BUSINESS ENGLISH DEVELOPMENT

Luminița COCÂRȚĂ

Universitatea "Al. I. Cuza", Iaşi, Romania

Abstract

The paper suggests a few reference moments in the development of Business English, following a chronological path and defining the literature in terms of the broad movements or approaches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Business negotiations all over the world are usually held in English and sometimes this is a reason of discomfort for those whose first language is not English. Understanding the other side is not easy at all. And the use of English is more and more extended since the internationalization of business environment grows. Furthermore, international companies, mergers and multinationals are expected to increase. Thousands of international non-native to non-native communications are undertaken daily in a huge number of settings: trade, diplomacy, tourism, journalism, science and technology, politics etc. When persons are involved in long-term international communications, such as international trading negotiations, the participants create their own "framework" or "network" (Goffman:1979). Within such a network, norms, standards and interpretive procedures are developed, becoming collectively recognizable as a style, peculiar to, or at least characteristic of the specific network. Therefore, standards of appropriateness, norms of spoken interaction, perception of where negotiations phases begin and end, and knowledge of the sequential ordering of specific negotiating actions are likely to become established by the negotiators over the course of regular communications. Such a network is established and sustainable via a variety of communication modes (telephone, telex, face-to-face meetings) which permit frequent interaction, and in this way, specific norms and styles are shared by a great number of individuals, transcending cultural barriers.

Research has established that 85% of international associations make official use of English, 70% of the linguistics journals in the world are published exclusively in English, 85% of the world film market is in English, 85% of the scientific articles in the world are

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written in English, 80% of the world electronically stored information is currently in English (Crystal:1997).

In the world of business, the English language people use has not very much in common with correct grammar and syntax, with the avoidance of Americanisms, or with having a good prose style, as long as one makes one's meaning clear. It does imply sometimes using the fewest and shortest words to cover one's meaning

Business English is more and more present in our discourse today and therefore, this study is meant to introduce the reader into this area of English for Specific Purposes.

Authors concentrated mainly on different forms of special needs analysis at the starting point of ESP courses, Business English included. Since divergent views appeared - on what those needs might be – there has been debate on whether or not subject-specific texts should be used in classes with students operating in a certain professional area.

If it is to consider the latest theories in the field, there were mainly two directions of thought: one given by Hutchinson &Waters in the early 1980s, who stated that:

"there is no justification for subject specific ESP materials"

because they understood to focus on the underlying *competences of language* and how they may best be acquired, rather than focusing so closely on the specific language itself.

Another direction was given by Pickett's concepts of *ergolect* and *poetics,* leading to the idea that there is a special language that needs teaching, and obviously, materials should reflect this:

"The student already knows the routines and transactions to which business English will refer, since these are almost behavioral universals. His task will therefore be the more narrowly linguistic one of acquiring the expressions."

(Pickett 1989:6)

The problem is with words, not with situations, as Pickett argued further on.

And more than that, as Mounftord put it later on, one should also consider other constraints on the use of ESP materials in the classroom, like:

- institutional factors (time, money)
- teacher factors (levels of training)
- learner factors (students' background and perception)

"The relevance and appropriateness of teaching materials must drive from the language of the target situation, whether or not there is any evidence that the student's interest in his or her

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area of study or work as a motivating purpose will automatically carry over into the ESP classroom."

(Mountford 1988:83)

A survey undertaken in 1998 about the materials Business English teachers used in class concluded with the idea that the most popular ones were:

- *Business Opportunities* (Hollett: 1994)
- *Business Objectives* (Hollett: 1991)
- *Business Class* (Cotton&Robbin: 1993)
- *New International Business English (*Jones and Alexander:1996)

The main reason was the methodology used by the books, taking into account the following 3 aspects:

1. The role of Business English as a mediating language between public and business
2. The wide range of students who may be called "Business English" students
3. The "open door" policy of many language schools which lead to very heterogeneous groups of students who need to be accommodated.

Therefore, materials must not be so specific that they would alienate certain members of a given group.

Adrian Pilbeam, a Business English trainer with many years of experience, presented eight criteria by which he believed Business English published materials could readily be used in the classroom.:

1. specificity
2. appropriateness
3. validity
4. flexibility
5. suitability
6. quality
7. length of production
8. time and cost

Consequently, Business English materials should be a compromise between the two main directions given by Hutchinson &Waters (skills and strategies of learning are important to a successful learning outcome) on the one hand, and by Pickett (the key lexis plays an important role in the teaching process) on the other hand.

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Obviously, the lexis does not and should not represent the only element around which a Business English course would be constructed, but without this specific lexis the effectiveness of the course will certainly be diminished.

Following Pickett's ideas on Business English, we must mention the fact that he gave a framework by which it can be examined:

1. Business language is layered and formed by a process of poetics[1]
2. The communication partners in business are
   - business to business
   - business to public
   - business to business in the same area.

Within this context, the lexis we can find in Business English would be:

a. function words, as in general English: *debt, boom*,
b. sub-technical terms, i.e. terms that are found in general English but have different general technical meanings. These words are thus found to have a broad distribution across disciplines, but may peak in a specific discipline: *depreciation, slump, order*, *issue, invest*, etc.
c. technical terms only found in a given area: *check, discount, invoice*

The idea that Business English is a dialect of English, but not exclusively of England, belongs to the same author (Pickett), who continues to argue that it is not a dialect defined by place at all, but by activity, occupation, subject matter or situation. For this we might use the term *ergolect*- though, for many years linguists have been using the term *register*.

This ergolect is created by the poetics of business language. Thus, general language flows into the Business English environment and takes on new combinations and meanings. These meanings are graded in terms of how understandable they are.

So, there is a lexis of business created by the process of poetics – flowing from the general to the opaque (and back again). This results in a layering of language and indicates that words in a business environment take on new meanings.

Here is an example of Business English layering, when it comes to word omission and abbreviation in telexes. It was suggested by Dudley-Evans (1987) and it contains three main types of abbreviation used: firstly, standard abbreviations that are used in everyday life, such as: *a.m*., *p. m*., a*pprox*; secondly, abbreviations that would only really be used in the office, such as: *asap (as soon as possible)*, *c/n* (credit note); and thirdly, highly specialized

[1] Pickett (1986:2) –Business English is drawn from general English to create fresh meaning in a business context which can then flow back into general usage.

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abbreviations that can be found only in telexes such as *adv*=advise, *bal*=balance. The extent of omission and abbreviation depends very much on the type of audience to which the text is addressed and on conventions established by a company, a department within a company or by an individual.

Therefore, audience is important in the choice of language used in a business setting. In a study about the lexis of Business articles found in newspapers, Posteguillo & Palmer distinguished between two types of articles:

- Business Press Articles (BPA) – aimed at the actual business community to give information and sometimes even influence the economic development of the country
- Business News in the Press (BNP) – articles aimed at the general public, their main purpose being simply to give information on business events.

The results showed that there were some similarities, owed to the fact that they both belong to the same journalistic genre, but there were also differences attributed to the different intended audiences of the articles, as illustrated below:

Similarities between BPA and BNP	Differences between BPA and BNP
Both types had similar average sentence length	BPAs had more references to specific figures
Both had a similar number of finite verb forms per sentence	BPAs had more business terms per article, than PNBs. (35/25 in general)
Both used similar amounts of the passive and active voice in sentences – the active voice being used more than the passive	PBAs used more technical acronyms than BNPs.
	Differences in syntax: the BPAs had much more complicated sentences than the BNP's Differences in the use of visual aids: BNPs often used a cartoon or clarifying map, whilst BPAs used tables and graphs.

Since there are two different types of audiences, there is also a gradation of difficulty in the articles – simpler language for the general public and moving to the more complex for the business people themselves. It seems that the idea of the layering of specialist lexis has

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now started to become accepted in the literature. In his COBUILT-based book: *Key Words in Business,* Mascull (1996) states that: "It (the lexis) systematically covers words and expressions that frequently occur and recur in talking about business. Some of these occur almost exclusively in business contexts; others are used in general English, but are used in a particular way when talking about business."

Nevertheless, the new formula used in class by Business English trainers today – meaning a good mix of teaching experience and real understanding of how business texts function in business communication represents a great improvement in business English teaching.

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