

Internationalization of Business English communication at university: A three-fold needs analysis

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Abstract

This paper provides an example of a thorough needs analysis previous to the syllabus planning of a Business English (BE) course at a Catalan university. Three types of sources for linguistic needs are considered. Firstly, the institutional foreign language (FL) policy of the university, which requires a CEFR level B1 for all graduates. Secondly, students' needs, collected through an entry test and a self-report questionnaire, which provide statistical evidence of the effect of experience abroad and number of years studying English on results of the entry test and perceptions of their own reading skills. Lastly, the opinions of six local business people representing the main sectors with international activity in the area of influence of the university. These business representatives, gathered in a focus-group discussion session, emphasize the importance of comprehension skills and accuracy in BE lexical selection for international business. The triangulation of these data reveals the need to enhance communicative efficiency in business routine tasks in the BE syllabus, instead of promoting approaches oriented towards native-speaker models. Finally, inconsistencies are revealed between institutional and business representatives' expectations regarding students' FL target level.

Keywords: needs analysis, Business English, internationalization, higher education.

Resumen

Internacionalización de la comunicación en el inglés de los negocios: un análisis de necesidades a tres niveles

Este artículo ofrece un ejemplo de un exhaustivo análisis de necesidades previo a la planificación de un curso de inglés empresarial en una universidad catalana.

Las necesidades se han establecido a partir de tres tipos de fuentes. En primer lugar, la política institucional de la universidad en lo que se refiere a lenguas extranjeras, para las cuales se requiere un nivel de B1 según las directrices del MCERL para todos los graduados. En segundo lugar, las necesidades de los estudiantes, recogidas a partir de un test de entrada y de un cuestionario, que proporcionan evidencia estadística del efecto de haber realizado estancias en el extranjero y también del número de años estudiando inglés en los resultados del test y en las percepciones acerca de sus propias habilidades. Finalmente, las opiniones de seis empresarios representantes de los principales sectores con actividad internacional en el área de influencia de la universidad. Los representantes empresariales, reunidos en un grupo de discusión, enfatizan la importancia de las habilidades receptivas así como de la corrección en la selección del léxico específico para llevar a cabo actividades empresariales a nivel internacional. La triangulación de estos datos revela la necesidad de potenciar en el programa de inglés empresarial la eficiencia comunicativa en situaciones comerciales, en lugar de promover un enfoque orientado al modelo de hablante nativo. Finalmente, se muestran algunas discrepancias entre las expectativas institucionales y las de los representantes empresariales en lo que se refiere al nivel de competencia adecuado.

Palabras clave: análisis de necesidades, inglés para negocios, internacionalización, educación superior.

1. Introduction

The indisputable dominant role of English in higher education institutions (HEI) and businesses is experienced all over the world. In Spain, however, the percentage of citizens who can speak English is very low as compared to other European countries (European Commission, 2012). Research around the world confirms that English is an intrinsic part of communication in a wide range of international settings, both at universities (Coleman, 2006; Graddol, 2006) and in businesses (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010). Universities have progressively internationalized their curricula so as to increase the number of international students, and to increase local students' foreign language (FL) command (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011). In turn, multinational corporations have also progressively adopted English as the corporate lingua franca with the objective of becoming more competitive and more visible in the business world (Truchot, 2002).

In order to shed more light on these phenomena, a closer look at institutional, pedagogical and professional ins and outs is necessary. Do universities have specific linguistic policies regarding the internationalization of their curriculum? What do prospective employers think about business students' need of English? How do stakeholders justify the need of English for professional career development in business? What type of English is it that is used in business courses at university and while doing international business interactions?

This article aims to provide a needs analysis about the teaching and learning of Business English (BE) in the Business Studies degree offered at the Spanish University of Lleida (UdL), taking into account the role of Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) in international commercial transactions. It takes into account all relevant stakeholders: the institution, the students and the businesses in the city of Lleida and its area of influence. By using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, we explore how these stakeholders shape the process of needs analysis, and how their views on English have an impact on the syllabus design of BE. Therefore, we aim to study the following issues:

1. The role of FL learning in the university policy documentation
2. The level of competence of Business students in English when they begin the BE course
3. The recommendations given by local business experts about BE needs and BELF

All in all, this article aims at complementing existing research on BE needs analysis.

2. Needs analysis

It is commonplace to present needs analysis as a cornerstone of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) syllabus design. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) bestow needs analysis a prominent place in the sequence of course design due to the very nature of ESP as a focused, learner's need-oriented type of course. In fact, one important difference between an EFL syllabus and an ESP syllabus within a HEI is the lack of previous thorough needs analysis of the former, leading into what Abbot

(1981) has termed a TENOR situation, acronym for “Teaching English for No Obvious Reason”.

Defining “needs analysis” is a problematic issue. Chambers (1980: 28), after an exercise of linguistic analysis of the term “needs analysis”, concludes that “if needs analysis does not mean the analysis *of* needs, then it must refer to analysing *in order to establish* needs, i.e., what one needs to know”. The learner is a pivotal element for s/he has gained attention as point of reference for needs analysis: specifically learners’ wants and lacks and how they accommodate when a language program is implemented (Allwright, 1982). Additionally, thanks to the broadening of linguistic analysis to include disciplines such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and other cross-disciplinary approaches to language and communication, current pedagogical needs include not only the language in “target situations” (that is, functions and form), but also the “dynamic and strategic competencies needed to effect, maintain or change roles and relations within particular contexts or domains of discourse” (Tajino, James & Kijima, 2005: 29).

We side with the opinion that BE is a specific variety of ESP that “is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations)” (Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 3). This definition urges the needs analyst to do research on BE trainee(s) to find out their particular sector and department, and the most likely business target situations in which s/he will be using English (Frendo, 2005). In the event that a BE training program is found at a HEI, as is our case, we believe that such a program can stop being a TENOR program, and its syllabus can reflect not only institutional needs, and students’ language needs, but also actual business needs of insider local stakeholders, all the more important because these professionals may become BE students’ prospective employers.

3. HEI internationalization and BELF

The University of Lleida (UdL) is a bilingual HEI in the Catalan-speaking area of Spain. This HEI is not an exception of the process of university internationalization in Europe. In fact, its policy-focused white papers (*Internationalization Plan 2006*¹, *Teaching Policy Plan 2007*², *Language Policy Plan 2008*³, *Action Plan of Internationalization 2012*⁴) aim at providing guidelines to

curriculum and syllabus designers about how degrees could internationalize their curricula by implementing either FL medium instruction or LSP tuition. This trend is common in other non-English speaking HEIs (Wätcher & Maiworm, 2008), and is justified because of the interest of language learning as a result of the process of internationalization. In fact, language learning is an important milestone of the new European Higher Education Area, as mentioned in the Bologna Declaration⁵. As a result, HEIs in non-English speaking countries undergo a process of “Englishization” (Coleman, 2006), as a way to compete with the major English-speaking universities in the attraction of international students (Graddol, 2006), and the preparation of local students for a global market (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011). This process that has been labelled as “internationalization at home” (Wätcher, 2003). Therefore, English-medium instruction (EMI) is growing in European universities, with the number of programs exclusively offered in this language rapidly increasing (Wätcher & Maiworm, 2008), even in contexts where there is a long ESP tradition (Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008). Such a trend may be justified by the importance that English appears to have in the performance of universities in international quality rankings. This has been shown by Horta (2009), who claims that five out of the ten best positioned European universities in international rankings are based in the UK, and other three mainly use English as their language of instruction, in spite of being based in non-English speaking countries. Only the remaining two predominantly use a language other than English (that is, French).

Resulting from the UdL’s white papers mentioned above, curriculum-designers opted for two compulsory ESP courses in the new Bologna-adapted Business Studies degree implemented since 2009-2010, thus preferring this option over EMI. It is in this academic context that BE instructors have set out a *needs analysis* for this subject, aiming at finding out the needs of future graduates as established by three stakeholder groups: (i) the institution and its policy regarding FL learning; (ii) students who are going to be the recipients of the BE courses; and (iii) the representatives of the local exporting business sector in which graduates will need to look for employment opportunities.

The needs analysis in this paper has included local business stakeholders’ opinions because, as stated by Cowling (2007), professional insiders’ views and expertise provide valuable information and knowledge about specific occupational tasks, functions and language forms and usage. Considering

that up to 90% of these international corporate communication contexts exclude native-speakers of English (Pullin, 2010), we may conclude that those interactions are mostly conducted in BELF, which was defined by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005: 403-404) as follows:

BELF refers to English used as a ‘neutral’ and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not ‘non-native speakers’ or ‘learners’.

Research on (B)ELF shows that communication may be successful (Pullin, 2010), but using BELF may also result in communication problems, typified by Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009) as lack of comprehensibility, cultural differences and stereotyped associations. It is also important to note how BELF and, more generally, ELF are characterized by a disregard of the English native speaker as the model, as their main goal is reaching international intelligibility among speakers of different first languages (Seidlhofer, 2011).

4. Methodology

This study combines different sorts of data and analytic methods through a process of triangulation. We have followed a qualitative and a quantitative approach: the qualitative research is based on an inductive method, by which data provide the analytical categories; the quantitative approach is based on a deductive method in which the relationship of different variables may provide insights about the causes and their potential effects. With these principles as points of reference, this research analyzes these sources of data: university policy documentation; students’ data taken from an entry test from a commercial BE textbook, and a self-report questionnaire on language command and experience as language-learners; and local stakeholders’ opinions obtained through a focus-group discussion session. The data derived from the focus group session were audio-recorded and transcribed. Here are the details of the three types of data collected:

- a) Documents: university policy documentation regarding English-medium instruction and ESP.

- b) Students' data: entry test on BE taken from a commercial textbook.⁶
- c) Self-report questionnaire consisting of one self-assessment grid of perceived CEFR level (Council of Europe, 2001: 26-27); the self-assessment checklist of B1 level attainment in reading⁷; responses to a questionnaire asking BE first year students (n=129) about their previous English learning experiences.
- d) Focus group: one session with local business stakeholders representative of exporting local industries.

5. Data analysis

This section explores the data obtained from the analysis of the university language policy documentation, students' data, and local business stakeholders' view. The data are examined considering the institutional target level in FL competence, the BE students' language level and the role of BELF in the syllabus-design process. Moreover, we particularly focus on the UdL as a case in point, with the goal of providing an epitome of what is currently happening in many other universities in similar bilingual contexts, in which the two local languages have to make room for English, the current international lingua franca.

5.1. UdL's language policy

Since 2006, the UdL has issued white papers which aim at implementing internationalization strategies. Among their recommendations, improvement of students' FL command stands out from the rest.

Firstly, the *Internationalization Plan* (IP), issued in 2006, results from the institution's need to position itself internationally. Specifically, the IP's mission is to promote inward and outward mobility, curriculum internationalization and internationalization-at-home strategies (p. 4). The main aim of this policy is the increase of the numbers of students participating in outward mobility programs, because of the students' low command of FL – as stated in the European University Association's assessment report on the UdL.⁸ The IP advocates the increase of English-medium instruction to increase students' command in FLs, which eventually may lead to an increase in the number of students participating

in exchange programs. Furthermore, the UdL issued in 2012 a regulation of the IP with the name *Action Plan of Internationalization*, which clearly lists the institutional objective of increasing the presence of EMI subjects with the goal of improving local students' command of English, among others.

Secondly, the *Teaching Policy Plan*, issued in 2007, settles down institutional strategic competences, such as “show command in a foreign language” (page 25). To promote this linguistic competence, the plan suggests EMI together with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as teaching strategies. However, no further mention is made about which organizational strategies should be adopted in order to implement either EMI or CLIL courses in the curricula.

Thirdly, the *Language Policy Plan*, issued in 2008, briefly mentions the general aim of promoting the use of EMI to develop FL proficiency. Later, in 2010, the university issued the regulation of this plan⁹, which directly states that students should be in possession of a CEFR level B1 when they graduate. Such certification can be obtained by taking LSP or EMI-subjects, or by writing a BA final thesis in a FL, among others.

All in all, UdL's language policy aims at improving students' FL command, and the Bologna-adapted degrees are intended to contribute towards this goal. In our case, Business Studies curriculum-designers decided to offer two compulsory BE courses in the first year with an approximate CEFR target level B1 and no other EMI/CLIL courses in mind.

5.2. Students' data

In this section we will offer some data relative to the students participating in the BE courses at UdL, based on an entry test and a self-report questionnaire distributed at the beginning of the first semester of their first university year. We will now proceed to briefly describe both instruments.

As already stated, the test was one provided by a BE textbook. It consisted of a series of questions divided into five sections: “listening”, “skills”, “vocabulary”, “reading” and “language”. The combination of these five sections produced a maximum total of 44 points. Results ranged from 11 to 42 (mean=26.1; SD=7.7).

The self-report questionnaire included questions on their previous experience learning English and a self-evaluation grid according to the

CEFR descriptors. Based on this, students came up with an assessment of their level of English in each different skill, ranging from A1 to C1. In order to avoid an excessive load of information, we will now just refer to the results in two of these skills “reading” and “speaking” (see Table 1), and we will do so because they represent two very important linguistic skills in BE, as emphasized by the business representatives in the focus group discussion: the capacity to read and understand documents and the capacity to speak and socialize in informal settings.

CEFR levels	Reading		Speaking	
	No. students	%	No. students	%
A1	4	3.1	18	14.0
A2	35	27.1	55	42.6
B1	67	51.9	45	34.9
B2	20	15.5	7	5.4
C1	2	1.6	2	1.6
Total	128	99.2	127	98.5

Table 1. Self-report based on CEFR on reading and speaking.

Additionally, we administered an 8-item check-list corresponding to reading skills that they should possess if they had a B1 level in reading, and we classified the students in two groups: B1 readers (those who answered affirmatively to 6 or more of the items: 75% and above) and non-B1 readers (those who responded affirmatively to less than 6 items). Another classification was established between those who had and those who had not ever taken an English course abroad (Table 2).

Grouping criteria	B1 reader		Courses abroad	
	No. students	%	No. students	%
Yes	89	69	14	10.9
No	40	31	115	89.1
Total	129	100	129	100

Table 2. Students' grouping.

As can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2, the number of students who claim to have attained a B1 level or higher (B2 and C1) in reading skills and students who we decided to classify as B1-readers are exactly the same (69%). We were actually surprised by such a coincidence as we expected to find variation due to the inconsistency that sometimes may be found in responses obtained using different instruments, and also due to the arbitrariness in

setting the cutting point between B1 readers and non-B1 readers at 75%. Somehow, we believe that this coincidence gives more support to the validity of these self-reported data. In any case, self-evaluations using the CEFR scales appeared to be fairly accurate as differences in these scales could predict different results in the entry test (ANOVA, $p < .05$).

Finally, students stated the number of years they had been studying English. As we may see in Table 3, most of them had taken English in secondary education and part of their primary education (more than 6 years as a whole).

No. of years	No. of students	%
Up to 6 ¹⁰	16	13.8
7-8	12	9.3
9-10	29	22.5
11-12	49	38.0
13-15	10	7.8
Total	116	91.4

Table 3. Number of years studying English.

In order to better understand the conditions that affected the language proficiency and skills of our students, we ran a series of statistical tests in order to look for potentially significant variables that could help us to explain the differences of the entry test results.¹¹ Considering one of the general aims stated above (the level of competence in English of Business students when they begin the BE course), we established two related hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Students with experience abroad will have a higher level of proficiency than students who lack such experience.

Hypothesis 2: Amount of years of instruction will have a direct effect on level of proficiency.

For Hypothesis 1, we ran a *t*-test comparing the results obtained by the two groups (with or without experience taking courses abroad) in the entry test as well as the self-reported levels of the CEFR.¹² The results show significant differences ($p < .05$) in the entry test scores obtained by students who had taken courses abroad ($x=31.4$) and those who had not ($x=25.8$). Differences were also found in self-evaluations of reading skills ($x=3.29$ vs. $x=2.80$). However, there were no significant differences between those two groups in their self-evaluation of speaking skills. The mean scores were $x=2.71$ for those who had been abroad, and $x=2.33$ for those who had not, which probably indicates that all of them, including those who had taken courses

abroad, felt rather unable to speak fluently in English, and the experience obtained had not been sufficient to overcome that limitation.

For Hypothesis 2, the procedure consisted in conducting a Spearman rho's correlation between scores of entry test, self-evaluation of reading skills, and raw number of years studying English. Statistical analyses were all conducted using SPSS software. The Spearman rho correlation involving "results of entry test", "previous years of English study", and "self-assessment of reading skills" gave moderate but significant correlations in all cases but one (see Table 4). Thus, the number of previous years of study of English did significantly correlate with the test scores but not with reading skills. One possible explanation for this lack of correlation could be that the reading skills developed along the years of study of English were different from those stated in the CEFR. Reading skills, however, did correlate with the entry test results, which provides further evidence of the validity of the instruments used in the study. These results partially support Hypothesis 2, which predicted that years of previous study would affect language proficiency level. It seems to be the case if we look at the test scores but not so when we look at their CEFR self-assessment.

Variables	Entry Test	Years of study	Reading skills
Entry test	1	.431**	.488**
Years of study	.431**	1	.130
Reading skills	.488**	.130	1

** p<.01

Table 4. Spearman rho correlation among variables.

In this section, we have characterized the students in our program. The most immediately observable element refers to the great diversity among students regarding their previous English proficiency level, with results in the entry test ranging from 11 to 42. Another relevant piece of data is their self-assessment of speaking skills, clearly lower than reading skills, probably due to a long tradition of neglect of speaking skills in Catalan schools. Still, only two thirds of students declare having B1 reading skills, which means that one third of all students are below the expected reading level for all students at the end of post-obligatory secondary education, and many more are below the expected speaking level. We must bear in mind, as well, that all students had already taken several years of English, with a fairly even distribution between those who had studied from five to ten years and those who had studied for a longer period of time. The number of years studying English appears to have

an influence on the results obtained in the entry test but not in the perception of their own reading skills. Another important figure indicates that the number of students with study abroad experience amounts to 11% of the total, and a comparison between these students and those with no experience abroad shows that this factor significantly affects perceptions of reading skills but does not affect perceptions of speaking skills.

5.3. Local business representatives' focus-group discussion

In this section, we will analyse the data obtained from local businesses with regard to the English-related training needs of business students. We will first offer a profile of the participating companies, followed by an account of their views on the use of English in their economic sector and the business communicative skills valued in their companies.

5.3.1. Company profiles

Representatives from local internationally-positioned companies were gathered together for a focus group session. By definition, a focus group session consists of an unstructured interview with several speakers at the same time.¹³ In this sense, we are in line with Long (2005: 36) that:

unstructured, or open-ended, interviews allow in-depth coverage of issues and have the advantage of not pre-empting unanticipated findings by use of pre-determined questions, categories, and response options, a potential limitation of structured interviews and questionnaires.

Several companies were contacted according to the following criteria: (i) their local presence in the Lleida area; (ii) exporting tradition; (iii) high entrepreneurial activity; (iv) different economic sectors represented. Eventually, seven companies or associations were chosen, although only six spokespersons finally attended the focus group session, given that Company 1 and Company 2 shared the same representative.¹⁴ The university teaching staff were represented by two BE instructors (the two co-authors of this paper), the Business Studies degree coordinator, and the head of the Department of English and Linguistics.

Company 1 belongs to the food and vegetable sector. Specifically, they produce, import and export stonefruit and pome fruit. They basically use English for international buying and selling operations, which imply

telephoning and travelling for a meeting or to a fair, either as professional visitors or as exhibitors. E-mailing is done in English.

Company 2 belongs to the wine sector. They produce bottled wine, and sell more than 70% of their production to more than 25 countries. They use oral English on a daily basis for promoting products, in meetings, product exhibitions, fair attendance, and, finally, in sales operations. As in the previous company, e-mails are mostly written in English.

Company 3 is a multinational company in the sector of capital goods. They use English as a corporate language when holding international meetings, when surveying clients' engineering needs, and when interacting orally with international partners while carrying out collaborative engineering design and development processes.

Company 4 works in the construction industry. It exports precast concrete products to Europe and to the Middle East, and imports construction products from China. They mainly use written English for exportation purposes to countries where French is not spoken, and to communicate with Chinese producers and intermediaries.

Company 5 is an ICT consultancy. The ICT production process is carried out collaboratively with employees from all over the world who use English to communicate (e-mailing or call conference). They also employ English orally and in written form with its suppliers and customers.

Company 6 is a financial consultancy with basically local, but also a number of international, clients. They primarily use English in writing and for e-mailing purposes, which deal basically with the validation of corporate agreements signed by local and international partners.

Company 7 is a Human Resources consultancy. Their clients are (i) exporting Spanish multinational companies, with open job positions either in back-office or as export area managers; (ii) foreign multinational companies based in Spain, whose staff needs English to report to headquarters; (iii) Spanish companies, who have outsourced financial operations, for which English is the main working language.

5.3.2. Views expressed in the focus group

As said above, we conducted a group discussion session with representatives of the exporting companies based in the university's area of influence. Their

business experience would help us to pinpoint which business communicative skills are needed by local business students. Some of the views expressed are as follows:

Firstly, local businesses are characterized as mainly composed of SMEs, belonging to the agro-food sector with an acute exporting awareness:

The productive system is not in English (...) The agricultural sector [is shaped into] small family companies (...) When their kids reach the accelerator pedal of the tractor, they [the kids] have no holidays and start working (...) [and] start to travel with their father. And the kid is supposed to have taken some English lessons [at school or private lessons] but they are not used [to employing English], except to catch a taxi or to ask for a towel to the receptionist of the hotel. But to carry out business, the truth is that [these business people] they need someone [a business student] coming from your university degree [Business degree].

There is some presence of multinationals in the form of subsidiaries, too:

There are companies that come here [Lleida] from abroad. And they need their subsidiary and administrative work to be done in English (...) there are companies from the area of veterinary, or food industry, which are Belgian, or [dealing with] computers from Germany...

Secondly, according to the local experts, English is mostly employed in the corporate sales department: “if you work for a company whose productive process is not in English (...) you can struggle along, because what is important is (...) the sales department”. Also, participants stressed the value of knowledge about the financial concepts associated with the firms’ commercial operations:

Our [Lleida business] main international relationships will be this merchandise flux, of commercial operations. Therefore, these people [students] should be used to talking about carriage and transportation, logistics, raw materials, price. All in all, they should manage all these concepts very well, which belong to the processes of a business: buying, selling, transporting (...) And they should also manage very well the financial concepts associated to these processes.

Thirdly, on the basis of the local experts’ trading experiences, participants emphasized that BE communicative skills are much needed for the following activities related to sales: travelling abroad arrangements, sales

demonstration presentations (at different settings), client needs analysis, after-fair small talk, and client e-mailing and telephoning: “they [students] will have to know which business situations they will come across as executive managers (...) they will have to make a phone-call about a tender issue”.

Fourthly, BELF experience makes its way in the group session, to the extent that cooperativeness will make up for the possible misunderstandings in intercultural communication styles. Complementary to this, native-like pronunciation becomes an issue, as the business spokespersons have more problems understanding a native speaker than speakers of ELF: “we speak a lot on the phone with people whose accent of English is not British. And this is an advantage for me, as we all can go at our own pace and it [the phone conversation] is successful”. Also, the local business representatives give oral fluency more importance than oral accuracy for successful business exchange: “oral expression (...) is essential as most of the exportation and sales activity is carried out in fairs or in the context of a personal interview”. All in all, some representatives emphasize that BELF principles (that is to say, common ground and communicative cooperation) may be helpful for successful oral communication, with a particular emphasis on the importance of oral comprehension:

Comprehension and [oral or written] production in business is important, because if you don't understand what you are being told there's no business. If you understand what you are being told, you'll find your way to make yourself understood. However, comprehension is the most important [aspect of business communication].

Not only is “oral comprehension” important in business according to stakeholders, but also accuracy in technical vocabulary use. The semantic fields mentioned are marketing, accounting, freight and transportation, logistics, and price. Additionally, the stakeholders appreciate the knowledge of technical vocabulary of terms derived from the agro-food industry, because of the importance of this economic sector in the area of Lleida: “someone [an executive] working for the fruit industry, will have to know how to say [fruit] size, varieties, hectares, tonnes ...”

Finally, regarding FL attitudes, local experts agreed on the need to overcome the face-threatening act of using English at international meetings: “you're going to come with me [local stakeholder talking], right? and you talk. Let's see how you manage”. Moreover, the little amount of exposure to English

instruction that students will have experienced at the end of their Business studies could be increased if BE instruction focussed on raising language awareness, to the extent that BE students regard English as a basic tool for their professional career, and they become self-motivated to keep on learning English.

In all, local business representatives agree that, in their companies, the department in which English is most likely to be used is the corporate sales department, with the activities of client-relationship maintenance, and international business transactions. Regarding BELF, native-speaker models are not seen as the model for syllabus design; and communicative cooperation, rapport and small talk are valued, resulting directly from the duty of client-relationship maintenance. Local stakeholders regard oral comprehension and the accurate use of technical vocabulary important for successful business communication. Finally, BE instructors are advised to help students to develop a positive attitude towards BE learning for professional and career development purposes.

6. Conclusions

Some elements appear from the three-fold analysis conducted in this study. It is rather clear that syllabus planning needs to pay closer attention to the aspects identified as crucial by the local business people, and thus greater attention to oral skills and specific vocabulary training are necessary. However, the concept of BELF needs to be taken into account in order to avoid any attempt to incorporate native-speaker-oriented approaches in the development of oral skills, therefore focusing upon developing communicative efficiency in the target situations related to business activities.

Another finding is the impact of stays abroad on students. Students with experience abroad perform better at the entry test and rate their own language skills better, which supports the results of previous studies – see Llanes (2011) for a critical review on the impact of study abroad on second language gains. Besides, research conducted with English teachers (Llurda, 2008) shows that prolonged stays in English-speaking countries increase their awareness of English as a Lingua Franca as opposed to English as a Native Language. Therefore, in addition to contributing to an improvement of language skills, stays abroad also help learners relax from the tension

coming from the perceived need to develop native-like oral skills in order to “adequately” speak the language.

Finally, some tensions among the different stakeholders become also apparent. A primary tension relates to levels of language competence, and it is derived from the discrepancy between the officially required level (B1), business people perceived needs for a successful development of business operations (roughly equivalent to B2 specification in the CEFR), and students actual level of competence (very diverse, ranging from A1 to C1). BE courses alone cannot provide a solution to this tension. Whereas university officials require that all business graduates achieve a B1 level, and business people expect BE courses to grant a level of competence that appears to be equivalent to B2, it seems too optimistic to claim that 12 credits (that is, 120 teaching hours) of ESP will bring all students to a B1 level. The situation requires extra help in the shape of more exposure to English through the promotion of EMI or CLIL-based courses, which would ensure that all students have a chance to reach the intended minimum level determined by the institution and ideally the level determined by local business people as well. In any case, with the purpose of bridging the needs of the three stakeholders mentioned, the focus of our BE courses at the UdL is placed on designing business routine tasks where technical vocabulary is learnt and practised. These tasks are rich with learning activities following a non-native speaker teaching model; that is, these activities particularly engage students in oral exchanges devoted to promote students’ development of oral fluency over oral accuracy. Any teaching unit in our BE syllabus is complemented with tasks which help students to raise their language awareness, in general, and their condition of long-life English learners while pursuing a professional career in business in particular.

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NOTES

¹ URL: http://www.udl.cat/export/sites/UdL/serveis/ori/Fitxers_descxrrega/Pla_internacionalitzacio2.pdf [14/06/12]

² URL: http://www.udl.es/export/sites/UdL/serveis/oqua/Formacio/Pla_director_de_docencia.pdf [14/06/12]

³ URL: <http://web.udl.es/rectorat/sg/bou/bou101/acord153.htm> [14/06/12]

⁴ URL: http://www.udl.cat/export/sites/UdL/serveis/ori/Fitxers_descxrrega/POI-UdL_12-16.pdf [26/02/13]

⁵ See, for instance, URL: http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF [14/06/12]

⁶ Lansford, L. (2010) *Market Leader: Intermediate. Business English Test File*, 3rd ed. Harlow: Longman.

⁷ URL: <http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Portfolio/documents/appendix2.pdf>. [06/06/10]

⁸ URL: http://www.oqua.udl.cat/export/sites/Oqua/modules/adjunts_informes_avaluacio/Institucional_UdL/EUA_2005_informe_extern_catala.pdf. [20/06/12]

⁹ URL: <http://web.udl.es/rectorat/sg/bou/bou123/acord224.htm>. [14/06/12]

¹⁰ There was only one person with just one year of experience. The remaining had all studied English from 5 to 6 years.

¹¹ Given that the entry test is based on a commercial BE textbook targeting the intermediate proficiency level, we conveniently equated the results of the test to levels of proficiency, although we are well aware of the problems in establishing so.

¹² The levels of the CEFR were given a numerical value (A1=1; A2=2; B1=3; B2=4; C1=5) so that we could apply a *t*-test comparing the students who had taken courses abroad and those who had not.

¹³ URL: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/DeafStudiesTeaching/dissert/Qualitative%20Methodologies.htm> [07/06/12]

¹⁴ The six companies are identified by a number, instead of their names, in order to preserve their anonymity.

