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THE LEVEL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AMONG EMPLOYEES IN FOREIGN TRADING COMPANIES IN SERBIA

SUMMARY: Due to the globalization and high demand of international market, business correspondence is being performed mainly in English, making the English language *lingua franca* in international trade. This paper shows in what degree the English language is, as the language for specific purposes, important in the international trading companies; it studies the connection between the professional position of an employee in a company, the usage and understanding of the language. Together with examples from the research conducted, this paper provides some answers to the questions – what professional positions are most likely to change in terms of the English language usage, that is, on which professional positions is the language known best?

KEYWORDS: Business English, international trade, trading companies, business correspondence, knowledge of business English

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1. Introduction

The English language is a global language, present in all areas of expertise and life, thus we have the impression that learning the language is not of the high importance. Due to the globalization many differences can be seen in economy, as well as in business correspondence and in foreign trade. Foreign languages and our exposure to them, in our everyday lives, influence our behavior and our acquisition of foreign languages is often at the unconscious level.

Not being conscious enough, that is, not knowing English language for specific purposes, people face difficulties in communication, especially in international trade. At the official website of the Institute for the improvement of education, there are no lectures and seminars about business English, and the acquisition of business English language is crucial step in successfully done foreign trade.

There are many published books and articles on the subject of global language and the English language as an international mean of communication. In her doctoral dissertation, Carmela Briguglio proved that people in Malesia and Hong Kong need further education in business English even though English language is one of the official languages. In this paper, notions of globalization and international trade in language contest are defined, as well as the phenomenon of the English language as a global language. Moreover, the term *lingua franca* is explained. The second part of this paper displays precise and clear findings from a research, conducted with the help of structure questionnaire.

2. English as a global language

If we want to communicate in an easier way, we need to pay attention on every aspect of communication – everyday communication, global and business communication. A language receives global status when it is developed in such amount that it plays special role, recognized in every society and every occasion (Crystal 2003: 3). Crystal also states that one language does not become global from the number of

people who speak it, but it becomes global on the basis of the social status of people, which means people speak the language that bring them security. If one language is *lingua franca* it serves different purposes, so we can distinguish several types such as: *lingua academica* (the language of science), *lingua emotiva* (the language of Hollywood), *lingua frankensteinia* (the language of conquest), *lingua cultura* (language based on literary text in English language) (Filipson 2008: 250, 251).

“Of all world-languages English probably has the vocabulary which is the most copious, heterogeneous and varied. In it, as it were, there it lies fossilized or still showing signs of the freshness of its assimilation, the whole English history, external and internal, political and social...” (Radosavljević 2009: 254). In his work *English Next*, Graddol claims that next to conventional division of the English language on Anglo-Saxon and modern English language, we can now talk about the period of the global English language (Graddol 2006: 60). Graddol also says that this gives us opportunity to further examine what *lingua franca* is, and observe cultural, linguistic, political and economic problems that surround us.

There are two factors that make English language a global language and those are: geographical-historical factor which is made of political influence and conquests throughout the history (for example English language was spared from all former British, and the role of the United States and the Great Britain in both World Wars); and sociocultural factor by which English language is spread through music, movie industry and especially after the development of the Internet. In order to be a part of international trade and international transactions, from the beginning of the time till the day being there is a need for one common language to overcome firstly language, and then cultural barriers.

English language has become the world's language both in international and global sense - international as a media of literary and cultural happenings in the world especially in countries of former British Empire; and globally as a default language of technology and social events (Briguglio 2005: 27). As previously mentioned, Carmela Briguglio did a significant research on the subject of global language and its influence on business. She proved that business correspondence can vary depending on the type of language strictures and skills which were used.

Throughout history, there was never a time where so many different nations need to communicate with each other and the need for bilingualism and one global language for the purposes of integration and business has never been higher (Crystal 2013: 14).

2.1. English language as *lingua franca* in international trade

“Every language is an adequate and sufficient medium for communication purposes to the society it serves” (Bugarski 1996: 25). In his book *The Introduction to General Linguistics* (1996), Ranko Bugarski writes about the term *lingua franca* which he defines as a language of wider communication i.e. the international language and the language of the world.

With the beginning of the 21st century, many foreign companies started their business in Serbia. With foreign companies' appearance in our country the need for one universal language emerged, so trading companies demand good command of the English language among their employees. ESP³ is one of the most challenging ways to learn a language bearing in mind that an individual learns how to use the language and how to do business in it, rather than learning basic language skills (Radosavljević 2009).

One of the main consequences of globalization, as globalization is mainly economic term, is free flow of assets and this is an additional proof of the importance of one global language. By time, the term BELF⁴ is acquired all over the world and it makes English language more important than ever before.

Learning BELF provides many conveniences in functioning in the world of business. The main reason for this is that sociological, political, ideological and psychological principles stay aside and are not in the way to language learning. As *lingua franca* needs to be a neutral language, even native speakers of English have to learn BELF because

³ ESP – English for Specific Purposes

⁴ BELF – Business English as Lingua Franca

BELF does not have slangs; it does not have as much rules in linguistics; it is used exclusively for business so we can omit articles, plural, and other grammar units which standard English language has. Moreover, we have interesting differences between standard language and BELF:

1. When learning standard variant of the English language, non-native speaker tries to imitate a native speaker while during the process of learning BELF the speaker's only goal is doing business.
2. Non-native speaker is considered to be an individual who needs attention and is not good enough for business (standard English language); the speaker is always right (BELF).
3. In standard variant of the English language we try to correct mistakes: BELF is all about expanding vocabulary and fast communication.
4. The culture of each country is important (standard English language), global business culture is important (BELF).
5. The aim is the understanding of the "perfectly" spoken English language (standard language); the aim is to understand the language for business purposes (BELF) (Živković 2015: 731).

In the book *Teaching Business English* (1994: 7-13), Mark Ellis and Christine Johnson explain business English language through five aspects:

1. Language which business people speak is often used.
2. Socio-business contacts are often imitated.
3. Clear information needs to be transferred in short amount of time.
4. Business language does not have rich vocabulary and is not bound to one culture but it is based on basic structures and business vocabulary.
5. Different courses of business English language are different depending on the goal of learning.

English language is the official language of business in 85% of international companies and organizations, moreover, in Asia that

number is 90%. Statistical data show that on the Internet 536 million people use English language, which is the 1/3 of all Internet users (Martins 2017: 61).

In the year of 1949, economist Paul Samuelson brought his theory of trade on which the business of The World Bank and IMF⁵ is based. Paul Samuelson's theory was brought with the goal to equalize labor cost and capital in the whole world. His definition serves as the base for globalization principle which is "whole world – one market" (Radović 2013: 221-224). Having in mind that there are many different nations in the international market and each individual has a different understanding of the term business, one question arises – In which extent does globalization influence communication among companies? If the principle of globalization is "whole world – one market", then we can say that the same principles implies one language for all participants in international trade - each country has its own language; thus the whole world should have one common language.

3. Research and results

The aim of this paper was to show in which extent do employees in trading companies in Serbia need business English, so detailed research was conducted. The empirical research was done in Serbia during the second half of the year 2018. The results were obtained with the help of the structured questionnaire, and two hypotheses were set:

1. The degree of ESP, among employees in trading companies in Serbia, depends on professional position in one company.
2. Employees in trading companies cannot do business successfully without ESP.

Questionnaire was made of three parts. In the first part, respondents had to circle the answer⁶ which they find suitable as they

⁵ IMF – International Monetary Fund

⁶ Answers in the 1st part were a) *I know the term and I use it;* b) *I know the*

were given a table with twenty five terms about international trade and business and they had to give their opinion.⁷ The second part was made out of twelve terms from the previous table and each term was accompanied with three translation equivalents. The third and the last part of the questionnaire was somewhat different – it consisted of eight sentences which were about international trade. The task was to circle *YES* if a respondent understands the sentence, or *NO* if a respondent does not understand. Questionnaires were given in telecommunication companies “Telenor” and “Vip”, insurance company “Grawe” and in “Erste” bank. Furthermore, in distributional company “Veletabak”, German company „DRÄXLMAIER Group”, in “Talent 4 Blinds” company from Belgium, French company “Essex Group” and “MK Commerce” company from Novi Sad – Serbia. Total of sixty-five respondents on thirty-two professional positions participated. Respondents were directors, managers, referees, sales representatives, secretaries, etc. Also, the age structure of respondents played an important part of this research, in order to see whether experience plays a role in English language knowledge.

After the research, it was concluded that the position in a company plays an important role because respondents on higher positions showed better knowledge of business vocabulary even though some vocabulary units were not in their area of business. The example to this are two respondents on *the director of logistics* position. Both respondents, of course, do the same job, but the respondent who had had lessons of business English did better as his answers were consistent. As lower positions in companies were questioned the level of ESP competence was lower and we can clearly see that in the example of sales associate position – respondents found terms to be confusing and they gave somewhat ambiguous answers, they had circled that they know the term but they did not know to translate them even though the answers were given.

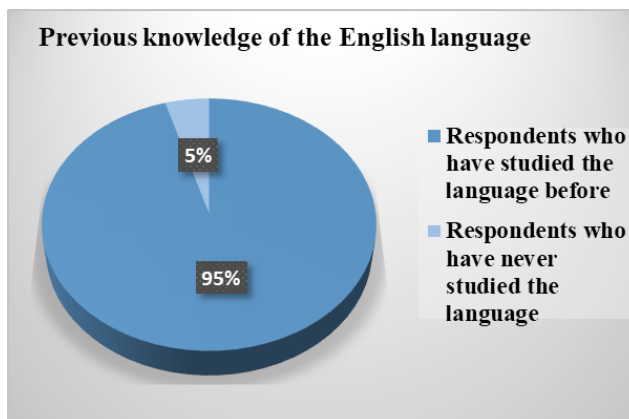
term but I do not use it; c) I do not know the term but I have seen it; d) I do not know the term and I do not use it.

⁷ Used terms were: *enquiry, commodities, freight, Incoterms, provision, reimburse, solicited offer, contract of sale, carriage paid to – CPT, carriage forward, reimbursement, remittance, beneficiary, liquidity, legal tender, delivery, assets, unsolicited offer, credit entry, risk-return trade-off, insurance, contingencies, invoice, customer status, liabilities.*

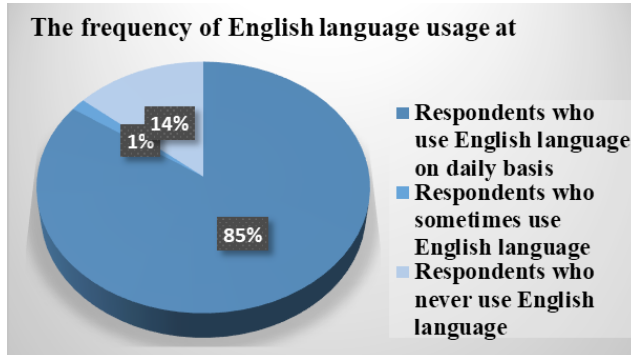
It was noticed that learning English is becoming one of the main priorities in education as only three respondents (5% of respondents) have never learned the language (*1st graph*). Another important thing is that only nine respondents do not use English in their job, one respondent use it occasionally and all other respondents use it daily (*2nd graph*). Respondents had to answer the question whether they think they know the business terminology in English language: 73% of respondents think they know business terminology, and 27% think otherwise (*3rd graph*). One more interesting fact is that every respondent said that learning business English should be obligatory in every corporation.

With the development of informational technologies the usage of the English language increased as English is default language on the Internet and it certainly tends to become default language of business (Martins 2017: 61). Respondents were divided in three groups considering age span: from twenty to thirty-four, from thirty-five to forty and from fifty- one to sixty; it was expected that respondents from the first group (age span from twenty to thirty-four) know the terminology best because they use the Internet more often than other two groups (*4th graph*). The research showed that this was not the case and that knowledge depends directly on professional position in the company. Employees who use the Internet at the great extent, knew standard variant of the language better but they need further education in ESP, i.e. BELF.

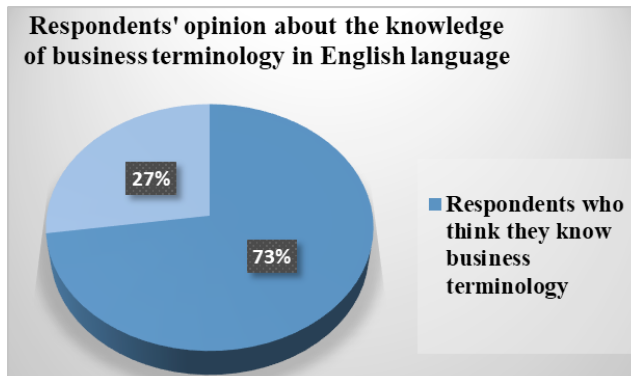
1st graph



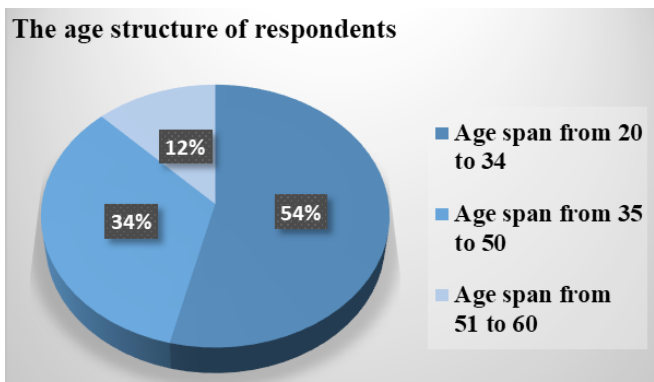
2nd graph



3rd graph



4th graph



4. Conclusion

The awareness of the importance of business English language is rising every day. The goal, mission and vision of the company contribute to the extent of English language knowledge. With the development of informational technologies, the need for one common language was integrated in each individual.

Language serves the purpose of communication in one community and we all need to understand it. So, if we observe trading companies, it is clear that business English should be perfected so that it actually becomes *lingua franca* or BELF.

Having in mind that the language is spread through culture, it is somewhat understandable that people think they know the language and they are not paying attention to business aspect of it, although there are clear differences between standard language and BELF. The age of globalization brings us certain changes and one of them is that societies and cultures merge and that we need one common language. Certainly, there are difficulties in learning a global language, even among native speakers, and that shows us how English language as *lingua franca* is.

The research on this subject was conducted on sixty-five employees on thirty-two professional positions, and it showed that employees in foreign trading companies in Serbia need good command of the English language at every position and in every age span. Both hypotheses have been proven right and that is another proof that the need for one global language, in this case English, is enormous.

This work represents one of the rare researches where employees in trading companies in Serbia were questioned, so we have an insight in the importance of English language in business in Serbia. The conclusion is, among other things, that there is a need for incorporating lessons of business English in high schools in the Republic of Serbia. Finally, this work may represent the basis for some future researches about this topic, which could further contribute to better understanding of this important subject.

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