
**GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH AS THE GATEWAY TO KNOWLEDGE
WITHOUT BORDERS**

Ivana Marinković

Business and Technical College of Applied Sciences – Užice, Republic of Serbia,

ivanamarinkovicue@yahoo.com

Dragana Pešić

Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, University of Kragujevac, Republic of
Serbia dragana.nedeljkovic@kg.ac.rs

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to point out the necessity of improving the status of the English language instruction at the faculties in Serbia educating students for a career in the fields of science and engineering. Economic development, globalization and the emergence of the Internet as a global communication channel transcending all the borders, have made English the world's common language, as well as the language of opportunity, and the driving force of growth and international development. Most developing and emerging economies have recognised the demand for effective English instruction in public education systems as a means to boost stability, employability and prosperity. In Serbian education system, English instruction is integrated into the curriculum from the first grade of primary education, but the fact that teachers in higher education institutions keep facing students with an ever lower level of language knowledge indicates that either the number of classes is insufficient or the instruction itself ineffective. Furthermore, Serbian faculties are still erecting borders around “specialties” or discipline-specific courses. The research results presented in this paper show that a lot of faculties offer English as an elective course, and even in those where it is compulsory, the number of classes and their distribution per semester and year of study are such that, having spent 16 years studying English, most students have to find some alternative ways of acquiring English upon graduation. On the other hand, the review of job requirements in the advertisements posted on the leading employment website in Serbia, Infostud, shows that most employers expect university graduates to have achieved at least B2 English level, which corresponds to independent users of the language, fluent enough to communicate without effort with native speakers. This proves that English represents a vital means of improving an individual's prospects for employment in Serbia, especially for well-paid employment, thus indicating that specialist knowledge of our university graduates, no matter how profound it may be, is actually limited without a working knowledge of English. In addition to enhancing their employment prospects, the knowledge of English provides students and university graduates with the ability of keeping pace with the advances in the professions for which they are educated, of making use of the available professional literature in English and international scientific events to further improve their knowledge and thus remain competitive on the labour market. In the age of global knowledge and technology, there is a growing demand for the internationalisation of higher education and academic mobility, both of which are impossible without the English language proficiency. Therefore, it is high time for all stakeholders in Serbian education to stop neglecting these facts, and to give the English language the recognition it deserves in higher education curricula.

Keywords: English proficiency, employment prospects, higher education curricula

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's global society business is increasingly being conducted across borders, which makes the ability to use English in the workplace a very valuable skill and a huge asset even to those companies that do not use English as an official language. In addition to verbal communication, employees are required to write emails and reports, which demands high levels of English proficiency and the knowledge of both grammatical and lexical features of specific registers. Therefore, it is an imperative that education systems follow the hints of labour markets and provide students with the skills that would enable them to succeed in this increasingly connected global economy.

As to the English language teaching itself, this calls for a shift in the focus of instruction from the language-centred approach to the learning-centred approach, which emphasises the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991). English courses need to be tailored to specific needs of a group of students, and based on real-world English applications. To achieve this end, English teachers must accept the role of course designers, aware of the necessity of needs analysis as “the process of determining the

needs for which a learner of a group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities“ (Richards, 1992).

2. RESEARCH

With such a background as the starting point, the aim of this paper is to show whether university graduates in Serbia, primarily those educated to pursue a career in science and engineering, meet the employment requirements of Serbian employers regarding English proficiency. It presents the results of the comparative analysis of job advertisements posted on the leading employment website in Serbia, Infostud, on the one hand, and the views of English teachers about the English instruction in general in faculties offering study programmes in the abovementioned fields. The analysis of job openings on Infostud, which was performed at the beginning of February, 2018, included 229 advertisements in the field of mechanical engineering, making up the third largest job category, following merchandising jobs and IT jobs, most of the latter being in English themselves. The number of the analysed advertisements represents 10.79% of the total number of job openings advertised at the time of the analysis, which was 2,123.

The information on English teachers' view was obtained by means of a self-administered online questionnaire, completed by 30 English language teachers in faculties awarding degrees in science and engineering. The questionnaire consists of 20 questions, which are of the following types:

- Yes/No questions (7),
- multiple choice questions (8),
- evaluation questions (2) and
- open-ended questions (3).

The questionnaire is designed so as to collect information on the value placed on foreign language courses in those faculties, proficiency levels their students achieve, problems EL teachers face in instruction delivery, and their readiness to provide students with English for the workplace despite all the problems they encounter.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS ON THE SERBIAN LABOUR MARKET

In 123 out of 229 advertisements in the field of mechanical engineering the knowledge of English, B2 level precisely, is a must. Needless to say, all the occupations requiring higher education degrees imply a high level of English proficiency, whereas the posts requiring secondary education imply either fluency or basic knowledge of English. Only unskilled or low-skilled jobs do not mention the English language knowledge as necessary. Therefore, the employers' views on the importance of English knowledge of their employees for successful business performance prove that discipline-specific knowledge, no matter how profound it may be, is limited without a working knowledge of English.

3.2 ENGLISH AS A COURSE IN FACULTIES OF SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING

The global importance of English in education has also been recognized by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, who have integrated it in the public education curriculum from the first grade of primary education. However, students enrol in higher education institutions with the insufficient knowledge of both English grammar and lexis; still, they have expectations that, upon graduation, they will become fluent speakers not only of General English, but of English used in the profession for which they are being educated as well. Furthermore, contrary to both students' and employers' expectations, faculties which do not focus on social sciences and humanities continue to erect borders around "specialties" or discipline-specific courses, attaching little importance to general education ones. According to the research results, most of them offer English as an elective course, and even in those where it is compulsory, the number of classes and their distribution per semester or year of study are such that they cannot provide students with the necessary or expected level of knowledge. Namely, 41.3% of respondents report that English is a two-semester course in their institutions, whereas the percentage of faculties where English is taught during 4 semesters is 16.7. There are faculties offering English courses in six, seven, or even eight semesters, as well as those where English is taught in one semester only, but their percentage is low, i.e. 8.3% each.

As to the number of classes per week, 2 is the prevailing number, reported by 50% of respondents, whereas in 33.3% of the surveyed faculties students have 4 classes of English a week. The remaining respondents report 3 English classes on a weekly basis. Consequently, in 66.7% of the faculties, students do not have English in the final year of study, which all respondents recognise as a serious drawback. Such a long period of not using a foreign language on a regular basis adversely affects the retention of the acquired knowledge, causing the students who are not used to being self-educated, autonomous language learners to forget a great part of it by the time they graduate.

Therefore, in order to get a desired job, they are forced to pay for courses in private language schools, which is both expensive and time consuming, thus postponing their opportunity of applying the acquired professional knowledge to actual work in their field.

Taking into consideration the abovementioned, it is not surprising that a great majority of surveyed English teachers, 66.7% precisely, consider the current number of classes insufficient for providing students with effective communication skills that employers are looking for. Naturally, they are dissatisfied with the status of their course in their institutions, some of the reasons for their dissatisfaction being as follows:

- English instruction is a side issue. English is an elective course and therefore formally dispensable.
- The fact that English is an elective course results in a minority of students studying it at the tertiary level of education.
- The ESP instruction has raised students' awareness of the importance of learning English and they keep requesting more classes of English a week, but the answer they get is that they should concentrate on discipline-specific courses instead of studying English.
- For more than 90% of students, English is not compulsory.

As mentioned above, nowadays employers expect applicants with university degrees to have at least B2 level of English proficiency. The research results show that 92.3% of surveyed English teachers agree with them, the remaining 7.7% having even higher expectations, i.e. C1 English level. Unfortunately, the reality in our faculties is far from satisfactory. Only 23.1% of graduates from the surveyed faculties meet the requirements of employers, provided that they belong to the group who study English throughout higher education. They are greatly outnumbered by those acquiring B1 level (46.2%). This, together with the fact that 23.1% reach only A2 English level and 7.7% even fail to move above A1 level, poses burning questions about previously gained knowledge and the quality of English instruction at the previous levels of education.

Equally surprising is the finding that the respondents evaluate student motivation for learning English as good and very good (53.8% and 46.2%, respectively). This leads to the conclusion that students are either unable to see beyond the borders of discipline-specific courses or are completely unaware of employers' requirements. In fact, students are aware of the necessity of English language knowledge for successful performance in the future workplace, but it seems too vague and too far off and therefore fails to be a strong motivator.

According to the research results, English teachers in Serbian faculties of science and engineering included in the survey unanimously share the employers' view that discipline-specific knowledge, no matter how profound it may be, is limited without a working knowledge of English. Some of the reasons they give are as follows:

- A lot of the literature that students use in the final years of study is in English. Almost all high-quality papers in different fields of chemistry are in English. All papers our PhD students publish as part of their PhD theses must be in English. A lot of students have professional practice or enrol in postgraduate programmes abroad, etc. In such environments, English is the common communication language.
- Without English, students can neither expand and improve their knowledge using the advanced international research results nor present their own knowledge and scientific achievements to employers or associates abroad.
- Our graduates confirm that the main language as well as a tool for the development of international cooperation with experts in their field (which is indispensable in the globalised world) today is primarily the lingua franca of the present – the English language, both GE and ESP. It is necessary for the access to the needed information on the Internet, which is mostly in English, as well as for further professional development, which is impossible without using foreign literature.
- Today, professional knowledge in any field remains poor if not enriched with the knowledge available in other languages, primarily in English.
- English is necessary for global communication, keeping pace with media production development, international cooperation.
- Business correspondence is often in English. Serious foreign companies penetrating our market require English language skills.
- Good knowledge of English is necessary for student mobility and application for student exchange programmes.

The reasons stated above comply with the respondents' answers to the question about the purpose of studying English at the tertiary level of education, which are given in Table 1 below:

Students have to know English in order to:	No. of respondents
further improve their professional knowledge using professional literature in English	53.8%
be successful in the occupations for which they have been educated	30.8%
get the job in their field, in the first place	0%
do everything mentioned above	15.4%

Table1: The purpose of studying English in Serbian faculties

3.3 ENGLISH TEACHERS' MOTIVATION AND PROBLEMS THEY FACE

Despite the impossibility of making their voices heard, despite the fact that the importance of their courses is not sufficiently recognised by two main stakeholders in education – subject lectures and students, English teachers at the tertiary level of education still strive to do their best and prepare students for “their roles as English language speakers and writers outside of the classroom” (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991) as much as possible under the given circumstances.

A great majority of them, 61.5% precisely, teach ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in their classroom even though they are educated to engage in General English teaching. By teaching ESP, they introduce students to the particular conventions that apply to the discourse community that they are educated to become members of. In order to do this, they have to design their own courses and provide authentic materials to meet the needs of a specific group of students, which is not an easy task at all given the fact that they themselves lack subject-specific knowledge. However, they are all aware of the importance of acquiring such knowledge, but as there are no opportunities of doing it through formal education or training, they study professional literature on their own (53.8% of the respondents), cooperate with subject lecturers (30.8%), or do both of these (15.4%).

Almost all the respondents (92.3%) are familiar with the concept of team-taught classes (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1981) and believe that they would make ESP instruction more effective, but a significant number of them (46.2%) do not think that subject lecturers would accept the idea of team-teaching. Given this context, it is not surprising that their suggestions for the improvement of the status of the English language course at non-philological faculties are more or less the same. They all agree that English should be a compulsory course, with a greater number of ECTS credits assigned. The number of classes per week should be increased, and English should be taught in each year of study. They also stress the importance of organizing the English language instruction in smaller groups because foreign languages cannot be successfully taught to large groups of students, where a majority of them seldom, if ever, get a chance to use the language for communicative purposes.

4. CONCLUSION

According to the results of the research presented in this paper, the importance of the English language as a course in Serbian faculties educating students in the fields of science and engineering is still underestimated, resulting in an increasingly wide gap between the proficiency level they acquire throughout their studies and the proficiency level their prospective employers require them to have.

This brings forth the necessity of cooperation between higher education institutions and employers in relation to curriculum design and recruitment, which would result in aligning the skills and competencies offered in higher education with the demands of the labour market. However, this is a rather challenging endeavour, which entails complex problems that exceed the power of individual faculties and English teachers.

Given this complexity on the one hand, and all the benefits that the ability to communicate in English can bring their students on the other hand, the best thing that English teachers can do is focus on developing independent language learners, aware of the fact that language learning is a lifelong process, which does not end in a language classroom, as well as continually directing their students' attention to the skills employers are looking for. Thus, students would be encouraged to take charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981), and if they realize that the proficient use of English will enhance their employability and career prospects, they will assume responsibility for their future professional success and make the most of what their teachers can offer them.

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Appendix

This questionnaire is anonymous and its results will be used for research purposes only. Please, read the questions carefully and tick the answers you agree with or according to the given instructions or use the provided space to write your answers.

1. At your faculty, English is:	☐ a. an elective course ☐ b. a compulsory course
2. How many semesters do your students have English classes?	☐ a. 2 ☐ b. 4 ☐ c. 6 ☐ d. 8 ☐ e. other:
3. How many English classes a week do your students have?	☐ a. 2 ☐ b. 3 ☐ c. 4
4. Do you think that the number of classes is sufficient to prepare students for successful communication in the workplace?	☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Do your students have English in the final year of study?	☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Do you think that they should have it in the final year in order to retain the acquired knowledge?	☐ Yes ☐ No
7. Are you satisfied with the importance attached to English language instruction at your institution?	☐ Yes ☐ No
8. If your answer to the previous question is negative, please give your	

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reasons for it.	
9. In your opinion, what level of English proficiency should university graduates have today?	a. A1 b. A2 c. B1 d. B2 e. C1 f. C2
10. The knowledge of English is necessary for your students in order to:	a. get a job in their field b. be successful in the job they have been educated for c. further improve their knowledge using professional literature in English d. other (please, state):
11. What level of English proficiency do most of your students acquire at your institution?	a. A1 b. A2 c. B1 d. B2 e. C1 f. C2
12. How would you evaluate your students' motivation to study English?	1 – no motivation 2 – poor 3 – good 4 – very good 5 – excellent
13. Do you think that the professional knowledge your students acquire, no matter how profound it may be, is limited without the knowledge of English?	Yes No
14. Please, give some reasons for your answer to the previous question?	

15. What is prevalent in your classroom:	a. English for Specific Purposes b. General English
16. How would you evaluate the importance of English teachers' knowledge of the subject matter of your students' the discipline-specific courses?	1 2 3 4 5
17. How have you acquired/do you acquire knowledge of the subject matter of discipline-specific courses?	a. through formal education/training b. by studying professional literature on my own c. through the cooperation with subject-area specialists d. other (please, state):
18. Do you think that team-teaching by a language teacher and a subject lecturer would contribute to the better ESP knowledge of your students?	Yes No
19. Do you think that subject lecturers in your institution would accept the idea of team-teaching?	Yes No
20. What would you suggest for the improvement of the status of the English language course at non-philological faculties?	