Telling ELT Tales out of School

Teaching business English – a challenge both for students and academics

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present some challenges that both teachers and students in the academic environment have to face when it comes to the study of business English. We are going to refer to the syllabus we are currently using, the materials and technologies involved in the teaching-learning process, the necessity of adapting to the students’ needs concerning their future jobs in the business environment as well as the assessment type and the content of the test used for obtaining a language certificate in business English offered by our department.

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**Key words:** Business English; students; language certificate; syllabus; course design

1. Introduction

Business English must be seen in the larger context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as it shares the important characteristics of needs analysis, syllabus design, course design, and materials selection and development which are common to all fields of work in ESP. As with other varieties of ESP, Business English involves a specific language corpus and emphasis on specific types of communication in a specific context. However, it was pointed out that Business English is different from other varieties of ESP due to its mix of specific content and general content (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). Hence the challenges that teachers of Business English face in their activity are as follows: What should the main focus be on? Specialized vocabulary? Improving communication skills in a business-related context? More specifically, what do non-native students in economics and business need to know about Business English in order to face the future challenges in their careers? How should a Business English course be designed in order to fulfill the expectations and necessities of the future businessmen? What teaching and learning techniques are most appropriate to the content of such a course?

These are a few questions this paper attempts to provide answers to, answers which are based on the practical experience of the authors as university assistants at the Department of Modern Languages and Business
Communication, the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, one of the oldest and most important state universities in Romania.

2. The importance of studying English in Romania

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the study of foreign languages and especially English revived in the Romanian educational system. Children start learning a foreign language from a very early age, 3 or 4, in kindergarten and continue in primary school, then in secondary and high-school with the first and another (second) foreign language. The most studied language is English, on the one hand, because it is obviously the most “international” language and, on the other hand, because there is a need for employees with good English skills on the Romanian job market as more and more international companies are now operating in our country. Besides English, pupils can also study French, German, Italian or Spanish in school. It is natural then that this concern for the development of foreign language abilities has been extended to the academic environment as well. No matter what college or faculty one attends, a practice course in a foreign language is usually included in the curriculum. Moreover, a language certificate is most often required in order to get a Bachelor’s degree or apply for a Master’s or PhD program. The majority of private and state-owned companies require knowledge of at least one foreign language, generally English, as a major asset of their future employees. So, it can be seen very clearly that learning foreign languages, especially English, in Romania has become increasingly important to all categories of people, no matter their age or qualification.

3. English in the Romanian academic environment

As mentioned above, in all Romanian academic institutions the study of at least one foreign language is compulsory. We are going to refer to a particular case, the university where we teach, the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, which is ranked among the first 1000 universities in the world, as well as to how English is taught here to students other than those from the Faculty of Letters. There are two departments which provide English courses for this category of students. These mostly practice courses last for one to four semesters dependent on the curriculum of the respective faculty. The students are expected to have at least B1 level (intermediate, according to the Common European Framework assessment scale) at the beginning of such a course, and they should be able to reach B2 or C1 level at the end of at least 2 or 3 semesters. The syllabus and the course design differ from faculty to faculty; nevertheless there are common components such as grammar or functions, with the differences referable to topics and vocabulary which are tailored to the major field students are dealing with during their academic studies.

4. Business English

It is common knowledge that students with a major in economics or business should study business language and vocabulary, whereas students with a major in chemistry, history or any other science should have a course in general English (or another foreign language) with the necessary adaptations to the specific language of their major area.

The department we belong to is part of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, and it provides foreign language courses for the students of this faculty and for another two faculties, the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of European Studies, so the major focus of our activity is business language and communication. We are going to refer to the structure of these courses and the challenges we encountered while designing the syllabus and the content of our courses. As we teach English, the examples will deal with this language.

The curriculum for students in business and economics at our university comprises 4 semesters of foreign language study in the form of a practice course in business English (or French, or German), and 2 semesters of a course and a seminar entitled “The Language of Business Communication” in the same foreign language these students studied in the first two years. These courses take place every week, making a total of 28 hours of practice course per semester in the first two years, and 14 hours of lecture and 14 hours of seminar per semester in the third year. The structure is the same for all the students of the faculty, whatever their major may be (accounting, banking, marketing, management etc.), except for the students majoring in International Relations who also have a practice course in another foreign language for three semesters, starting with the third semester. All students in the second year have also the possibility of choosing to study another foreign language as a non-compulsory course.
Compulsory language courses are also included in the curriculum of certain Master’s programs provided by the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. Master’s students attend a one-semester course in Intercultural Business Communication (in English or French, dependent on the first foreign language they studied in school and faculty) and a two-semester practice course in another foreign language (English, French, German, Spanish or Italian).

5. The syllabus and the design of a business English course for students in economics

Next, we are going to refer to the components involved in the structure and the content of the practice course in business English that we teach to the first and second year students from the Faculty of Economics. A number of the following essential questions arose from the very first time our more experienced colleagues started designing this course, as well as every time its content has been under discussion and subject to modifications: What should such a course contain? What language skills should it focus on? How much specialized vocabulary should it comprise? Should there be a different course design for each program of the faculty (marketing, management, finance etc.)? How much knowledge of economics does an English teacher need in order to be able to teach such a course? What should we actually teach, specialized vocabulary or the use of language? Should we expect our students to be able to use a large range of business-related vocabulary or to be able to use English correctly in business-related contexts, to acquire good communication skills in addition to the linguistic ones?

There have been many developments over the past decades in terms of the way teachers and course designers look at Business English. In the 1960s and 1970s the specialist vocabulary was seen as the distinguishing component between General English and Business English. Textbooks at that time were intended to offer target specialist vocabulary in a context of a written text or dialogue which dealt with a specific topic (for example, banking). Exercises mainly comprised comprehension questions about the text and vocabulary drills. Such textbooks did not take into account the learner’s previous knowledge nor did they consider how the learner might use language in real life.

Later on, in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s course books began to put a greater emphasis on communication skills, on speaking, writing, listening and reading within a business context. Business English teaching became thus more focused on functional areas – language for recommending, expressing opinions, giving advice, showing agreement etc. These developments have continued so far as there appeared a growing need for enhancing such skills as presentation techniques, negotiating or meeting skills. The practical use of language prevailed over the theoretical knowledge about the language.

Another important distinction that specialists made over the past decades was between pre-experience and job-experienced learners of Business English and, consequently, between teaching to the former and to the latter. Thus, students in economics could be considered as pre-experience learners who have special needs according to their existing level of English and to the language requirements involved in their future jobs. Pre-experience learners seem to be more open-minded than job-experienced ones but they may lack confidence in their ability to deal with business subject matter. Therefore, they need to be given adequate information from which to work. A course provided for this category must take into account these needs.

When designing a course in Business English, specialists such as Mark Ellis and Christine Johnson (1994) suggest a few specific steps to consider, in contrast to General English courses, such as:

- Needs analysis: what do students need to know in order to face the requirements of their future job environment?
- Assessment of level: using written tests, we can see what level of language students have at the beginning of the course.
- Syllabus: set courses, like the ones taught in colleges, should have fixed objectives and syllabus.
- Course objectives: should be defined in relation to the needs analysis findings; in the case of pre-experience learners they can be worded in terms of their course of study or in terms of required language improvement (command of structures, functions etc.)
- Time: in the case of college language training, time is limited so the course should be structured according to the duration (number of weeks, semesters etc.).
- Learner expectations: in the case of Business English, learners are likely to be more goal-orientated and to expect success.
Evaluation of progress: written or oral examination, dependent on particular circumstances.

These steps were very helpful in the elaboration of our Business English course. After assessing the students’ needs, the conclusion was that the content of this course should be the same for all the students no matter their major specialization. This decision was made years ago when students had the opportunity of following a course in specialist language in their last year which was intended to focus on the particular requirements of the field the students were supposed to work in after graduation (banking, marketing, tourism etc.) However, after the introduction of the Bologna system, some courses were closed and this course was among them. Regardless of this development the structure of the practice course remained the same; in this respect, opinions were shared. There are students and teachers who believe that students in economics need to acquire general Business English knowledge, with vocabulary from all business fields and an emphasis on skills, functions and the practical use of language. Others feel there is a need for a more specialized course which should put an emphasis on specific vocabulary related to their major study area (accounting, finance, marketing etc.) All in all, the structure and content of the course remained the same for all programs and students of our faculty, and as we are going to show later on, it contains topics, skills and functions that will be useful to any person working in the business environment. We also have to mention here that not all our students end up working in the field they have a major in; we can find accounting graduates working in banks or marketing graduates working in tourism. So they will definitely need a course that will help them in various business areas.

The level assessment of students is usually made at the beginning of the first year through a written test, most often a multiple-choice test based on grammar knowledge. Students should be at least at B1 level in order to be able to face the requirements of the course. They are told from the very beginning that they need to continue the study of the first foreign language they learnt at school in order to reach B2 level in the third year. Moreover, in order to benefit from the business communication course they will have to obtain a language certificate that is necessary for degree program completion. We will refer to this certificate in the following sections. If students do not have the required level at the beginning of the first year, they may be allowed to attend the course but they must take personal responsibility for catching up with their peers on their own in order to reach the expected level. Our department also has a language centre that offers different kinds of courses at different levels for the community, and students can also use these courses to improve their English knowledge.

The syllabus is fixed in terms of topics, structures, skills, functions, and basic vocabulary. There is a comprehensive description of the syllabus and the course in the form of a brochure entitled “Business English Files” (there is one for each language and each year of study). The teachers on the course can find the guidelines they need to follow, the main topics for each semester, the grammar issues they have to cover, the skills and functions to work on in each part of the course, as well as basic vocabulary students are expected to acquire by the end of this course. However, teachers have a choice of materials; they can use textbooks they consider suitable to their course together with supplementary audio-video, workbook, and test materials. We have noticed that the majority of us prefer using British or American business English course books as they appear to be the most comprehensive sources for such a course. The level of the course books is usually upper-intermediate or advanced and here we can mention the well-known Market Leader (Cotton et al., 2001; Dubicka & O’Keeffe, 2006) collection, New Insights into Business English (Tullis, 2000), New International Business English (Jones, 1996) and others. These course books cover the topics of the course (e.g. Professional Communication, Recruitment, Business Ethics, Management, Marketing, Finance and Accounting, Banking etc.) and they are structured into thematic units comprising essential vocabulary input through authentic economic texts usually taken from economic magazines such as “Financial Times” or “The Economist”. These texts are accompanied by reading comprehension drills, vocabulary exercises and listening comprehension exercises. A grammar issue is presented in every unit together with suitable exercises and the skills part is completed with the functional approach in a larger context, for example “negotiating” and “expressing agreement and disagreement”. Some units also contain a case study that is very appealing to students, it can be used for group work and development of speaking abilities, and then a writing topic should be suggested on the case, for example a report or a letter, something specific to the business field.
The objectives of the course are clearly defined and they mainly refer to the command of structures and functions. For example, at the end of the course students should be able:
- To understand different types of oral messages in English;
- To identify attitudes and opinions from a material they listened to;
- To initiate and participate in conversations on professional themes;
- To extract the relevant information from a text using different reading techniques;
- To compose written messages adapted to the professional environment such as letters, reports, proposals etc.;
- To communicate effectively in a business environment where the use of foreign languages is necessary.

As we are speaking about a practice course, the evaluation methods should also be specific. Thus, students are actually assessed during the whole semester in terms of their participation in classes; they have a mid-term examination which usually consists of a grammar test, and also an end-term examination which can be written or oral, at the teacher’s discretion.

6. The language certificate

The need for certification in a foreign language has always existed as a natural need for the public acknowledgement of one’s level of knowledge and abilities in the use of a non-native language. Students who are willing to obtain a degree from a university in another country are usually required to obtain a language certificate in the language of that country or an international language, most often English. The majority of universities in the United States and in Europe require TOEFL certificate; however there are a lot of universities which accept Cambridge language certificates either in general English (CAE, CPE) or in business English (BEC Vantage or Higher).

According to the new regulations of the European Union concerning language policies, certification in at least two foreign languages is necessary for any European citizen. This certification is not necessary just for admission to a certain college, but also for obtaining a Bachelor’s degree or applying for a Master’s or PhD program. Therefore in our university the existing language centers offer opportunities for students to obtain this certification as a requirement for obtaining a Bachelor’s degree.

As mentioned in the previous section, our department also has such a center, which provides language courses for the community and which issues language certificates in general and business language (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish). The students of our faculty need to take this certificate exam at the end of their Bachelor’s studies unless they already own an internationally-recognized language certificate such as Cambridge or TOEFL. This certificate called Lingua (like the name of our language center) is, at the moment, a nationally-acknowledged language certificate that students can use in our country to apply for Master’s or PhD programs, to apply for scholarships abroad through our university (Socrates, Erasmus), or to prove their language competence at their job place. The certificate has a limited validity period for two years.

What do you actually assess through this certificate? First of all, the progress students have made since their admission to a college until graduation, which covers three years of study and six semesters of foreign language courses. The certificate exam consists of two parts: a two-hour written exam and an oral exam. A skill-based assessment similar to the one made in the Business English Cambridge exam will show if students reached the required B2 level.

The written exam comprises four parts. The first one is a listening comprehension drill; students listen to a 2-3 minute recording (a presentation, a dialogue or several monologues on the same theme) and they are supposed to do a certain task. For example, to decide on truth value of 5 or 6 sentences related to the recording, or to fill in the gaps with words they hear, or to choose the correct answer to some questions from a given list. The second part is a reading comprehension exercise; students are given a text from which 5 or 6 sentences have been removed and they have to insert the sentences back in the text, the sentences being written in a random order below the text. Part three is called “English in Use” and it comprises several vocabulary and grammar drills: open cloze, multiple choice, identify the wrong structure or derive new words from the words given. Part four is a writing task; students have to write a business-related paper i.e. a report, a letter or a proposal. The oral exam has two parts; the first part consists of a mini-presentation based on a statement the candidate chooses from a range of subjects; the second part requires interaction with examiners based on a topic the student learnt about during school years (advertising, business travel,
meetings, insurance etc.). The oral exam lasts for around 5 minutes per candidate and it takes place after the written exam, on the same day.

The marking scheme allocates 6 points to each section in both exams; however, there is a calculation formula for the written part, with maximum 18 points, and the remaining 12 points are allocated to the oral exam, 6 points for each part. The maximum number of points a candidate can get is 30; however, the required minimum is 20 points, which would represent B2 level. So, if a student gets 20 or more points, she/he can register for a support course related to their BA dissertation and obtain a Bachelor’s degree, or can apply for an entrance exam to a Master’s or PhD program. If the score is under 20, students must retake the exam until they reach the necessary level. If someone needs this certificate for other purposes, then a lower or higher score could be required. Exams take place on Saturday, at least twice a month, registration must be made on-line and there is a symbolic fee for candidates.

In order to help candidates understand the structure and requirements of the exam, our department prepared a brochure, “The Candidate’s Guide to the Lingua Certificate”. This brochure familiarizes candidates with the structure of the exam and provides examples of tests in general and business language for all the languages that we teach. There are also test books published by members of our department, as well as course books based on the syllabus that was described before. There are students who prefer to take an international certificate such as BEC Higher because they have a very good level of English and such a certificate has a life-time validity period. Our center also provides preparation courses for this exam, therefore, another interesting topic to discuss in a future paper would be the teaching techniques we use in these courses as we have quite an original skill-based approach to teaching and practice.

7. Conclusions

In this paper we attempted to present a few aspects of our teaching experiences related to Business English. We described the major issues we were confronted with while designing the syllabus and the practice course for students in economics. We support the practice of continuous assessment and the necessity of focusing more on the use of language than on specialist vocabulary. However, the issue is still open to discussion and we believe that, together with the introduction of the Bologna system in higher education, we should re-assess the needs of our students, and consequently reconsider the content of our courses as well as more modern techniques that would be suitable to this kind of course and to the needs of future economists.

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