

Author: Anna Sliwa

## FUNCTIONS OF IN-COMPANY LANGUAGE COURSES

### **Abstract:**

In-company language courses are an instrument used by firms for more purposes than simply improving the skills of employees. They can be a component of the social package, administered at the discretion of employees themselves, in preference over season tickets to the gym or a series of spa treatments. They can be a means of retaining good employees, who agree to remain in the company for a specified period of time in return for such investment. They could be an internal marketing tool included in company mission – the company that cares for its employee's lifelong learning will easily be seen a Socially Responsible Corporation. Language courses benefit both parties as they tend to be relatively cheaper than professional training.

**Key words:** in-company language courses, language instruction, perks

**Authors and/or co-authors short biographical statement:** I am a teacher of English at the Department of Languages of Wroclaw University of Economics, Poland. Currently I am working on a PhD in marketing of language instruction. The paper represents part of my research results.

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### **Paper**

Obligatory language education in Poland begins in secondary school where all children learn a language for 3 years. In high school a second language is introduced and children continue learning 2 languages (usually English and German, Spanish, French or Russian) till their final exams, that is for another 3 years. Theoretically, all school leavers should have a good working knowledge of their first language (A2 – B1<sup>1</sup>) and a basic knowledge of their second language (A1-A2<sup>2</sup>) by the time they enter university education.

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<sup>1</sup> **B1** Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. Source:

In reality only a minority of graduates can demonstrate language skill at the regulatory levels. Among reasons it is necessary to mention unequal access to language learning at early stages, as some children start learning very early in life or at least attend non-compulsory classes in primary school. As a result, the start of obligatory language education meets pupils at language levels ranging from zero to at least A2, and that difference, while adding to the poorer students' demotivation, continues to further stages.

According to Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education regulations, foreign language competence of all Bachelor's degree holders is supposed to be at level B1, whereas that of Master's degree holders – at B2<sup>3</sup> level. This is to be achieved with only 120 hours of language tuition. Another problem is that university courses make an understandable effort to adapt to students' specialization. In business courses, Business English is taught, in technical courses it's Technical English, in Medicine, Nursing and Physiotherapy it's the so-called Medical English. However, even these 'specialized' courses are inevitably general. Although it is still acceptable for a student of Accounting to use a standard Business English book with chapters on marketing, management, business ethics and insurance, students of Surveying find it hard to accept that they are asked to buy a standard Technical English book with chapters that treat lightly of IT, gas dynamics, theory of relativity and oceanography. Because they find the material taught irrelevant to their needs, they consider language courses a necessary evil, especially that they are awarded very few ECTS points for them.

Instead, an increasing number of students attend private language schools while still at college and they tend to complete the courses with one of popular international language

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_European\\_Framework\\_of\\_Reference\\_for\\_Languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages), 20.06.2009

<sup>2</sup> **A2** Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. Source:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_European\\_Framework\\_of\\_Reference\\_for\\_Languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages), 20.06.2009

<sup>3</sup> **B2** Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Source:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common\\_European\\_Framework\\_of\\_Reference\\_for\\_Languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages), 20.06.2009

certificates, like Cambridge FCE or CAE, LCCI's Spoken English for Finance and Commerce (SEFIC), the German PWD (Prüfung Wirtschaftsdeutsch International), one of Goethe-Zertifikat levels or TestDaF, the French Diplôme de français des affaires of the Parisian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCIP), the Spanish Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera (DELE) or the Italian Certificato Di Lingua Italiana (CELI). Universities do not offer these certificates as standard because the cost of obtaining them is beyond the reach of many students.

If it wasn't for these extracurricular courses, there would be much fewer competent language speakers than there are today. However, they are still a minority. Graduates with good language skills and appropriate education find employment with relative ease, both in Poland and abroad. For those with lower language competence getting a good job is a challenge. First of all, they can't work outside Poland in their profession, which automatically blocks their chances of getting a decent European level income. In Poland the situation in the job market enables employers to state very demanding requirements for job seekers; even for simple office jobs "fluent English" is required beside 5 year's experience.

Research carried out by the author in years 2007-2009 (analysis of job advertisements in daily local press and 2 internet portals for the Lower Silesian region over a period of one month) shows that in approx. 75% of job advertisements for different kinds of jobs, from low level jobs like checkout attendants up to higher level managerial posts, a 'good command' of English or another foreign language is at least recommended. The group of jobs where this skill is generally not required include low paid cleaning jobs or manual work in small production plants. There even is a Google AdWords advertisement with the tagline: "Speak a language? Get a job" leading to a popular job portal (not, as one might think, to a job portal for language specialists).

In another part of the same research the author asked 319 respondents at different ages, in different jobs, how often they had the chance of actually using their language skills at work. The results (see Table 1) show that if statistically 75 % of job advertisements contain the requirement of language skills, then in at least 5% of them this requirement is excessive or perfunctory as 35% of respondents claim never to use a foreign language at work, and a further 11% use it only rarely.

Table 1 Survey results for question: „How often do you get the chance of using a foreign language at work”

Practially all the time	165	5,0%
Quite often	32	10,0%
Occasionally	121	37,9%
Not very often	36	11,3%
Never	114	35,7%

Source: own research

This result brings to mind an important question: if language skill is not directly related with job description, why is it used as a requirement in the recruitment process? A possible answer is that it helps select candidates with better potential, with a set of characteristics which is desirable for their prospective employer. In the same way as fresh graduates who already have some work experience are preferred over candidates who have never worked not because the former have acquired some skills pertinent to the job but because they have demonstrated a willingness to work, which is an important asset. Language skill, which – as has been proven - is a scarce good, is used in the recruitment process as a benchmark for the candidate’s conscientiousness and diligence. As described above, only students who sacrifice their own time and money have a chance of acquiring superior language skills by attending courses outside standard education.

Having stated that it would be easy to jump to a conclusion that all people who are employed can effectively communicate in a foreign language. It is by no means so. Firstly, setting high requirements does not necessarily lead to finding high profile candidates. Secondly, even if the candidates have actually completed a certificate, there is no guarantee that they will communicate effectively in the given working environment. Every specialization has its own specific jargon which has to be learnt from experience and is not likely to be taught in a language school. Another difficulty is jargon connected with certain popular applications – even a CAE diploma holder will surely feel baffled when confronted with the ORACLE database (even if job requirements stated ‘good computer literacy’ and ‘confirmed language competence’ and the candidate answered ‘yes’ to both of them).

Respondents in the author’s research recounted a number of bad experiences with employers who expected a newly acquired employee with advanced language skills to: handle different sorts of software and Internet applications, understand technical specifications, understand instructions for technological processes, understand and translate legal contracts or CISCO manuals. On finding that the new recruit is overwhelmed by the task, the employer typically accused them of lying in the interview and complained about the inadequacy of language certificates.

This broadly outlines the main axis of conflict between expectations of employers and linguistic competences of employees. Language skills are more than knowledge confirmed by a diploma, they are dynamic, they change in time and vary from situation to situation, and from person to person. A fluent language speaker can effectively communicate in everyday working contexts, in speech, in writing and on the telephone, but might magnificently fail to follow technical instruction. On the other hand a linguistically prolific engineer can competently use on-line manuals and documentation, as well as quickly learn new technical terms, but be at loss in face-to-face conversation. A holder of an advanced level certificate might know a great deal about the language's structure and lexis, might always form 100% correct sentences, but be beaten in direct sales or presentation skills by a speaker who makes mistakes but is a better communicator.

It can be now easily gleaned from the above discussion that finding an employee who would without additional training cope with language challenges of a modern company is almost impossible. That is why in-company courses offered massive scale by private language schools are so immensely popular. The market is strongly dispersed; the biggest share seems to be taken by freelance teachers who find ways into companies through personal recommendations. The rest is evenly divided between language schools offering in-company courses. A small share is taken by large, established schools that also offer traditional courses.

From the clients' perspective, the choice of cooperation mode depends on a number of factors. Now I will proceed to discuss the four most important ones.

1. Size of company.

The problem of in-company language training for large firms is that international corporations use management systems with set procedures for the selection and validation of suppliers (of goods and services). They are also accustomed to cooperating with other businesses on clear principles:

- deadline for product delivery or service completion is stated in the contract
- the contract directly identifies range of responsibilities of both parties, defines a need which the transaction is supposed to satisfy
- on signing the contract, the client knows precisely what benefits they will receive at the agreed price.

In-company language training is a detour from the typical procedure, as conflict of interests occurs between the client organization and the language school about to provide a service:

Client Organization	Language School
wants to set a deadline for completion of tasks	Works on the assumption that the moment when you „know” that language never really comes and learning never ends. Will press the client not to set a final date.
wants to pay only for the necessary minimum, wishes the training to consist only of immediately useful elements, like the ability to give information on the product on the telephone	assumes that in order to communicate effectively and fluently a solid foundation is necessary. One needs to understand how a language works and have some orientation in the language’s culture. Will try to persuade the client to go beyond the necessary minimum.
wants guaranties that at the moment of service completion employees subjected to training will have the required skills	Only few language schools give these guaranties. Even then, they are hinged on a number of provisions concerning students’ attendance and active participation in classes, and as a result are little more than a marketing ploy. Schools know only too well that the rate and efficiency of acquiring language competence are very individual, so no realistic guaranties can be given.
want the course to be tailored especially for the needs of a the organization, run by an instructor who, beside being a fully qualified language teacher, is also a specialist in the required filed, e.g. lawyer, engineer, financial controller etc.	Prefers to work on familiar ground, to offer general courses, standard ‘Business English’ or ‘Technical English’. The problem is finding a teacher who would be both a linguist and a lawyer or engineer, such cases are rare and expensive.

Multinational organizations are growing and very attractive market for suppliers of globalization services, like the language of communication. The desired product is a syllabus that would guarantee effective international cooperation within standard organizational processes. Language instruction in corporations should be custom made along the lines of Integrated Information Systems, which use organization specific neologisms, acronyms and technical terms. Standard courses, although certainly improve the learner’s knowledge of

grammar and vocabulary in a given language, do not ensure seamless communication in the organizational environment.

Small and medium enterprises can select a supplier and mode of cooperation at their own discretion. This is why it is quite normal to see a freelance teacher running a makeshift Business English course in one room, an arrival from a language school teaching a group of technicians in another, and the MD hosting a native speaker from British Council in his own study. As results from a series of interviews with company managers and employees carried out by the author, when selecting a supplier of language courses, the boss of a small or medium enterprise will rely on price and recommendations. He will also often let his staff make the choice.

## 2. Number of employees that need to be trained.

It happens rarely but is not impossible, that all employees in a company have to be taught a language at once, be it because of a takeover, or a sudden change in markets, or because of new technology that requires increased communication with a new country. A feasible option then is employing a group of language instructors full time. It is expensive but cheaper than paying them on commission, and definitely cheaper than making all employees redundant and finding new ones who already speak the language.

Such extreme situations happen less frequently than when only a limited group needs to shape up linguistically. That includes the whole selling department, or purchasing department, or line managers. Then a tailored course can be ordered especially for the needs of that particular group, and it usually means just one or two hours weekly. Such customized course will contain a particular body of vocabulary and structures pertinent to their jobs.

Alternately, there is a number of people from different departments who want or have to improve their language skills. Because they can't have a tailored course, they are usually taught a general type of syllabus, divided into levels, depending on their existing competence. Although this can involve the same total number of people as in the case of tailored courses for departments, division into levels means that the company will pay for more hours of instruction, as this will mean 2 or 3 hours weekly per group.

Last but not least there are individual lessons, mainly with members of top management. For that purpose companies tend to choose big, well established language schools with a brand name, like Berlitz, and their very effective Total Immersion Course. Because of its price Berlitz is rarely asked to teach a large number of groups. Instead it is preferred by managers who choose it on the basis of its reputation and the prestige it provides. Such VIP courses are reputed to be a means of networking as an additional perk.

### 3. Specific diagnosed language problem that the company needs help in solving.

As mentioned before, certain companies decide to invest in language courses because of change: be it a major revolution like a takeover by an international organization resulting in changing all procedures, or simply a cheaper international supplier whose arrival has given the accounting department trouble with invoices in a foreign language. They will shop around for quotations for a custom-made course, and will expect language schools to come up with a wrapped-up offer that will give them guarantees that their language problem will be solved in a specified period of time, at a specified price.

However, the reality is often disappointing. From research carried out by the author using the ‘Mystery Client’ technique it seems that language schools are completely unprepared for this opportunity. The author visited 11 large language schools in Wroclaw asking them to provide language lessons for technical workers which would enable them to communicate with instructors from parent company in the USA, who would be introducing a new technology. The classes were to be preceded by a 5-day technology training for the language teacher, who needed to get an in-depth grasp of the technology before he could teach anyone. That is why the ‘Mystery Client’ asked for a language specialist who also had background in engineering.

Only 2 out of 11 visited schools were really interested in cooperation on described terms, although even they had doubts whether it will be possible to persuade a teacher to attend a 5-day training, which was provided free of charge but the teacher would not get paid for attending it. Other schools tried to persuade the client that training in technical language was useless and suggested one of the school’s standard courses.

It seems that language schools yet need to learn to be flexible. At present schools take an easier route and concentrate on companies without specified educational needs (see below). Companies which are trying to solve a concrete problem with staff language competences are left high and dry, at the financial mercy of one entrepreneurial school that is ready to take risks.

### 4. Absence of a diagnosed language problem.

In most cases companies do not suffer from an immediate urgent educational need. Their staff are linguistically literate because they have already undergone strict selection at recruitment stage. In spite of this a vast majority of businesses invest in their employees’ further language education. In-depth interviews carried out by the author with company bosses and employees reveal a broad scope of motivations. Companies believe that development is important for staff morale, so they create opportunities not just in form of

professional training but also self-development courses like time management, speed reading or language. As a perk, standard language classes are relatively cheap. They are cheaper than company car or mobile phone, cheaper than leadership development or coaching, but give a 'sense of achievement' and 'doing something useful in free time', which are valued by staff.

Language schools respond actively to such needs: they offer a detailed needs analysis, written and spoken placement tests, divide participants into levels according to *The Common European Framework of Reference* defined by the European Council, design a class schedule in accordance with the various requirements of different groups, appoint a specialist responsible for cooperation between the schools and the client company, monitor the progress of classes and effects of the educational process, run tests verifying participants' advancement, run surveys measuring participants' satisfaction, provide reports to demonstrate attendance, progress and results. Schools invest considerable amounts of money in electronic Teacher Scheduling Systems and School Administration software in order to make a favourable impression on the client and give bosses real time access to their subordinates' educational advancement.

Such eagerness to please is not always longed-for. Language school owners know that a majority of clients never even enter the system once. They don't feel the need to monitor how their employees use the opportunities the company is offering as perks, in the same way as they would not check if the staff swim really fast in the swimming pool the company bought them tickets for or if they keep gossiping in the jacuzzi. They don't need to know that. What they need is employees who know they are getting perks, who feel the company is doing something for them, who might feel remorseful about quitting a company which has invested in them.

Employees usually feel grateful if their employer decides to finance or co-finance their language lessons. Doing a language course is an activity which gives the participant reasons to be proud about or to motivate their own children to be more ambitious. Participants like to tell their friends 'You know, I'm learning Italian' and see their surprise and envy, which even increases when they add '... and my boss is paying for this'.

It is believed that 80% of what an individual knows and can do is learned outside of formal education. Companies therefore are the main arena of learning opportunities for individuals. Companies on the other hand rely on the knowledge and competences of their management and employees. Therefore providing learning opportunities is at the core of behaving socially responsible towards employees. A learning organization is a socially

responsible organization. Since better qualified employees will be more productive and flexible, this is a win-win situation.

## Literature

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