

The Importance of English as a Global Language for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Diana Prodanović-Stankić

University of Novi Sad,
Faculty of Philosophy,
English Department,
Novi Sad, Serbia
stankicd@eunet.rs

Abstract – Every small and medium-sized business (SME) that aims at positioning itself on the global market has to communicate using English, the global language of business. The aim of this article is to explain the concept of communicative competence and suggest how it can be improved and used for the benefit of SME. The importance of English for SME is reflected in many tasks that are carried out in everyday business, which are dependant on fluency in English. Hence, improving communicative competence in English should be set as one of long-term objectives of every SME that wants to be successful and profitable.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing process of transition towards market economy, the sector of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) shows the greatest potential for growth in Serbia and it seems that this sector offers the best possibilities for employment. It must be stressed that encouraging the growth and development of SME is also part of the European Commission policy. In the Charter that was agreed upon by the Council of Europe (2000), education and training represent the most important elements of the development of SME. It goes without saying that establishing their position as rivals in the global market as well as marketing and promoting their products and services internationally cannot be achieved without increasing the communicative competence in English. The aim of this article is to explain the concept of communicative competence and suggest how it can be improved and used for the benefit of SME.

According to the data offered by the Serbian Business Registers Agency, there are more than 100 000 small and medium-sized businesses in Serbia and in that way they represent the nucleus of Serbian economy. Vemić (2008: 83) cites that SME in Serbia employ 66% of the total labor force, and make 67.5% of turnover and 56.9% of gross domestic product, though the data might be outdated at the moment, since a great number of SME is put out of business due to current recession. Discussing different types of SME, Stanković (1989: 40–41) makes a distinction between three types of small and medium-sized enterprises, according to their main business orientation.

In the first place, there are SME that deal with small-scale industry focusing on traditional sectors of manufacturing and production and services. In the second group, there are subcontractor enterprises that cooperate with big corporations and the third group includes modern and highly innovative enterprises.

However, regardless of their business orientation, number of employees or performance, as well as legal and financial issues, the most important factor that can have a long-lasting impact on the SME is the continuous process of education and training. Clearly, the main goals of any SME are long-term expansion and profitability. Yet, expansion, and hence, profitability can be achieved only by the means of developing specific business skills and education.

II. DISCUSSION

Moreover, the expansion of almost any SME is closely connected with the challenge of globalization, since for the majority of SME, one of the key objectives is marketing their products and services in the global market. The essential precondition for accomplishing this aim is the so-called communicative competence, which undoubtedly implies a good command of English. It is interesting to note here that regarding the phenomenon of globalization, the English language is a case in point – suppressing all other languages, English has become *lingua franca* of the globalizing economy. According to Crystal (2003), only one out of four users of English in the world is a native speaker of the language, still, English is a global language. As Firth (1996: 240) has it, English represents a ‘contact language’ for people who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication. Hence, regardless of the fact whether entrepreneurs are doing business in the local region or internationally, in most cases English will be the language used in communication.

Following Hymes (1980: 24), we can define communicative competence as the ability that combines both the communicative form and function. It refers to speaker’s knowledge of a language, his knowledge of

social and cultural elements related to this language and his ability to use this language appropriately in a given communication. In other words, speakers of a language have to focus not only on the linguistic competence or knowledge of particular aspects of a language (for example phonology, morphology, syntax, etc), but on the function of linguistic units as well, taking into account the purpose and context of a particular communicative act. Hence, the aim of any language teaching, in this case, teaching English as a foreign language, should be based on the objective of achieving adequate communicative competence.

Regarding the integral relation of communicative competence in English and the development of SME, it can be said that this relation is manifold. First of all, the communicative competence in English can be realized on different levels and through specific tasks. Communication within the SME can be either personal or mass communication when it comes to the recipients, and if we focus on the mode, a distinction can be made between oral or written communication. Typical situational types, related to communication, which can be found in everyday business, are activities such as making phone calls, welcoming guests, negotiations, making presentations, writing and reading e-mails, letters, reports and similar, as well as translating different kinds of texts.

Since the overall aim of any SME is to promote itself in the best possible way, employees and executives who are in contact with international business partners need to have a good command of English in their everyday business in order to be successful. For example, being reluctant to talk while making a phone call due to lack of fluency in English will make a bad impression on the prospective buyer or business partner. Good command of English includes specific language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Non-native speakers of English should attain at least B2 level of the Council of Europe Framework in order to be rather fluent in achieving the aforementioned specific tasks. In most cases, employees have a certain inhibition to use English fluently if they are not confident enough about their knowledge. This inhibition might present a serious threat to any kind of oral communication, and it is well known that successful communication underlies all business interactions.

Needless to say, a company cannot afford to lose an opportunity to make a successful contact with an international client or a chance to promote its products / services due to insufficient knowledge of English of its employees. On top of that, the inability to translate and fully understand the meaning of an agreement, contract or any other document may have damaging consequences. Namely, at some point every company will outgrow its local market and will need to present itself on the regional or international market where a good command of English is a must. Certainly, there are companies that aim only at the domestic market and that operate just on the national level, yet, even such companies need to take into account global players that in most cases dictate the market.

Therefore, SME should set as its goal training its employees to become effective communicators in English, who are able to do different tasks starting from answering the phone and setting appointments to presenting their company on international trade fairs. In addition to this, working across cultures implies also knowing proper etiquette and differences between given cultures. Hence, learning English should be a part of personal development of employees. It is not just that employees need English in order to communicate with their clients and partners. Being the global language, knowing English enables the employees to get further education in their own field, do additional research, read articles and journals related to their field of work, participate in different conferences and workshops and cooperate with people from abroad.

Furthermore, since language in general is closely connected with advertising and marketing, creation of sales, promotional and marketing materials in English is inevitable. The same applies to presentations of companies in English on the Internet. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the language of advertising in general, however, it must be pointed out that all the material should be written in correct English. Evidently, the Internet offers many possibilities for selling products and services that are yet to be used fully, and that again is closely connected with outgrowing the local market and expanding business on the international market. Still, certain rules have to be followed when it comes to using wordplay, allusions metaphor or any kind of ambiguity as a marketing technique – the use of language should be clear and one has to be careful to avoid reference to specific cultural concepts that are not known outside one linguistic community, otherwise, such concepts will be confusing and difficult to understand. If the material is not originally written in English but translated into it, the material must be translated with great caution, in particular regarding technical terms.

Taking into account the importance of English for SME, at some point in their development SME should consider engaging and encouraging their employees in learning English. However, this process has to be organized carefully. Although most of the companies require substantial knowledge of English as part of their recruitment policy, more often than not, prospective candidates for a particular post do not possess adequate knowledge. In order to avoid such situations, companies should work on their own criteria when it comes to the level of knowledge the candidates should possess, as well as on the ways of testing this level.

Moreover, after defining precisely what kind of needs do they have when it comes to the linguistic competence of their employees, companies can help them in the process of learning. Specifically, that implies organizing tuition that would cater for the specific needs employees, i.e. the company has. In other words, the process of improving the communicative competence of the staff has to be based on those aspects that are most important and relevant for the business the particular company does. Ideally, tuition should be organized to address the needs of each individual, regarding his / her communicative

competence related to his / her position in the company and tasks he / she should do in his everyday business.

Hence tuition and classes should cover not only grammar and general vocabulary but specific vocabulary as well. This is of utmost importance because most of the translators outside the company that can be given the job of translating may not be familiar with specific vocabulary that is used in the particular business and, of course, inadequate translation can have serious consequences. This can be avoided by training employees adequately because in that way they will improve their communicative competence in English as well as their self-confidence in using the language.

If the company cannot afford providing tuition for its entire staff, priorities have to be chosen regarding the business activities and tasks each employee does. Furthermore, exposing the staff to as many possibilities to use the language and practice their communication will have significant effects on their competence.

III. CONCLUSION

Many companies are aware of the importance of improving the communicative competence in English of their employees, so they often organize or pay for English courses. However, it is important to set this as a long term objective and accordingly, organize the training in such a way as to cater for the needs of the specific company or specific group of people. Basically, this implies determining the level of knowledge the trainees possess,

and then focusing on the specific communicative tasks that are carried out in the given company. Being aware of specific needs and defining the goals helps attaining the desired level and increasing self-confidence of the employee related to his / her fluency in English. In the long run, learning English and training for specific purposes a given company will have a positive and far-reaching effect on their business.

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