

# RAISING STUDENTS' AWARENESS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES ACQUISITION

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## **Abstract**

*In an attempt to investigate the level of awareness among students on the importance of learning English as a second language, this paper aims at highlighting the role played by the foreign language professor in helping students gaining a positive attitude towards language acquisition. Teaching and consequently learning a foreign language used to focus mainly, not before long, on two major components, namely grammar and vocabulary. Still, the acquisition of a new grammar rule or of a new set of words does not help students much in regarding and understanding language as social interaction.*

*The paper takes as a starting point a questionnaire, which is filled in by students at the beginning of the academic year, consisting in ten questions approaching issues related to the significance of English language, their motivation in learning and practicing, the outcome and the advantages a fluent English speaker might enjoy in the current world. The more aware students are, the more active and responsible for their own learning they become. Besides building this sense of useful and targeted learning, the English professor is further responsible for an appropriate blending of teaching methods in order to reach the final outcome.*

**Key words:** language awareness, social interaction, blending, global language, motivation

**JEL classification :** I 121

## **1. Language awareness among students**

On the grounds of the increasing complexity of the modern world, the ongoing globalization which encompasses any field of activity, be it economic, political or educational, the traditional paradigm of teaching and learning English as a foreign language would be rather reconsidered and hence, it had better focus more on the relevant relationship between language, culture and society. The traditional approach to acquiring a foreign language by simply learning new vocabulary and grammar rules is no longer efficient nowadays. In order to be able to master foreign languages, learners should first understand the importance of acquiring that language, they have to be aware of the benefits they derive from developing a good knowledge of a foreign language. It is equally important for learners to consciously understand how the language really works in the target culture, as any foreign language should be understood both in terms of structure and use. Both teachers and learners should aim at a language acquisition in terms of social interaction, be it written or verbal. This is what researchers in the field and ALA<sup>2</sup> call language awareness.

According to Tulasiewicz (1998:p.vii) □ *Language awareness implies a more informed understanding of the ways languages work* □. Moreover, as we well know, language is deeply linked to experience, to everyday life and vice versa. That is why language should be learnt and used in terms of social culture.

Considering the weightiness and complexity of language awareness in teaching and learning English as a foreign language, this paper aims at describing the role of the teacher in creating and raising such awareness among learners and consequently, using appropriate means of teaching in order to meet the learners' needs and keep them motivated and aware of the benefits.

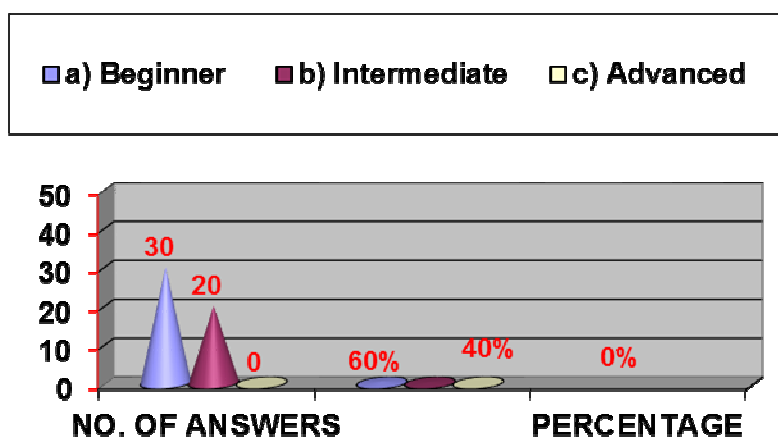
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<sup>2</sup> ALA stands for the Association for Language Awareness which defines language awareness on its home page as □ explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception o sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use□

A first step in initiating language awareness is to find out the level of learners' motivation, their approach to learning English, how much they know about the signification of English as a global language and what methods of teaching they are keener on. Our study has in view two groups of university students (50 students) majoring in economics, within Constantin Brancoveanu University from Pitesti, the Faculty of Management, Marketing in Economic Affairs, Rm Valcea, Romania. During their first English classes, at the beginning of the academic year, the students were handed in some questionnaires (Annex 1) whose interpretation will provide reliable data considering the level of their motivation in studying English as a foreign language, in order to further help their professor finding the most appropriate manner of teaching and stimulating the students get involved.

**Question 1:** What is your level of knowledge in English, according to your own assessment?



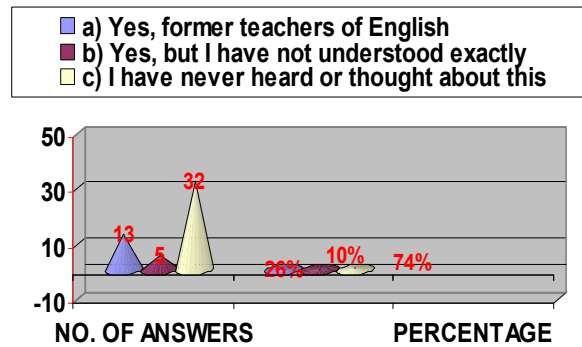
The intention here was to find out the students' subjective view of themselves, they were not assessed formally, by means of a language assessment test. During the following English classes, it has turned out that students had underestimated their level of knowledge, as most of them scored over 60 points (out of 100) during a language assessment test whose difficulty met the requirements of B2 level within the European assessment grid.

**Question 2:** Think about top 2 reasons why you may want to become fluent in English.

When asked to enumerate top 2 reasons to learn a foreign language, 30% of the respondents mentioned that fluent English speakers can easily impress their friends and relatives, some other mentioned the positive reaction of foreigners, the curious glances from passers-by, especially when travelling abroad. Of course, impressing people around you, be they nationals or foreigners, cannot be a sound reason why a student can choose to learn English, but it can be used as a favourable offshoot by the teacher.

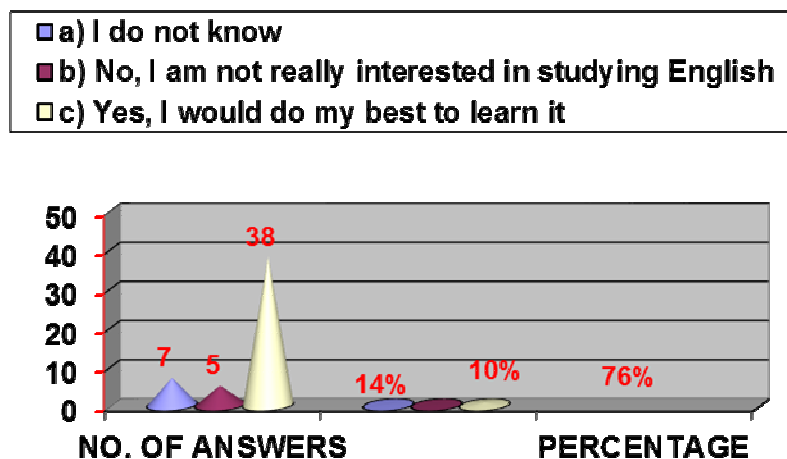
Another reason chosen by 20% of respondents referred to the advantages English speakers can enjoy while travelling, such as the possibility of understanding the culture and history of other peoples.

**Question 3:** Has anyone before explained to you the usefulness of the English language as a global language?



The results clearly show that most of the students interviewed (32%) have not been aware so far of the relevance of English as a global language because they have not been explained, while few of them (13%) have been told but some of them have not understood.

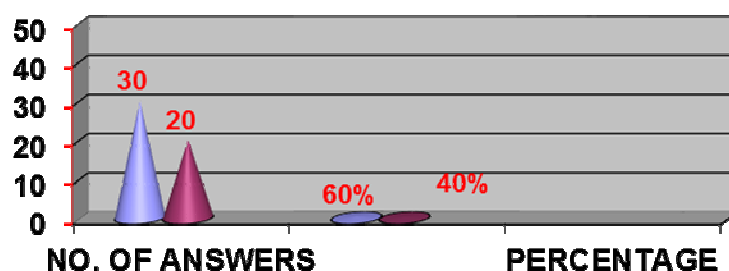
**Question 4:** If you were aware about the importance of speaking English nowadays, do you think your attitude towards studying it would be a more favourable one?



By far more than half of the students interviewed (38%) admitted that their attitude towards studying English would improve if they knew the benefits, hence there is plenty of interest, once the students get motivated.

**Question 5:** How much do you think fluent English communication skills will improve your employability after graduating the university?

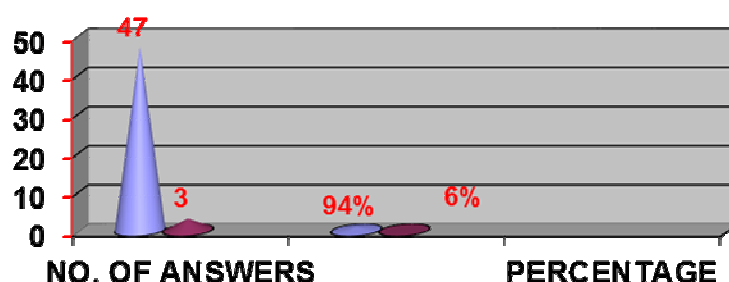
- ☐ a) I do not think my chances to get a well-paid job depends on my fluency in English  
☐ b) I think bilingual speakers are the winners in any job competition



Analysing students' replies we can see there are a few students who really understand the real benefits a foreign language can provide nowadays, when the economic world is becoming increasingly globalized and companies tend to expand overseas. There are two main reasons by which these students can get motivated to further study a foreign language: in any job competition with a number of other applicants, the bilingual individual is by far more likely to be the winner. Moreover, once hired, the knowledge of a foreign language can bring the employee further economic benefits, like salary premiums or allowances for travelling abroad, or a pay rise while getting promoted. Students should be helped to understand that fluency in English is imperative for being successful in many fields of employment in today's world.

**Question 6:** Have you ever spoken with an English native?

- ☐ a) I have neither spoken with an English native  
☐ b) I have spoken with an English native on one/several occasion/occasions



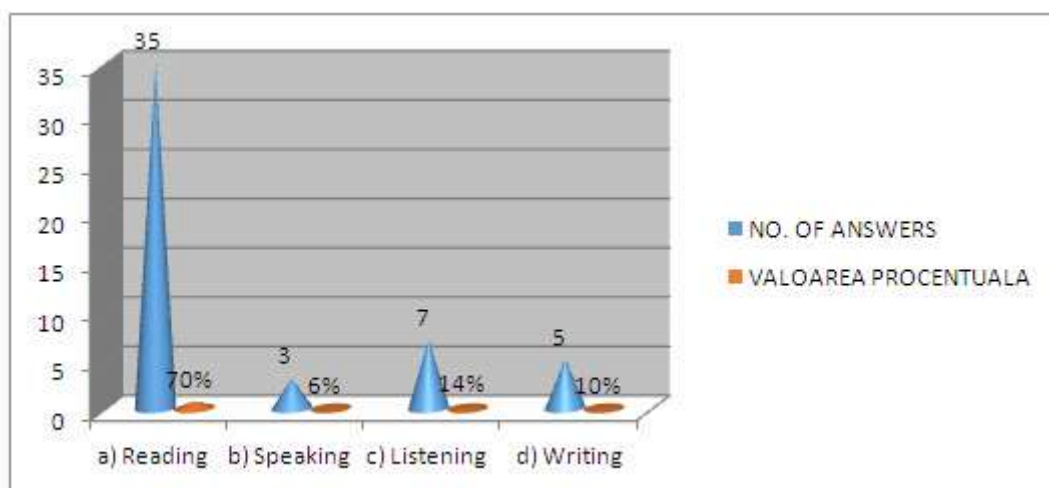
Speaking with natives, that is getting involved in real-world English conversation practice, is one of the most efficient means to improve one's foreign language, some of the advantages being: learning authentic and practical use of vocabulary, getting used to accent and pronunciation, hence improving one's listening comprehension skills, and last but not least struggling to express oneself only in the target language. Some of the circumstances favouring this possibility and consequently motivating students are: studying/working/travelling abroad, making pen pal friends or using some of the especially dedicated websites offering a selection of tutors for different skill levels. One efficient tool

the English professor can use at this level is explaining the students the numberless benefits of Erasmus scholarships and internships provided by the university they are currently studying at: experiencing different cultures, growing in self-confidence, gaining a new perspective in both personal and professional development, setting up a wide range of international contacts, enhancing one's employability and of course developing one's language skills.

**Question 7:** What is difficult for you in learning and practicing English?

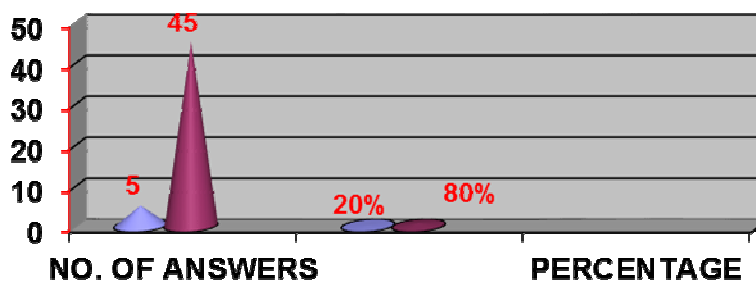
Asked about the difficulties they face in the process of learning and practicing English, 30 % of the students interviewed witness that the toughest task is understanding the use of tenses in English, 40% mention their inability of expressing themselves in English and the remaining 30% refer to the difficulty of translating from their native tongue into English.

**Question 8:** What type of activities do you like most during the English class?

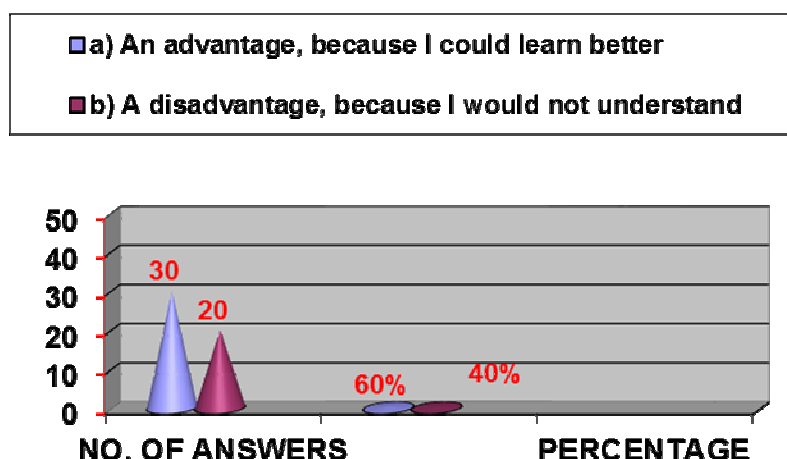


**Question 9:** Which do you think is most important: thoroughly learning English grammar or trying to use the language in real situations?

- ☐ a) Studying grammar
- ☐ b) The use of language in real situations



**Question 10:** If your English teacher chose to speak only in English during the class, would this be an advantage or a disadvantage for you?



## 2. Rethinking the teaching of English

After having analysed the responses provided by students, hence their level of language awareness, their needs and desires related to language learning, language teaching has to take place in connection with the process of internationalization and globalization, the main task of a language teacher being that of using an appropriate teaching methodology.

### 2.1. Communicative language teaching

To avoid any possible misunderstanding that might arise from using terminology, we should mention that the communicative approach on foreign language teaching does not refer to teaching communication instead of grammar. Supporters of this method focus on including in their courses open discussion activities. Still, grammatical competence remains an important element in acquiring a language, but learning a foreign language has to go beyond rules. Most learners are not afraid they could not master the rules of sentence building, but they lack confidence in being successful to use language in purposeful communication.

In order to help them master this capacity, the English language teaching should focus mainly on its use in situational contexts of communication, so that language can be understood as a means of communication not as a chain of rules and exceptions to these rules. Furthermore, the focus should be on the use of English in communication situations delimited by specific purposes, in our case economic instances such as finance and banking, tourism, management, marketing accountancy. There is still another aspect to consider when trying to meet the learners' needs, namely the difference between formal and informal speech, as well as between different types of texts: narrative, interviews, reports, conversations on the phone, face-to-face discussions.

At one point in the survey students confessed that their utmost fear is that they cannot understand grammar tenses in English, that is partly because language learning is seen by many as the formation of mechanical habit (Richards, J.K., 2006:p.4) for whose achievement students must reproduce correctly ready-built sentences, the chances of making mistakes being diminished by tasks such as learning dialogues by heart or copying different written texts. In order to help them gain confidence in their abilities and prevent considering language learning as a burden, students can be encouraged to create meaning collaboratively, to try to incorporate what they have learnt in real communication situations favoured to occur during the course, to use proverbs and idioms, as they offer some of the most efficient approaches on the origin of languages. While teaching proverbs

and idioms it could be useful to encourage students finding out similarities and differences between their native tongue and the target language, trying to understand their structure and their origin in order to catch the meaning, analysing various examples where proverbs and idioms can generate misunderstandings, due to either wrong pronunciation, wrongly understood meaning or improper use in context. A conscious understanding of how language works, of how native speakers use their language, can further enhance a better use of language.

Furthermore, classroom activities must always include group work or pair work tasks, helping them get used to actively participating. They will gradually become comfortable with expressing themselves in English, especially if they are not constantly monitored and interrupted by the teacher whenever errors occur in their use of language. So, the role of a perfect, faultless user of the language, often played by the language teacher, should be replaced with the latter's involvement in making students have a different approach on making errors, far be it from an obsession. In this way, the success of learning the language comes through having to communicate real meaning, where form-focused instructions could be integrated. Learners will absorb the new vocabulary items and grammar rules on an unconscious level while challenged to interact naturally in the target language.

Learning can be also personalized by introducing self-study resources covering a wide range of topics of interest for independent study. In this way, learners can assess their own performance and see how they manage when they are physically assisted by their teacher.

## **2.2. The integrated skill approach**

While learning a foreign language, students may face different challenges, be motivated by different contexts and have different individual learning preferences. These various reasons determine them to figure out the four activities listening, speaking, reading and writing as interesting according to their immediate needs or purposes. In order to meet these needs and fulfil their expectations, the English professor should not focus on only one or some of the 4 skills. An efficient learning environment should include all four of them, with the appropriateness of the tasks designed by the professor increasing the chances to keep learners motivated. Besides the proven efficiency of the integrated skill approach in teaching a foreign language, it also increases the chances to satisfy all learners. This is because efficient learning does not depend only on the information taught but also on serving the needs of learners.

## **Conclusions**

In a great number of schools in Romania, English is a compulsory subject in the curriculum. Still, this is not enough, for in order to enjoy the benefits provided by an appropriate acquisition of the language, teachers/professors should get themselves involved in making learners/students, whatever their level of study, aware of the importance of the English language as a global language. Once they have a positive attitude towards the relevance of English language, students will become more confident and hence more responsible for their own learning. Learners could develop a transnational view of the English language and thus become aware of its relevance and usefulness if they are guided to consider language practices in social networks all over the world: starting from interpersonal interaction to mass-communication and communication within and between organizations. The more learners know and get to understand how the target language functions, the more they get to appreciate it.

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## QUESTIONNAIRE

**Respondent's data:****Name and surname:****Group of study:****Question 1:** What is your level of knowledge in English, according to your own assessment?

- a) Beginner
- b) Intermediate
- c) Advanced

**Question 2:** Think about top 2 reasons why you may want to become fluent in English. (open question)**Question 3:** Has anyone before explained to you the usefulness of the English language as a global language?

- a) Yes, my former teachers of English
- b) Yes, but I have not understood clearly
- c) I have never heard or thought about this

**Question 4:** If you were aware about the importance of speaking English nowadays, do you think your attitude towards studying it would be a more favorable one?

- d) I do not know
- e) I am not really interested in studying English
- f) Yes, I would do my best to learn it

**Question 5:** How much do you think fluent English communication skills will improve your employability after graduating the university?

- a) I do not think my chances to get a well-paid job depend on my fluency in English
- b) I think bilingual speakers are the winners in any job competition

**Question 6:** Have you ever spoken with an English native or have you ever heard an English native speaking?

- a) I have never spoken with an English native
- b) I have spoken with English natives on one/several occasion/occasions.

**Question 7:** What is difficult for you in learning and practicing English? (open question)**Question 8:** What type of activities do you like most during the English class?

- a) Reading
- b) Speaking
- c) Listening
- d) Writing

**Question 9:** Which do you think is most important: thoroughly learning English grammar or trying to use the language in real situations?

- a) Studying grammar
- b) The use of language in real situations

**Question 10:** If your English teacher chose to speak only in English during the class, would this be an advantage or a disadvantage for you?

- a) An advantage, because I could learn better
- b) A disadvantage, because I would not understand