



## **An observatory for foreign language usage in the workplace**

**Nicole Lancereau-Forster**

LAIRDIL Laboratory, Université de Toulouse 3, France

[nicole.forster@iut-tlse3.fr](mailto:nicole.forster@iut-tlse3.fr)

### **Abstract**

This presentation deals with the origin of the concept of an *observatory* and the process of establishing one. Initially, as part of a doctoral thesis on foreign language learning and teaching at university, on the one hand, and foreign language usage in industry, on the other, a needs analysis was conducted by triangulating sources and methods based on tasks and situations. This analysis revealed an educational shortcoming in this regard and highlighted the fact that foreign language anxiety is regarded as a major issue in the workplace. In order to address this shortcoming, the university teaching environment has to be brought more in line with the workplace in the field of foreign languages. An *Observatory for Foreign Language Usage in the Workplace* is considered to be an innovative means for achieving this objective.

### **Key words**

language in the workplace, foreign language teaching/learning, foreign language anxiety

### **Introduction**

A side-effect of the globalization of the economy has been the increased contact between various nationalities and cultures in the workplace. The English language has become prevalent in multinational and transnational firms and this inevitably affects the teaching of English as a foreign language at university. This paper deals with the links between the university and industry in this field and the adequacy between English as taught at university and English used in the workplace.



Research carried out into the matter (Lancereau-Forster, 2013) provides the basis for the analysis and highlights some educational shortcomings to be addressed. A model is proposed which can be applied to enhance the knowledge of both environments. The Observatory for Foreign Language Usage in the Workplace then appears as an innovative instrument to help reduce this dichotomy between university and industry which still exists in the field of foreign languages today.

### **Literature review**

The link between the teaching of English as a foreign language at university and the economic world emerged with the appearance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Tom Hutchinson and Alan Waters (1987) distinguished three main reasons that gave rise to it, at the end of 1960 and during the 1970s. First, they mentioned two key periods in recent history. The first one occurred after the Second World War with the growing hegemony of the American economic power: The second key period took place in the early 1970s as a result of the oil crises and the export of some Western expertise to countries in the Middle East. English became increasingly linked to economic and political changes: It [English] became now subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers. (id.: 7)

English was then no longer restricted to the domain of education, but expanded to economic and scientific sectors. As a result, a characteristic of ESP teaching lies in the knowledge of the language needs of learners. Hutchinson and Waters stressed this fact: “[ESP is] an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners” (1987, p. 21). Later on, they add: « What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the *existence* of a need as such but rather an *awareness* of the need » (1987, p. 53). Pauline Robinson also points out this link: “« a basic ESP philosophy is to cater to specific needs of learners as much as possible » (1991).

Meanwhile, and this is the second point mentioned by Hutchinson and Waters, a significant change in linguistics was happening. Instead of focusing on a traditional study of linguistic features and grammar, Henry



Widdowson (1978) became interested in the use of English in real communication situations. He explained, for example, that there was a significant variation between written and spoken language and that language could vary according to context. Hutchinson & Waters then explained that: If language varies from one location to another, it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make these features the basis of the learners' course (ibid., p. 7).

The third reason cited by Hutchinson and Waters, which caused the emergence of ESP, was linked to the development of educational psychology. Indeed, studies such as those by Rogers (1969), in *Freedom to Learn* and his humanistic learner-centered approach emphasized the importance of taking into account the personalities, the interests and the needs of the learners. Therefore, the motivation would be enhanced and learning facilitated. Hutchinson and Waters conclude: "All three factors seemed to point towards the need for increased specialization in language learning" (ibid., p. 8).

With ESP, the context became determinant. Swales in his reference book, *Genre Analysis* (1990, p. 1) introduced three key concepts: *discourse community*, *genre* and *language-learning task*. He presented six characteristics to identify a group of people as part of a community of discourse (ibid., p. 24-26): common goals, mechanisms of intercommunication, participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback, genres, some specific lexis and a balance between novices and experts. The term genre was defined by John Swales as such: A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre [...] In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience (ibid., p. 58).

Genres belong to discourse communities. Yet, discourse communities use a classification of genres and, as John Swales indicated, "a discourse community's nomenclature for genres is major source of insight" (ibid., p. 54). Basturkmen (2009) also corroborated the importance of the genres



of the discourse communities that the learners might integrate after their university studies:

Members of discourse communities regularly communicate with one another and with the outside world [...] It is understood that learners of English should try to emulate the ways of communicating of those who are already members of those communities, and thus ESP instruction focuses learners' attention on the genres used in target discourse communities, as these are seen to represent the typical forms of communication in them (ibid., p. 3).

In the 1990s, investigations into the language needs in industry increased (Curriand & Truchot, 2010). Thus, the report Prolang (Hutha, 1999) studied language skills and communication in industry and commerce in Finland. This was a comprehensive study carried out in a particular country. Another study, published by Hagen (1999), showed the results of the Elucidate project (1995-1997). This study compared how European companies managed language and cultural skills in their international trade. More recently the ELAN report (ELAN, 2006) studied the effects of the lacks of language skills among businesses in the European economy. This study provided a clear vision of the problems of language management of companies in Europe. Similarly, researchers involved in the DYLAN project, funded under the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Union, studied the "conditions in which the linguistic diversity of Europe is an asset for the development of knowledge and the economy" (DYLAN, 2011), and dealt with multilingualism, with research conducted on three levels, i.e. companies, European institutions and European educational systems. The CELAN project (2010-2012) was part of the development of *Language Strategies for Competitiveness and Employability* and aimed to improve the dialogue between the business community and language practitioners.

Along with these reports, articles on the use of languages in business focus on specific features, and give an insight into the world of business. For example, Hollquist's research (1984) concerned the use of English in three large Swedish companies. Similarly, studies of journal articles like *ESP* or *System* published by Elsevier dealt with the same issues, especially





articles analyzing the use of English and the needs of the workplace: the article by So-mui and Mead (2000) regarding the needs in the textile industry, by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta (2005) who examined the case of two Scandinavian companies, by Taillefer (2007) gave the example of economics students' needs, by Lehtonen & Karjalainen (2008) and their research on the needs perceived by employers as well as Kassim and Ali (2010), who also listed the communication situations and needs.

### **Methodology**

A needs analysis was carried out in both environments using a triangulation of sources and methods based on tasks and situations, as recommended by Long (2005). In the university context, the study focused on the teaching/learning of the English language in the mechanical and production engineering department of the Institute of Technology (IUT) of Toulouse which has a bias towards aeronautical sciences. Questionnaires were sent to students and lecturers at local and national levels which enabled the current situation and the language needs of IUTs to be analysed. In the industrial context, problems and difficulties faced by technicians employed in the aerospace companies were identified thanks to questionnaires sent to former students in employment and semi-structured interviews in the workplace. The members of staff interviewed were HR people, former students and technical managers.

This needs analysis was based on work analysis. The expression *work analysis* is preferred to that of the traditional *job analysis*, as it provides a wider scope and perspective:

Work analysis can be defined as the systematic investigation of (a) work role requirements and (b) the broader context within which work roles are enacted (Morgeson & Dierdorff, 2011, p. 4).

For the researchers, "work role requirements" meant both work (tasks and activities) and worker (knowledge and skills) requirements. In order to structure the interviews in the workplace, a model was needed which



would encapsulate the various circumstances. Bertin, Gravé and Narcy pointed out that:

- a model in didactics ... should be understood as a tool to organize present knowledge as well as to prompt further action for increased knowledge. [...] a model can be understood in the following ways:
- it identifies basic components whose nature has to be defined or clarified;
- it identifies interfaces between these components, or “places for interaction”
- it eventually requires the researcher to investigate the reflexive impact of interactions on the original nature of each component » (2010, p. 3 - 4).

Drawing inspiration from the teaching/ learning triangle (Houssaye, 1988), we created a model: the Workplace Language Use Triangle (WUT):

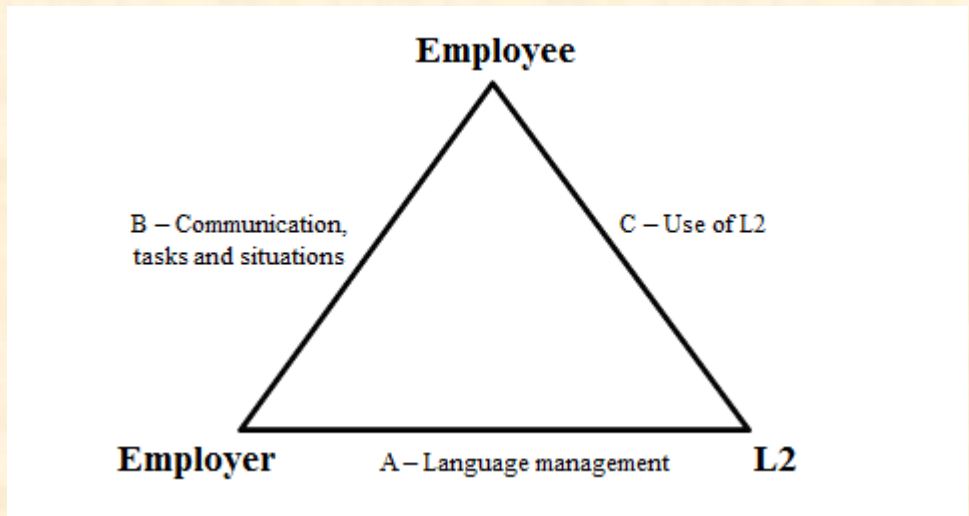


Figure 1: The Workplace Language Use Triangle (WUT).



In this triangle, we distinguished three subsystems A, B and C along three sides:

Employer - L2 side	A Language management
Employer - Employee side	B Communication, tasks and situations
Employee - L2 side	C. Use of L2

Table 1 — *The Sides of the Workplace Language Use Triangle*

- “A” subsystem refers to language management in the company, for example, recruitment issues, employability, lifelong learning and promotion.
- “B” subsystem accounts for the work itself, oral and written activities as well as internal and external communication.
- “C” subsystem is related to the use of the foreign language by the employee, issues related to language needs and the attitude of the employee towards English.

## Results

The results of the research showed that the adequacy of English as taught at university to English used in the workplace is imperfect. Indeed, some shortcomings appeared between the perception of cognitive, linguistic and emotional problems on the part of students, and the use of English in business. The gap between the learners’ perceptions and the use of English as a foreign language in industry was particularly noticeable on two levels:

- their under-estimation of the importance of the English language and of its use in firms. While IUT learners tend to underestimate the role of English, we found that the English language has become almost essential in the recruitment of technicians as well as in its almost daily use. Similarly, we noted that some former students, only recently employed,



tended to underestimate the importance of English for a promotion to a better job. They considered English as a bonus, but they did not regard it as essential. In fact, managers in industry seem to think very differently. English has a selective role in the choice of candidates even if, for example, the applicant has some good technical competence. Companies want to create mobility. They value visits and stays in English speaking countries as well as internships abroad (for example: mandatory ones for future engineers in France, but not for future technicians). These give access to different cultures and help feel the willingness to communicate. The openness and the desire to communicate are qualities which are highly sought after by HR people.

- the variation of the perceptions of shortcomings or needs, according to the sources (learners, lecturers, employees or middle managers). For example, this variation is at its highest when pronunciation is concerned. Pronunciation is a language component which is often underestimated by students and employees or perhaps a component they do not have a problem with. Yet, during missions abroad or during telephone conversations, problems may arise as a result of misunderstandings but also of lack of phonetic accuracy. In industry, managers insist on the economic losses due to the misunderstandings that may arise from comprehension errors. We must "understand and be understood", a former student said.

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) also proved to be a major issue in the workplace. It is first noticed during job interviews carried out partially or entirely in the foreign language. The job interview shows similarities between FLA in the classroom and FLA in the workplace. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, p. 127) showed links between foreign language anxiety in the classroom and 'three related performance anxieties': anxiety related to examinations or tests, apprehension of communication and fear of negative evaluation. They wrote that the fear of negative evaluation might "occur in any social, evaluative situation such as interviewing for a job or speaking in a language class" (ibid., p. 128). During a job interview, foreign language anxiety, for example, can appear as test-anxiety. The communicative anxiety related to the use of the





mother tongue is then transformed into communicative anxiety related to the foreign language L2. In addition, a third category of anxiety may appear. Indeed, the fear of negative evaluation may permeate the whole interview and can be a reminder of a classroom situation, the evaluation being carried out by the interviewer(s) instead of the teacher.

The job interview, however, is not the only situation when FLA is experienced in the workplace. Our results showed that a high percentage of students, once employed and even after three years at university, retain a "school-like" attitude and are afraid of making mistakes, which can lead to a mental block. Yet, an opposite attitude is required in companies where employees must dare to speak the foreign language. The new recruits are expected to show a positive and proactive attitude. The managers we interviewed, repeatedly told us that, in fact, the issue was more "psychological or emotional than linguistic". Anxiety-provoking tasks in the workplace were then investigated, as it appeared that a better knowledge of these could help fight FLA, first at university then later in the workplace, hence improve the preparation of students for the working world.

### **Discussion - The Observatory**

All these results indicated a lack of interaction and communication between university and firms. Whenever the link existed, it needed reinforcing and updating regularly. This was particularly noticeable with new technologies, e-mails, teleconferences, new forms of collaborative work which keep developing. Facing this evolution of work, the worker has to adapt and develop new skills. Tasks accumulate, oral and written tasks may intertwine. The employee, indeed, may be reading and writing emails whilst answering the phone and looking at another screen. All these changes need to be well known by lecturers or teachers of English for special purposes. In addition, they may need to become aware of the new needs due to the changing career patterns of employees during their working lives. A technician may want to become a chartered engineer at one point in his-her career and an early specialization may not be advisable in certain contexts.



After the research, a new issue was facing us: how to reduce the shortcomings and the gap between the learning and teaching of foreign languages and the use of these languages in the workplace? Indeed, it was obvious that our research at university and in industry had its limits in time and was showing a trend more than a fixed situation. One of the current features of business communication is precisely its dynamic aspect and new modes of communication appear regularly. Our research would therefore need to be continued and renewed regularly, especially with regards ICT. The notion of observatory came from that need. To help meet the changes and various research needs, the creation of an Observatory for the Use of Foreign Languages in the Workplace (*OULis*) was launched. According to Merriam Webster's on-line dictionary (Webster, 2014), an observatory is:

1. a building or place given over to or equipped for observation of natural phenomena (as in astronomy); *also*: an institution whose primary purpose is making such observations.
2. a situation or structure commanding a wide view.

The Observation of the use of languages in the workplace really appeared as the start of new and promising findings for the improvement of both language learning/teaching at university and language use in the workplace. As Henry David Thoreau, wrote: "where there is an observatory and a telescope, we expect that any eyes will see new worlds at once" (1849). In the case of *OULis* Observatory, the telescope could be a metaphor for any instrument helping to have better understanding and the different methods used in our research (quantitative, qualitative, for example).

The purpose of this Observatory is to serve as a direct and durable link between universities and businesses, as regards the use of languages in the workplace. A strong link between businesses and professional university training already exists for the industrial and technical fields and we want to extend the link to foreign languages, enhancing this link and updating it regularly. Therefore, language teaching will be backed by the industrial world in real time but not controlled by it. The Observatory

offers the advantage of preventing shortcomings between language teaching at university and the reality of their use in companies. For this purpose, it aims to promote exchanges and establish cooperation between university and various industrial and economic branches in the field of foreign language usage. Its main missions are both to contribute to research and the teaching of foreign languages at university and help address business problems related to foreign languages. It may participate in prospective studies.

In order to organize the observations offered by the Observatory, a second model needed to be elaborated. From our previous research, a new model was developed to study the components and interactions between the communities involved in both environments. Both worlds are interdependent, industrial managers referring to the university as a "reservoir" for recruitment. Hence, we connected the Teaching/ Learning Triangle by Houssaye (1988) with our previously exposed model of the "Workplace Language Use Triangle (WUT)". We obtain a geometrical figure which we call the "University/ Workplace Language Use Prism".

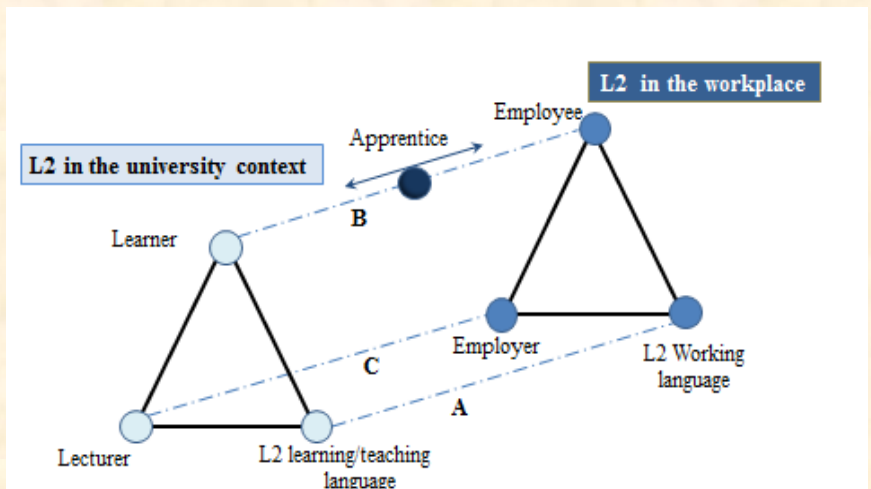


Figure 2 : University/ Workplace Language Use Prism



Each of the two triangles appears in context. The three vertices of the triangle on the left representing the initial university training are modified on the right in the triangle of use in the workplace. One of the three vertices has disappeared, that of the teacher. It is replaced by the vertex corresponding to the employer. The other two vertices have remained, but have been modified. The vertex corresponding to the learner has become that of the employee. At the intersection of these two worlds is the apprentice, both a learner and an employee at the same time, a university student being introduced to his-her future employment. The vertex corresponding to L2 has also evolved from the language learned at university to the language used in the context of work.

The transitions between both worlds can also be studied. They follow the three sides of the prism, drawn in dotted lines figure 2.

- Side A, from the general knowledge of L2 to L2 as a language of work concerns the necessary links between the knowledge acquired at university and the specific expertise required in the workplace.
- Side B, from the learner to the employee, concerns the evolution of the learner to his future employee's status. Problems related to the personality of the individual are at stake.
- Side C, from the teacher to the employer deals with the passage towards new protagonists, a new job, new tasks and situations.

### **The first steps of the Observatory**

The first steps of the studies within the *OULis* Observatory deal with side A of the triangle (WUT), that is language management in firms. More specifically, language management is concerned with recruitment, job interviews, assessment tests, continuous professional development (CPD) as well as languages and promotion. First of all, a questionnaire was devised regarding these items and issued on line in English and in French to be filled in by companies (Human resource people, for instance). This quantitative study is to be completed by a qualitative study in order to specify and focus on some results. A one-day seminar hosting speakers from the business world and academia should then follow.





The scope of the study has been extended from the aeronautical industry to all economic and social sectors. It has also been spread out geographically from the Toulouse area to other parts of France and to other interested international partners. From September 2015, the second and third steps will deal respectively with side B and C of the triangle, that is to say on the one hand, communication and work situations in the workplace and on the other hand, the use of the foreign language, the difficulties and needs experienced as well as the attitudes towards this use.

### **Conclusion**

Research showed that the needs for more proximity between university and businesses are real to improve the learning/teaching of foreign languages and their use in the workplace. The Observatory is an instrument to meet these needs; it is a valuable tool for teaching and for research. The creation of such an observatory facilitates research as the existence of an official entity acknowledged both by the university and the industry, providing access to key resources, people and data.

### **References**

- BASTURKMEN, H. (2009). *Ideas and options in English for specific purposes*. Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge.
- BERTIN, J.-C., GRAVE, P. & NARCY-COMBES, J.-P. (2010). *Second Language Distance Learning and Teaching: Theoretical Perspectives and Didactic Ergonomics*. Hershey, PA: IGI.
- CELAN project. (2013). Retrieved from <http://celan-project.blogspot.fr>.
- CURRIVAND, T. & TRUCHOT, C. (2010). Du traitement des langues aux politiques linguistiques dans l'entreprise. *Le journal de l'école de Paris du management*, 1(8), 17-24.
- DYLAN project. (2011). Retrieved from [http://www.dylan-project.org/Dylan\\_fr/home/home.php](http://www.dylan-project.org/Dylan_fr/home/home.php).
- ELAN report. (2006). Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/languages/documents/doc421\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/documents/doc421_en.pdf).



- Elucidate Survey. (1999). *Business Communication Across Borders. A Study of Language use and practice in European companies*. In Hagen, S. (Ed.), London: CILT.
- HAGEN, S. (1999). Business communication across borders: a study of language use and practice in European companies. London, U.K.: Languages National Training Organisation.
- HOLLQVIST, H. (1984). *The Use of English in three large Swedish companies*. Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist och Wiksell.
- HORWITZ, E., HORWITZ, M. & COPE, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- HOUSSAYE, J. (1988/2000). *Le triangle pédagogique. Théorie et pratiques de l'éducation scolaire*. Berne: Peter Lang.
- HUHTA, M. (1999). Language/Communication Skills in Industry and Business - Report for Prolang/Finland. Retrieved from [http://www.ooph.fi/download/47735\\_skills42.pdf](http://www.ooph.fi/download/47735_skills42.pdf).
- HUTCHINSON, T. & WATERS, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: a learning-centred approach*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- KASSIM, H. & ALI, F. (2010). English communicative events and skills needed at the workplace: Feedback from the industry. *English for Specific Purposes*, 29(3), 168-182.
- LANCEREAU-FORSTER, N. (2013). *L'anglais comme langue de formation en IUT et langue de travail dans le domaine aéronautique industriel*. Thèse de doctorat. Toulouse: Université de Toulouse 3, France.
- LEHTONEN, T. & KARJALAINEN, S. (2008). University graduates' workplace language needs as perceived by employers. *System*, 36(3), 492-503.
- LONG, M. H. (2005). *Second Language Needs Analysis*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- LOUHIALA-SALMINEN, L., CHARLES, M. & KANKAANRANTA, A. (2005). English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(4), 401- 421.
- LOUW, K., DERWING, T. & ABBOTT, M. (2010). Teaching pragmatics to L2 learners for the workplace The job interview. *Canadian Modern*



*Language Review/ La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 66(5), 739-758.

Merriam-Webster. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/observatory>.

MORGESON, F. P. & DIERDORFF, E. C. (2010). Work analysis: From technique to theory. In Zedeck, S. (Ed). *APA Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (p. 3-41). Washington, DC: APA.

ROBINSON, P. C. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide*. New York: Prentice Hall International.

ROGERS, C. (1969). *Freedom to learn: A view of what education might become*. Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill.

SO-MUI, L. & MEAD, K. (2000). An analysis of English in the workplace: the communication needs of textile and clothing merchandisers. *English for Specific Purposes*, 19, 351-368.

SWALES, J. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press.

TAILLEFER, G. (2007). The professional language needs of Economics graduates: Assessment and perspectives in the French context. *English for Specific Purposes*, 26(2), 135-155.

THOREAU, H.D. (1849/2010). *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. London: The British Library.

WIDDOWSON, H. (1978). *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford, U.K. : Oxford University Press.

## **Contact**

Nicole Lancereau-Forster, Ph.D.

22 rue des tournesols

31170 Tournefeuille, France

nforster@lairdil.fr