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THE RELEVANCE OF AN ESP INSTRUCTOR IN HELPING STUDENTS ACQUIRE CONFIDENCE AS A BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILL

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Abstract

Having as a starting point the common belief that effective communication relies to a great extent on building meaningful content while making use of a wide range of grammatical and lexical resources and attempting to have a sensible discourse management approach, this paper aims to focus on the relevance of confidence in successful communication. Both outer confidence, that is fluency, naturalness, engagement and inner confidence, that is accuracy, one's personal touch and meaningful pronunciation, influence the effectiveness of communication and are to be considered 21st century relevant communication skills. The outcomes reached by means of qualitative and quantitative research show the usefulness and relevance of an ESP instructor in helping adult learners acquire confidence as a basic communication skill.

Keywords: confidence; communication competence; fluency; accuracy; self-assessment; labour market.

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1. What is confident communication

The process of teaching and learning a foreign language for specific purposes has been extensively approached lately in the context of globalization and hence the pertinency of the 21st century skills needed on the labour market and in the real world outside the lecture hall. During the staff recruitment process, special emphasis is placed on transversal competences among which intercultural competence is greatly valued. In an attempt to meet the requirements on the labour market, a relevant foreign language for specific purposes teaching syllabus aims at understanding and practicing that language within the context of plurilingualism, i.e. by willingly accepting that communication competency is based on all the knowledge learners have acquired and all the experiences they have gained. With the acceptance of the structural uniqueness of languages, an ESP instructor's role has shifted from simply conveying grammar and vocabulary rules and patterns to encouraging learners to become active actors in their own learning process. In spite of this all-embracing assumption of communicative language teaching importance, ESP instructors still face numerous challenges when using the appropriate strategies to encourage learners to produce meaningful target language messages likely to help them increase their confidence.

Good communication skills usually include a set of interrelated general competences such as **knowledge (savoirs)** typically relying on one's social experience, **skills (savoir-faire)** which are considered to have a theoretical basis and **existential competences (savoir-être)**, mainly seen as

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moral, intellectual and behavioural attitude. Concurrently, good communication skills depend to a large extent on other factors, such as the emotional ones, among which self-confidence plays a crucial role. It is a common belief that confidence is the result of an inner feeling of self-belief as well as the result of one’s awareness of mastering the appropriate knowledge and information needed.

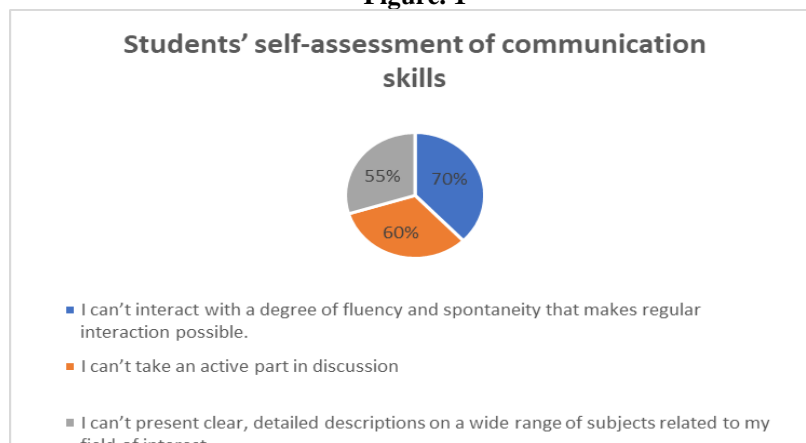
Consequently, an important ESP instructor’s role is raising learners’ awareness of what they have already acquired and they know in order to use a language for communication, as well as of what they have to develop so as to be able to use that language effectively on the labour market. For gathering the necessary amount of information in order to be able to examine the learners’ “**current situation**, in other words where the learners are before teaching begins, and the **target situation**, which is where they would like to be at the end of the teaching” (Frendo, Evans, 2005, 15), and to design suitable strategies for bridging the gap between the two situations, the ESP teacher needs to envisage suitable means of formal and informal assessment developed from different perspectives. The thorough analysis of these achievements and needs is what actually differentiates a general English course from a course for specific purposes, offering the possibility of focusing on the areas considered more relevant by the learner and also of working with learners to decide on the appropriate way to act further. As there is much arguing for the effectiveness of certain language placement methods, a reliable analysis of learners’ strengths and weaknesses would include both a teacher conducted assessment and a learner’s self-assessment.

To ensure the expected outcome of self-assessment, the ESP teacher has to follow at least four important stages. Firstly, learners are to be made aware of the benefits of self-assessment. The ESP teacher is also responsible for choosing the relevant reference framework and providing guidance when conducting learners’ self-assessment. Last but not least, helping learners understand the results is vital for allowing further development and improvement of the weaknesses they have identified. A useful tool in this regard is considered to be the Common European Framework of Reference. The research undergone in this paper has as a starting point the students’ self-assessment, applied according to CEFR criteria. The self-assessment questionnaire was applied at the beginning of the academic year, to first-year business students, covering a number of 160 respondents willing to participate. The qualitative and quantitative research undergone based on students’ responses has focused on providing useful and meaningful solutions for developing both outer confidence, strictly related to fluency, naturalness, engagement in speaking and listening and meaningful body language, as well as inner confidence, strictly relying on accuracy, personal touch and meaningful pronunciation.

2. Balancing fluency and accuracy

After having analysed students’ self-assessment of their weaknesses and strengths in using English for specific purposes, spoken interaction seemed to be their major matter of concern, with a vast majority considering themselves proficient in terms of their writing and listening skills.

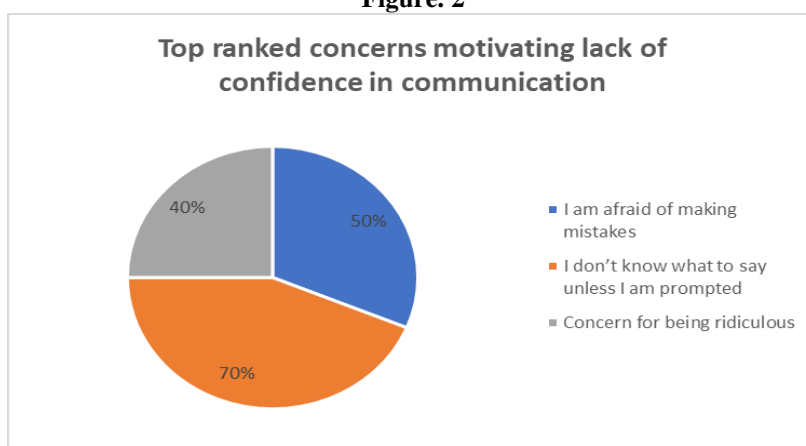
Figure. 1



Nevertheless, the students invited to self-assess their speaking skills in terms of spoken production, considered themselves able to *explain a viewpoint on a topical issue* (70%).

As foreign language learning and teaching effectiveness is often influenced by learners’ beliefs about different aspects, respondents who self-assessed themselves as being less skilful at spoken interaction were further invited to give some reasons in this regard. The top ranked concerns expressed by learners attempting to motivate their lack of confidence in communication included *the fear of making mistakes*, their *unskillfulness of producing spontaneous messages* and their *concern for sounding ridiculous*.

Figure. 2



At language level, confident communication can be acquired and developed during the process of teaching and learning a foreign language for specific purposes, with the teacher/instructor playing a central role in the process. Among the various considerations in teaching that Diane Larsen Freeman considered important, a primary one would be “taking into account who the students are and why they are studying the language. An assessment of students’ language needs and how they learn should inform the choice of syllabus units and teaching practices. We are, after all, teaching students, not just teaching language” (Diane, Freeman, 2003, 4). This means teachers, across the world, may have their own most relevant way of designing specific practices, consistent with the actual needs of learners, their level of proficiency and local expectations. Helpful strategies designed by an ESP instructor to meet the needs in this particular case fall into what is known as language correctness, i.e. accuracy, and language flow and efficiency, i.e. fluency. The utmost purpose is for learners to use language that fits the context and to be aware of what language they use to meet their communication needs.

Usually classroom activities are either accuracy-directed, such as practicing pattern drills accompanying newly taught grammar structures or fluency-directed, aiming to encourage spontaneous communication skills, such as role-play and free discussions. Being strictly controlled, accuracy-oriented activities have the advantage of developing correct grammar patterns and the disadvantage of being less-meaning oriented, thus preventing the occurrence of less controlled, spontaneous ideas in communication. With this approach predominantly used in the class, the outcome would be a mechanical routine, likely to render learners unable to transfer their knowledge to real communicative situations.

On the other hand, fluency-oriented drills have as major drawbacks the neglect of language structure, usually morphological and syntactic, but also phonological. Having the main advantage of learning language while using it, a complete communicative language teaching strategy (CLT) will result in meaning taking precedence over form and in fluency taking precedence over accuracy (Frendo, Evans, 2005, 13). With no structure rules to follow, learners tend to mispronounce sounds, use wrong endings or construct incorrect word order sentences. Timing is also of great importance when using fluency-oriented activities, as a too-early emphasized communication approach would result in a bare transmission of simple messages, with no linguistic ability of developing extended speeches or of producing verbal exchanges on various topics. The completely interactionist learning process,

implemented at the very beginning of instruction, facilitates the acquisition process but it does not ensure building the fluency needed with professional communication needs. When they are able to self-assess their language level and communication skills, learners usually attribute their uneasiness in interacting in a foreign language to the fear of making mistakes and to their constant need of support.

As it has been often claimed by authors in the field, grammar is no longer taught as separate from larger context, with the communicative method already replacing more traditional ones.

“Typically, a teacher or a textbook will use both activities that are primarily communicatively focused and activities that primarily deal with the parts of language—yet these will occur in different lessons, or different parts of lessons, or in different parts of a textbook unit. In other words, even at the microlevel of a lesson, the two approaches remain segregated.” (Diane, Freeman, 2003, 7).

In order to help our respondents to overcome their weakness, which can be associated with the “inert knowledge problem” (Whitehead, 1929), an efficient teaching approach likely to help learners build self-confidence in their linguistic skills is to be rather cumulative, based on both practicing previously acquired structures as well as on expanding their knowledge, by means of more impersonal, less authoritative tasks, encouraging free production of language, with the purpose of having them increase their outer confidence.

Such balancing can be attained by simply supplementing accuracy-oriented drills with fluency-oriented ones. In most situations, accuracy and fluency-oriented activities focus on practicing specific vocabulary or grammar structures; in ESP classes with higher levels of proficiency, such activities can focus on both vocabulary and grammar. The attempt this paper makes to prove the efficiency of balancing inner and outer confidence building communicative activities was contextualized on the basis of the following finance and economy vocabulary exercise and grammar structures previously discussed and practised, used for expressing finished actions at a definite time in the past and actions occurring at an indefinite time, also in the past.

Table 1

Match words 1-9 to definitions a-j:	
1. loss	a) money that you borrow from a bank
2. demand	b) selling something for less than you buy it for
3. share	c) money that you pay to borrow money
4. interest	d) ownership of part of a company
5. investment	e) income greater than expenses
6. supply	f) goods and services that people sell
7. profit	g) money that you borrow to buy a house or a flat
8. loan	h) money that is put into a business
9. mortgage	i) goods and services that people want to buy

Source: Marjorie, Resenberg. 2012, 6.

Aiming firstly to extend the newly acquired linguistic structures in a more controlled way, i.e. by designing accuracy-directed drills, students are asked to work in pairs and start a conversation following the structure given:

Table 2

Student A's questions	Student B's answers:
1. borrow money from a bank	
2. sell something for less than you bought it	
3. pay some money to borrow more money	
4. have expenses greater than your income	
5. buy a house or a flat	
6. put your money into a business	

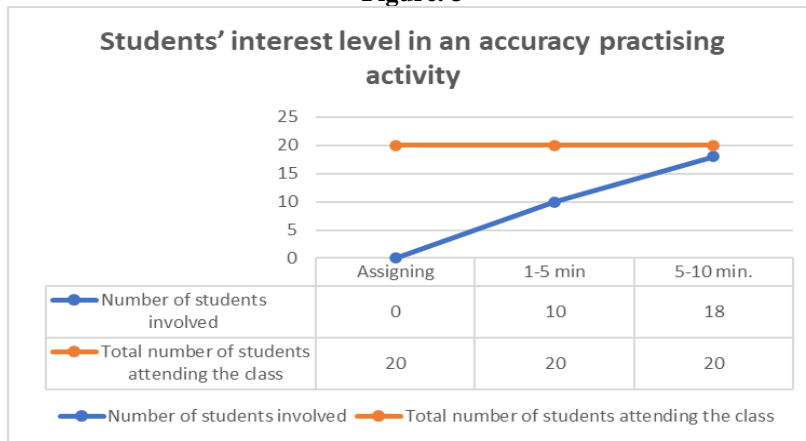
7. purchase any services
8. own a part of a business
9. sell any goods or services to other people

Example:

Student A: “Have you ever borrowed money from a bank?”

Student B: “Yes, I have/No, I haven’t”

Figure. 3



Even if the drill was controlled and the learners were explicitly instructed on what and how to practise, their level of interest was quite moderate, with only few of them showing enthusiasm, and most of them mechanically applying the structures given.

The same activity was further balanced with a fluency-oriented drill, aiming at both encouraging learners to practise in their own context and reality, and stimulating their interest. The only adjustment brought to the original task is the request to provide only positive answers for being able to expand their answers further:

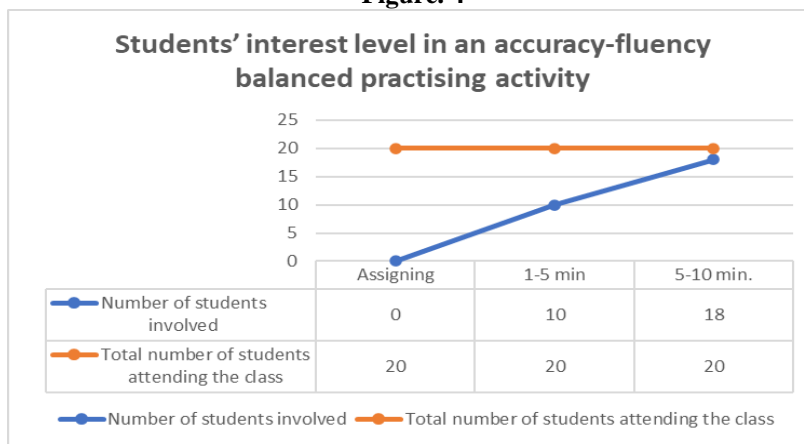
Table 3

Student A's questions	Student answers	B's	Student A: Ask for more information using at least three different question words: <i>when, where, what, who with, how, why</i>
1. borrow money from a bank			
2. sell something for less than you bought it			
3. pay some money to borrow more money			
4. have expenses greater than your income			
5. buy a house or a flat			
6. put your money into a business			
7. purchase any services			
8. own a part of a business			

9. sell any goods or services to other people
 10. your own question
 11. your own question
Example:
Student A: Have you ever sold something for less than you bought it.
Student B: Yes, I have.
Student A: Where were you?
Student B: I was.....
Student A: Why did you do it?
Student B: Because, I.....
Student A: How much money did you lose/How big was your loss?
Student B: I didn't lose much money, but I.....

Students' interest and the general willingness and availability to perform the tasks were impressive shortly after having been instructed.

Figure. 4



3. Encouraging personalization and confident pronunciation

Starting from the premise that confident communicators tell stories and they personalize their speech, ESP teaching is greatly related to encouraging personalization. Personalizing grammar structures has a twofold purpose: it helps students remember them better but it also encourages them to communicate. Teaching practices should harmonize with students' natural tendencies. Storytelling is a common practice which helps learning by personalizing. Learners can be encouraged to tell anecdotes about their own personal experiences, by using pictures, or by providing prompts to guide them through a story. The ESP teacher's own story can be provided, either for listening to or reading, as an accuracy-oriented activity. The ESP teacher has to consider the fact that speaking activities need scaffolding and planning time; therefore, to help learners increase their confidence, they can be encouraged to plan their answers, record the speaking and then rehearse their answers until attaining the desired level. A good way to raise students' awareness of the qualities of a good speech, including the importance of body language and miming is providing them with authentic video recordings of different TED talkers who are personalizing their speech with their personal stories.

Even though it is strictly related to such characteristics as intelligibility, comprehensibility, and fluency in communication, pronunciation is one thing often neglected in language for specific purposes teaching, or at least one thing practiced and taught less than grammar and vocabulary. Mastering pronunciation efficiently is usually associated with the ideal of mother tongue accent, disregarding its "critical importance to provide instruction that enables students to become, not perfect pronouncers of English, but intelligible, communicative, confident users of spoken English for whatever purposes they need." (Morley, 1991, 489) Since having a perfect native English speaker

accent is a hardly achievable goal, ESP learners often become demotivated or they even develop a certain *concern for sounding ridiculous* (40% of respondents in our case), a feeling more likely to occur with adult learners. In case of ESP adults learners a redirection of priorities within the sound systems is needed, in an attempt to make them aware that the intelligibility and comprehension of communication are mainly due to suprasegmentals - intonation, which brings out the meaning, alongside stress patterns, pauses and key words – and the way they are used in order to communicate meaning in the context of discourse. A Cambridge Assessment English Speaking Examiner considers the following criteria for assessment: intelligibility, the appropriateness of intonation, sentence and word stress and the clear articulation of individual sounds.

With the obvious goal of increasing learners' self-confidence and helping them become comfortable in using spoken English, the ESP teacher can use the importance of intonation, pauses and stress as an example of developing speech awareness and focusing on modifications of intelligibility levels. Less confident learners could be provided with transcripts/texts using symbols likely to guide their reading with the suitable intonation and right pauses.

My name is Paul Thomson. I'm a student at Bucharest University of Economic Studies, so, I'll graduate with a degree in economics. You probably know the word economist. But, can you guess what a Financial Planner does? Let me give you a hint. He examines and suggest financial opportunities and develops plans and budgets for clients. What do you think? Exactly? He customizes financial plans to meet the clients' needs.

My name / is Paul Thomson. / I'm a student at / Bucharest University of Economic Studies, / so, I'll graduate with a degree / in economics. You probably know / the word / economist. But, / can you guess what a / Financial Planner / does? Let me / give you / a hint. / He examines / and suggests / financial opportunities / and develops plans / and budgets / for clients. What do you think? / Exactly? / He customizes / financial plans / to meet / the clients' needs./

4. Conclusions

The beliefs learners have about the process of ESP learning and teaching are extremely important and relevant in sequencing the syllabus, choosing the appropriate pedagogic activities and designing helpful strategies, as well as in developing learners' autonomous approach to language learning. One obvious outcome of the research undergone in this paper is the importance of balancing different skills while attempting to practice different grammar and vocabulary points. Most textbooks today are extensive and comprehensive, interweaving a variety of syllabus and types of activities into lessons. The language teacher is the one able to choose the appropriate practices to develop in their students the ability to use the language, whether with a view to their developing spoken communication skills, or to their becoming literate, or both.

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Appendix:

Self-assessment survey – Common European Framework Reference

Please read carefully the self-assessment grid below and check the options you consider to reflect your current level of knowledge in the English language².

	I consider myself able to do it	I still need improvement	I don't consider myself able to do it Please give at least one reason.
Self-assessment of listening skills			
I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.			
I can understand extended speech and lectures on reasonably familiar topics.			
I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes.			
I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.			
Self-assessment of reading skills			
I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language.			
I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.			
I can read articles and reports on contemporary problems			
I can understand contemporary literary prose			
Self-assessment of speaking skills			
I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken.			
I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events)			
I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.			
I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction possible.			
I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.			
I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to their field of interest.			
Self-assessment of writing skills			
I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.			
I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions			
I can write clear, detailed text on subjects related to my interests.			
I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view.			
I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences			

² The self-assessment table provided is prepared by the author based on the CEFR grid available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/self-assessment-grid>