

BUSINESS ENGLISH WITH FIRST YEAR STUDENTS IN ECONOMICS

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Abstract: *When teaching languages for specific purposes (LSP), such as Business English, the background knowledge of the students, the level of understanding economic terminology, business notions and concept, play a rather crucial part. Though important and of utmost relevance, this aspect is often neglected and language instructors are faced with the situation of having to check and explain such elements instead of counting on the students knowledge in their field of specialization. As desirable as it may be to able to rely on your students' expertise in the specific domain they are qualifying for and consequently be in the position to even elicit explanations from them when the case, the teachers of LSP more often than not will find themselves in the circumstance of dealing with lexical and conceptual material that seems totally novel for their as yet inexperienced learners. Teachers may not be able to benefit from any 'specialised' help in the matter from their students and hence they shall prepare their material such way that they can themselves, if needed, provide at least minimal information on the specialised concepts and specific terminology found in the material they use in teaching the language. The current article discusses this issue of having to adapt to the level of specialised knowledge of the learners when teaching a language for a specific domain to students newly entering the field. It brings a series of opinions on the matter, as found in the literature, and also presents several concrete examples of unexpected vocabulary problems encountered in teaching Business English to first year students in Economics. Thus, the study puts forward the idea of the need for a better harmonisation of curricula in this respect, so that the study of specialised language shall come after the students are at least elementarily 'initiated' in the major areas of the domain, so that they can have an idea of what some basic notions they meet in authentic texts may represent and mean.*

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1. Preliminaries

As discussed by most part of the literature of speciality, the classic method of vocabulary introduction in teaching a foreign language promotes a contextual approach (Richards & Rodgers, 1996; Walters, 2006).

1.1. Benefits and challenges of authentic texts

People learn better and faster the things that they need and they have a preoccupation towards. „Motivation to learn and effectiveness of learning depend

on the learner's needs and interests. With ESP learners a common approach is to select and work on authentic texts from their field of specialization. The clear relevance of the English course to the students' needs should improve motivation and thus make learning better and faster." (Hutchinson & Waters, p.8)

With students in economics, teaching Business English vocabulary is indeed best to be approached contextually, i.e. to bring authentic texts as study material for the introduction of lexical elements: "Vocabulary can be best learnt in context that is why authentic materials can be a choice" (Sim, p.5).

But this comes with a flaw. Students in their first academic year, and more particularly in the first semester, might not be familiar with the specific economic notions and concepts, not even in their native languages, as these aspects are very likely not to have been covered yet in the classes of the specialised disciplines of study.

1.2. A question of teachers' role

The major question here is: what is the right approach in such condition? Are teachers of languages to explain specific terminology and to what extent? Must they and can they do so?

It can be argued that teachers of ESP should not try to 'know everything' and substitute other instructors, as they cannot be held responsible to fill the lacks in specialised background knowledge: „the goal of English for Specific Purposes is not primarily the teaching of a subject in English as a foreign language, but rather that the aim is to teach English with a specific content which is normally mixed with general topics" (Maleki)

On the other hand, what happens if teachers of LSP cannot properly explain or choose not to interfere? Can the term be simply left aside, until further and appropriate study within speciality discipline classes? Theoretically, yes. Practically though, clarification, at least of a certain degree, is required in order to ensure overall context apprehension that can render a basic fluency of thought needed for the cognitive processes of language acquisition.

2. ESP class profile and corresponding approach

2.1. 'Expectation and return'

Relying on what students already know, on how much they can at the moment grasp from the field of their chosen future career, is crucial in maintaining class interest and consequently in their acquisition of the language terminology at stake. "The students' abilities in their subject-matter fields, in turn, improve their ability to acquire English. Subject-matter knowledge gives them the context they need to understand the English of the classroom. In the ESP class, students are shown how the subject-matter content is expressed in English. The teacher can make the most of the students' knowledge of the subject matter, thus helping them learn English faster." (Fiorito)

Ideally, it should be strictly language, communication skills and linguistic abilities that the LSP teacher should concentrate on because the specialised notions are supposed to be known: „In the case of ESP classes, the teacher is no longer a "primary knower". The students themselves are frequently the primary knowers of the content of material. The teacher's main role is to create real, authentic

communication in the classroom based on the students' knowledge. (Morena, p.46)

Still, though it would be ideal that students only have some general English problems, concerning elements of communication and grammar structure, and could try to cover these lacks by inferring meanings from context, they, as noticed, most often rely heavily on translation (Benhaoued, p.3). But even this or, more appropriately, it is exactly this approach that becomes totally useless in the circumstance when the term in discussion, a given economic concept, is altogether new to the learner.

So, „in certain situations, such as pre-study or pre-work courses in which learners have not yet begun their academic or professional work and have poor subject knowledge, methods of teaching ESP courses will be similar to those of general English. On ESP practice, ESP is a materials-led field, and that most materials are prepared by individual teachers for particular situations. This is, of course, no simple job.” (Dudley-Evans, pp.131-136)

2.2. Level of language specialization

Bearing in mind the actual requirements and characteristics of nowadays labour market, the focus on students' language proficiency is what should be the main preoccupation of a language teacher. „Modern workplace communication expects well-rounded professionals who not only have an excellent command of their subject area, but who can also communicate well both with colleagues and the general public. The focus needs to be on communication, and consider both accuracy and fluency (with fluency being possibly more important than accuracy 'at all costs'). (Day & Krzanowski, p.13)

Indeed, teachers of ESP are supposed to carefully select and prepare their material at the same time with a view to the level of specialisation of their students: “the teacher's task also includes adapting material when published materials are unsuitable or writing his\her own materials. But, one of the main controversies in the field of ESP is how specific those materials should be.” (Morena, p.46). So, material preparation for ESP classes can be a rather painstaking endeavour as, definitely, authentic texts do not allow for levels of terminology understanding in accordance with diverse school curricula.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Aim of research

This practical study aims at finding to what extent English terminology most relevant in several basic economic fields, as met in the authentic texts, can be effectively taught having the conceptual background previously formed and the notional knowledge implemented from practice or during classes of speciality disciplines.

3.2. Research hypothesis

The hypothesis of the current study is:

With first year students in economics, an important part (more than half) of the basic economic terms, notions and concepts that appear in Business English texts, are not understood or known properly.

This situation may be due to a misbalance in curricula, with the study of several introductory disciplines of speciality beginning later.

If the hypothesis is confirmed then the challenges faced by the specialised language instructor, in preparing the didactic material, choosing and adapting texts, finding and providing elementary explanation of specific concepts, become obvious and awareness of this aspect is more than welcomed for selecting best approach and most suitable way of tackling the lesson.

3.3. Method of research

The method of research was that of observation and analysis of data observed with four series of first year students taught along two academic years. Along teaching Business English classes using authentic texts, lacks of knowledge of economic concepts were noted, marked and further centralised and analysed as to the percentage these unknown notions represent in a total of words considered essential or of utmost relevance to the specific domain. A notion was considered unknown if the majority of the students in the group did not understand its meaning or use.

3.4. Results measurement

The share of the known lexical elements and concepts in the total of essential terms selected was calculated and a comparison was drawn between the results in the diverse fields. The percentages obtained are analysed to find whether the research hypothesis is confirmed or not.

4. Analysis of specific vocabulary knowledge

4.1. Approach undertaken

The most relevant vocabulary, lexical elements, notions and concepts met in Business English texts during the classes taught to first year students in economics along the last two academic years were extracted and grouped according to the economic fields they are representative of. Category tables were drawn up presenting this vocabulary lined alphabetically and classified according to proximity of meaning and concepts in each line where the case.

A term was considered unknown and marked with red in the following exemplification tables if the majority of the students in the group did not understand its meaning or use. The table lines marked with yellow represent concepts or notions only partially, vaguely or not thoroughly understood by the majority.

4.2. Data obtained and corresponding remarks

Analysing the situation we can note that there are not too serious issues for the most straightforward circumstances, as those related to getting a career, a job in a company (seen in Table 1), travelling and holiday making (illustrated in Table 2) or passively assimilated lexis due to extensive hearing/ seeing in the media, for instance, as the case of marketing domain (shown in Table 3). For these circumstances, on average, the share of essential vocabulary knowledge in the total selected is around 66%, which is a quite fair result for first year students.

Table 1: Vocabulary connected to working in a company

1. dismiss, lay off, resign, retire
2. dole, indemnity, incentives
3. engage, employ, -er, -ee, (un)employment
4. (sick) leave, days off
5. full-/part- time job
6. getting idle
7. headquarters, office, plant, factory
8. job title
9. moonlighting
10. peers, fellow workers
11. redundancy
12. strike
13. union
14. wage, earnings
15. work shifts/ long hours/ overtime

Source: own concept and design

Table 2: Vocabulary of Tourism

1. abroad
2. accommodation
3. all-inclusive
4. bed and breakfast
5. boarding card
6. booking
7. car hire/ rent
8. check in/ out
9. coach tour
10. foreign currency
11. full board
12. guest house, inn
13. half board
14. hotel, motel, hostel
15. luggage trolley
16. reception
17. resort
18. tour operator
19. travel agent/~cy
20. voucher, traveller's cheque
21. single, double, twin-bedded room
22. self-catering /independent flat
23. paying deposit/ down-payment vs. paying balance
24. sight-seeing, entertainment, leisure activity

25. time-sharing

Source: own concept and design

Table 3: Marketing related vocabulary

1. ad(~vert) (~ise) (~ment), commercial spot
2. brand, logo, slogan
3. challenger
4. competitive edge
5. consumer
6. demand and supply
7. distribution
8. flyer, brochure, leaflet
9. follower
10. free market competition
11. free samples
12. market leader
13. market share/ dominance
14. marketer, market research
15. marketing mix
16. monopoly, oligopoly
17. niche, ~r
18. product line
19. promote, promotion
20. sales, discount

Source: own concept and design

Problems start to develop as the degree of specialisation increases, i.e. as the domains considered are in themselves of a more specific nature.

For the fields of world economy, macroeconomics, international commerce and global business (exemplified in Table 4), we can see that a fifth of the terms are vaguely understood and more than 40% of them are totally new concepts. In all, only a share of 36% (9 out of the total of 25 selected) of the words met in the authentic texts on the domains are clear to the learners.

Table 4: Terminology related to Economy, Business and Trade

1. (foreign) investment
2. (visible/invisible) import/ export
3. aggregate supply/demand
4. autarchy
5. bailout (package)
6. balance of trade vs. balance of payment
7. breach of contract/ agreement
8. capital outflow

9. carriage, shipment
10. carrier, freight agent
11. consignment, merchandise, freight
12. customs, duty free
13. dumping
14. economic output
15. economy of scale
16. emerging market
17. foreign trade
18. free market/ trade vs protectionism
19. GDP, GNP
20. IMF, GATT
21. INCOTERMS
22. margin
23. negotiations, terms and conditions
24. quota and tariffs
25. retail vs. wholesale

Source: own concept and design

In what the field of business organisation and management is concerned, it is remarked that again only 40% of terminology seem totally familiar to the students while a quarter of the terms are remotely known and 35% are brand new concepts (as presented in Table 5).

Table 5: Terms in management and business organization

1. brainstorming
2. chair person
3. chief executive officer (CEO)
4. corporation, company, firm, business
5. General Assembly
6. joint stock
7. joint venture, alliance
8. limited liability
9. meeting agenda
10. memorandum of association
11. merger vs. acquisition
12. minute of the meeting
13. organization chart
14. public company
15. share, ~holder
16. SME
17. social parts vs. shares
18. sole proprietor, freelancer
19. staff, board, human resources

20. takeover

Source: own concept and design

When it comes to money, fiscal issues, finance, banks and banking, financial market and stock exchange, crisis and boom (exemplified in Table 6) or to the sophisticated specialization of accountancy (Table 7) things get even more blurred. Though terminology of banks and banking is heard around and sounds familiar to some extent, meanings prove however rather obscure. Money terminology is grasped, fiscal matters are quite easily deduced from contexts while financial market lexical problems prove of a more complex nature and require more consideration. In all, a third part of the concepts in these fields is understood clearly, a third just vaguely and the other third is rather unknown.

For the accounting field, even the terms that are 'known' seem to be blurry when it comes to their meaning, so some vocabulary might have been assimilated during classes of disciplines such as basics of accounting but many concepts seem to have eluded proper apprehension as to their usage and applicability. Thus, if 35% of the terminology is known there still may be a reserve as to whether its meaning is indeed properly grasped.

Table 6: Basic terminology of Finance and Banks

1. (checking/ saving) account
2. ATM, cash desk
3. bank deposit, deposit box
4. bank overdraft
5. bank run, bankruptcy
6. bill of exchange
7. bonds vs. stocks
8. boom
9. borrow vs. lend, loan
10. broker, ~age
11. bull and bear (market)
12. central/ investment bank
13. cheque, payment instruments
14. coin, banknote, change, cash
15. collateral, mortgage, insurance, real estate
16. credit vs debit, interest (rate)
17. currency, monetary aggregates
18. depression, crisis, recession
19. derivatives, options
20. earn/ earnings, save/ savings
21. economic cycle
22. exchange (rate)
23. fee, taxation, fine, state budget
24. financial bubble
25. front/ back office

26. levy
27. pawn
28. promissory note
29. stock (market/ exchange), index, listing
30. subsidy, grant

Source: own concept and design

Table 7: Accounting vocabulary

1. (in-/tangible) assets
2. (working) capital
3. accountant, accountancy
4. balance sheet
5. book keeping
6. cash flow
7. claim, account receivable
8. debenture
9. depreciation
10. dividend
11. equity / equity interest
12. expenses, expenditure
13. good will
14. income, revenue
15. inventory
16. liabilities
17. profit and loss account
18. turnover
19. value added
20. write off

Source: own concept and design

5. Final considerations on research results

Considering the whole set of results we can note that on average the research hypothesis is fulfilled. In the total of 115 Business English notions, lexical elements and sets of concepts, 34 items are obscurely familiar and 47 items are totally new. These two categories sum up to a share of 70% of unclear terminology, which mean that only 30% of the terms are clear and properly known and understood by the students, as seen in the pie chart in figure 1.

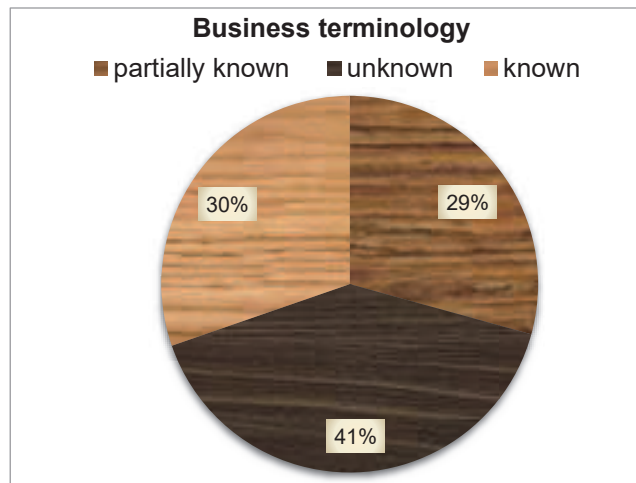


Figure 1. Knowledge of business concepts with first year economic students
Source: own concept and design

6. Conclusion

A minimal but proper introduction to all fields of economics – management, marketing, accounting, tourism, finance and banking, business and trade – seems to constitute a prerequisite to learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), namely English for Economics in this particular case. To ensure effective acquisition of Business English terminology, the basic knowledge in the field and the conceptual background specific to its areas need to have previously been well implemented so that students can make good use of them when attempting to acquire English language for the specific purpose.

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