

**THE EXCITEMENT OF STUDYING BUSINESS ENGLISH:  
A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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***Abstract***

*The study analyses the unique quality of the learning process in the Business English classes offered at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and attempts to point out its teaching ingredients and strategies conducive to pleasant and exciting learning. The range of instruments the engaged teacher brings to this educational encounter, alongside the absorbing learning experiences they help to build turn the Business English class into a haven of joyful learning and “flow” in Csikszentmihalyi’s terminology. A haven rising on student empowerment, responsibility for their own learning, excitement, and joy, all documented through multiple research methods.*

***Keywords:*** Business English, exciting learning, flow, student engagement, joyful process.

***1. Background information***

Our research has been inspired by the prevailing gloomy picture of education worldwide, in marked contrast to what we experience in the Business English classes we offer to our undergraduate students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania.

We all are constantly made aware - via all communication channels - that education is in crisis, that it is outdated, since it shaped up in response to the needs of the Industrial Revolution and, as such, it has become increasingly irrelevant to present-day needs. Not surprisingly in this context, modern education is compared to the Death Valley in California where nothing grows, as a rule, in the century-long absence of rain. Schools are perceived to kill creativity, while the schooling system offers multiple subjects but joy and excitement, as if education can be only dry, boring, and joyless. Education is definitely in need of a new paradigm, according to students, parents, and educators alike.

We as parents and educators look around and wonder: where is the learners’ natural curiosity and creativity, their passion for learning and collaboration, the pride they take in the efforts they

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make in school, and the overall excitement of the learning experience? Why does the process of becoming educated apparently require students and teachers alike to banish joy, pleasure, and excitement? Is the pursuit of joy inherently harmful to the students and detrimental to the learning process? And then we reflect on our own teaching experience and our colleagues' and realize that any educator will experience at some point in their career the students' joy of learning and their excitement at discovering knowledge and ways to work with it. For some fleeting moments, if not for longer, any educator will see the learners' eyes brighten up as they are fully engaged in the learning activity at hand and they do love the experience. They forget about virtual reality, their beloved technology, and the charms of social media, and they are all there, engaged in the absorbing activity going on in the classroom.

If learning has the power to generate this intense joy and excitement in the learners who are thus able to stay focused and engaged while the teachers are able to set the wheels of the learning universe in this joy-inducing motion, there clearly is some disconnect between the general perception of education and learning in general and the immediate reality we know in the Business English class with the students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. We are clearly privileged to teach a subject that has strong appeal through its everyday practicality and long-term validity. But is this the full explanation?

### *1. Scope of the research*

In order to begin to make sense of this disconnect, we will start small and specific. With the major English dictionaries, "excitement" is defined as "a state of enthusiasm" in the person who experiences excitement, accompanied by great eagerness, pleasure, interest, as the case may be. Our study aims to identify the students' perception of the Business English class, in an attempt to confirm and further validate the teaching staff's classroom observations and their findings based on direct interactions with the students. Students' perceptions will then be processed and analyzed so as to yield the specific profile of the Business English class that could account for the excitement that students experience during the sessions. The profile will then be used to inform the best practices and the benchmarking that the professional development of Business English teachers thrives on.

The present qualitative research has actually a two-fold goal: the first would be to objectify, document, and justify the students' response to the approach to learning that we promote in the Business English classes in our institution; the second would be to distill these findings into a protocol or a recipe for engaged study leading to the students' enhanced learning. Basically, we constantly notice that in the Business English class students struggle with challenging concepts and terminology, but the whole experience is more often than not exciting to them, they give 100% of themselves to it, they learn and they love the experience. There is clearly joy and excitement in the learning process and this makes it effective.

Until the present study we have never collected student testimonials or invited their support in documenting the particular quality of the learning going on in the Business English class. Their eyes bright with the excitement of learning, their flushed cheeks, their happy demeanor, their smiling faces, the quick comments - ("Business English is my favourite subject!", "Great stuff!

We've learned so much today!" "Looking forward to the next session", "I enjoyed it a lot. Almost forgot I was in school...") - they make as they leave the classroom at the end of the session that echo their non-verbal messages and the cascading "Thank you"-s in lieu of "Good bye" at the end of the session tell a story of joyful learning that this study aims to unravel. If students come to experience *flow* - in Csikszentmihalyi's terminology – in the Business English session, then we need to be aware of the steps leading to it and the ingredients that contribute to it. If learning can be exciting, joyful, and pleasant to our students, what does it take for the teachers to generate this favourable context? Since the students' positive state, both emotional and intellectual, has been documented to enhance learning, then how can teachers trigger this sense of joy and excitement in the students, so as to maximize the learning going on in the Business English class?

Before we move on and try to come up with an answer by means of our research, the extensive quote below captures the importance of flow for the outcomes of the learning process and, implicitly, the benefits of inducing student enjoyment in formal education, at all levels.

*"According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), such learning is an example of flow, which he defines as the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it at even great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. (p. 4)*

*If we want students to experience more flow in school—if we want them to see school and learning as joyful—we need to rethink how and what we teach. No longer can schooling be primarily about creating workers and test takers, but rather about nurturing human beings (Wolk, 2007). By helping students find the pleasure in learning, we can make that learning infinitely more successful." (Wolk, 2008: no page number available, online resource)*

Since we fully agree with the tenets above, we will now move from the rationale of our research to the following core section.

## **2. Research methodology**

Chapter 2 looks at the research hypothesis and the methodology employed for studying it.

### **2.1 Student perspective**

For the goals of the present research, the focus will be on the analysis of the learning environment in the Business English class from the students' perspective. The learning content, the tasks, and the methodological approach will be informally assessed as seen through the students' eyes, in an attempt at identifying the specific ingredients that account for the excitement of studying Business English in our institution, specifically with the authors' groups of undergraduate students who gladly became the subjects of the present qualitative research. We take this excitement as a given and proceed to the research hypothesis: students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies experience a state of flow - in Csikszentmihalyi's acceptance of

the term - in the Business English class as a result of the relevance of the teaching content, the engaging teaching methodology employed in the ESP classes, Business English included, and the empowerment they experience thanks to the methodological approaches at work in the Business English class.

## ***2.2 Research methodology***

This subchapter highlights the methodology of the research. As such it documents the subjects who agreed to take part in it, the materials that we chose to use, and the procedures that we followed in order to support the objectives of the study.

### *The subjects*

As briefly mentioned previously, the subjects of our research were the undergraduate students that the two authors teach regularly, in all 16 groups who have one 80-minute Business English session every week. The 300-320 students regularly attending the weekly sessions came from all three years of the undergraduate programs offered by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in its 10 schools: specifically, our subjects were prevalingly enrolled on the International Business and Economics program, with significant numbers also on the Marketing and Business and Tourism program. They were all invited to act as subjects and they agreed enthusiastically and asked repeatedly about the progress of the research and the additional opportunities for extra help they could provide.

### *Materials and method*

We investigated the research hypothesis by means of a range of research tools that we deemed adequate for the purpose of this qualitative research. They included the following:

- 1) interviews with the group leaders and a small sample of group members who had stood out through their high and steady engagement level in the Business English class. These interviews were scheduled outside the teaching periods over six months, off the academic premises, at one of the many coffee places in the university's vibrant neighbourhood;
- 2) ad hoc class discussions, usually fast paced and always held at the beginning or the very end of the teaching session, as a rule once or twice per month over six months, throughout the academic year, and
- 3) focus groups that were organized with each group of students twice, at the end of each semester, in the last session when test paper results and feedback are available to the students. This is usually reflection time and the teacher engages the students in conversations and what needs to be changed or improved, what would they like to keep, and what to add to the Business English session so as to keep the joyful learning on, as well as the excitement of the overall educational experience.

Given the size of the subject sample involved, we deliberately chose to stay away from cumbersome research procedures and opted for subject-friendly approaches which caused only

minimal disruptions to our research-participating students and their schedules. In addition, we built on our previous relationship with the students and the opportunities for pleasant learning that the Business English class constantly provided. This served also practical reasons and reduced the research-induced stress on the authors.

### ***3. Findings and conclusions***

This final chapter focuses on the findings and the conclusions that this small-scale qualitative research has occasioned. What the range of research methods employed consistently revealed correlated well with the teachers-turned-authors' observations concerning the excitement, joy, and satisfaction that students and often times teachers as well experience in the Business English class on account of the learning that goes on in the class. Our findings echo the tenets of joyful learning as first introduced by Udvari-Solner and Kluth in 2007 and which have been further developed (Seel, 2012).

*“Characteristics of joyful learning include being highly engaged in the task or experience while having a sense of wonder and curiosity. Typically, educators and their students both benefit from and feel synchronicity in the teaching/learning experience. There is a sense of shared interest and purpose. Learners of all abilities interact meaningfully with the educational content while also interacting with one another in supportive academic and social interchanges...”* (Seel, 2012)

Building group rapport and empowering the students - in order to develop a positive attitude towards learning Business English, among others - emerged as one of the key observations that the subjects in this small-scale qualitative research offered when accounting for the quality of the learning process in the Business English class, their own engagement and the ensuing linguistic outcomes.

Some of the key factors conducive to the excitement and the joy of learning that are the hallmark of the Business English class in our institution, according to the students involved in the present research, appear to be the following:

- The students' sense of responsibility for their own learning and their control over the learning process, in close correlation with the learning-how-to-learn support consistently provided by the teachers;
- Their involvement in the decision-making process in class, including jointly setting the learning priorities with the teacher;
- The authentic resources the teachers employed and the challenging yet doable assignments they developed around these resources so as to facilitate the learning process;
- The collaborative, supportive environment that encourages risk-taking approaches in a positive, non-threatening context where mistakes are welcomed as learning opportunities. As a result, the students are spared the pain of losing face and feeling inadequate when making mistakes;

- The micro-teaching sessions in which students are encouraged to volunteer for the small-scale teaching of a business concept relevant to the study unit of the day. These micro-teaching sessions consist of a short interactive presentation; its teaching content and format are entirely at the student presenters' discretion: some students choose to develop visual materials to convey their message effectively, others draw charts, or sing through the presentation. Some approach the content in surprising and innovative ways, some choose to share facts and numbers that shock the audience into attention. Their focus is on getting their message across to their peers, engaging the audience's attention, practicing effective public speaking and overcoming their nervousness, all the while demonstrating thorough preparation as well as in-depth understanding of the respective business concepts, alongside professional skills.
- The final point that the students emphasized as the underlying ingredient of their learning excitement in the Business English class was the sense of mystery that the teachers often built around new business concepts, leading the students to individual exploration and collective discovery. This was perceived as highly valuable and productive, and so was the flipped classroom approach commonly employed in order to give students the chance to study new content at their own pace at home and then reflect on it, discuss, and analyze it in class.

The consensual freedom the students enjoy in the Business English class makes room for creative approaches that the learners employ with zest in order to personalize the teaching input they deliver through their presentations in what has become an on-going positive emulation. By "consensual freedom" the teachers-turned-authors refer to the state of vivacious and enthusiastic student engagement in the class activities, to the effect that the learners have ample room to manifest their own personal interests and priorities in a flexible class environment that encourages and stimulates them to develop the approach that best resonates with them, so as to find - and strengthen - their own voice.

The freedom comes with a clear sense of purpose that has been previously discussed and agreed between the teacher and the students as partners in this exciting educational endeavour that is the Business English class at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in Romania. The relevance of Business English to the students' every-day life and professional development also adds to this increased sense of excitement and pleasurable learning, according to students' input. By way of conclusion, this small-scale qualitative study highlights a number of teaching ingredients and strategies that have been documented to generate the pleasant and exciting quality of the learning process conducted in the Business English class at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, thereby enhancing the learning outcomes.

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