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# BUYING PROCESSES OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING

– Case: Language Centre of Turku University of  
Applied Sciences



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# BUYING PROCESSES OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING

## Case: Language Centre of Turku University of Applied Sciences

The purpose of this thesis is to study the buying processes of client organizations of the Language Centre of Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) as they purchase language and communication training. The aim is to provide the language centre with practical information regarding the factors that influence the buying-decisions of its clients. The theoretical part of this thesis refers to literature on the subjects of organizational buying behavior and purchasing processes of services. The empirical study focuses on organizations that have recently bought language and communication education from the language centre of TUAS.

Due to the descriptive aim of this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for gathering empirical data. Three client organizations of the language centre were chosen as research objects. The theoretic frame of reference was used to formulate a thematic outline for the interviews, and the same outline was used for analysing the results.

The research results indicated conformity between the theoretical framework and the formulation of the actual buying process in practice. This conformity was most evident in the fact that the purchasing of such services as the language centre provides, actualizes in the form of a process instead of a single action. Furthermore, the results provided information contrary to previous assumptions regarding the number of actors in the buying centre, as well as activities in the buying process. The findings may be used for formulating a strategy which suits the clients' processes and demands.

### KEYWORDS:

Buying process, organizational buying behavior, buying centre, language and communication training

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# KIELI- JA VIESTINTÄKOULUTUKSEN OSTOPROSESSI

## Case: Turun ammattikorkeakoulun kielikoulutuskeskus

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää Turun ammattikorkeakoulun kielikoulutuskeskuksen asiakasyritysten ostoprosessia, ostettaessa kieli- ja viestintäkoulutusta. Tavoitteena on tarjota kielikoulutuskeskukselle käytännöntietoa tekijöistä, jotka vaikuttavat sen asiakasyritysten ostopäätöksentekoon. Viitekehystenä tutkimuksessa käytetään organisaation ostokäyttäytymiseen ja palvelunostoprosesseihin liittyvää teoriaa. Empiirisen tutkimuksen kohteena ovat asiakasyritykset, jotka ovat hiljattain ostaneet kieli- ja viestintäkoulutusta Turun ammattikorkeakoulun kielikoulutuskeskukselta.

Tutkimuksen kuvailevan tavoitteen vuoksi empiirisen tiedonkeruun menetelmäksi valittiin teemahaastattelu. Tutkimuskohteiksi valittiin kolme kielikoulutuskeskuksen asiakasyritystä. Haastattelujen teemoina käytetään viitekehysten pohjalta muodostettua runkoa, jota käytetään myös aineiston purkamisessa sekä analyysissä.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat yhdenmukaisuutta teoreettisen viitekehysten, sekä käytännön ostoprosessin välillä. Tämä yhdenmukaisuus on huomattavissa muun muassa siinä, että kielikoulutuskeskuksen tarjoamien koulutusten kaltaisten palveluiden ostaminen toteutuu käytännössä prosessin muodossa, eikä siis ole yksittäinen tapahtuma. Lisäksi, tulokset osoittavat toista kuin mitä oletettiin liittyen ostoryhmän jäsenten lukumäärään, sekä ostoprosessin vaiheisiin. Tutkimustuloksia voidaan käyttää hyväksi muodostettaessa strategiaa, joka vastaa asiakkaan prosesseja sekä tarpeita.

### ASIASANAT:

Ostoprosessi, organisaation ostokäyttäytyminen, ostoryhmä, kieli- ja viestintäkoulutus

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SME	Small and medium sized enterprises. Enterprises qualify as micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) if the staff headcount is less than 250, if the turnover is € 50 million or less, or if the balance sheet total is € 43 million or less. (European Commission)
B2B	Abbreviation for business to business. Trading of products or providing of services which occurs between two companies, as opposed to involving a private consumer.
TUAS	Turku University of Applied Sciences. TUAS is a multi-branch educational community of some 9000 students and 750 experts. (turku.fi)
DMU	Decision making unit refers to the group of individuals who participate in the buying process*. These individuals aim for their objectives by making various decisions at different stages of the process. In this thesis the term <i>buying centre</i> is used synonymously for DMU. Buying centre is covered in paragraph 2.2.
*Buying process	In this thesis the decision-making process regarding buying is referred to as the <i>buying process</i> . The term <i>purchasing process</i> is used synonymously with <i>buying process</i> .

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Former President of Chrysler Corporation, Mr. Lee Iacocca said: “You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere”. This statement of a well-known businessman accurately points out the importance of good communicational skills, in business as well as in all other areas of life.

Companies of all sizes in all industries face communicational challenges in their operations. Communicational, cultural or language-related difficulties are present in businesses even when operating only on a national level. New and diverse communicational challenges call for fluent language and communication skills, whether it is in one’s native language or a foreign one.

These challenges may arise either from inside the company itself or from the surrounding environment. Challenges arising within the company may be cultural differences amongst employees or communicational difficulties, such as misunderstanding or lack of communication between individuals or hierarchical levels. Misunderstandings may also arise through problems in communicating with agents outside the company such as buyers, suppliers, and business partners. Time, money and trouble could be saved by eliminating misunderstandings through effective and accurate communication.

According to a report published by the European Commission, there is a direct link between language skills and successful and profitable businesses. The survey, conducted across nearly 2000 European SMEs, also indicated a genuine demand for language skills among their workforces. Companies who set clear language strategies (such as providing language courses or hiring native speakers) are getting better results than those that do not. (© Communicaid Group Ltd.2010)

Whether a company is in the need of language training rather straightforwardly depends on whether employees of that company operate with foreign agents and need to use a foreign language in their work. The need for cultural training can be identified in a similar fashion; If two or more different cultures are in close contact with each other, the communication can most likely be eased and improved through widening ones cultural understanding through training. Communication training however, can benefit everyone, regardless of the line of business, size of the company or the markets operated in. Every time a person comes in contact with another, effective communication will help get the wanted message through and to reach the target.

Many have realized the growing demand for language and communication training and are now selling and marketing these services to companies, public organizations and private people. Companies are constantly being contacted and offered training from different providers, both private and public.

Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) is an educational community of some 9000 students and 750 teachers, and offers education in multiple branches. The Language Centre at TUAS is an expert organization in language and communication education. In addition to coordinating language and communication education for TUAS students, the language centre provides training for businesses, as well as for the public sector. ([www.turkuamk.fi](http://www.turkuamk.fi))

Within the language centre is a small team of experts called the Organizational Education Unit, who take care of the selling of language, communication and cultural education to companies and organizations. The unit organizes up to over eighty courses a year for businesses and organizations in Southwestern Finland.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide practical information about the buying process of the language centre services, from the clients' perspective. The aim is to find out what adds value for the client, and how the process could be improved. Based on these objectives the research questions are as follows:



In the case of selling the services of the Language Centre of Turku University of Applied Sciences;

*Q1. What is the structure of the customer's buying-decision process?*

*Q2. How do client organizations perceive the buying-decision process?*

*Q3. How can the language centre formulate its strategy to suit the client's processes?*

When it comes to analyzing how industrial customers choose to invest, according to Reeder et al. (1991), there are three fundamental questions to answer:

1. What is the structure of the customer's decision-making process, and how can the supplier's strategy be designed to suit that process?
2. Who are the people who affect the buying decision?
3. What criteria are used in evaluating and decision-making of the product or service being offered? (Reeder, Brierty & Reeder, 1991)

The theoretic part of this thesis will therefore consist of recognizing the activities and stages that form the buying process and identifying the people who form the buying centre by influencing the buying decision. Possible criteria used for evaluating and for decision-making are identified in the empirical part of this study.

In this thesis, buying is considered a synonym for purchasing and sources focusing on purchasing have been included in the discussion regarding buying behaviour in the theoretic framework.

## 2 BUSINESS MARKETS

According to Vitale and Giglierano (2002: 5), [business-to-]business markets consist of all organizations that purchase goods and services to use in the creation of their own goods and services, which then are offered to their customers. This business aspect of the purchasing agent is what differentiates business markets from consumer markets, and creates unique characteristics to the buying process.

In industrial markets, the customer may be a commercial organization, a public organization or a non-profit organization. It is essential to remember, that the product or service is not purchased by a customer for their own personal needs, but for the need of the organization. Moreover, the goods or services purchased are always organization bound. The purchase decision is therefore based on the personnel's experiences in organizational operations and on the specific needs of the organization in question. Furthermore, the buying process may vary a great deal depending on the buying organization, for example on how much resources and expertise are available. (Rope, T. 1998, 13-14.)

Fluctuating demand is also typical for business markets, which means that the demand for products and services usually changes more, and also more quickly, than the demand for consumer goods and services. (Armstrong, G. & Kotler, P. 2009, 183.) This fluctuation in the demand of the buyer organization creates additional challenges regarding marketing and selling for the supplier organization. According to Vitale and Giglierano (2002: 5), the aim in business marketing is to create value for both organizations by matching and combining the capabilities of the supplier with the desired outcomes of the customer.

## 2.1 Organizational buying-decision process

In a business to business market, understanding buyer behaviour is crucial in order to successfully market and sell services. To understand the buying process of an organization, one needs to know what stages are included in the process, who are the people involved, how do buyers acquire information, what criteria is used for comparing buying alternatives, and how the final buying-decision is made.

According to researchers of organizational buying behaviour, Ward and Webster (1991, 419), organizational buying behaviour refers to decision-making processes in formal organizations. Moreover, Webster and Wind (1972) have defined *organizational buying* as a decision-making process by which formal organizations **establish the need** for purchased [products and] services and **identify, evaluate, and choose** among alternative brands and suppliers (Webster & Wind 1972). Organizational buying shall therefore not be considered as a single decision, but a series of actions and decisions over time.

The *procurement process [buying process]* has been said to be the **sequence of activities** which must be performed in the resolution of a buying situation. Once a buying situation has developed, triggering the procurement process, the activities will progress until the problem is resolved, either by means of a purchase or a decision to terminate or to discontinue the process. (Robinson et al. 1967) These activities leading to a resolution are often referred to as phases or stages of the buying process.

### 2.1.1 Stages of the Organizational Buying Process

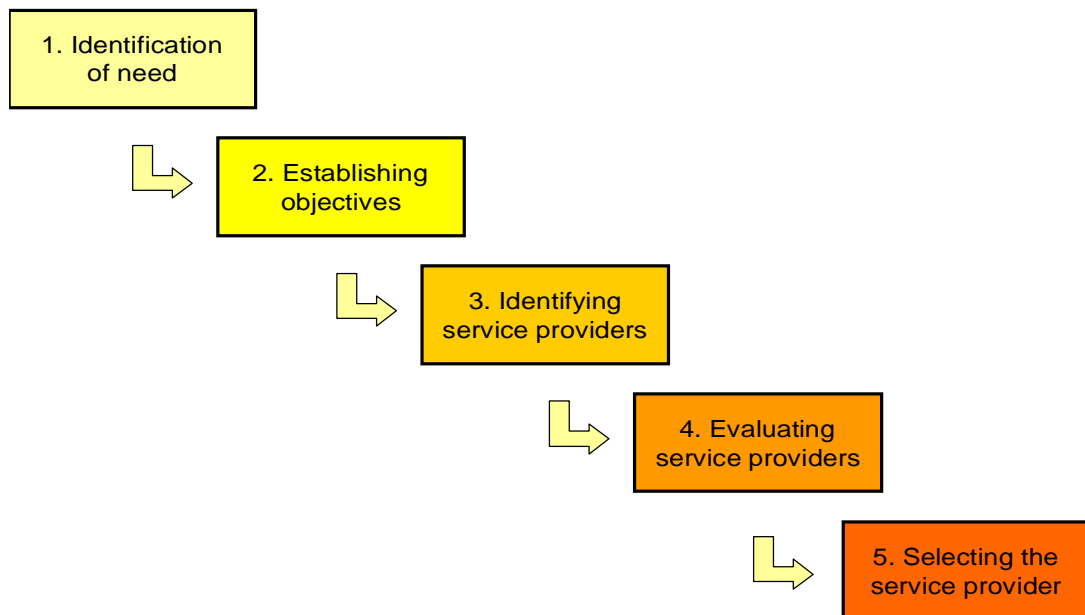
Organizational decision-making is a complex process that takes place over time and involves several members of the given organization. Whereas it is easy to describe the decision process as the whole process leading to the various buying decisions, there are many **different views of the number**, nature and sequence **of the various stages** comprising it. (Webster and Wind 1972)

The decision process has been said to consist of **four stages**. (I.a. Bradley, Webster) On the other hand, a study presented by The Marketing Science Institute presented an **eight stage** decision process. In addition to these models, numerous others have been presented, with up to **twelve stages**. (Wind) This variation in the number of stages shows that the process may vary considerably, depending on the product or service being bought, the industry, and the nature of the buying situation.

Since the aim of this study is to investigate behaviour that leads to buying-decisions and selecting the service provider, models that include post-purchase stages are irrelevant. Therefore, a five-stage model by Webster and Wind is used as a frame of reference for this study.

Webster and Wind present a general model for the organizational buying-decision process composed of five basic stages. They point out that “The specific nature, importance of, and interrelations among these stages vary across organisations and buying situations, yet **this model does provide a good starting point for the understanding of the buying decision process**”.

Figure 1. Organizational Buying-Decision Process



Source: Webster and Wind 1972. Modified by Niina Heikkilä

#### 2.1.1.1 Identification of need

A buying situation is created when some member of the **organization perceives a problem** that can be solved through the purchase of a product or service (Webster and Wind 1972). In the case of the language centre, this buying situation is often created by a phone call made to the potential customer, where the potential customer realizes the need for improving their language or communicational skills.

#### 2.1.1.2 Establishing objectives

Eventually, the **need for purchased goods and services will be defined** with sufficient clarity to permit the drawing up of specifications for the purchase (Webster and Wind 1972). The client organization will in other words clarify their needs and objectives in order to recognize a seller who can meet those

specifications. The client will identify the aspects in which training is needed, when it is needed, and for whom it is needed.

#### 2.1.1.3 Identifying service providers

When the specifications and schedules for the purchase have been defined, at least in preliminary fashion, **the market is searched for available alternatives**. Previously used sources of information and sources of supply will be consulted first (Webster and Wind 1972). After being contacted by the language centre, having recognized a need and defined objectives, the buyer may search the market for others who offer the training they need. This is why it is essential for the language centre to also keep an eye on the competitors and to conduct benchmarking on a regular basis. The relationship that has already been established between the buyer and the language centre through their previous interactions may or may not be of influence at this stage.

#### 2.1.1.4 Evaluating service providers

The **evaluation of alternative buying actions** is the key step in the buying decision process. In rudimentary form, it consists of comparing the characteristics of the available alternatives against the criteria established when specifications and schedules were set (Webster and Wind 1972). The buyer compares what the language centre has to offer against their own needs and against what the competitors have to offer.

#### 2.1.1.5 Selecting the service provider

In this model the process ends with the **selecting of the final service provider**. Post purchase activities are not included in this research since the aim of this study is to find out what leads to the selection of a certain service provider.

## 2.2 Buying Centre

Organizational buying decisions are rarely taken by only one individual. Usually several members of the organization will participate or be affected by the buying situation (Robinson et al. 1967). These members of the organization are referred to as the *buying centre*. Success in industrial marketing is said (by Robinson et al.) to depend on being able to identify who these different members of the organization are and what their influence is.

Buying centre *size* refers to the number of people actively involved in a purchase situation across the various stages of the decision process. Currently, many accept the notion that buying centres will be larger when the purchase decision is of significant importance or the purchase situation either is unfamiliar or complex. In contrast, smaller buying centres are expected when the purchase decision is of lesser importance, is more familiar, and more routine. (Lewin and Donthu, 2005) The buying centre of the language centre services is currently expected to be rather small, and to consist of only one or a few people.

In a business setting, major purchases typically require input from various parts of the organization including finance, accounting, purchasing, information technology management, and senior management (Lyson and Farrington 2006: 422). Lyson and Farrington mention several departments being involved in the buying decision, however in practise this means that several *people* are involved, whose background and expertise may vary. One of the basic perceptions in business-to-business marketing is that the target group is not the organization but the *people* that work in organization (Rope 1998: 10). What is more, business buyers are definitely not just calculating and impersonal, but human and social and therefore, react both to reason and emotions. (Armstrong, G. & Kotler, P. 2009, 188.)

There are several distinct roles in the buying centre: **users**, **buyers**, **deciders**, **gatekeepers** and **influencers**. It is quite likely that several individuals will occupy the same role within the buying centre (e.g., there may be several users) and that one individual may occupy two or more roles (e.g., buyer and gatekeeper). (Webster and Wind 1972)

In many cases the potential **users** are those who initiate the buying process or even formulate the specific purchase requirements (Webster and Wind 1972). In the language centre case, the users are most commonly a group of employees of the organization who need to improve their communication skills (in a foreign language or in their native language) in order for the organization to operate more efficiently. These employees might work in customer service, in sales, or in other areas that require language and communication skills.

**Buyers** are those organizational members with formal authority for selecting the supplier and arranging the terms of the purchase (Webster and Wind 1972). They are often the ones in contact with the supplier concerning visits, terms and payment. (Jobber, D. 2007, 156–157) The title of the buyer varies in organizations depending on the size and the nature of that particular organization. In the organizations purchasing language and communication training from TUAS language centre, the buyer has commonly been the CEO or Personnel Manager.

**Deciders** are those members of the organization who have either formal or informal power to determine the final selection of suppliers. The *buyer* may be the *decider*, but it is also possible that the buying decision actually will be made by someone else and left to the buyer for implementation. (Webster and Wind 1972)

**Gatekeepers** are the individuals who control the flow of information into the organization, and in doing so indirectly influence the purchasing decision (Parkinson and Baker 1986). Gatekeepers exert their influence primarily at the stage of identifying buying alternatives. Because they actively influence the



definition of the feasible set of buying alternatives, they significantly determine the outcome of the purchase decision. (Webster and Wind 1972)

In other words, *gatekeepers* may allow or prevent access to a member of the decision making unit. According to Jobber, this is an additional role and not essential in all buying processes. (Jobber, D. 2007, 156–157.)

An example of a *gatekeeper* regarding the case study could be a secretary who disposes a mail with an offer or advertisement from one service provider, and thus this particular service provider is not included in the alternatives from which the final provider is chosen. The secretary has therefore possibly influenced the outcome of the buying decision by controlling the information flow on to the *deciders*.

***Influencers*** are organizational members who directly or indirectly influence buying or usage decisions (Webster and Wind 1972). Nevertheless, they may not be centrally involved in the purchasing decision. They are those who gather additional information and add choice criteria during the process, in order to influence others to some outcome. (Jobber, D. 2007, 156–157)

In addition to these five roles, some authors define a sixth role within the buying centre. Suggested by Bonoma in 1982, and defined by David Jobber (2007) ***initiators*** are those persons who begin the purchase process and discover the need. (Jobber, D. 2007, 156–157) The empirical part of this thesis will investigate who initiates the purchase process and discovers the need, but *initiators* as such will not be introduced as a separate role in the buying centre. This is to make the questions and answering as simple as possible for the interviewee, and to be able to concentrate on the respondent's point of view, with as little confusion as possible.

Organizational purchasing decisions are typically made by a buying centre whose members are identified by the area of their functional responsibility or by their role in the purchase decision (Moon and Tikoo, 2002). Depending on their functional responsibility and role in the operations of the organization, each member of the buying centre might have satisfaction requirements different

from the requirements of others. Moreover, as the number of participants in the buying process increases, it is likely that the number of satisfaction requirements increase also. As the seller, it is important for the language centre to be aware that there are often more than one person's satisfaction requirements to please. What is more, they should be aware of who actually makes the decisions, and what criteria are being used.

The following table defines the most likely influences of members of the buying centre at each of the five stages of the buying decision process, according to Webster and Wind.

Table 1. Decision stages and roles in the buying centre

	User	Influencer	Buyer	Decider	Gatekeeper
Identification of need	( x )	( x )	( )	( )	( )
Establishing specifications and scheduling the purchase	( x )	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )
Identifying buying alternatives	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )	( x )
Evaluating alternative buying actions	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )	( )
Selecting the supplier	( x )	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )

Source: Webster and Wind, 1972, pp 80

According to this table the user is most likely to influence the decision making process in all of the five stages, as is the influencer. The buyer is likely to be involved in establishing specifications, identifying and evaluating supplier alternatives and selecting the supplier, but not yet in identifying the need. Deciders are likely to influence in establishing specifications and selecting the supplier but not elsewhere, and the gatekeepers influence is likely to take place only in identifying buying alternatives. Studying the people involved in the decision making, and their influence at each stage will give important information on whom to target and in which way.

### 2.3 Organizational Buying Situations

**Buy Classes** refer to different *buying situations* which are categorised according to the prior experience of the buying organization with the service, and with the service provider. Robinson et al. (1967) define the buy classes, as the “systematization of the complexity of organizational buying situations”. The buy classes are classified as *straight rebuy*, *modified rebuy* and *new task buy*. The following table illustrates characteristics that relate to each basic type of buying situation.

Table 2. Characteristics of buying situations

Type of Buying Situation	Newness of the Problem	Information Requirements	Consideration of New Alternatives
New Task	HIGH	MAXIMUM	IMPORTANT
Modified Rebuy	MEDIUM	MODERATE	LIMITED
Straight Rebuy	LOW	MINIMAL	NONE

Source: Robinson, Faris and Wind 1967, p 25

The above grid shows the presence of three different characteristics which define the buy class. These aspects (shown at the top of the grid) are *newness of the problem*, *information requirements*, and *consideration of new alternatives*, and the level of their presence varies in different buying situations.

As can be seen from the grid, in the **new task buy** where the product or service is being purchased for the first time, the problem is a new one, a lot of information is therefore required, and consideration of new alternatives is very important. This buying situation is said, by Robinson et al. to occur infrequently, but also to be of great importance to marketers because it sets the pattern for the more routine purchases that will follow.

In **modified rebuy** the product or service has been purchased before, however, modifications are considered regarding the specifications of the service, delivery, or the service provider. In this buying situation the problem is relatively new, and therefore a moderate amount of information is needed. The consideration of new alternatives is limited.

The existence of a modified rebuy situation does not necessarily infer that the buyer will, in fact, change either the item purchased or its source. The result may be that he purchases exactly what has been purchased all along – even from the same source. The distinctive element is the re-evaluation of alternatives – often the consideration of new ones – prompted by the conviction that it is worthwhile to seek additional information and alternatives before a decision is reached. (Robinson et al. 1967)

**Straight rebuy** is a situation where the same product or service is purchased, on the same terms, from the same service provider. The company has faced this same problem in the past – most probably many times (Robinson et al. 1967). There are no serious considerations of new alternatives involved in this situation. According to Robinson et al., this is the most common buying situation in organizational buying.

#### 2.4 Factors influencing organizational buying behaviour

It is highly important for a marketer to know when, how and why buyers make the choices they make. Furthermore, the marketer needs to understand what influences are involved and how they are likely to impact the decision process (Kauffman 1996). These influencing factors can be divided into four categories: *environmental*, *organizational*, *group factors* and *individual factors*. Dividing the factors into categories helps understand and structure the influences.

*Environmental factors (external factors)* are typically factors outside the organization, on which the organization does not have direct influence or control. These include economic factors such as level and type of demand, economic outlook and interest rates. Further factors involved are technological

change, political and regulatory developments, social responsibility and competitive development. (Lyson and Farrington 2006: 422) (Kotler 2002)

According to Wind and Thomas (1980) the environmental influences are difficult to assess and problematic to measure. These factors influence the buying process by providing information, but may also create constraints as well as opportunities, not only for the buying organization but also for the seller. This is why it is important for an industrial buyer, and seller, to acquire adequate information on all relevant environmental factors.

*Organizational factors (internal factors)* have been described by Hutt and Speh (1998: 76-93) to consist of strategic priorities, the strategic role of purchasing and the strategic trends of purchasing. These factors may directly or indirectly influence the buying decision process. Moreover, buying decisions are affected by the organization's system of reward, authority, status and communication, including organizational objectives [purchase objectives (Kotler 2002)], policies, procedures, and structures (Lyson & Farrington 2006: 422). All of the above factors influence the internal operations and values of the buying organization and therefore influence the processes of that organization, including the buying process.

*Group factors* are also referred to as *interpersonal factors* or *social factors*. Organizational buying situations are collective, i.e. they include the interaction of several people within the organization. These people involved have different interests, status, and level of authority, empathy and persuasiveness. The influences of these differences are called group factors. (Lyson & Farrington 2006: 422) (Kotler 2002) Group factors, and the level of their influence, naturally vary amongst organizations.

Buying decisions are influenced by the way individual participants in the buying process form their preference for products and suppliers. These *individual factors* of influence in the buying process include the person's age, professional identification, personality and attitude towards the risk involved. (Lyson & Farrington 2006: 422) Furthermore, the individuals may have different

evaluation criteria, different ways of processing information, and different risk-reduction strategies. (Hutt & Speh 1998: 76-93)

To conclude, the theories relevant to this study regard the stages of the buying process, the roles in the buying centre, the different buying situations, and the factors that influence the buying decision. All aspects are considered from the perspective of *organizational* buying behaviour, and are further studied in the empirical part of this thesis.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to find out how the buyer experiences the process of purchasing the language centre products, and what factors lead to the buying-decision. By understanding the clients' actions, goals and satisfaction requirements regarding the practicalities of buying, the purpose is to find possible ways of making the buying-process easier and most beneficial for the buying organization. This study includes the main aspects of the buying process including stages of the process, buying centre and roles in it, buying situations and factors influencing organizational buying behavior.

Empirical research was conducted in qualitative form and emphasis was put on understanding and focusing on the respondents' point of view. The research material was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews with buyers from organizations that have recently bought language centre products. The interviews took place in January 2011, and earlier studies and theories on organizational buying were collected as a frame of reference and a theoretic background for this study.

#### 3.1 Research strategy

For studying organizational buying behavior, Parkinson and Baker suggest two alternative methods. The first option is a large-scale survey covering several variables. For an accurate outcome in this method, the sample size needs to be considerable, and it is often difficult to find the right people for a sufficient sample. Further problems with this method are low rate of response and the difficulty of formulating the research questions.

The second method Parkinson and Baker present takes an in-depth look at the whole decision process and appears to offer the researcher a greater opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of the decision process and the factors which are likely to influence the nature of this process. Moreover, using the qualitative method for studying buying behavior will provide



the researcher with higher quality information, and the conclusions drawn from the answers are more reliable. (Parkinson & Baker, 1986)

The research material was thus collected through individual interviews in order to collect information that will help best understand the views of the respondent. The flexibility of this approach allows the specifying of questions if needed. Interviews were chosen as the method because the personal and close contact creates better opportunities to motivate the interviewees to answer and to think about the answers, as opposed to using a survey. (Hirsjärvi, Remes ja Sajavaara, 1997)

The research questions of this thesis are open questions, and in order to find answers to them, open questions needed to be asked from the research objects. The openness excludes a fully structured base of questions for the interview. However, a thematic outline is used in all interviews, in order to gain comparable and thus somewhat structured results. The form of the interview is therefore a semi-structured one.

### 3.2 Case selection criteria

My cooperation with the language centre and the organizational education unit began in December 2009, when I started a work placement period as a student assistant at the language centre. The placement period lasted until the end of April 2010, and it was agreed then that I would return in September to start working on this thesis.

The interviewees for this study were chosen in cooperation with the head of the organizational education unit and with the sales and marketing assistant. The main criteria for the selection were that the interviewee had bought training from the language centre on behalf of the client organization, in the last six months. Both public and private organizations were included as research objects in the sample.

Although face-to-face interviews do offer the opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of the respondent's point of view, I did not want to settle for only

one research organization in this study. Interviewing several organizations increases the validity of the research and corresponds with the research objectives. Conducting three in-depth interviews allows for collecting high quality information and constructing reliable conclusions, without the problem of ending up with excessive research material.

The organizations chosen as research objects are Mehiläinen Group, Hella Lighting Oy Finland, and Turku Municipal Health Care. The two organizations operating in the medical field, Mehiläinen and Turku municipal health care are located in the city centre of Turku, and Hella has its premises in Salo. Hella is a private organization and a part of a multinational corporation Hella International. Mehiläinen is part of the largest private healthcare and nursing services provider in the Nordic countries, the Ambea Group. In Finland Mehiläinen operates in both private and publicly funded markets. Furthermore, Kerttuli old-age home is a round-the-clock care center of the municipal health care in Turku. All three organizations have bought language and communication training from the language centre of TUAS during the past four years.

### 3.3 Interviews

The interviewees were inquired about their personal experiences at every stage of the buying process, and asked to identify all the people involved and their roles in the decision-making process. Further topics regarded the service they received from the language centre, the language centre website, and possible ways of adding value and functionality into the process.

The interviews were held at the premises of the client organizations, lasted up to 50-60 minutes, and were recorded on tape for further analysis. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and the recordings were transcribed into written form. The results from the interviews were translated into English, and analyzed thematically following the same structural order of topics as in the actual interviews.

As mentioned earlier the client organizations to be interviewed were chosen in cooperation with the head of the organizational education unit and with the sales and marketing assistant. The person to be interviewed from the client organization is the person who is in contact with the language centre regarding each purchase.

The themes for the interview, as well as the questions, were formulated based on the theoretic part of this thesis. The main theoretical subjects are the stages of the buying process of services, the buying centre, the roles within the buying centre, buying situations, and factors influencing organizational buying. Further questions were formulated based on practicalities, regarding: the customer service that the client organizations receive when in contact with the language centre; the web pages and online visibility of the language centre; and possible added value through additional services. The frame for the interview was approved by the head of the organizational education unit and some questions were added on her request.

When pursuing the interviewee, it is good to emphasize the interviewee's uniqueness and importance for the study. (Hirsjärvi, S. & Hurme, H. 2006, 85.) Keeping this in mind, I made sure to let the interviewees know that their cooperation and replies were of great importance to my thesis study, as well as to the language centre by providing crucial information on how to improve their operations and services. Thus the efforts of the interviewees may improve the processes they undergo when cooperating with the language centre in the future.

### 3.4 Reliability

The collection of the thorough background information before creating the interview questions increased the reliability of this study. The essential terms, concepts and theories regarding the subject were thoroughly familiarized beforehand to the conducting and constructing of the interviews.

When analysing qualitative material, reliability relates to the interviewer's actions more than to the interviewee's answers. The results should reflect the interviewee's views and ideas as much as possible, however, the results are always a reflection of both the interviewer's and the interviewee's common discussion. It is important that all the available material is taken into consideration and that all the information is lettered correctly. (Hirsjärvi, S. & Hurme, H. 2006, 188-190.

The lettering of the answers was conducted by maintaining the answers as original and consistent as possible in order to avoid the correct meanings and tones from being distorted. The analysers own assumptions were acknowledged and thus avoided. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the interviewee, which enables accurate interpretation of the answers, including tones and accents. As the interviews were captured on tape, all essential aspects of the conversation, such as literal speech, voice control and possible emotional charges were preserved.

All in all, the interviews were successfully conducted without much distraction. No technical problems occurred during the interviews, and only once was an interview interrupted due to an expected reason for a few minutes. Furthermore, all unclear matters were clarified already during the interviews with additional questions and specifications. All of the above mentioned factors have an increasing influence on the reliability of this study.

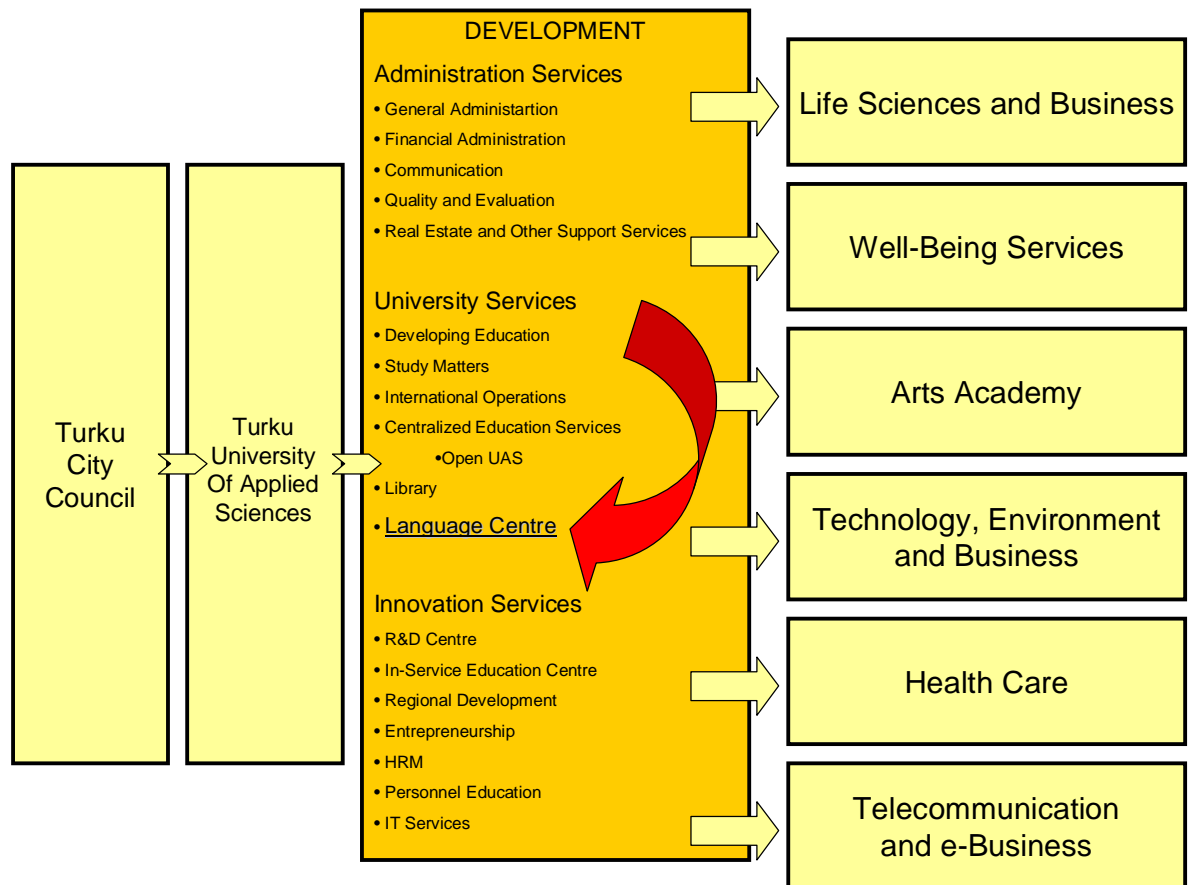
## **4 CASE: LANGUAGE CENTRE OF TURKU UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES**

Turku University of Applied Sciences is an educational community of about 9000 students and 750 teachers, and offers education in multiple branches. The operational area of TUAS is Southwest Finland and approximately 1500 professionals graduate from TUAS annually. The administrator of TUAS is the Turku city council. ([www.turkuamk.fi](http://www.turkuamk.fi))

The Language Centre at Turku University of Applied Sciences is an expert organization in language and communication education. In addition to coordinating language and communication education for the students of TUAS, the language centre also provides training for businesses, as well as for the public sector. ([www.turkuamk.fi](http://www.turkuamk.fi))

The following figure presents an organizational chart of Turku University of Applied Sciences, which also depicts the role of the language centre within the organization.

Figure 2: Organizational chart, Turku University of Applied Sciences



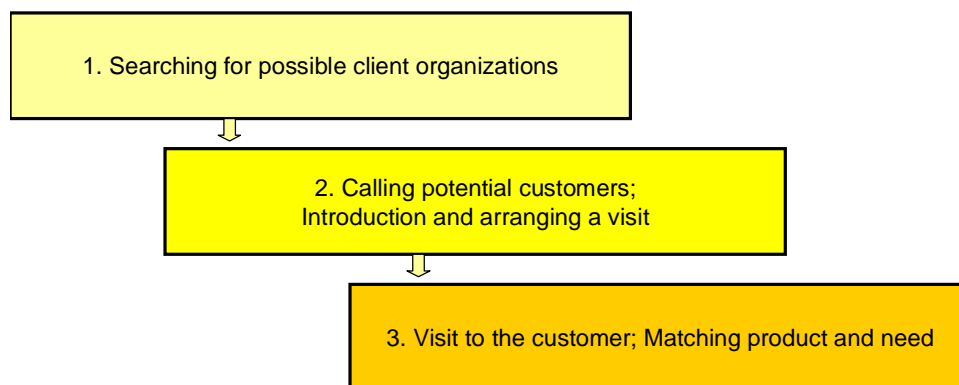
Source: turkuamk.fi. Modified by: Niina Heikkilä

As can be interpreted from the above chart, the language centre caters for all six faculties of Turku University of Applied Sciences, providing the students basic and specialized language courses. Furthermore, within the language centre there is a small team of experts who take care of the selling of language, communication and cultural education to companies and organizations, and it is called the Organizational Education Unit. The unit organizes up to over eighty courses a year for businesses and organizations in Southwestern Finland.

Mass marketing has not been a top priority in the past for the organizational education unit, and the selling process has been as follows:

Possible client organizations are searched mainly through internet and possibly through other media and word of mouth. The client organization receives a phone call, where the language centre is introduced, a range of products is briefly introduced, and a possible visit is arranged. During the visit courses are further introduced and the aim is to find the most suitable courses for the needs of the organization. Most new customers are acquired this way. Also existing customers are contacted regularly.

Figure 3: Selling process of the organizational education unit



Source: Niina Heikkilä

As the current selling process of the language centre uses a very personal approach, which compared to mass marketing is extremely time consuming; efforts have also been put towards online visibility. The web site of the language centre is connected to the one of TUAS, as the address is [www.turkuamk.fi/kielikoulutus](http://www.turkuamk.fi/kielikoulutus). The site of the language centre itself has been altered in order for it to show amongst the top options when Googling the words one might use, when searching for language and communication education for organizations. On the site there are clearly visible contact details and instructions on how to proceed with ordering the education.

Up to this point most selling has been made through the process described above where the language centre seeks and finds the customer. Only a few clients per year have themselves found and contacted the language centre, as opposed to the language centre finding them. Calling possible clients is targeting one potential customer at a time, whereas the language centre could be targeting a larger group of customers if other methods were used to support the current process. On the other hand, a personal approach seems to strengthen the relationship between the language centre and the client.

#### 4.1 Products of the language centre

In the past the language centre has offered three separate high-quality product ranges for its clients:

- Language training – to help improve language skills from basic level to the one required
- Communications training – to strengthen communication skills such as presentation, negotiation and interaction in a foreign or native language
- Cultural training - to widen cultural awareness from the perspective of your own work ([www.turkuamk.fi](http://www.turkuamk.fi))

The language centre is currently working on creating a web portal, where the buyer can choose the components of the training according to the needs of the organization. This is opposed to the previous system where the organization chooses amongst ready made products, and is believed to offer the buying organization a more tailored and personalized end-product. The three main categories of training (language, communication and cultural training) will remain, however. This new tool will be launched in August 2011, and can be found at [www.suunvuoro.com](http://www.suunvuoro.com).

All in all, operations regarding the selling of these products have been focused on what the language centre has to offer. This thesis investigates the



customers' processes and satisfaction requirements, in order to increase the customer orientation of the operations of the language center.

#### 4.2 Client organizations of TUAS language centre

The clientele of the language centre consists of first, second and third sector organizations and individuals, i.e. private companies, public organizations, non-profit organizations, associations and private people. The broad selection of supply in the educational services of the language centre allows a broad and varied clientele. Altogether during the past four years the language centre has catered for up to 90 client organizations. The client organizations interviewed for this thesis are introduced in the following part.

##### 4.2.1 Mehiläinen



Mehiläinen Group is a well-known provider of private health care and social services in Finland. Mehiläinen's nationwide service network of privately funded health services consists of a total of 21 medical centres, occupational health centres, and 9 hospitals. On the publicly funded markets the Mehiläinen group consists of 8 elderly care centres, 12 child welfare units, and 21 mental health rehabilitation units. Mehiläinen is a part of the Ambea Group, which is the largest private healthcare and nursing services provider in the Nordic countries. (mehiläinen.fi)

##### 4.2.2 Hella Lighting Finland Oy



Hella Lighting Finland (HLF) is the leading manufacturer of lighting products for the automotive and vehicle industry in the Nordic countries. Talmu (as it was formerly named) was founded in 1955 as a small family owned company, and

since 1983 it has been owned by Hella KGaA. Over the years, Talmu has developed into an international supplier, and over 90% of sales revenue comes from exports. The HLF plant is situated in Salo, South Western Finland. New products are designed and developed in close cooperation with automotive and vehicle manufacturers making the best possible use of the knowledge and know-how of the worldwide network of Hella International. (hella.com)



#### 4.2.3 Turku Municipal Health Care

##### – Kerttuli Old-age Home

Turku Municipal Health Care aims at promoting citizens' health by providing preventive health care services, medical checks, treatment and rehabilitation services, and by improving the living environment. There are five round-the-clock care centres for elderly people in the Municipal Health Care and Social Services Department of Turku. Kerttuli Old-age Home aims at preserving a home-like atmosphere for its residents. There are 144 rooms for residents, 12 of which are short-term slots. (turku.fi)

Further considerations on the processes and activities of both Turku University of Applied Sciences, and its client organizations are presented in the following chapter (5), where the results of the interviews are analysed. The discussion is continued in the concluding chapter (6).

## 5 ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The results of the interviews are analyzed thematically, following the same order of topics as was followed in the actual interviews, which is: stages of the buying process, buying centre, combining buying centre roles and stages of buying, practicalities regarding buying, web pages of the language centre, and customer service and additional services.

### 5.1 Buying process

Regarding the buying process, the aim of the interview was to realize and acknowledge all activities that take place during the process of buying; starting from recognizing a need and ending with the selecting of a supplier. A five stage general model was used as a point of reference for the questions. These stages are: 1. Identification of need, 2. Establishing objectives and specifications, 3. Identifying service providers, 4. Evaluating services and providers, and 5. Selecting the service provider. This model is well suited for depicting the buying process of a service such as language and communication training.

#### 5.1.1 Need identification

In step one, it is realized that there are people in the organization who are in need of improving their language or communicational skills, in order for the organization to operate in a desired manner. The need itself in all research object organizations was recognized to be growing, and apparent in daily operations.

The uses for language and communicative skills in all three organizations (A, B and C) include communicating with clients and customers. In one of the organizations (B), also internal communication was identified as a point where the need for improving communication skills is present, as well as in external communication not only with clients but also with suppliers.

Furthermore, both oral and written abilities were recognized to be of importance in all cases. Organization C uses a system where written reporting is crucial, which brings about the need to improve employees' written communicative skills, as they were recognized to be separate from oral skills.

Matters on how and by whom the need is recognized, are presented below in section 5.3

### 5.1.2 Establishing objectives and specifications

When the organization has established objectives that they want to achieve with the act of the purchase, concrete specifications regarding the service being bought can then be made. The objectives for the interviewed organizations were said to be improving language skills and writing abilities, increasing self confidence and learning to be brave in using language, noticing that there are others who share the same issues, and being there for each other. Other objectives were said to be improving a specific aspect of a matter, and improving functionality in work practice.

The objectives and specifications were not written down at this point, but they were discussed or thought about, in order to find the necessary specifications for the buy.

### 5.1.3 Identifying service providers

The alternative actions in identifying different service providers are a) externally seeking for service providers and gathering new information, b) internally recalling and comparing familiar service providers to one another, and c) not considering alternatives at all. All interviewees unhesitantly pointed out that no external information search or service provider search was necessary, since they are contacted with offers on a regular basis.

The channels that have been used by service providers for contacting the interviewees are e-mail, letters and pamphlets and phone calls. Written offers were said to give a better chance to familiarize oneself with the material, as

opposed to phone calls, and are therefore preferred by one of the respondents. The other two respondents did not pick a preferred channel.

The contacting from service providers is perceived as acceptable, optimistic and even smart, when it occurs reasonably seldom. One of the interviewees however, feels awkward due to constant and frequent contacts from one particular service provider (other than the language centre), who shows no signs of backing off regardless of being told that the organization is not considering changing their current service provider.

In organizations B and C, the interviewees were not yet involved in the initial purchase from the language centre by the organization. However, they point out that although they are aware of alternative service providers, based on their relationship and experiences with the language centre, it has been a natural option to continue cooperation with the language centre, and buying from other providers has not been seriously considered.

Organization A had a buyer-supplier relationship with another service provider prior to the cooperation with the language centre. When the language centre contacted them with an attractive and competitive offer, they decided to “test” this training and the service provider. Tendering did not take place, but the language centre was internally then compared to earlier service providers.

#### 5.1.4 Evaluating and selecting the service provider

When considering the criteria used for evaluating and comparing service providers against each other, and thus selecting one over the other, the replies of the interviewees were rather coherent. The commonly most important criterion was said to be contents of the course and the ability to tailor the contents to accurately suit the current needs of the organization.

Price was also mentioned as a criterion by all interviewees, but it was not admitted as the primary or decisive one. Moreover, buying from a familiar service provider was said to be of ease and convenience, and a further crucial

criterion turned out to be prior good experiences regarding the overall service, as well as the courses and their contents.

## 5.2 Buying centre

The interviewees were asked to identify members of the organization to fill the different roles that in theory exist within the buying centre. Moreover, they were asked about their own role and influence in the decision-making. Participants are first identified, and their input will be discussed later on.

*Users* of the service being bought are the employees of the organization who participate in the language and communication training. They have several titles and tasks within the organizations. In all research object organizations, the users include employees who are in contact with customers or clients of the organization, e.g. customer care in different units, sales personnel, reception and office personnel. Also, employees in contact with suppliers and research and development personnel participate in the training, and are thus users of the service bought, and an integral part of the buying centre.

According to the interviewees in two of the three research object organizations, there are other potential users in addition to those who have already participated in the training. Due to this reason and the fact that the growing importance of communication skills has been recognized, additional training is under planning.

The *buyer*, who has the formal authority to actually sign the contract for the purchase, in the interviewed organizations is either the manager or the CEO. The *buyer* is involved in deciding who the final service provider is, in two of the interviewed organizations. In the third one, the decision is made by the *decider* solely, and the implementation is left to the *buyer*.

The *deciders* make the decision on the service provider either independently or together with the *buyer*, or as in the third case: the roles of both *buyer* and *decider* are acquired by the same person.

*Gatekeepers* - people who may have control over whether a piece of information reaches others in the buying centre - can be difficult to identify. Two of the interviewees claimed that there are no *gatekeepers* i.e. no one blocks information, and contacts take place directly between people who make proposals and decisions. The third interviewee felt that she might herself be a *gatekeeper* since she is the one who receives all information, and although she is a *decider*, she is not the *buyer* with the final authority over the budget and therefore over the final buying decision.

Further *influencers* are heads of department, who bring about the need for training in the employees of that particular department. Furthermore, persons in charge of the budget are seen as *influencers*, as they have the authority over where money may and may not be spent.

### 5.3 Combining buying centre roles and stages of buying

After acknowledging the activities included in the buying process and identifying the people involved, the interviewees were asked to point out which actors were of influence at which stage. For doing so, the following table was presented to the interviewee as a visual link for the stages and the roles, to ease the answering of the questions at hand.

Table 3: Decision stages and roles in the buying centre (empty)

	User	Influencer	Buyer	Decider	Gatekeeper
1. Identification of need	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )
2. Establishing specifications and scheduling the purchase	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )
3. Identifying alternative service providers	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )
4. Evaluating alternative service providers	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )
5. Selecting the service provider	( )	( )	( )	( )	( )

Due to time constraints in one of the interviews, filling this table was left out. Some of the earlier answers however, provide information regarding this subject, and the table will be filled in as far as possible.

In the following table, **x** points out stages at which the person in question was active and involved in, according to the interviewee from organization A. Accordingly, **x** represents organization B, and **x** represents organization C. The (**x**)'s of interviewee A are conclusions from previous replies.



Table 4: Decision stages and roles in the buying centre – according to interviewees

	User	Influencer	Buyer	Decider	Gatekeeper
1. Identification of need	( x ) ( x )	( x )	( )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
2. Establishing specifications and scheduling the purchase	( x ) ( x )	( )	( x ) ( x )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
3. Identifying alternative service providers	( )	( )	( )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( ) ( x )
4. Evaluating alternative service providers	( )	( )	( x )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
5. Selecting the service provider	( )	( )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )

Replies, and therefore places of the x's in the table appear to be somewhat similar, although not exactly consistent with each other, nor with the theory of Webster and Wind (1972). The results will be further discussed in the conclusions, in part 6.

#### 5.4 Practicalities regarding buying

When asked about the initial contact which triggers the buying process, the replies were somewhat varied. This question did not regard the first-time purchase from the language centre, but repeated purchases. In the cases of the interviewed organizations, as in the cases of most client organizations of the language centre, the initial contact in the first-time purchase came from the language centre to the client organization and not the other way around. All interviewed organizations are repeated buyers, and the purchases may be years apart from each other.

With organization A, it is the language centre that makes the initial contact which triggers the buying process of a repeated buy. At the end of each course, the possible point in time for the next course is discussed and it is agreed that the language centre will make contact at that point in time. The responsibility of initiating the process is therefore left for the language centre, as opposed to the client organization.

Regarding organization B, the language centre is again the one who initiates the buying process by contacting the client organization. The interviewee's response was that the contact from the language centre made the organization realize that there was an existing need for training. The interviewee adds that although the need existed, they would not have initiated contact with any service provider, since the need was not recognized until they received the contact from the language centre.

In the case of organization C, it was the client organization that made the initial contact triggering the buying process. The respondent commented that as there is a great deal of providers for these services, they have to consider what kind of education they need, and then seek for cooperation with suitable providers.

After the initial contact which has been a phone call, contact with the interviewed organizations is kept through e-mails and telephone calls. At this stage the training is thoroughly planned and thought over. Prior to the course itself, the current level and specification needs are mapped out by testing

employees of the client organization. The time between the initial contact and the actual implementation of the course varies and may take long periods of time. Organization B names the current economic situation as a reason for delaying the developing of knowhow through training. Organization A has had difficulties in motivating employees to participate in the training, although the need for improvement has been identified to exist. In organizations B and C, need as well as motivation is high but there are insufficient resources to train all employees in need of and motivated to developing their knowhow.

The interviewee from organization C points out that they hope to be instantly informed if problems arise regarding the course, i.e. if someone drops out or is absent on many occasions. Otherwise they do not require contacts during the course. Organization A's comment on communication and agreeing on matters was that it has been fluent and pleasant.

All interviewees state that they were not familiar with the language centre of TUAS before they received the initial phone call from them. When considering the initial phone call from the language centre, one of the respondents states that they were content with the service provider they were working with at the time and were therefore not actively considering new alternatives at that moment. However, when the language centre offered an EU funded training program (considerably cheaper than training available from other service providers) the organization was intrigued. After trying the new training program from the language centre it proved to be better and more accurate than earlier ones for the buying organization. This contentment led to extended cooperation with the language centre.

Another respondent also states that the interest towards restarting the buying process (as the company had purchased training from the language centre earlier as well) arose greatly due to the affordable pricing of the offered training program. These statements regarding attractive pricing contradicts the statements made earlier, claiming that price is not a primary or a decisive criterion. Nevertheless, attributes that differentiated the language centre from

other service providers were said to be price, familiarity, and the good feedback from participants in the training.

All respondents reveal that they are content with the way things have progressed into each buying process. The client organizations receive reminders that it might be a favourable time to organize another course, but are also given the time and space to map out their current demand. What is seen as important in the progression into the process is that the client must be listened to and the process must progress according to the clients' terms and wishes. Also, sufficient material should be sent to clients well in advance, before trying to set up a meeting, to enable the client to familiarize themselves with the offer and to present possible requests for specifications.

#### 5.5 Web pages of the language centre

All respondents have visited the web pages of the language centre, but mainly in order to enter the Optima platform and to view their own personal substances, not so much to view the language centre pages or to search for any specific information. The main pages have been used to enter language level testing and to view course contents. The respondents were therefore unable to recall enough information to comment on the content of the web pages, but have positive comments regarding the Optima platform. Since it is extremely important that the training corresponds to the practical need of the organization, the way the courses are presented online was said to be convenient.

#### 5.6 Customer service and additional services

All interviewees say that they have received good or excellent service when doing business with the language centre. The language centre staff members who the clients are in contact with were said to be appropriate and to the point. The matters that have been agreed on have also been seen to accurately, and it is trusted that the teachers have been selected accordingly.

Regarding the service provided by the teacher (teaching and communication with the teacher) and the service provided by the office staff of the language centre (communication regarding the practicalities of buying), one of the respondents see these two as separate matters; aspects regarding the classes and their location are dealt with the teacher, and matters regarding planning are dealt with the organizer. Two of the interviewees see the two services as a whole. The contract contains the schedule, price, and all aspects regarding the matter. Either way, things have worked out well from the clients' perspective.

When talking about additional services (for example: Facebook, Twitter, newsletters, organized events), two of the interviewees say that it is possible that these types of services would add value to the service bought, however not necessarily for them, at the moment. There is not enough time for anything "extra", according to the interviewees.

None of the respondents were interested in discussions on current matters in Facebook or Twitter, nor felt that there is enough time for this type of interaction. They did mention however, that for others, maybe a younger generation, this could work.

Regarding newsletters, the respondents feel that as they are not looking for anything new, and as their needs are already being catered for in a satisfactory way, they do not need nor have time for anything other than the actual training. Nevertheless, newsletters are seen as a positive thing, rather than a nuisance and although they are often glanced through and then deleted, a respondent still said that she is happy to receive them.

The language centre also organizes events for its clients. An event organized in November 2010 for example, was an "International Breakfast" where teachers, organizers, clients and native speaking exchange students met over a breakfast buffet and live music. Teachers and staff members introduced themselves, and new ideas regarding languages and communication were discussed. None of the interviewees could themselves attend this particular event, but mention that they were pleased to receive an invite, and recall receiving invitations for

several interesting events. However, time restraints make it too difficult to detach oneself from work. Nevertheless, organizing such events does create a positive image of being an active and versatile organization, according to the interviewees, even when they are unable to attend the event.

Overall, the respondents are pleased with the cooperation and relationship they have established with the language centre.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study is to describe and understand the buying behaviour of the language centre clients. This part covers the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the interview results, as well as development ideas regarding the operations of the assigner organization, the Language Centre of Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The results of the empirical study are compared against the theoretic research material in order to find out, whether the results gathered provide answers to the research questions that were formulated before conducting the actual study. The first research question is: *What is the structure of the customer's buying-decision process?*

### 6.1 Conclusions regarding the structure of the buying process

According to the literature gathered for the theoretical part of this thesis, the buying of such services as the language centre offers in industrial markets is always regarded as a *process* in which more than one person from the buying organization is involved. The model of Webster and Wind (1972) which was used as a point of reference introduces five stages that form the buying process, and all five stages were also recognized to occur in practice regarding the buying of all three interviewed organizations.

The fact that the structure of the customers buying decision process includes at least five differentiable stages is something that the seller, i.e. the language centre, needs to acknowledge and use in formulating their own strategy and actions regarding the sell. It is important to lead the customer through the stages without pressuring them to reach the final stage too quickly, as it might lead to terminating the whole process. As was stated by one of the interviewees, familiarizing oneself with offers and related materials takes time.

The need for language and communication training is recognized by all three interviewees as growing and apparent in daily operations of the organization. As

the need identification is the initial stage which triggers the buying process (Webster and Wind, 1972), it is most crucial for the language centre to be able to ensure that the need identification for new potential customers takes place and the process is thus triggered.

In many cases the initial contact from the language centre to the potential customer causes the customer to consider the issue and possibly realize that the need does exist. Since this may be considered the point which determines whether the process begins or not, extra attention should be put in the initial phone call and particularly in attempts to promote the need identification.

Listing the current uses for, and advantages of language and communicative skills of the existing clients, may be used as a trigger for potential customers to realizing their own needs. This listing might take place during the initial phone call or it might be included in e-mails following the phone call and specifying the offer. These uses, i.e. where good language and communication skills are required, include communicating with clients, suppliers and other external agents of the organization, as well as internal communication within the organization itself.

Another aspect that the current clients have in common is that they have realized the importance of continuous education of employees, as well as the importance of, and advantage gained from effective communication in daily operations. These factors might also be used in persuading the potential customers into realizing the scope of their own needs.

Regarding the identification of alternative service providers, it is evident based on the replies of all interviewees that as buyers they do not feel a need for externally seeking for unfamiliar service providers, since they receive contacts and offers constantly. Therefore, the image and information that the buyer has of alternatives at this point is crucial. This emphasizes the role of the initial contact to potential customers. Mass marketing and PR could be used to strengthen conspicuousness and improve the image of the language centre, which might prove helpful in the stage of the initial contact to the customer.



The strength of the language centre is that when a buyer-supplier relationship has been established, it is able to cater experiences satisfying enough for the client not to seriously consider alternative service providers.

In order to select one service provider over others, certain criteria are used to compare the available service providers to one another. The most important criterion was said to be the ability to tailor the content of the course to fit the current need and situation of the organization. This emphasises the importance of mapping out the current level of skills and the wishes of the organization. Amongst the strengths of the language centre is the high quality of teaching and the teachers' ability to use varying teaching methods to cater for the individual needs of each client.

Although price was said to have attracted the clients at first, it is reputedly not the primary or decisive criterion when choosing the final service provider. The fact that price unquestionably is an important factor, highlights the importance of being able to offer funded learning programs such as OSAKE\*. Good experiences and the convenience of repeating a buy from an already familiar provider are also said to be of influence, which makes post purchase actions and relationships with existing clients important.

\* OSAKE (In Finnish: -Opetushenkilöstön ja työelämän viestintäosaamisen kehittäminen monimuotoisissa ympäristöissä) is a project, partly funded by the European Union, and it aims at improving communicational skills in working life for teaching personnel.

## 6.2 Conclusions regarding the buying centre

Overall, it is well acknowledged amongst the interviewees that several people do influence the buying decision process, as stated by Robinson et al. (1967). The buying centre of language centre clients does not consist of only one or two people, as may have been assumed earlier. The theory used for identifying the people involved (by Webster and Wind, 1972) includes five separate roles, and people who occupy those roles all influence the buying decision in one way or

another. The empirical research reveals that all five roles are identified to have one or more people occupying it, in one, two or all of the interviewed organizations.

Following are first a table demonstrating the most likely influences of members of the buying centre at each of the five stages of the buying decision process, according to Webster and Wind (1972). The second table illustrates the replies from the empirical research of this study.

	User	Influencer	Buyer	Decider	Gatekeeper
Identification of need	( x )	( x )	( )	( )	( )
Establishing specifications & scheduling the purchase	( x )	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )
Identifying buying alternatives	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )	( x )
Evaluating alternative buying actions	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )	( )
Selecting the supplier	( x )	( x )	( x )	( x )	( )

Source: Webster and Wind, 1972, pp 80

	User	Influencer	Buyer	Decider	Gatekeeper
1. Identification of need	( x ) ( x )	( x )	( )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
2. Establishing specifications & scheduling the purchase	( x ) ( x )	( )	( x ) ( x )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
3. Identifying alternative service providers	( )	( )	( )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
4. Evaluating alternative service providers	( )	( )	( x )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )
5. Selecting the service provider	( )	( )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( x ) ( x ) ( x )	( )

Source: Niina Heikkilä

All interviewees identified themselves as occupying a role of *decider*, which explains why the *decider* is seen as being involved at all five stages. Naturally, the respondents feel some kind of a connection to each activity, as they are an integral part of the buying process as a whole.

As can be interpreted from the above table, users are seen to influence in the early stages of identifying the need and establishing specifications regarding the contents and level of each course. Although this does not correspond with the likely influences listed by Webster and Wind, the users are not involved in the later stages according to any of the interviewees.

The involvement of *influencers* differs greatly, as in the table of Webster and Wind *the influencers* are likely to be involved at each of the stages. Only a few

*influencers* were recognized by the interviewees as being involved, and at only one of the stages. Furthermore, the buyer is acknowledged to influence in many of the crucial stages, according to both the interviewees as well as according to the theory of Webster and Wind.

Being aware of all the different people exerting their influence at different stages of the process is important for the language centre, as success in industrial marketing is said to depend on being able to identify who these different members of the organization are and what their influence is. (Robinson et al., 1967)

### 6.3 Conclusions regarding the practicalities of buying

The second research question is: *How do client organizations perceive the buying-decision process?* In order to find out how they actually perceive the process, the interviewees were asked what activities actually took place and formulated the buying-decision process in their case, and how they felt about each of the occurred activities.

The fact that in two of the three interviews, the respondent stated that the buying process of a repeated buy was triggered by a contact from the language centre to the customer reveals the importance of contacting existing customers who have in the past purchased courses from the language center. What further emphasizes the significance of contacting the existing customers is that one of the respondents admitted that although a need existed for training, they would not have initiated contact because the need was not realized until they received a phone call from the language centre.

The third respondent prefers a model where they are the ones who initiate the buying process by first considering what they need, and based on those considerations contact the suitable service provider. It is thus extremely important that customers are aware of everything the language centre has to offer, in order to prevent the customers from changing to other service providers assuming the language centre does not offer the education they need.

Several client organizations of the language centre have been involved in OSAKE, which is a training program funded by the European Union, and thus considerably cheaper compared to the training of competitors of the language centre. One of the interviewed organizations was working with another service provider at the time, but decided to try the education provided by the language centre, due to its affordable pricing. This organization found the training offered by the language centre to be better suited for them, and this contentment led to the ongoing relationship between the organization and the language centre. This indicates that the strength of the language centre is being able to cater for its clients in a professional and satisfactory manner, and thus create long-lasting relationships.

Being able to offer funded programs such as OSAKE, at minimal costs for the client organization is a huge advantage for the language centre. It provides the language centre the opportunity to gain the interest of potential clients with the small costs and thus creates the opportunity to convince the client with proficiency of teaching, accurate contents and ease of cooperation, to continue the buyer-supplier relationship. According to the feedback from clients, the language centre has managed to do just that.

The third research question is: *How can the language centre formulate its strategy to suit the client's process?* The previously introduced processes, activities and perceptions of the language centre clients should be used as a base for formulating the strategy of the organizational education unit, for selling their services.

As was established in the theoretic frame of reference in part 2, understanding buyer behaviour is crucial in order to successfully market and sell services. This is why the practical information gained through the empirical research of this study provides valuable information for the organizational education unit, and helps better understand the behaviour of its clients. This information may in turn be used for acquiring new customers through a more customer oriented approach.

The ideas and information gathered in this study provide various possible benefits to the Organizational education unit of the Language centre of Turku University of Applied Sciences. The unit now has practical information that can help add sales, gain potential growth and improve customer relations.

Based on the finding of this study, knowledge on the buying processes of the client organizations could be extended through further qualitative research. This could provide a broader, more generalized viewpoint on the subject. More client organizations could be studied, and organizations of different sizes could be included as well as organizations that are not repeated customers of the language centre. This could provide valuable information, not available from repeated buyers.

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