



Research note

Raising student awareness of the use of English for specific business purposes in the European context: A staff–student project

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Abstract

This Research Note reports on a large-scale staff–student project focussing on the use of English for Specific Business Purposes in a number of promotional genres (TV commercials, annual reports, corporate web-sites, print advertising) within several of the EU member states: Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Spain. The project as a whole aims to identify where and to what extent English is used and also to investigate the consequences of including English in promotional genres where corporations are presumably intending to reach and persuade audiences in non-English-speaking countries. We are therefore interested in the occurrence of English, the attitudes of consumers to the use of that English and whether or not they are able to understand it. In this paper, we report in detail on a survey of the use of English in print advertising in the July 2003 editions of glossy magazines aimed at young women in the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, together with an experimental investigation of the attitudes to and comprehension of English, based on data collected from between 43 and 50 respondents in each of the three countries. The project has been invaluable in raising student awareness of the way in which English is present in the world around them, and more specifically that English is increasingly becoming an intrinsic part of a number of highly visible and also highly accessible promotional genres.

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1. Introduction

Several researchers have commented on the use of English in the European context. Among these, perhaps of most influence have been Margie Berns (1995) and David Graddol (1999). Berns (1995) re-applies Braj Kachru's 1985 model classifying the status of English in different countries according to the extent to which English is used and when and whether it has its own norms (see Kachru, 1985). She identifies three groups of countries within the European Union as it was in 1995: the UK and the Republic of Ireland, with native varieties of English; Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, where she believes English is used as a foreign language (FL); and Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, where English is in the process of developing as a second language (L2). Graddol (1999) draws on Labrie and Quell's account of the 1994 Eurobarometer survey in which speakers self-report whether or not they are able to hold a conversation in English (see Labrie & Quell, 1997 for further details). He reports that by 1995 there were 95 million English speakers of varying degrees across Europe and he speculates further that English will be most likely to attain the status of an L2 in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands – and may indeed already be part way through that process in the Netherlands and Denmark – and that it will be least likely to do so in Spain.¹ In short, Graddol (1999) and Berns (1995) agree in their predictions that the Netherlands is on its way to achieving L2 status for English, whereas Belgium, France and Spain are not, but Berns differs from Graddol in predicting that English in Germany is also on its way to achieving L2 status.

It is against this background of English being used to different degrees in the various EU countries, that we would like to discuss a large-scale project that is currently ongoing at the Radboud University Nijmegen focussing on the use of English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) in a number of promotional genres, i.e., texts in different media aimed at promoting the organizations concerned and the products or services they offer (TV commercials, annual reports, corporate web-sites, print advertising) within several EU member states: Dutch- and French-speaking Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Spain. Our aims have been to identify where and to what extent English is used and also to investigate the consequences of including English in promotional genres where corporations are presumably intending to reach and persuade audiences in non-English-speaking countries. The project is in its second year, and has so far involved around 160 students and a team of multilingual, multicultural staff, who analysed the use of English in the various promotional genres and carried out experiments testing respondents' comprehension of and attitude towards the English used. The students were all in the fourth (and final) year of their Business Communication Studies Masters programme and, as part of this programme, had specialized in Dutch, English, French, German or Spanish. The teaching staff consisted of a native speaker of English, a native speaker of German, two native speakers of Spanish, and five native speakers of Dutch, with expertise in

¹ Danish adults (77%) claimed that they could hold a conversation in English in the Eurobarometer survey, as did 75% of the Swedish respondents, 71% of the Dutch respondents, but only 13% of Spanish.

Dutch, English, French, German and Spanish, respectively. In the second part of this Research Note we will focus on the use of English and its effect on attitude and on comprehension in three of the target countries, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, in one of the promotional genres we studied, print advertising aimed at young women. We will also discuss the wider relevance of the project for ESBP.

Elsewhere we have detailed the particular situation in the Netherlands (see Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2004), where English is a common feature of promotional business genres such as magazine advertising and TV commercials. Piller (2003) reports on similar trends in other European countries such as France, Germany and Greece, in her review of the use of English in advertising language around the world. She concludes that “. . .English is the most frequently used language in advertising messages in non-English-speaking countries (besides the local language, of course). . .” (2003, p. 175). Significantly, however, evidence from previous studies on print advertising and TV commercials indicates that potential consumers consistently over-estimate their proficiency in English, and also that English is not in fact, well-understood by a large percentage of the target groups that organizations are intending to reach (Gerritsen, 1996; Gerritsen, Korzilius, Van Meurs, & Gijsbers, 2000). It is this apparent mismatch between (promotional) information and (consumer) interpretation that we will explore further below, not only as an important and perhaps neglected aspect of ESBP, but also as a useful way of raising student awareness of the use of English in business contexts and the effects this may have on the intended target audiences.

2. The project in general

The four-year Masters programme in Business Communication in Nijmegen is a multidisciplinary degree, which includes courses in communication studies, organizational studies, intercultural communication and foreign language studies focussing on either English, French, Spanish or German. The research project we are describing here, was designed for Dutch Masters students as part of their final research-based-course, and was intended to utilize their theoretical knowledge of doing research, to raise their awareness of how English interfaces with Dutch, French, Spanish or German, in promotional genres intended for a Belgian, Dutch, French, Spanish or German readership, respectively, and also to improve their skills in writing about research.² Prior to the project, a number of promotional genres were identified which we thought would be useful sources of English, based on evidence from the existing literature (e.g., Gerritsen, 1995; Gerritsen et al., 2000). These included annual general reports, print advertising in glossy magazines, TV advertising and

² Students were expected to spend a total of 240 h on the course to earn 8.6 ECTS points and there were 78 h available in total for each class of 15–20 students for staff to develop, prepare, teach and grade the course. The classroom sessions were weekly seminars of 90 min each, or tutorials of 20–30 min for each student group, given over a 14 week period.

corporate web-sites. The staff research team compiled a set of corpora³ representing all the different countries for each of our target genres, so that these could be distributed amongst the students at the beginning of their four-month course. This allowed us to provide the students with comparable sets of data and also to ensure that we could start the corpus analysis as soon as possible at the beginning of the course. In 2003 the project focused on the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, and in 2004 this was extended to include France and the Dutch- and French-speaking parts of Belgium. The students worked in groups of three or four and they focused on one genre and one country; for instance, in 2003 the students specialized in Spanish worked on the Spanish corpora, those specialized in German worked on the German corpora, and those specialized in either English or Dutch worked on the Dutch corpora.

The course itself was roughly divided into three parts: a theoretical part in which relevant literature on the use of English was discussed with and by the students, including the predictions made by researchers such as Berns (1995) and Graddol (1999) on the future of English within the EU; a corpus analysis part in which students were asked to analyse one promotional genre and make an inventory of the amount and type of English that was used; and an experimental part in which students, supervised by members of the teaching staff, designed a questionnaire with test items based on their corpus analysis, to investigate how well a group of at least 25 respondents were able to understand the English used in the specific promotional genre, and what their attitude was to the use of that English. The respondents were chosen to reflect the target group of the promotional genres concerned, for instance, young, highly educated women aged between 18 and 25 for advertisements published in glossy women's magazines.

In the corpus analysis phase, students first identified lexical items (and fixed phrases) in English and referred to the authoritative dictionaries for each target language to establish to what extent the item or phrase had been assimilated into that language. The following criteria were used in determining whether or not a word was to be considered English:

- a. The word did not occur in the most recent edition of an authoritative dictionary for the target country.⁴ A word such as *manager*, for instance, that now appears in the authoritative Dutch dictionary, the Van Dale, was therefore not counted as an English word.

³ For 2003, for instance, these were annual reports and corporate web-sites for the *AEX* corporations listed on the Dutch Stock Exchange, and equivalent corporations in Germany and Spain; TV commercials recorded in the first week of August 2003 broadcast before, after and during the main evening news in the three countries; and the Dutch, German and Spanish editions of various magazines from April to September, 2003, targeted at different sectors in society, including glossy magazines aimed at young women (*Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*), magazines aimed at "housewives" (*Libelle* or equivalent), sports magazines aimed at men (*Voetbal International* or equivalent), and magazines aimed at teenage girls (*Girly* and *Fancy* or equivalent).

⁴ In 2003, for instance, for Germany, this was the Duden dictionary *Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1999), for Spain the online (2003) edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* published by the Real Academia Española and for the Netherlands, the *Van Dale Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal* (1999).

- b. The words occurred in the same meaning as in an authoritative English dictionary,⁵ or found on a UK web-site via Google.
- c. Words that occurred in an entirely English phrase, such as “Your last stop before the top”, were also counted as English words, even if in isolation such a word could also be Dutch, French, German, or Spanish (when used on their own, “top” or “stop” could, for instance, be Dutch). Each individual word was counted, whether it occurred on its own or as part of an entirely English phrase.

We discussed the concept of inter-rater reliability, and we suggested to students that they work individually first on their analysis of the texts and then compare notes. This analysis promoted a considerable amount of discussion both within the student groups, particularly on the internet discussion board (e.g., WebCT[®] or Blackboard[®]) we encouraged students to use during the project, and amongst the teaching staff involved in our weekly meetings outside of class. We observed students working through the process of approaching the texts as (novice) language analysts rather than in their more customary role as language learners. More specifically they became aware of the arbitrary decisions that may be associated with the assimilation of foreign words or phrases into the standardised, i.e., dictionary, version of a language.

Students kept detailed notes on the way in which the lexical item or fixed phrase was used, particularly if that was in a modified form reflecting the target (non-English) language, e.g., fragments such as *Voor supersofte en kissable lips*. . . (For super soft and kissable lips) and . . . *Echte musthaves* (Real must haves) taken from Dutch glossy magazines. These notes were then used to develop a questionnaire to be used in the experimental part of the course. Students were encouraged throughout to collaborate with other student groups working on the same genre across the different cultures, including via our internet discussion board, and more specifically to select wherever possible the same test items for use in the questionnaire so that responses from target groups on comprehensibility and attitude to the same ads could be compared across the three countries. This proved particularly successful for the ads taken from glossy magazines (see further discussion below), since the students identified a number of large corporations that were running parallel campaigns across the EU with greater or lesser degrees of English included, e.g., *Siemens*, *Elizabeth Arden*, *Skechers* and *Nivea Haircare*.

In the 2003 project, for instance, in all three of our target cultures there was widespread use of English in print advertising in glossy magazines targeted at young women, where English was used in far more than half of all advertising. In addition, the corpus analysis revealed that international print advertising campaigns were often not translated for the Netherlands, whereas they were partly (but not completely) translated for Germany and Spain, with more English occurring in Germany than

⁵ For the project in 2003 this was the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2003) edited by C. Soanes and A. Stevenson or the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2002) edited by M. Rundell.



Fig. 1. The Elizabeth Arden Green Tea campaign used in Spain.

in Spain (see Fig. 1 for the version of the *Elizabeth Arden Green Tea Fragrance* campaign that was used in Spain). This provided our students with a concrete example of the language variations that exist across the EU, which we believe would also be applicable in other countries of the EU and elsewhere. In the next section we will go on to discuss print advertising in *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* in the Netherlands, Germany and Spain in detail, as a pertinent example of the use of English in a promotional genre used across the different cultures.

3. An example analysis: print advertisements in glossy magazines aimed at young women

The corpus analysis of print advertisements in glossy magazines focussed on the July 2003 edition of *Elle* for the Netherlands and Germany, and the July 2003 edition of *Cosmopolitan* for Spain. Only advertisements of half a page or more were included in the analysis and each one was analysed in detail for the occurrence of English. Table 1 shows the total number of advertisements for each of the three magazines, together with the number of advertisements that contained English.

The percentage of advertisements in which English used was high for each of the target countries, and a χ^2 test revealed no significant differences between them. We pointed out to our students that the percentage of advertisements containing English was considerably higher than that reported in a similar study in 1994, when only 33% of the total number of advertisements in glossy magazines for the Netherlands and Germany contained English, and as few as 17% for Spain (Gerritsen, 1995). For Spain in particular, there had apparently been a considerable increase over a 10-year period, providing us with an opportunity to relate our findings to the predictions made by researchers like Berns (1995) and Graddol (1999), based on data collected in the mid 1990s, that less English would be used in Spain – the type of link that, in our experience, students often find difficult to make. Moreover, this link with a relatively recent set of literature allowed us to discuss the penetration of English in Dutch, German and Spanish, as an example of language variation, including the speed with which this process may in fact happen.

Table 2 shows the total number of words in the advertisements containing English, together with the total number of English words.

The relative number of English words in the advertisements containing English was low, varying from 6% in Germany to almost 8% in Spain. A χ^2 test revealed that there was a significant difference between Spain and Germany ($\chi^2 = 5.96$, $df = 1$, $p = .015$), providing a useful (and contradictory) link with previous studies. At least for this corpus, the amount of English in advertisements in Spain was significantly larger than in Germany. Further analysis revealed that English occurred most

Table 1
Advertisements with English in glossy magazines

	Netherlands	Germany	Spain
Number of ads	21	43	53
Number of ads with English	17 (81%)	24 (56%)	40 (75%)

Table 2
Relative number of English words in advertisements containing English

	Netherlands	Germany	Spain
Total number of words in ads with English	1501	1999	3941
Total number of English words	98 (6.5%)	120 (6.0%)	310 (7.9%)

frequently in the body of the advertisement and the slogan for all three countries, and likewise for all three countries it was used least often in the sales information. This suggested that advertisers were keen to ensure that sales information was comprehensible to their potential consumers, and it also allowed us to demonstrate to students that there is a close link between the demands of the social context, i.e., the marketplace, and the realisation of the text-genre (see also Piller, 2003, for a discussion on sales information).

A final observation we pointed out to our student researchers was the fact that some of our findings may be attributable to the fact that the Spanish compilers of standardised Spanish dictionaries have resisted the influx of English words to a greater extent than their counterparts in either Germany or the Netherlands. A word like “weekend” appears in German and Dutch dictionaries, but not in Spanish dictionaries, although it may on occasion be used, e.g., on web-sites. In other words, in Spain there has been less officially standardised assimilation. Our method of analysis may ultimately have led to the classification of more words as English in the Spanish corpus, than in either the Dutch or German corpora, because relatively fewer English loanwords appear in the (Spanish) dictionary – an illuminating example both for us and our students of the influence of methodological decisions on research findings.

As mentioned above, the second part of the study was in the form of an experiment in which respondents’ comprehension of and attitude to English were investigated, using a series of manipulated test items based on the corpus analysis and an accompanying questionnaire. The respondents were young, highly educated women aged between 18 and 25 – the target group for the magazines we surveyed – totalling 50 for the Netherlands, 43 for Germany and 43 for Spain.

To investigate the attitude to English for each country, a between-subject design was used, which means that each half of the respondents for each country saw only one version of the test item concerned – a test item containing some English, or a manipulated version of the same test item containing only German, Spanish or Dutch, respectively (see Rietveld & Van Hout, 1993, for further details on the use of ‘between’ versus ‘within’ subject design). This allowed us to compare the attitude of the respondents to texts with English and texts only in the respondents’ first language. Once we had identified an advertising campaign common to all three countries, students then worked with us to produce equivalent test items, drawing on their translation skills between English, Dutch (their first language) – and for some of them, German or Spanish, and indeed, also on their skills in manipulating the different electronic versions of the various test items. It was a sobering experience for the staff to see just how quickly and creatively our students could negotiate the electronic tools they needed to do this! Fig. 2 shows the manipulated Dutch test item based on the *Smile with all your senses* advertising campaign for *Elizabeth Arden*.

Respondents were asked to complete a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = complete agreement to 7 = complete disagreement) relating to a series of positive and negative labels such as *irritating*, *arrogant*, *functional* and *attractive*, through which they evaluated the use of English (or the use of the same lexis in German, Spanish or Dutch, if they viewed the version of the test item in their own language)

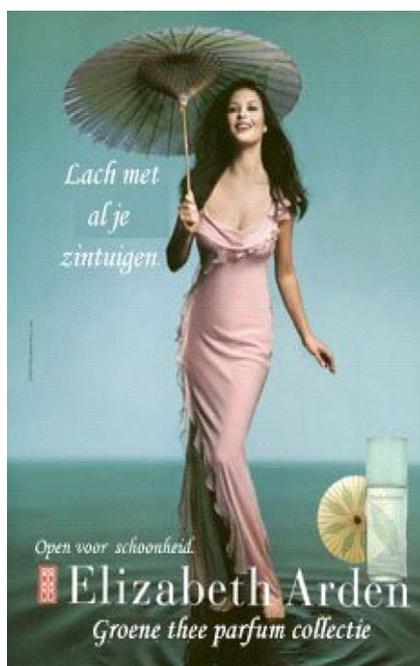


Fig. 2. The manipulated Dutch test item for the Green Tea campaign.

for each test item.⁶ These were then combined to give a score for the respondents' attitude towards the test items, as shown in Table 3.⁷

The respondents from all three countries were neutral towards the use of English, and no significant differences could be found either between the three countries or between the different versions of the test items for each country. This suggested that respondents held a neutral attitude both towards the use of English and the use of their own language in advertising.

The second part of the experiment – respondents' comprehension of the English part of the advertisements – was investigated in two ways: a self-report phase and an actual comprehension phase. Respondents were first asked if they thought that they were able to passively understand a test item such as Elizabeth Arden's slogan *Smile with all your senses*, and indeed whether they thought they could actively translate it, and after that they were asked to give the global meaning of the same test item in their own language (but not a literal translation). The self-report phase allowed students to make a theoretical link with previous large-scale studies, such as the Eurobarometer survey referred to by Graddol (1999), which makes extensive use

⁶ A full version of the questionnaire is available from the authors.

⁷ A Cronbach α test for these 10 items gave a score of 0.81, such that they could be considered collectively as a reliable indicator of attitude.

Table 3

Attitude to English in ads or equivalents in respondents' own language (1 = positive, 7 = negative)

	Netherlands (<i>N</i> = 25)	Germany (<i>N</i> = 20)	Spain (<i>N</i> = 23)
	Mean, standard deviation	Mean, standard deviation	Mean, standard deviation
Ads with English	3.5 1.1	2.9 1.4	3.4 0.9
Ads in respondents' own language	3.5 0.7	3.1 1.1	3.4 0.8

Table 4

Respondents' self-report on their passive understanding of and ability to transtate *Smile with all your senses* (1 = completely able, 7 = completely unable)

	Netherlands (<i>N</i> = 25)	Germany (<i>N</i> = 20)	Spain (<i>N</i> = 23)
	Mean, standard deviation	Mean, standard deviation	Mean, standard deviation
Able to understand	2.08 1.58	1.10 0.31	1.65 1.07
Able to translate	2.32 1.82	1.30 0.57	1.61 1.12

of self reporting, and the challenge, of course, in the second phase was for students to decide what could be considered as a correct meaning for the original test item and what would be considered as incorrect. For example, for *Smile with all your senses*; *Lach met ogen, oren, neus, lippen en gevoel* (*Laugh with your eyes, ears, nose, lips and feeling*) was considered as acceptable, but *Wees blij* (*Be happy*) was not. Tables 4 and 5 show the findings for the respondents' self reporting and actual comprehension of meaning, respectively, for the Elizabeth Arden slogan *Smile with all your senses*.

As shown in Table 4, all the respondents rated their ability to understand and translate the slogan as quite high. In both cases, the German respondents rated their ability higher than the Spanish respondents, who in turn rated their ability higher than the Dutch. The differences between Germany and the Netherlands were significant.⁸

Table 5 shows that the respondents' actual comprehension of the slogan was also high. More than 70% of all the respondents were able to give a correct global meaning for the slogan and a χ^2 test revealed no significant differences between the three groups. We pointed out to the students that in comparison to a similar study in 1994, there had been a consistent increase across all three countries in respondents' ability

⁸ A one way analysis of variance with a post hoc Tukey test provided the following: Comprehensibility $F = 3.850$, $df = 2$, $p = .024$; Translation $F = 3.612$, $df = 2$, $p = .033$.

Table 5
Actual comprehension for *Smile with all your senses*

	Netherlands (<i>N</i> = 25)	Germany (<i>N</i> = 20)	Spain (<i>N</i> = 23)
Correct	20 (80%)	16 (84%)	15 (71%)
Incorrect	5	3	6

to understand an English text, again contradicting the predictions made in previous studies.⁹

A final point we discussed with the students was the need to understand the limitations of the project. The corpus analysis reported on here as an example of the research projects that students completed, was based on only one edition of one glossy magazine targeted at highly educated young women, and the experimental investigation involved only one advertisement and highly educated respondents. We suggested to them, for instance, that a lesser educated group of respondents, would probably have scored less well on the comprehension task (see also Gerritsen et al., 2000). We encouraged them to interpret their findings on the occurrence and comprehension of English, tentatively, as an indication of a shift in the status of English in all three countries – at least for print advertising – but also to understand and account for the methodological constraints in the project and the influence that these may have had on their findings.

4. The relevance of the project for ESP

The project has a number of elements that we believe are of direct relevance to English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP). Firstly, several researchers have commented recently on the need to discuss – at least at higher levels of proficiency – the fact that English commonly interfaces with other local languages in business texts (e.g., Louhiala-Salminen, 1999; Nickerson, 2002). Our experience has been that the project is invaluable in raising student awareness of the way in which English is present in the world around them, and more specifically that it is an intrinsic part of a number of highly visible and also highly accessible promotional business genres. Students have increased their understanding of how language in general, and English in particular, can be used by the business world in promoting their products, but they have also become aware of the fact that at least some of the target audience may be struggling to understand the message and may not appreciate it either. In addition, for the staff teaching on the project, each with their own expertise in the various languages under analysis, not only was it fascinating to observe the variations that existed across Europe in the use and influence of English, it was also an inspiring and – at times – challenging endeavour to develop and implement a research methodology of relevance for all the languages involved. Secondly, the detailed text analysis required in identifying English in the texts, in analysing its assimilation into the local

⁹ Gerritsen (2004) reports that for a similar group of highly educated respondents for Spain, Germany and the Netherlands in 1994, only 33% of the Spanish respondents were able to effectively translate the text, only 34% of the Dutch respondents and likewise, only 44% of the German respondents.

language concerned in terms of syntax and morphology and in deciding whether or not a respondent's translation or paraphrase was acceptable or not, all provided opportunities for our students to develop their English language skills in what we hope is a highly motivating way. And finally, we believe that the experimental part of the project in its investigation of the comprehension of and attitudes towards the English used in the different promotional genres provides useful additional information that complements the largely descriptive nature of recent research in the field of ESBP.

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