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Developing a Skills-Based Syllabus for Business English Students

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Abstract

As ESP trainers, we are increasingly aware that our learners have a specific purpose in learning English. Consequently, our aim is to develop a syllabus based on their particular needs and professional requirements. Our course objectives should thus focus on developing skills, cultural awareness and communicative effectiveness. Therefore, language accuracy is no longer a priority particularly if we take into account time restrictions (short number of hours) as well as other limitations (great number of students, various levels of English, etc.) and challenges (knowledge of the field, jargon) that the Business trainer has to deal with on a regular basis. It has long been argued that learning the vocabulary related to a particular job is fundamental to ESP lessons. However, as Adrian Tenant (2015) rightfully notes, standard vocabulary knowledge may actually prove useless when students are faced with real life situations. He stresses on the fact that students must be taught how to learn, develop and use their knowledge on the long term. The aim of this paper is to identify and describe some key skills that business English students need to acquire in order to set the basis of their further development. The main topics which may be included in the Business English syllabus will be discussed and relevant examples will be provided.

Keywords: *Education, ESP, business, communication.*

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Introduction

The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi organizes Business English classes (i.e., lectures and seminars) for its first and second year students. This implies the study of Business English for four semesters (2 hours per week). Depending on their specialization, they may continue the study of English in their third Undergraduate year or during Master programmes. However, our students' level of English remains extremely heterogeneous. They are fed up with grammar rules and are hardly interested in literature and culture. What they are particularly keen to achieve is the ability to communicate in English, both in writing and orally. This is why our purpose is to enable them to use English in both professional and personal contexts. However, some difficulties arise with groups which normally gather students from the beginner up to the advanced level. The large number is also an important issue: the University Business English lecturer usually teaches groups of 30 – 40 students (at seminars) whose level of English, as we have already mentioned, is extremely varied.

Therefore, as Nick Brieger rightfully notes, the main aim of any Business English teacher is to use programmes where *content*, *language* and *communication* are combined in order to develop the learner's language knowledge and communication skills. However, most of us are not content-specialists; we are rather knowledgeable generalists able to tap into the learner's expertise and use it as a resource for his/ her future progress in the field of Business English (Brieger, 1997, pp. 16-17). Our students' main needs revolve around three essential aspects: *accuracy*, *fluency* and *effectiveness*. Nowadays in Romania, English is taught since kindergarten; therefore, most of our students have been at least exposed to it for approximately 12 years before coming to University. Consequently, there are students who have already acquired an impressive amount of general vocabulary and grammar rules but who, despite expectations, fail in acquiring the ability to communicate effectively; there is also another category who, although being capable of effective communication for a limited period of time, thanks to some other abilities related to it – use of gestures, eye-contact, mastering of context-related structures - once outside their specialist area, are no longer capable of dealing with a spontaneous communication situation (Brieger, 1997, p. 42), which is particularly the situation that Adrian Tenant refers to and which we have mentioned in the abstract of this paper.

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1. Business Students' Needs

Our experience shows that students need to acquire: the ability to adapt to an international, global context; the ability to communicate effectively; the ability to relate and interpret meaning; the ability to discover and use cultural information; the ability to decode non-verbal communication. Consequently, we also need to inform our students on *cultural diversity*. Let us take presentations, for example, which are undoubtedly an essential element in business communication – the same presentation may be successful in front of an American audience and might not go very well in front of a Japanese one: with Americans, for example, humour is a must; a direct style, a strong personality are appreciated by this individualistic culture which requires the speaker to "sell" himself; British also appreciate humour but are more moderate in terms of sales language. On the other hand, a Japanese audience will feel more comfortable in a more formal environment, where the communication style is quiet and polite. Similarly, in Germany, a presentation is likely to be very serious and data focused, being normally performed in front of an audience unlikely to become involved (Dignen, 2012, p. 26). Therefore, we may assume that an informal presentation which goes perfectly well in the US may be considered unprofessional in Germany and Japan, for example. Moreover, students must become aware that in international communication, the language should be kept simple and colloquial expressions, jargon, slang and acronyms should be avoided so as to make sure that the message is succesfully transmitted.

1.1 What about Grammar?

However, one may ask *What about Grammar?* Most often, students are reluctant to studying grammar; they expect university lectures and seminars to offer new perspectives on foreign language learning and, to them, this is the equivalent to *NO GRAMMAR!!!* However, we insist on the fact that some focus on grammar rules remains essential. For this reason, during our students' first semester at university, we generally concentrate our efforts to help them reach a satisfactory level of General English, irrespective of their backgrounds. We integrate Business content into grammar structures and we aim to do this in the most appealing manner, i.e. by means of humour. As Anne Dwyer suggests in her paper, *Conditionals: Which Comes First – the Condition or the Consequence?* (in Business Issues BESIG, Summer 2011, Issue 78, pp. 15-16), in order to teach 2nd Conditional, we may use the following approach:

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- Pre-teach the second conditional. Show photos of the most famous economists and elicit the names and the reasons they are famous for. Then distribute a worksheet with the beginning of some sentences comprising the names above. Students think of funny endings using the second conditional.
- Then, students are given the endings of the sentences. They are all mixed. Students are asked to match them. In this way, they learn both 2nd Conditional and new facts about famous economists.

It must be noted, however, that the stress falls on functional grammar – we are particularly interested in familiarizing our students with the linguistic strategies meant to enable them to communicate successfully, i.e. use of modal verbs in business communication, types and structure of questions in business negotiations, for example.

2. Developing the Structure of a Skills-Based Syllabus

2.1 The Syllabus Structure for the First Undergraduate Year

While *Grammar Focus* takes up the first semester of the first year of study (lecture and seminar), the second semester is dedicated to *Company Structure, Managerial Styles, Banking,* and *Marketing*. Quite obviously, the four topics are intertwined which makes it easy to have them blended in the second semester curriculum. Students are introduced to the main types of *companies*, to the key issues related to them and to *managerial styles*, e.g. the notion of leadership is introduced. Students thus acquire key business vocabulary and practice in business-related contexts. An example of such an activity is provided in the May-June issue of *Business Spotlight* (2014, pp. 73-5): students are given a text which provides information on personalities such as Bill Clinton (president of the United States), Lee Iacocca (head of Chrysler), Steve Jobs (Apple), and other representative figures of the global business world and exemplifies on the main characteristics that great leaders share. Students are thus familiarized with vocabulary related to leadership (e.g. awe, devotion, charisma etc.) as well as with practical examples of professional achievement. By using the text as a starting point, we may discuss vocabulary, structural as well as cultural issues.

As for *banking*, it represents one of the most appealing domains for our students. They seem fascinated with the whole range of banking products as well as by the manner in which these are operated. Most of them dream to work in a bank when they graduate. The study of financial and non-financial institutions, of banks (types of banks) and banking is therefore

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extremely relevant to them. We introduce students to the main types of financial institutions (retail banks, investment banks, insurance companies, building societies etc.) as well as to NBFIs (non-banking financial institutions such as pawn shops, currency exchange offices). In this manner, they acquire the banking-related vocabulary (e.g. assets, mortgage, mergers, currency etc.) and are given the opportunity to use it in newly-created contexts during seminars. The role of the Central Bank is also focused on and its key operations are introduced to the students who thus acquire new vocabulary (e.g. bail out, lender of last resort, monetary policy etc.).

Marketing is perhaps one of the most prolific topics in the Business English curriculum; students become actively involved and most of them love to have their creativity engaged in the various activities that Marketing has to offer. Most often the study of Marketing is followed by a product presentation that students have to give during a seminar. They enjoy using the newly acquired vocabulary (e.g. 4 Ps, distribution channel, accessibility vs. availability, promotion, sales) and experiencing on the newly introduced marketing strategies in a hands-on experience, i.e. on a product they choose to "sell".

2.2 The Syllabus Structure for the 2nd Undergraduate Year

The third semester of Business English (1st semester of the second year of study) deals with *Cross Cultural Issues, Socializing* and *Negotiating*: all these focus on students' ability to interact successfully and are obviously intertwined: most often, business professionals have to socialize and negotiate in culturally-diverse environments. Cultural awareness is essential to any professional in the global business world. As Richard Lewis stated, "The English language (…) cannot exist in a vacuum or be disembodied from its speakers with their innate sense of time, space, authority, appropriacy, morality and sensitiveness." (*Teaching Cultural Competence* in IATEFL *Voices*, January-February 2014, Issue 236, pp.8-9) In order to enhance students' intercultural knowledge, we may resort to Hofstede's well known dimensions - Power Distance Index (PDI), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Individualism/ Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity/ Femininity (MAS), Long-Term Orientation (LTO) (Utley: 63) -, to Martin Gannon's cultural metaphors and to Richard Lewis's model, according to which cultures may be described as: *Linear active* - task-oriented, highly organized planners (the Germans), *Multi-active* - people-oriented, loquacious, interrelators (the Spanish), or *Reactive* - introvert, respect oriented listeners (the Japanese) (Lewis: 8-9). Students generally enjoy the use of metaphors in

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Business communication while Hofstede's dimensions and Lewis's model enable them to identify the key aspects of various cultures around the world.

The fourth semester is entirely dedicated to *business correspondence*, which is perhaps one of the most complex experiences that a professional in the English speaking business world has to go through. It is thus our aim to help students become familiar with business correspondence structures and vocabulary which nevertheless implies a high level of proficiency in English. Some key aspects related to writing were identified by Nick Brieger who referred to 3 pillars supporting the business writing skills: *language* (grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, speling), *style* (formal vs. informal, direct vs. indirect, simple vs. complex) and *structure* (format, layout, paragraphs, headings, etc.). Once developed, the above framework was turned into a more friendly one comprising: *readability* – the ease with which the document can be read, *impact* – the intended result of writing, *accuracy* – the correct use of language (Brieger, 2014, pp. 7-8). Our purpose in teaching Business correspondence is to help our students understand and acquire the necessary skills to reach satisfactory levels in terms of *readability*, *impact*, *accuracy*. Put it simply, we are particularly interested in helping our students succeed in writing texts which can be easily read and understood by others. As Bob Dignen shows, there are 10 essential tips to successful writing: manage information (documents need to be accurate, complete, accessible); create personal guidelines (think about the specific context you are writing in); manage the risks (Dignen refers to meaning, permanence and technology-related risks which generally occur in written communication); develop trust (show that you are reliable, that you care, keep people informed); make it readable (here, Dignen refers to length, use of detail and use of jargon); structure (3 main steps are identified in the process of obtaining a clear structure: state your purpose, explain the problem, state the necessary actions to take); accuracy (in terms of verb forms, nouns, conditionals, false friends, etc.); use of register; use of writing as a self-marketing tool; build up a database (to ensure access to documents which may be adapted and re-used) (Dignen, 2014, pp. 29-31).

Conclusions

If we were to shortlist the essential rules in developing a skills-based syllabus for business students, we would primarily address the needs of the students; nevertheless, our focus would also be on keeping materials specific; on exploiting topical resources; on incorporating communicative activities as

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well as on the intercultural element (Preshous, 2013: 15-16). Creating a skills-based syllabus built on the aspects discussed above has been a point of concern for the last four academic years (or even longer). We have experienced with various versions in order to improve its impact on students' learning process and we have found that the above formula responds, to a great extent, to their needs. However, we are still far from the "perfect recipe". As long as the world evolves, as long as people change, as long as students reconsider their expectations, we will have to adapt our learning content to their specific needs, and this may turn into a never-ending story.

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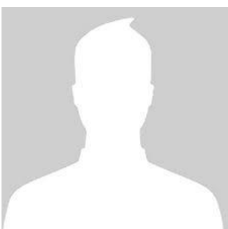

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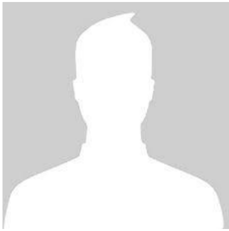
member since 2011. She has published more than 20 papers in the fields of Business Communication, Business English and Cultural Studies



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