance of needs analysis and content adjustment to the needs of individual students or at least to particular groups of students.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, our research findings seem to suggest that motivation, or the absence of motivation to study foreign languages at the academic level does not stem solely from the correct adjustment of curricula to students’ needs, based on needs analysis. Of course curricula should reflect the needs of students, of their employers, and of the cultural contexts and times we are living in. In other words, they should be flexible and dynamic. Language teachers should teach language skills, but also soft skills or critical thinking (as some have already been doing for a while, the authors included). But content adjustment alone does not motivate students successfully. Indeed, content should be new and authentic, and the learning experience should *feel* authentic, too. Students should have access to a learning environment where they could practice all the skills, i.e. language-related skills but not only, that will help them in their future lives and careers. But that environment should also, if possible, be stress-free, friendly, relaxed, but “serious”, as some of them clearly identified in their comments. Identifying the key motivators for language learning would probably best be studied in another, more comprehensive, research project.

Consequently, we aim to continue this study with a large-scale quantitative research project focused on the same issues, in order to obtain

generalizable conclusions hopefully translatable in some curriculum change in the near future.

**Appendix 1**

**Final Questionnaire**

1. Do you find studying English/French/Romanian at the university useful?

- Yes
- So and so
- No
- Explain

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2. What seems useful to you in the foreign language classes?

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3. What do you consider not very useful to study in the foreign language classes?

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4. Is there anything you would like to study in foreign language classes that you aren't currently studying?

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5. Which of the following competencies do you consider important to study in a foreign language class?

- a. receptive skills (reading, listening)
- b. productive skills (writing, speaking)
- c. academic writing (for research purposes)
- d. grammar (focus on accuracy)
- e. vocabulary in your field of specialization
- f. telling facts from opinions, ranking evidence (for research purposes)

- g. evaluating your sources (when doing research) / evaluating an argument / identifying bias
- h. arguing in favor/against an issue (for research purposes)
- i. problem solving / lateral thinking puzzles
- j. soft skills
- k. team/individual projects
- l. professional skills (oral presentations, negotiations, meetings)
- m. other: .....

6. Which of the above have you studied and found it useful?

- a. ....
- b. ....
- c. ....
- d. ....
- e. ....

7. Which of the above haven't you studied (enough) so far and you feel you need to practice?

- a. ....
- b. ....
- c. ....
- d. ....
- e. ....

8. Would you welcome a curriculum change, to integrate more than language-related skills in the teaching of foreign languages?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Explain .....

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9. If that happened, would you feel more motivated than right now to attend these classes?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Explain .....  
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10. Other comments

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