

What Do We Teach When We Teach Business English?

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There is a large community of Business English teachers worldwide. The number of Business English courses has increased significantly during the last few decades. However, topics regarding Business English have been often avoided by linguistic researchers.

The paper will focus on three currently relevant issues in Business English teaching. Firstly, syllabuses from course books, which have been used at the Faculty of Economics in Split, Croatia in the last six academic years, will be compared in order to analyse advantages and disadvantages of using them to teach Business English to pre-experienced students at the tertiary level.

Secondly, I examine the role of Business English teachers in the process of acquiring Business English and developing skills necessary for either spoken or written business communication. I support the approach that Business English teachers are primarily language teachers (BE teachers in Croatia have TEFL qualifications) and that they do not have to be consultants in management, finance, marketing or other fields of business. Nevertheless, every Business English teacher will have to gain knowledge of specific lexis and business discourse and transfer the knowledge to the students.

Lastly, I will try to resolve the dispute on whether Business English is a part of English for Specific Purposes or simply General English used for business purposes by supporting the argument that it does represent a variety of ESP and that differences exist between teaching General English and Business English.

Key words: Business English, course book, teaching, English for Specific Purposes

Kaj Učimo, Ko Učimo Poslovno Angleščino?

Na svetu je prisotna velika skupnost učiteljev poslovne angleščine. Narastlo je tudi število tečajev poslovne angleščine v zadnjih nekaj desetletjih. Vseeno pa so se lingvisti pogosto izogibali raziskovanju tega področja jezika.

Članek je fokusiran na tri trenutno najvažnejše teme o učenju poslovne angleščine.

Prvo je učni program iz učbenikov, ki so se koristili na Ekonomski fakulteti v Splitu, Hrvaška, v preteklih šestih akademskih letih; avtor navaja in primerja prednosti in slabosti njihove uporabe pri predavanjih poslovne angleščine za študente, ki imajo predznanje na terciarnom nivou šolanja.

Drugo nas avtor opozori na vlogo učitelja poslovne angleščine pri procesu učenja ter na razvoj potrebnih veščin v govoru in pri pisanju poslovne angleške komunikacije. Zastopa stališče, da so učitelji poslovne angleščine primarno lingvisti (npr. učitelji poslovne angleščine na Hrvaškem imajo TEFL kvalifikacijo) ter da ni nujno potrebno, da prihajajo iz krogov svetovalcev v poslovnih upravah, sveta financ, marketinga in podobno. Vsekakor pa mora vsaki učitelj poslovne angleščine imeti potrebno znanje iz posebnih pravnih in poslovnih področij in prenesti to znaje na študente.

In zadnje, avtor nas uvede u dilemo ali je poslovna angleščina del angleščine namenjene posebni uporabi ali je preprosto splošna angleščina, ki se uporablja v poslovnih namenih;

predstavljen je argument, da je del angleščine za posebno uporabo ter da obstajajo razlike med poučevanjem splošne angleščine in poslovne angleščine.

Ključne besede: poslovna angleščina, učbenik, učiti, angleščina za posebno uporabo

In the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Business English is becoming one of its most widely spread components. I will offer a view from a different perspective or rather a view expressed by one more Business English teacher on the topic of teaching Business English.

There is a large community of Business English teachers worldwide. The number of Business English courses has increased significantly during the last few decades. Expressed in figures, data are taken from the book *Teaching Business English* (Ellis and Johnson, 1994); even more than a decade ago there were over 100 schools that provided Business English courses in the UK alone. There are over 1500 members of the Business English Special Interest Group, which is a part of the organisation called the International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL). However, topics regarding Business English have been often avoided by linguistic researchers.

This paper will focus on three currently relevant issues in Business English teaching: Business English course books, the role of Business English teachers and what actually is considered under the term of Business English. Firstly, syllabuses from course books, which have been used at the Faculty of Economics in Split, Croatia in the last six academic years, will be compared in order to analyse advantages and disadvantages of using them to teach Business English to pre-experienced students at the tertiary level.

Secondly, I will refer to the role of Business English teachers in the process of acquiring Business English and developing skills necessary for either spoken or written business communication. I support the approach that Business English teachers are primarily language teachers (Business English teachers in Croatia have TEFL qualifications) and that they do not have to be consultants in management, finance, marketing or other fields of business. Nevertheless, every Business English teacher will have to gain knowledge of specific lexis and business discourse and be able to transfer the knowledge to the students.

Lastly, I will try to help resolve the dispute on whether Business English is a part of English for Specific Purposes or simply General English used for business purposes by supporting the argument that it does represent a variety of ESP and that differences exist between teaching General English and Business English.

The syllabuses for Business English courses at the Faculty of Economics in Split for the obligatory and elective Business English courses for both undergraduate and professional studies strongly depend on the contents of course books used in the Business English classes. The most relevant features and components every course book for pre-experience students should have are: providing an authentic framework of contemporary international business; using the task-based approach which helps the students understand and acquire Business English vocabulary and learn skills in a more efficient way which means including challenging (but not too challenging because it can become frustrating to the pre-experience students) and interactive activities which will enable development of business skills (role-plays, case studies, meetings, presentations etc.); including the whole package of resources for students and teachers (teacher's resource book, supplementary materials for the students, self-study materials for the students and tests); including technologically up-to-date materials such as CDs and DVDs

Course books are a helpful tool, particularly for inexperienced language teachers if they are well structured, topics are carefully chosen, texts provide authentic data from the

world of business and there are abundant additional materials integrated in the course book package for the practice in the classes and for the students' self-study. Course books are, however, more appropriate for experienced learners of Business English than for those already employed and with special requirements. In his book *How to Teach Business English* (2005), Evan Frenko lists the advantages course books offer to language teachers.

Perhaps the most obvious advantage is that they can save the teacher a lot of work. A course book provides a solid framework to work with, which is particularly useful for the less experienced teacher or one who is under time pressure. Many pedagogical decisions, such as course content and methodology, are already made. Most course books look professional, which is normally important with Business English learners. In addition, many course books come as part of a package that includes comprehensive teacher's guides and resources, supplementary materials for the students, self-study materials, audio and video resources, and so on. For certain types of courses, and particularly those for pre-experienced groups, they may also provide a window on the business world.

Course books evolve over time. If we compare the Business English course books used six years ago at the Faculty of Economics Split to the ones that are used now, the new ones are more user/student friendly and more teacher friendly.

The course books we have been using at the Faculty of Economics Split are all designed and published by established UK publishers such as Longman, Oxford University Press or Cambridge University Press. The newest one is *Market Leader* by David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent (pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate level). It is, as the author of the teacher's resource book, Bill Mascull, says "an extensive new Business English course designed to bring the real world of international business into the language teaching classroom". Many authors of Business English course books and those who write about how to teach Business English in a most effective and efficient way emphasise the importance of authenticity. *Market Leader* certainly has that quality, which is, among other activities, achieved by the up-to-date articles from *The Financial Times*.

New Insights into Business by Graham Tullis and Tonya Trappe is a slightly outdated course book, at least the 2000 Edition, which was used as a textbook for students of professional studies at the Faculty of Economics till 2004. It does, however, provide a good choice of topics relevant and necessary for experienced students. Students who use the course book can find out basic information about company structure, the process of recruitment, retailing, franchising, international management styles, and the stock market. What this course book lacks, and *Market Leader* provides, are case studies, simulations of meetings at which students have to try to solve certain problems that particular company faces, and more activities for developing behavioural techniques (socialising, presentations, interrupting and clarifying at meetings, and negotiating).

Activities mentioned in the previous paragraph encourage business English students to use practiced expressions, phrases, and collocations related to a specific business topic or a situation they could find themselves in while performing one of the tasks at work in future. Case studies are activities with more layers than other previously mentioned activities. For every case study, students have to be prepared to use the whole range of skills in order to make the proper use of it. Most of the time, students simulate a meeting in small groups and upon ending the meeting one or more of them present the decisions made at the meeting or explain the actions the group decided to take in order to solve the problem set in the case study. Every case study, at least in the *Market Leader* set of course books, requires students to write either a report, business letter or an e-mail in which everything that was practiced orally in the class is transformed into a written business correspondence task.

That case studies represent an activity strongly favoured by business English students prove the results gained in the research conducted in October 2007 among second year

students of Economics and Business Studies at the Faculty of Economics in Split, who were taking the course Business English 3 and had already gained sufficient experience in completing case study tasks. When asked to decide whether they preferred discussing case study tasks at the oral exam or the rest of the exam questions, 80.3% (122 out of 152) of the interviewed students opted for the case study tasks (Marinov and Pašalić, 2008).

The main disadvantage of case studies is that they are sometimes too challenging for students to cope with. Students need more information and step-by-step guidance through the whole activity because they lack necessary knowledge and experience and the skills to predict the best options in particular business situations. It is not easy for a first year student to simulate a meeting at which he/she has to discuss setting up a joint venture structure between two holiday companies with colleagues from the group even when the teacher provides a thorough explanation of what joint venture refers to.

There is another disadvantage which has nothing to do with the contents of case studies but with the number of students in one group (on average 50) at least in the case of the Faculty of Economics Split. Pair work and group work methods represent an excellent opportunity and structures suitable for simulating business situations and developing behavioural techniques. Nevertheless, it is quite an endeavour for one business English teacher to control often more than ten groups of 4-5 students in the class dealing with a case study task for instance. Further discussion on this topic will be presented in another paper.

We will now briefly analyse contents of course books for business English in tourism High Season and First Class which used to be used at the Faculty of Economics with students of Tourism. Unfortunately, these course books do not follow the same pattern as the two mentioned earlier (*Market Leader, New Insights into Business*). Limited instructions and sometimes not a clear aim of activities make them less student friendly and teacher friendly. For example, in one of the units in the course book *High Season*, students have to fill in the gaps in the staff tree of a medium-sized hotel as a pre-listening activity. They have to suggest the missing jobs such as House Manager, Front Office Manager or Resident Manager. The first year students of Tourism have not enough information or previous knowledge to refer to unless the teacher provides the names of all jobs included in the staff tree and their duties. By doing that the teacher would provide all the answers and it certainly would not be an effective pre-listening activity.

However, the course book we use with students of tourism, currently *English for International Tourism*, includes appropriate tasks for the first year students. It is designed in a contemporary style and proves to be more up-to-date resource regarding vocabulary, topics, articles and activities than *First Class* and *High Season*.

Contents of the business English course books are not always prescriptive. Nevertheless, there is a common thread shared by every course book used for business English courses. A clear definition of a business English syllabus can be found in *Teaching Business English* (Ellis and Johnson, 1994):

The business English syllabus is likely to be defined primarily in relation to business performance skills such as meetings, presentations, socialising, or report-writing. Within these skills areas, certain concepts are typically discussed and expressed, for example, describing changes and trends, quality, product, process and procedures, and strategy. These concepts can be broken down into the more linguistically powerful functional areas such as comparing and contrasting, expressing cause and effect, recommending, and agreeing. The language defined in the syllabus may include grammatical or lexical items, and elements of spoken or written discourse, including, for instance, cohesive devices and stress and intonation patterns.

Features of the business English course books discussed in this chapter might be considered helpful by inexperienced business English teachers while trying to choose the right course book for the business English course they are about to teach. Furthermore, course

books do not only have to be used as a resource for the whole course but as a resource for supplementary materials.

The next issue I will examine is the role of the business English teacher. Business English is a quite specific subject to teach at the tertiary level. It requires an interdisciplinary approach because it includes teaching business skills, business know-how, intercultural topics and all of this has to be done in a foreign language. Business English means teaching a foreign language for special purposes, which leads us to conclude that business English teachers have to be, above all, language teachers. It is also clear that students expect the business English teacher to be able to provide the subject matter and the language. Nonetheless, business English teachers actually have to teach their students how to use English when they have to do business.

Frendo's (2005) perspective on business English teachers is an interesting one and it includes the gist of the role of business English teachers:

In most other fields of teaching the teacher knows more about the subject than the learner, but in business English the relationship can be more symbiotic: the teacher knows about language and communication, but the learner often knows more about the job and its content. Business English teachers need to be able to make informed decisions about language and language learning. They also need credibility, professionalism, and an awareness of the business world. Above all, they must be able to adapt to a particular teaching context and be willing, themselves, to learn.

Frendo's view of business English teacher refers primarily to teaching or training in company. It refers to the job-experienced learners and not that much to the students of economics, business or tourism, in particular first year students. However, it is indisputable that every business English teacher has to be prepared to learn about new topics from the world of business and economics.

Some business English teachers can be considered business English trainers. There is a reason for that. We would like to refer to the explanation of the difference between training and teaching given by Mark Ellis and Christine Johnson in *Teaching Business English* (1994):

“Training” is the word commonly used to refer to what adults receive in a company context: we talk, for example, about management training, computer training, and sales training. ”Teaching”, on the other hand, implies education: the passing on of knowledge, but also of a right and wrong way of doing things. (...) Another implication of “teaching” is that it involves giving information about the system of language, whereas “training” implies developing skills using language as a means of communication.

Hence, those who teach courses in negotiations, presentations or finance in companies are business English trainers. However, I believe that training cannot exclude teaching and vice versa.

I believe that there is another distinction to be made while discussing the role of a business English teacher. It is the one between native and non-native business English teachers. Non-native business English teachers are, above all, language teachers. All business English teachers in Croatia, at least the ones who gained their education there, have TEFL qualifications, and who at certain point of their careers switched from teaching general English to teaching business English. It is, of course, much easier for native speakers with business background to gain basic teaching skills and teach business English in companies. For someone who has a degree in business or economics in Croatia to become a successful business English trainer would be quite an endeavour. Therefore, we support the following statement: “Although it is of great value to be able to talk intelligently to learners about their work, it is of greater importance that the trainer should be seen as an expert in presenting and

explaining the language, and in diagnosing the students' language problems" (Ellis and Johnson, 1994).

There is yet another problem imposed upon business English teachers at the tertiary level in Croatia, the one that is concerned with the language background of our students. We have never got the opportunity to teach the group of students at the same level of language proficiency. It is the business English teacher's role to recognise that and to adapt to the situation in the class.

Furthermore, at the Faculty of Economics Split, business English teachers have to teach business and economics as well as business skills and vocabulary. They have to do that because the business English syllabus sometimes includes certain topics students have not yet discussed in other classes at the Faculty. For example, first year students do not know much, if anything, about franchising. Therefore, the business English teachers have to introduce basic information and conditions of franchising business in order to enable them to perform all tasks referring to franchising. The same refers to e.g. marketing mix or "four Ps" because they study marketing at senior years (3rd or 4th) and business English is their obligatory course in the 1st and 2nd year.

I can conclude by saying that the main goal of a business English teacher or trainer is to help students, experienced learners, or job-experienced learners to improve their language skills in order to be able to communicate in English successfully within the specific field of business.

The last part of this paper will refer to the definition of business English which went on on-line among members of the Business English Special Interest Group (BESIG) Yahoo group for weeks. An interesting statistical fact is that the on-line discussion included more than 25 responses from 14 respondents from six different countries, as stated in the article "Business English Definitions – Summary" written by Ian Robert Kirkwood and published in the *Newsletter of the Business English Special Interest Group*, Summer 2008, Issue 69.

One of the members of the BESIG forum sent an e-mail to other members of the forum containing these questions: What is business English? What is the purpose of business English?

Every answer given to these two questions was given by individuals who are established business English teachers and trainers. We would like to compare their definitions of business English and try to prove that majority of business English practitioners support the idea of business English belonging to the discipline of English for Specific Purposes.

One of the responders who took part in the on-line discussion finds business English closer to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) because it includes teaching business concepts to pre-experience students. The same responder thinks that English for Business (E4B) or English for Business Purposes is English learnt by people who do not need the explanation of business concepts but only the English equivalents. They do not need to be taught the contents only the soft skills. S/he concludes that E4B is a part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The other responder emphasised the importance of teaching business communication in the Business English course. S/he believes that helping students improve their communication skills in English classifies Business English as a part of English for Specific Purposes and it differentiates it from English for Academic Purposes.

Another responder emphasised one of the definitions of business English provided by Ellis and Johnson (1994), which says: "BE implies the definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on particular kinds of communication in a specific context."

S/he continues by stating that business English is different from the range of varieties of English for Specific Purposes because it combines a specialised content and General

English i.e. “general content relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations” (Ellis and Johnson, 1994).

In Pickett’s view, business English is “a mediating language between the technicalities of particular businesses ... and the language of the general public” (Kirkwood according to Pickett, 2008).

The on-line discussion goes on with a responder who thinks that business English consists of “issues as the vocabulary which business people use, the particular language skills which they require in order to do business in English, grammar, and the ability to read about and discuss topics of general interest with other business people”.

The same responder states that business English helps business people, and we would like to add to business English students at the tertiary level as well, to read “what is being written in the business sections of newspapers; they can read and discuss the latest ideas coming from international business schools. This allows them to keep up to date with the latest trends, business techniques, innovations and developments in the business world.”

One of the responders listed ELT researchers who support the idea that business English “comes under the greater umbrella of ESP”. The list includes the following authors: Dudley-Evans & St John (1996), Pickett (1986), Ellis & Johnson, 1994, Johnson (1993), Strevens (1978) and Donna (2000). The same responder emphasised Johnson’s (1993) comment on business English which says that “Business English is much broader than other varieties of ESP because of the number of different purposes for which it is taught.”

The previous responder went on even further and reminded us of the possibility to divide Business English, according to Dudley-Evans and St John (1996), into two groups, English for General Business Purposes (EGBP) and English for Special Business Purposes (ESBP). In St John’s view (1996) EGBP is suitable for pre-experience learners and ESBP is intended for job-experienced learners.

One of the reasons for not being able to provide a dictionary definition of what business English actually is, is the fact that, unlike English for Academic Purposes or English used for technological subjects, business English does not have a “common core”. In other words, the lexis and grammar required in certain academic scientific or technological subjects is already defined and in business English it is not yet well established. It could be because of the strong impact of general English (St John, 1996).

Nevertheless, I strongly support the argument that business English has to be included in the context of ESP because all the factors that classify something as ESP are applied to classify something as business English as well. Those factors would be “needs analysis, syllabus design, course design, and materials selection and development” (Ellis and Johnson, 1994).

I have not managed to provide a dictionary definition of business English. However, I believe that I have managed to contribute a clearer picture of what business English includes and even more importantly, what teaching business English involves. I have tried to draw attention to the difference between being a native speaker who teaches or trains business English and being a non-native business English teacher or trainer.

It is also clear that teachers or trainers of business English are not in the same position when they teach at a company and when they teach at the tertiary institutions. In other words, approach and methods used in the business English classroom with experienced students differ from the approach and methods used during in company business English training.

I have praised well designed and well structured course books for business English published by established UK publishers, which were apparently products of long-lasting teaching and researching of language used in the everyday activities occurring in the business world.

As mentioned earlier, it is my belief that disputes over the classification of business English should not be made too complicated. In my view, business English has to be considered an ingredient of English for Specific Purposes. Its vocabulary, collocations, topics, and texts distinguish it from general English. However, it cannot be disputed that general English represents a relevant feature of business English which regardless of the frequency of general English expressions, collocations and similar usages in business English does not make it less important than English for Specific Purposes.

Therefore, regardless of the institution where we teach business English, regardless of the students' business experience and business know-how, it is indisputable that business English includes a specific vocabulary, specific subject matter and it has to meet specified students' needs.

In the end, I would like to emphasise that business English is a field which needs to be researched in more depth. Since business English is corpus based, the future task for business English researchers and practitioners should include more corpus based research.

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