

Surveying students' level of satisfaction at ESP seminars – a prerequisite for efficient foreign language learning

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Abstract

Feedback plays a crucial role in foreign language education, serving both pedagogical and motivational purposes and significantly impacting the outcomes of instruction. While external factors like grades, social expectations, and rewards drive students' engagement, their intrinsic motivation fosters deeper learning. Given its critical role, students' feedback on course content and teaching methodologies offers valuable insights for enhancing instructional effectiveness and addressing learners' needs. Establishing a strong feedback culture in the language classroom ensures better learning experiences, increased motivation, and overall academic success. This paper researches and presents a case study on economics students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, showing relevant data on the importance of surveying students' level of satisfaction at ESP seminars. Collected in a meaningful and well-organized learning environment, students' feedback becomes a prerequisite for efficient learning, especially with higher education undergraduates.

Key words: students' satisfaction, instructional effectiveness, skills, feedback, linguistic needs

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The weightiness of foreign language acquisition

Foreign language learning has become a fundamental component of education in today's increasingly interconnected world. Considering the primordial role of globalization, multilingualism is seen as a necessity rather than an advantage for students seeking academic success as well as for professionals aiming to build rewarding careers. Full proficiency – or even advanced proficiency – in a foreign language provides

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access to international study programs, cross-border professional experiences and, last but not least, to insightful cultural experiences.

Besides enhancing career prospects and promoting cultural awareness, foreign language acquisition fosters cognitive development, i.e. one more reason accounting for the essential part foreign language learning has in higher education. Studies show that bilingualism, known as “the ability to speak and write two languages proficiently” (Jayanath, 2020:79) and multilingualism, known as “proficiency in speaking and writing in more than two languages” (Jayanath, 2020:79) help develop both problem-solving and critical thinking abilities. Conducting a meta-analysis of 32 studies, involving 4161 participants, to assess the cognitive consequences of bilingualism, J. Varadwaj (2020:34) identified the following benefits: “attentional control, working memory, metalinguistic awareness, metacognitive skills, symbolic representation and divergent thinking, and problem solving”. Highlighting the significant cognitive advantages offered by bilingualism, particularly in executive functions like attention and memory, the authors suggest that education policies should promote second-language learning to maximize the cognitive benefits (Varadwaj, 2020:38).

Acknowledging all these and many more benefits, dedicated researchers and language professionals have developed a wide array of teaching and learning strategies and techniques to be applied in both formal and informal education settings. In recent years, significant shifts have occurred in the educational process, mainly due to the rapid advancements in technology, but also to changing pedagogical approaches and the evolving awareness of prioritizing learners’ linguistic, professional and personal needs. Moving away from “the traditional teacher-led class”, FL instruction praises teachers acting as “equals and helpers rather than the wise expert of the academic style” (Cook, 2013:276).

With a stronger emphasis on communicative competence, second language learning is to be integrated into real-life scenarios, set in appropriate cultural contexts, where language learning “is the same as language using” (Idem:277). Much attention is also paid to the importance of exposing learners to real world language use by incorporating authentic materials such as films, podcasts and social media posts. Collaborative learning and peer interaction have become common due to numerous possibilities learners have to join international language exchange programs, both virtually and physically. Last but not least, changes have also occurred in terms of learners’ assessment, with a shift towards monitoring their progress over time and providing personalized feedback.

1. The manifold purposes of feedback in FL teaching

Feedback plays a crucial role in the context of foreign language education and much research has been done exploring the way feedback influences learners' motivation and their overall performance and engagement in the learning process. Conceptualized as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007:81), or "a means of fostering learner motivation and ensuring linguistic accuracy" (Ellis, 2009:3), feedback serves manifold purposes in the teaching-learning process. As the previously-mentioned authors' research has proven, feedback is efficient for students, since it helps them acquire insights into their understanding, spot their misconceptions and clarify their learning objectives. Equally beneficial for teachers, it helps them evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction process and determine further steps in their teaching approach. The authors advocate for the efficiency of both peer and teacher feedback, especially when focused on the task rather than personal praise, the latter being "rarely effective" (Idem:102).

As most research findings have shown, a mix of peer and teacher feedback is ideal in educational settings, as long as teacher feedback is "meaningful" and "it caters for students' individual needs" and peer feedback is done in "a well-controlled learning environment" (Herra & Kulinska, 2018:141), and on condition that proper "training, guidance and practice" have been provided to students and peer feedback is "planned and guided carefully" (Thirakunkovit & Chamcharatsri, 2019:160). Extremely diversified and easy to implement at every stage of the teaching and learning process, the success of feedback-oriented activities, i.e. "better learning, an increase of motivation, and further developments of students' personalities" depends on "a well-organized implementation of a particular feedback culture in the second/foreign language classroom" (De Florio, 2023 : 65).

In a conducive-to-learning classroom management, teacher, peer and student feedback is important not only for pedagogical purposes but also for motivational ones. Grades and academic performance, parental and social expectations, competition with peers, rewards and incentives are common extrinsic motivation factors driving students to engage in learning activities, while the pure enjoyment of learning a foreign language is an

instance of learners' intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic or intrinsic, motivation plays an essential role in increasing the instructional success, because "if an individual does not consider a goal worth striving for, its attainability does not matter (idem: 71).

This is one strong reason why students' satisfaction and their perceived relevance of the course content are critical factors in language acquisition. Students' feedback in this regard provides useful insights into students' needs, the effectiveness of teaching methodologies and areas requiring improvement.

2. Surveying students' level of satisfaction at ESP seminars – a prerequisite for efficient foreign language learning

Purpose of the study and methodology

The purpose of this study is to collect useful information about students' needs, the effectiveness of teaching methodologies and areas requiring improvement by surveying students' level of satisfaction with the activities conducted at ESP seminar. The survey was applied at the end of the 1st academic semester, with the aim of using the relevant data obtained for making further teaching adjustments during the 2nd academic semester. Such adjustments are expected to help improve the learning outcomes and increase students' satisfaction.

The study attempts to answer three fundamental questions:

1. Do students perceive the importance of foreign language learning in today's interconnected world?
2. How frequently do students use English in real-life and in what contexts?
3. What are students' expectations for future ESP seminars?

Data for this study was collected by means of quantitative research. The questionnaire (see Annex 1), was conducted among 108 economics undergraduates, majoring in finance and banking, international business and economics, management and agrifood and environmental economics, at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Students' participation was by all means voluntary and they were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, as well as about their freedom to withdraw at any time without consequences. The questionnaire was prepared with Google Forms and shared to students via the institutional email and it did not imply the collection of personal data, names or email addresses of

respondents. Pilot tests were first conducted with a small group of 2nd-year students to ascertain the survey's clarity, accuracy and efficiency.

Findings

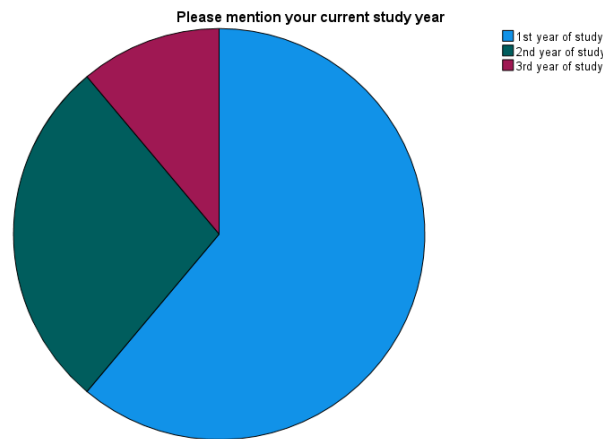


Figure 1. Respondents' current study year

The distribution of students based on their current study year and their main field of study has no further implications other than informative ones. The 108 respondents belong to the 1st year of study (61%), 2nd year of study (28%) and 3rd year of study (11%).

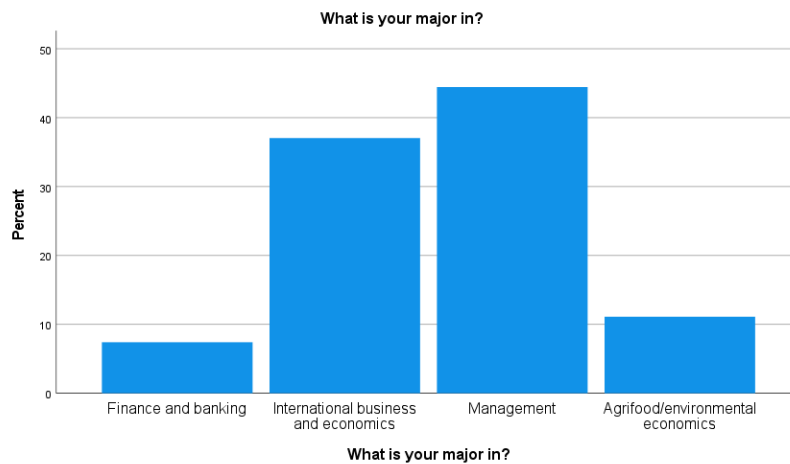


Figure 2. Respondents' major field of study

Respondents major in management (44%), international business and economics (37%), agrifood and environmental economics (11%) and finance and banking (8%).

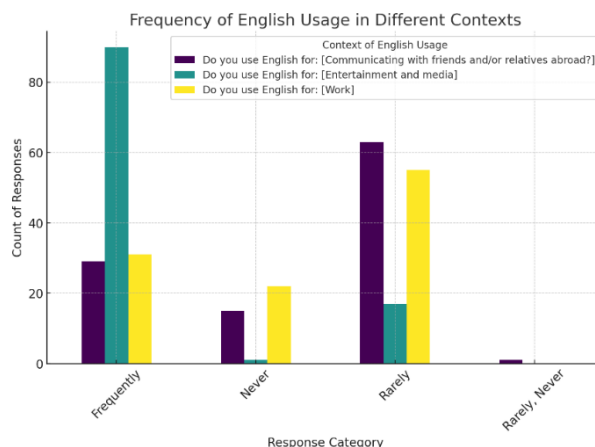


Figure 3. Frequency of English usage in different contexts

The distribution of responses, as presented in the above bar chart, shows students' engagement with the English language in their daily lives. Out of all categories, entertainment and media account for the most frequent (90%) usage of English, possibly due to the increased accessibility and the prevalence of English in international entertainment nowadays.

English also seems to be a common international linguistic means of communication, since 29% of respondents claim to use English frequently for communicating with their friends and relatives abroad. Employment opportunities for students are diverse, a consequence of this being a highly variable usage of English in work settings, with a considerable percentage of respondents indicating rarely (48%) or never (23%) using English at work.

The findings help us to conclude that, while media engagement and global communication motivate students to aim at maintaining a good English level, if not at attaining a proficient one, English for professional use depends on their further career aspirations. Also, based on the findings, several targeted teaching approaches can be developed to enhance students' English proficiency in the contexts they find relevant, such as role plays in meaningful contexts, language exchange opportunities with native speakers, media-based learning encouraging students to analyse films, podcasts and news, interactive quizzes on media and entertainment, interactive storytelling.

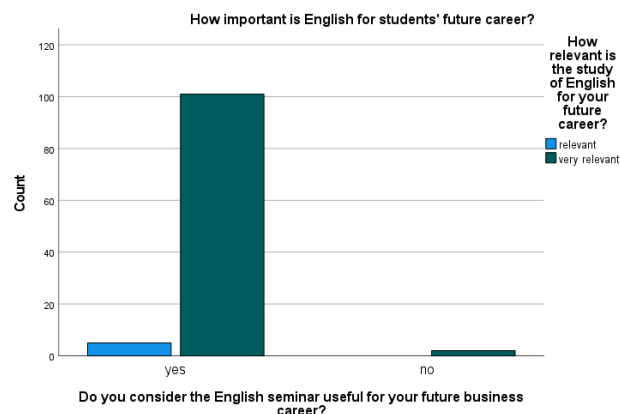


Figure 4. The relevance of English for students' future careers

A significant majority of students (93%) consider English very relevant for their future careers. Besides recognizing English as a crucial skill for the labour market, almost all the students surveyed (98%) considered the English seminar useful for their future business career. Considering the strong value English has for students' careers as well as the usefulness of the English seminar, our ESP seminars for economics undergraduates will continue to integrate real-world business scenarios for making learning more effective. Given the high level of interest, additional workshops, guest lectures, and case studies related to English in business contexts could be introduced, while some hands-on learning experience will further enhance their professional readiness.

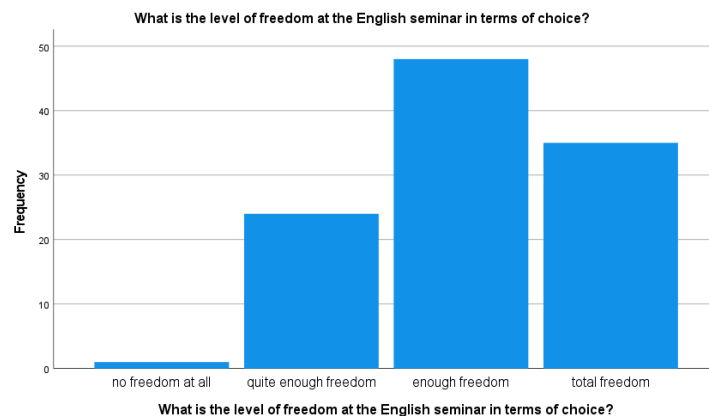


Figure 5. The freedom of choice at ESP seminars

Most respondents (44%) consider they have enough freedom and a significant share (33%) consider they have even total freedom in terms of choices. A moderate number of students feel that they have quite enough freedom (22%) and only 1 respondent feels that students do not enjoy any freedom in choosing the type of activity or the topics to be approached at the ESP seminars.

Taking into consideration the overall positive perception, we reckon that ESP seminars successfully foster a flexible learning environment that allows students to make choices. Guidance and clear expectations are necessary in any learning environment; still, students-led discussions on seminar content would be a useful strategy of meeting students' needs at this point.

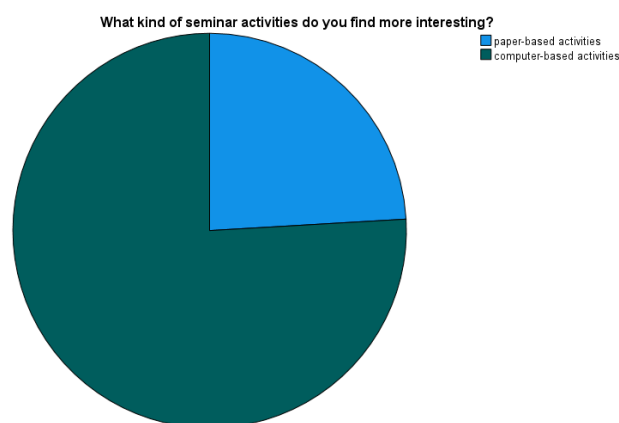


Figure 6. The format of seminar activities

Considering the strong preference for computer-based activities (76%) over paper-based ones (24%), more online vocabulary and grammar quizzes could be an attractive alternative to printed materials. Flexible submission formats for written tasks, i.e. either digitally or on paper, will meet students' preferences.

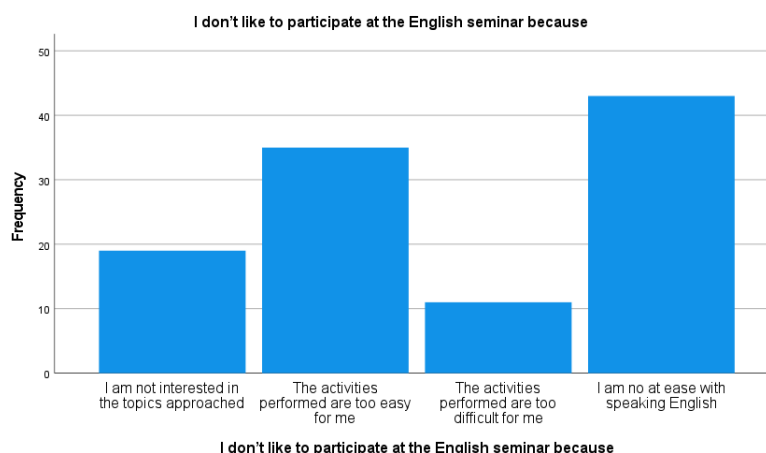


Figure 7. Students' main reasons for not willingly participating at seminar activities

Discomfort with speaking English was the most common (40%) among the main reasons justifying students' lack of motivation for willingly participating at seminar activities. We consider that peer discussions on different topics and storytelling games could replace the more challenging speaking activities like role-plays and debates, to boost students' self-confidence. The learning environment is considered to be a friendly one since mistakes are normalized as part of learning and speaking activities rely on clear prompts and guidance.

A significant share of students (32%) feel the activities are not challenging enough, indicating a need for more engaging or advanced tasks to maintain their interest, or even more varied difficulty levels so students can choose tasks that match their needs. We consider that the lack of interest in the topics approached should be further investigated so that we can find out their fields of interest. Still, a first step to be taken would be to relate topics to real-life situations and to current events to increase their relevance.

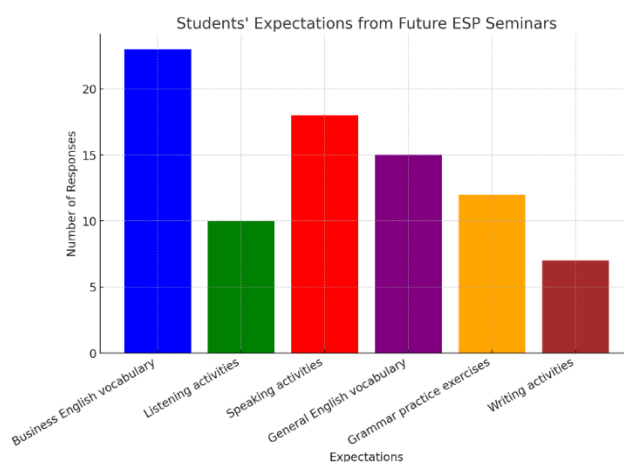


Figure 8. Students' expectations from future ESP seminars

Students' feedback on the learning activities they consider the most relevant for meeting their needs plays a crucial role in the organization of future ESP seminars. Respondents showed a strong preference for "business English vocabulary", which emerges as the most frequently requested activity to be conducted at future ESP seminars, this proving to a certain extent students' awareness of the importance of mastering specialized terminology and professional language skills. The second most highly desired activity at ESP seminars is "speaking", indicating that students enjoy the opportunities provided for improving their oral communication skills.

"General English vocabulary" also appears to be a key priority, reflecting students' awareness of the need for a broader linguistic foundation alongside their specialized studies. While "grammar practice exercises" and "listening activities" are moderately preferred, they remain essential elements of the learning process, suggesting that students still acknowledge the importance of structured grammar instruction and enhanced comprehension skills. Since the listening materials currently used are mostly authentic (e.g. business podcasts, business interviews, TED talks), a possible solution for maximizing their efficiency could be a more interactive approach and a better integration with speaking activities. "Writing activities", however, receive the least interest, implying that students do not perceive this skill as extremely useful in meeting their needs.

In response to the high interest shown by students in speaking activities, the ESP seminars will definitely prioritize interactive activities, such as role-plays, debates, and simulated workplace discussions to help

learners develop spontaneous and confident communication. Also, the moderate preference for grammar practice indicates a need to incorporate these components in a more engaging and contextualized manner. Although writing activities receive the least preference, their relevance should not be overlooked and further efforts will be made to integrate these tasks in meaningful contexts likely to meet students' interests.

The last question included in the survey was an open-ended one, encouraging students to bring new ideas and enlarge on their own requests. 75% of our respondents claimed to not have any further suggestions, most of them being satisfied with the way ESP seminars are currently conducted. Some students suggested: "going to museums, movies and cultural events", "focusing on translation exercises", "receiving feedback on pronunciation", "approaching topics other than those related to business and economics", "more role-plays". One respondent asked for "more homework to keep me motivated to learn English", while somebody else suggested "working on more difficult grammar exercises".

4. Conclusions

With multilingualism a key asset equipping students with proper abilities to navigate global challenges and acquire cross-cultural understanding, foreign language learning is a vital aspect of higher education today. On the one hand, universities must continue to emphasize and innovate foreign language programs to ensure academic enrichment, enhance career opportunities, and build cultural competence. On the other hand, efforts to create a conducive-to-learning environment are essential in foreign language teaching. Besides significantly impacting students' motivation and engagement, teachers' attempts to empower students by having them reveal their own linguistic needs and then addressing them render learning more meaningful, a crucial aspect for foreign language acquisition and improvement.

Without overlooking its limitations, which can be further approached either by open discussions at seminars or by means of further qualitative or quantitative research, this study provides relevant findings, urging for some immediate action taking for increasing students' active and wilful participation at ESP seminars: implementing various targeted teaching strategies to enhance students' English proficiency in contexts that are relevant to them; conducting students-led discussions on future seminar content; focusing more on online vocabulary and grammar

quizzes; integrating flexible submission formats for written tasks; alternating challenging speaking activities with peer discussions on different topics and storytelling games. Overall, our research has aimed to show that, when gathered in a structured and meaningful learning environment, students' feedback becomes essential for effective learning, particularly among higher education undergraduates.

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Annex 1

Surveying students' level of satisfaction at ESP seminars – a prerequisite for efficient foreign language learning

All information provided in this questionnaire will be treated confidentially. Your responses will be collected anonymously, and the data will be used exclusively for research purposes. Names or other personally identifiable information will not be associated with your responses. If you choose to provide personal information, it will be handled with the utmost care and used only within the scope of this study. Participation in this questionnaire is voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw at any time without consequences. There are no right or wrong answers, and we sincerely appreciate your honest opinions. Please respond sincerely and comprehensively to the questions. The response options are designed to cover a wide range of experiences, and your opinion is valuable.

1. Please mention your current study year:

- 1st year of study
- 2nd year of study
- 3rd year of study

2. What is your major in?

- Finance and Banking
- International Business and Economics
- Management
- Agrifood and environmental economics

3. Do you use English for:

	frequently	rarely	never
• Communicating with friends and/or relatives abroad?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Entertainment or media?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 4. How relevant is the study of English for your future career?**
 - 1- Not very relevant
 - 2- Quite relevant
 - 3- Relevant
 - 4- Very relevant

- 5. Do you consider the English seminar useful for your future business career?**
 - Yes
 - No

- 6. What is the level of freedom at the English seminar in terms of choice (do you choose the type of activity you will engage in/do you choose the topics to be approached by the teacher)?**
 - 1- No freedom at all
 - 2- Little freedom
 - 3- Quite enough freedom
 - 4- Enough freedom
 - 5- Total freedom

- 7. What kind of seminar activities do you find more interesting?**
 - Paper-based activities
 - Computer-based activities

- 8. I don't like to participate at the English seminar because:**
 - I am not interested in the topics approached
 - The activities performed are too easy for me
 - The activities performed are too difficult for me
 - I am not at ease with speaking English

- 9. What would you like your teacher to spend time on? (you can choose more than one option)**
 - Grammar practice exercises
 - General English vocabulary
 - Business English vocabulary
 - Writing activities
 - Listening activities
 - Speaking activities

- 10. Please mention your personal suggestion for improving the ESP seminar.**