

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES FOR PRE-EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper aims at rendering the perception of pre-experience learners of ESP (Ellis and Johnson, 1994) on organisational cultures at a Romanian Faculty of Economics and Business Administration based on the results of a questionnaire intended for upper-intermediate students. The respondents' choices will be interpreted in the context of their specialism at the undergraduate level.

Keywords: *communicative language teaching, organisational cultures, pre-experience language learners, questionnaire-based research.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As an associate assistant of English, I teach ESP seminars to undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. Organisational Cultures is one of the subjects taught to second year students in a communicative, learner-centred approach. Although some of the students have already entered the labour market, the syllabus is designed for pre-experience learners and not low-experience or job-experienced ones, following the distinction made by Ellis and Johnson (1994) between the three categories. Thus, since pre-experience learners, mainly "students in colleges or universities will have gained their knowledge of business largely from books, (...) such knowledge will be incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. They will be less aware of the language needs in terms of communicating in real-life business situations, and their expectations of language learning will be moulded by their experiences from school..." (1994: 5) But on the other hand, they will be "more open-minded than those who are already well ahead in their careers, and this has implications for what can be done in the classroom.

However, they may lack confidence in their ability to deal with business subject matter" and "need to be given a lot of information from which to work." (1994: 16)

Job-experienced learners are also likely to be influenced by "their educational backgrounds, but they will, in most cases, have gained some practical experience of having to communicate on the job", hence their focus "on what they perceive as their own short comings in terms of fluency, getting the message across, and being able to understand the people from other countries that they have to deal with." (1994: 5) It is also argued that pre-experience learners have three kinds of needs. Apart from preparing for examinations, be they in English or not, they will have to develop their reading and listening skills, "with a strong emphasis on the vocabulary of the subject" and "will need to prepare for their future working life in business" (1994: 5-6 passim).

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

Our approach starts with a questionnaire designed to assess the organisational culture(s) each student is best suited to working in which was chosen with observance to the principle of 'obtaining the best answers' (Brace, 2008: 3), that is trying to achieve the most accurate answers, not obtain particular answers to support our position. As teachers and trainers, our role is to be as objective as possible in order to illustrate the best, most accurate picture that we can paint. Furthermore, we view our responding students as 'volunteer conversationalists' (Bradburn, Wansink and Sudman, 2004: 7-8) "under no compulsion to answer our questions" who "must

be persuaded to participate in the interview, and their interest (or at least patience) must be maintained throughout." As a result, we selected this questionnaire because of its lack of demeaning, embarrassing, or upsetting questions that could determine the respondents to terminate the interview or falsify their answers. We did not grade the answers so our students had nothing tangible to gain from the interview. We simply gave them the opportunity to state their opinions or relate their experiences to their teacher in a communicative learner-centred environment. We also accepted the claim that despite its similarities to conversations (and in our case, it could have been used to improve the learners' speaking skills), the survey process differs from them in several respects: "(1) a survey is a transaction between two people who are bound by special norms; (2) the interviewer offers no judgment of the respondents' replies and must keep them in strict confidence; (3) respondents have an equivalent obligation to answer each question truthfully and thoughtfully; and (4) in the survey it is difficult to ignore an inconvenient question or give an irrelevant answer." (ibidem) We did not ask the students to write their name on the questionnaire, we did not have to explicitate any question and there were no cases of students that refused to answer any individual question.

The questionnaire was applied to a total number of 377 students from all sub-fields of Economy and Business: Accounting and Information Systems (98), Finance and Banks (72), Business Information Systems (54), The Economy of Commerce and Tourism (47), Marketing (41), Economics and International Business (33), Management (16), Statistics and Economic Forecasting (10) and General Economics (6).

Students had to complete the following questionnaire about them by choosing one answer (A-D) for each of the following six questions:

"What organisational culture suits you?"

- 1) I like working in places that have:
 - A a clear set of rules and methods to follow.
 - B flexible ways of working.
 - C no rules whatsoever.
 - D few rules, but these are made by the boss.

- 2) I think that key-decision making in the workplace is best taken:
 - A by my line manager.
 - B in a group where everyone has an equal say.
 - C by myself.
 - D by a strong leader.
- 3) I prefer organisations that communicate:
 - A through official means of communication.
 - B through a direct exchange of views.
 - C the minimum possible.
 - D through personal relationships.
- 4) I dislike working in organisations that:
 - A have no clear idea of what they want from you.
 - B place limits on your freedom to do the job.
 - C ask too much from you.
 - D treat you as a number and don't recognise your individuality.
- 5) Which of these words best describe you?
 - A loyal and trustworthy
 - B creative
 - C independent
 - D a winner
- 6) I think bosses should:
 - A do their job.
 - B provide me with the resources to do my job.
 - C be invisible.
 - D be respected and followed." (Handford, Lisboa, Koester and Pitt, 2011: 46)

According to Handford, Lisboa, Koester and Pitt (2011: 138-139, *passim*), mostly 'a' answers in a respondent show preference for a role culture, value of stability and long-term job security. Thus, such respondents like to know in advance what their objectives are – this is best recorded in a formal job description and an annual job plan. They would probably feel at home in the public sector or a large organisation in a stable business environment, such as life insurance and high street banking.

Mainly 'b' answers point to a task culture in which respondents enjoy working creatively in teams on projects where people can exchange views openly, honestly and informally. A high salary is not important. Such people like to feel passionate about their job. Their ideal working environment could be in the product development section of a marketing department, a management consultancy firm or the creative side of an advertising agency.

Generally ‘c’ answers indicate the respondents’ preference for a person culture. These people are individuals above all else whose worst nightmare would be to work in an organisation where they had to sing the company song every morning! Organisations are neither friends, nor enemies, they are simply a fact of life and can be useful as long as they do not interfere with our work. One would be well suited to working in some academic departments of universities as a freelance contract worker, such as software designer or programmer.

Mostly ‘d’ answers show preference for a power culture. Such respondents are competitive people and like winning, are happy to take risks and feel prepared to work very hard to achieve what they want. They like dynamic organisations with strong leaders who are not afraid to take big decisions and they enjoy working environments which have the minimum of rules and regulations and very little bureaucracy. Organisations with this type of culture tend to be small and/ or tend to be concentrated in fast-changing business environments such as

investment banking, start-up companies and recently restructured companies.

The results obtained are shown in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As table 1 shows, most students (162) from all specialisms prefer to work in a task culture since they ticked 3 or more than 3 ‘B’ answers from the questionnaire, namely 34 out of 98 from Accounting and Information Systems, 30 out of 72 from Finance and Banks, 27 out of 54 from Business and Information Systems, 21 out of 47 from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism, 21 out of 41 from Marketing, 14 out of 33 from Economics and International Business, 6 out of 16 from Management, 7 out of 10 from Statistics and Economic Forecasting, and 2 out of 6 from General Economics. Respondents showed preference for flexible ways of working and the chance to be part of a group where everyone has an equal say. Students described themselves as creative and, even at this stage (of pre-experience learning), marked the importance of being

Table 1 - Distribution of Respondents’ Choices per Sub-field

Sub-field	No. of students	Answers												
		A*	B*	C*	D*	A+B	A+D	B+C	B+D	C+D	A+B+C	A+B+D	A+C+D	B+C+D
1) Accounting and Information Systems	98	34	34	1	8	6	2	4	1	0	0	7	0	1
2) Finance and Banks	72	22	30	1	5	4	2	1	1	0	2	0	4	0
3) Business Information Systems	54	18	27	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0
4) The Economy of Commerce and Tourism	47	15	21	0	4	1	2	0	2	1	0	1	0	0
5) Marketing	41	9	21	0	4	6	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
6) Economics and International Business	33	12	14	1	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7) Management	16	6	6	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
8) Statistics and Economic Forecasting	10	1	7	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
9) General Economics	6	3	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	377	120	162	3	26	22	9	5	5	1	2	10	10	2

*Mostly A (role culture), B (task culture), C (person culture) or D (power culture) answers (3≥ 6) per questionnaire.

provided with the resources to do their job, an aspect that should not be ignored by companies operating in this organisational culture. It is perhaps in these times of global financial crisis that stability, long-term job security and a stable business environment are more valued, even at undergraduate level.

An equal number of students from Accounting and Information Systems (34) and Management (6) would like to work in an environment dominated by a role culture. Only the students in General Economics (3 out of 6) opted for role culture above all else. Second ranked among the respondents is role culture; 120 students prefer to work in companies operating on this culture: 34 out of 98 from Accounting and Information Systems, 22 out of 72 from Finance and Banks, 18 out of 54 from Business and Information Systems, 15 out of 47 from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism, 9 out of 41 from Marketing, 12 out of 33 from Economics and International Business, 6 out of 16 from Management, 1 out of 10 from Statistics and Economic Forecasting, and 3 out of 6 from General Economics. These students clearly showed preference for workplaces with clear sets of rules and methods to follow, a line manager with a key role in decision-making capable of guiding them on their own path. Such respondents describe themselves as loyal and trustworthy and strongly dislike working in organisations that do not know what they want and what to ask from their employees. Managers of such companies should simply do their job. It is important to note that teamwork and the lack of financial incentives are likely to motivate most of our students who would passionately and creatively devote to their jobs.

Interestingly enough, the third preferred culture is power culture (26), whereas person culture is the last one they would like to work in (3). Thus, 1 out of 98 from Accounting and Information Systems, 1 out of 72 from Finance and Banks, 1 out of 33 from Economics and International Business, and no student from Business and Information Systems, The Economy of Commerce and Tourism and Marketing, Management, Statistics and Economic Forecasting, and General Economics would be suitable for a person culture. Also, 8 out of 98

from Accounting and Information Systems, 5 out of 72 from Finance and Banks, 2 out of 54 from Business and Information Systems, 4 out of 47 from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism, 4 out of 41 from Marketing, 3 out of 33 from Economics and International Business, and no student from Management, Statistics and Economic Forecasting, and General Economics would like to work in a power culture. Therefore, few students would like to work in places with no rules whatsoever and only a few for companies with few rules made by the manager. Again, few students view themselves as key factors in the decision-making process, whereas a few think that decision-making in the workplace should be left in the hand of a strong leader. Students' preference, in general for a communicative environment and a friendly, relaxed atmosphere at work could explain the extremely few ticks of organisations that communicate the minimum possible. Also, few students would like to work in organisations that communicate through personal relationships and stated their dislike for companies that ask too much from you or treat you as a number and do not recognise your individuality. The few respondents that describe themselves as independent people would like to work for bosses that are invisible, whereas winners envisage bosses as people that should be respected and followed. Consequently, few students consider themselves competitive people who are happy to take risks and feel prepared to work very hard to achieve what they want at this stage of their life and studies and even fewer view work in an organisation as a fact of life which is useful as long as it does not interfere with their activities.

Moreover, based on their answers, 91 students are fit to work in more than one culture or in a mix of cultures: role + task culture (22), role + power culture (9), task + person culture (5), task + power culture (5), person + power culture (1), role + task + person culture (1), role + task + power culture (2), role + person + power culture (10), role + person + power culture (10) and task + person + role culture (2). Thus, 6 out of 98 from Accounting and Information Systems, 4 out of 72 from Finance and Banks, 1 out of 54 from Business and Information Systems, 1 out of 47 from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism, 6 out of 41

from Marketing, 3 out of 33 from Economics and International Business, 1 out of 6 from General Economics and no student from Management, Statistics and Economic Forecasting would be suitable to work in a role and task culture altogether. Furthermore, 2 out of 98 from Accounting and Information Systems, 2 out of 72 from Finance and Banks, 2 out of 47 from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism, 2 out of 16 from Management, 1 out of 10 from Statistics and Economic Forecasting, and no student from Business and Information Systems, Marketing, Economics and International Business and General Economics would fit in both a role and power culture. Only 4 students from Accounting and Information Systems and 1 from Finance and Banks are suitable for working in both a task and power culture, whereas a student from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism would fit in a mix of person and power cultures. As far as combinations of three cultures are concerned, no more than two students from Finance and Banks would be suitable to work in role, task and person cultures, whilst 7 students from Accounting and Information Systems, 1 from The Economy of Commerce and Tourism, 1 from Marketing and 1 from Management would like to work in role, task and power cultures. In addition, 4 students from Finance and Banks and 6 from Business and Information Systems would be suitable for working in role, person and power cultures, whereas only one student from Accounting and Information Systems and 1 from Management would fit in task, person and power cultures.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, we could argue that a significantly higher number of students (311 out of 377) would prefer a single type of culture to a combination of two or three cultures (66, of which 41 would be suitable for a

combination of two cultures and 25 for a combination of three cultures). We could go as far as arguing that most students are less likely to adapt to new environments since they are appropriate to work in a single culture.

CONCLUSIONS

By applying Handford, Lisboa, Koester and Pitt's questionnaire to pre-experience language learners (as understood by Ellis and Johnson, 1994), namely our 2nd year students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, UAIC, we were able to point out that most respondents were suitable for working in a single type of culture, as opposed to a combination or mix of two or three cultures. Moreover, we showed that, of the four organisational cultures considered, most students were fit to work in a task culture as they preferred flexible ways of working and the importance of having an equal say in the company. Second ranked was role culture and very few students showed preference for person and power cultures.

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