TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract. *English for Academic Purposes can take many forms and one of the most popular in the last decades is Business English. The main aspect to be understood about it is that its teaching is not mainly destined to Business students, although they would probably benefit from it anywhere in the world, at almost any university. However, Business English is mostly and foremost destined to those who, already engaged in a business environment wish to develop their language skills, as well. In all cases, the role of a teacher is to facilitate the adequate linguistic abilities. In the last decades, the focus is mainly on the communicative teaching approach, and the language schools worldwide concentrate on communication mostly, in the detriment of grammar, for instance. This presentation will discuss the pros and cons of the communicative approach in the business environment and in the academic one, too. The article will look into these aspects in depth, envisaging a modern, up-to-date teaching of Business English.*

Keywords: *Business English, students, teaching approach, communication*

Today, English is clearly recognized as the official language of business around the world. Many foreign companies have already adopted it as the most effective way to trade and communicate on a global scale. Thus, the demand for skilled English speakers has increased and the students in Economy are expected to master at least one foreign language – often English. Because of this, Business English has become increasingly important, not just in corporations and private schools, but starting from the 1st year of the Bachelor's degree, as well. The predominance of English in the world is largely due to the vast proliferation of international trade of North American and European companies, speaking English. A large percentage of multinational corporations originate from the United States and continue to have their head offices there. Their influence on the global business community is considerable, and in order to communicate and negotiate with them, it is imperative to learn their language. The emergence of the Internet also plays a vast role in the spread of English internationally. The English language predominates in the online world, as can be seen on social networks and forums and also because more and more foreign sites now offer pages translated into English as alternative to their original language. However rapid the development of the emergent countries and the growth of the Asian markets, English still remains, for now, the official language of business. But what is the difference between a good level in English and an excellent command of the language? From a purely practical point of view, the better you can speak a language, the better you can negotiate - and not only with native English speakers but with foreign speakers, as well. With the advent of online commerce, the importance of a website to reach as many customers has increased the importance of English even further. In addition, the higher the level of English proficiency, the better the professional image of oneself or one's business to foreign clients. Furthermore, the better the level of English, the more varied the job opportunities might be: one could have access to a much wider choice in terms of career prospects and often better paid positions.

On a personal and professional level, a good oral fluency allows for more freedom when traveling for personal or business purposes and the possibility to succeed in a large number of countries. As already said, a good knowledge of English is important to succeed in doing business internationally, as Business English is unavoidable for people who work or do

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business with English-speaking countries, local businesses that work in English or when ones works abroad. For university students preparing to entry into the job market, Business English courses may represent an unparalleled advantage.

English for Academic Purposes can take many forms and one of the most popular in the last decades is Business English. The main aspect to be understood about it is that its teaching is not mainly destined to Business students, although they would probably benefit from it anywhere in the world, at almost any university. However, Business English is mostly and foremost destined to those who, already engaged in a business environment wish to develop their language skills, as well. In all cases, the role of a teacher is to facilitate the adequate linguistic abilities. As Frendo puts it:

> So, business English is an umbrella term for a mixture of general everyday English, general business English, and ESP. It is not limited to words or phrases that only appear in some special business world. […] there are some other things which make business English distinctive. Firstly, business people do a variety of things with language; they socialize, predict, analyse, negotiate, buy, write, persuade, compromise, telephone, compete, market, sell, produce, interview, train, travel, plan, investigate, deal, advertise, explain ... the list is endless. These are done in a specific business context, and for business aims (Frendo 7).

In the last decades, the focus of language teaching lies mainly in the communicative teaching approach, and the language schools worldwide concentrate on communication mostly, even in the detriment of grammar, it may seem. This article will attempt to discuss the pros and cons of the communicative approach in the business environment and in the academic one, too. The article will look into these aspects in depth, envisaging a modern, up-to-date teaching of Business English.

The approach of teaching English as a foreign language, representing the system for teaching the language in class, is based on a particular theory of language or on a particular theory of learning, or both of them at the same time. Scott Thurnbury argues that *method*, nowadays mainly known as *approach*, should not be confused with methodology, the second representing the sum of classroom practices, for example classroom management, independent from the method of choice for teaching (Thornbury 131). Some well-known and wide-used such theories are audiolingualism, which draws on the structuralist description of language, in other words, draws on linguistics and behaviorist perspectives on learning; grammar translation, its name being self-explanatory; the direct method; the silent way; the communicative approach. These theories influence the choice of syllabus in teaching, of materials and obviously, of activities used in class. This paper draws largely on the communicative approach, which will be discussed in detail and the addendum to the paper will mainly highlight examples of teaching or lesson ideas, including their results, based on this approach. As Thornbury suggests, nowadays it is widely recognized that language learning is such a complex process that no single approach can and should be used; the tendency today is towards *eclecticism* and towards customizing teaching approaches to accommodate the specific needs of the learners (Thornbury 132).

For decades, one of the most popular, the so called golden standard for teachers of English as a foreign language to adults has been the Certificate of Teaching English for Adults, designed and offered by Cambridge University. This is called CELTA for short, and it offers initial teacher training in English, being ideal for people with no experience in teaching and wishing to teach a foreign language, more precisely English. CELTA is well-known as well for qualified teachers who want to update their teaching methods and place more emphasis on communication in class. The CELTA certificate from Cambridge is the

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only independent TEFL course, and is highly regarded by employers around the world, especially by private schools. CELTA brings practical experience to teaching, emphasizing the role of the student in his or her own learning process and transforming the teacher from a master of the class into a monitor and a guide. Creativity is well regarded and so is communication, basically students learning from one another and together in pairs and groups, rather than individually. Real life materials are employed and creativity is extremely valued, too, both in the case of students and of teachers. As Fendo states:

> Because business English is not only about language, but about language use, it is worth first considering the issue of communicative competence. there are various components which need to be considered when discussing language skills, of which knowing about language is only one. Language learners also need to be able to use the language in real-life situations. Various ways of dividing communicative competence into its component parts have been discussed over the years, with teachers being particularly interested in the teachability of such components. Business English teachers need to focus on three key components in particular: linguistic competence, discourse competence, and intercultural competence (Frendo 8).

There is, however, a gap between the university courses of Business English and the corporate ones or the ones to be encountered in private schools, and perhaps there shouldn't be. Generally speaking, a Business English course's purpose is to familiarize students with the language of business and corporations and deepen the notions they already possess – in other words, to develop the business side of their English knowledge and strengthen their vocabulary and terminology of commercial and economic specialty. Such a course will allow students to explore the debates on economic and business topics, and to refine their knowledge of these matters. Business students may start with a good level of language or may be absolute beginners. The teaching approach will not differ much, but the level will be tuned so as to respond to the needs of the learners. In practice, this means place testing, when possible, the students in order to place them in the right groups with peers they can communicate equally. This makes things easier for the educator and ensures a better quality of teaching, too. However, this is not always possible and large mixed classed may occur, especially in state schools and universities, and this situation implies a different approach that will be addressed below. Adjusting the teaching to the needs of the students is the key to a successful class. So, if students seem to have gaps in grammar, those gaps need to be addressed directly, if the lack some vocabulary, it needs to be taught, if learners are not good communicators perhaps more speaking activities are required and so on. But a very important factor influencing teaching has to do with the ability to devise interesting lessons that engage learners in using language for reasons they can relate to. All these rules to be considered are in line with the communicative approach guidelines of teaching and they emphasize doing rather than studying per se. These are real rules of thumb to be followed for the success of any EFL class.

In his volume on teaching Business English, Evan Frendo discusses the categories of business English learners: pre-experienced learners and job-experienced learners. The first have very little or no experience of the business world, at the beginning of a business career, such as high school students or Bachelor students (Frendo 1). Their need for the help of the teacher is substantial and they need a lot of teaching input to start and then progress in this area. Typically, they are learning business English because they intend to follow a business career. The second category is that of job-experienced learners, who know a lot about their business and job, and are very clear about their needs in regards to learning. They do not need any teaching input concerning the business world. In fact, they may know a lot more about

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their field of expertise than the teacher himself. And there is a third category, a middle one, comprising those who already have some Business English knowledge but need improvement due to job requirements (Frendo 1).

On the methodological level, the objective of a Business course is to bring students to master the linguistic and conceptual tools that allow them to structure their discourse (to argue, to convince, to problematize, to illustrate, to document and to discuss a Business-related subject). In practical terms, a Business course allows students to use and apply these skills through professional scenarios, taking into consideration their starting level of language, as there are available Business courses, curricula and textbooks for all CERF levels of expertise. The Business English course should include thematic, methodological and practical work, supported by a number of documents and resources, taken from real, updated sources, such as English newspapers and magazines, news or talk-shows, podcasts, radio shows, websites and so on, in order to keep in touch with the essentials of the economic world, one that changes rapidly. The Business training will always include oral comprehension of authentic video and oral documents of the business world from reliable sources. The Business lessons should be based on situations frequently encountered in professional life, such as business transactions, presentations, negotiating or conducting meetings, taking part in role plays, working on team projects, writing emails, memos, letters or reports. It must be remembered that Business English is a lingua franca, a variety of language sometimes unknown to natives as well, one that requires a very specific expertise in the student's field and quite an effort from the teacher, too.

Researchers, Thornbury points out, have made little distinction between spoken fluency in L1 and L2, which is not accurate, as even among L1 speakers there may be differences in the degree of fluency displayed (Thornbury 29). The lack of fluency is a major impediment for all learners, and this blockage even appears in the case of more advanced learners. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of practice opportunities, and this is what the communicative approach, such as CELTA, is trying to overcome. A teacher must ensure enough speaking practice in classes at all levels and in all settings, including at the university. Enough exercises for this particular skill will create a sense of confidence and the students will find it easier to reproduce the speaking practiced in class in real life situations. Nowadays, all language approaches tend to give priority to speaking, at least in the beginning and the end of the lesson, or as a means of practicing grammar, Thornbury points out (Thornbury 27). However, the speaking skill should be dealt with in interactive real time class discussions, offering students the chance to practice, so as to interiorize the knowledge acquired and to access it often in order to become an automatism, like in L1. There may be a series of obstacles regarding this, such as anxiety, repetition of the same words and structures, the tendency to translate from L1. Scientifically speaking, these obstacles have to do with the distribution of attention between planning what to say and articulate it in a short time, an excess of self-monitoring can represent a major impediment, as Stephen Krashen explained in his theory of monitor over-users. According to the researcher, the acquisition system initiates the utterance and the learning system monitors or edits it. However, this conscious learning process should not make excessive use of monitoring, but should try to pass this stage and that of under-users, meaning learners who do not use their conscious knowledge, and try to become optimal users, in other words to use the monitor suitably.

> Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and

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> understanding. [...] 'comprehensible input' is the crucial and necessary ingredient for the acquisition of language. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. In the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful (Krashen 129).

Evan Frendo discusses the discourse competence, which deals with language use in a spoken interaction, such as role plays of negotiations or meetings, of delivering presentations or practicing business correspondence. In other words, discourse management according to Frendo has to do with the two productive skills: speaking and writing (Frendo 9).

> By way of analogy, if linguistic competence refers to the building blocks of language, discourse competence refers to the whole house. Like the occupants in a house, who use different rooms for different functions, the participants in the discourse have to communicate within different contexts; it follows that different discourses require different strategies. One strategy involves the use of register (the degree of formality, or the degree of specificity, especially of topic vocabulary). Another aspect of discourse is that often one of the participants may hold more power than the other participants, and this is also reflected in the types of language used. Thus discourse can reflect relationships between individuals, and can even be seen as a tool for manipulating others. Related to this is the concept of genre, which seeks to distinguish between different types of texts (Frendo 10).

Another important aspect to be taken into consideration when discussing teaching Business English is that of intercultural competence, a key factor in learning how to communicate properly. Intercultural competence has to do with emotional and social skills that make one feel comfortable with people from different cultural backgrounds and make people from other cultures feel at ease with one another. They are gradually created across encounters and interactions with other people and nationalities. Study may also help in this respect. Intercultural competencies involve emotions and feelings that will generate an attitude of openness to interact with other cultures with consideration. They rely on the development of self-knowledge, one's own cultural identity and the awareness of one's multiple roots. They are also built with the awareness of being part of the larger human community, moving beyond one’s national identity and habits.

However, Olson and Kroeger state that an extensive international experience does not necessarily imply an intercultural sensitivity, as there are other factors influencing this (Olson, Kroeger 31). It is therefore a skill that requires the attention of the Business English teacher at all times. The development of intercultural competence implies renewing one's experience of the world (Bignami, Onorati 7). For this, the utilization of specific skills is not enough, one still needs to mobilize metacognitive abilities, such as identifying beliefs and values as cultural constructions, or learning to cope with difference and choose thoughtfully between several legitimate options. Intercultural competence is the foundation of global competence, in other words, the open-mindedness that makes it possible to “understand the cultural norms and expectations of others, to make them interact, communicate and articulate effectively, including outside their home environment” (Hunter et al. 267). Recognizing the educational value of human interaction, real or simulated in a Business class, in the

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acquisition of global competence, in particular the intercultural competence, is based on the valorization of three aspects: to reinforce self-awareness as a cultural being, to raise awareness of others in their cultural contexts and develop the ability to "build bridges across cultural differences" (Vande Berg et al. 14-15).

Applied linguists discuss about the "inseparable" relationship (Porcher 53) between language and culture: "every language carries with it a culture of which it is both the producer and the product." Galisson states that "It is as a social practice and socio-historical product that language is imbued with culture. The symbiosis game in which function language and culture makes that they are the reciprocal reflection and forced one of the other" (Galisson 45). According to Kramsch (Kramsch 199), language represents an embodiment of culture and a means by which human beings build their social world.

Language teaching has emphasized for a long time the need for educating the student, improving his general knowledge. At the beginning of the 20th century, intercultural awareness was neglected by direct methodology as the main objective of foreign language teaching was focusing on the acquisition of practical language. Later, language teaching was dominated for some 30 years by methodologies resulting from structural linguistics where this lack of cultural awareness became even more noticeable: the e-cultural contents were referred to by the notion of 'Civilization', to which anthropological and sociological dimensions have been added later. This change took place first in the United States in the 1960s when the racial, ethnic and political conflicts were endless, which also favored the development of intercultural communication later. In the 1970s, the teaching of cultural and intercultural communication in the United States embraced an anthropological approach so as to facilitate intercultural communication for political and commercial purposes. From then on, the teaching of culture shifted from 'Civilization' to 'Culture' which referred to the day-to-day life, customs and values of a target culture. Kramsch (46) pointed out that this shift exhibits a democratization of foreign language learning which started to spread rapidly. He identified culture as a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions (Kramsch 205). The definition signaled that culture is not collective but also individual. In the eighties, the emphasis placed on communication in foreign language teaching gave birth to a period of "marriage between language and culture" (Risager 52). However, this took quite some time, as there was still a dichotomy between language and culture. The prevalence of the communicative approach in language acquisition in those decades prioritized the teaching of oral language in real communication settings, such as the migration of work force toward Europe, for example. Afterwards, in the 1990s, critics focused on the restrictions of cultural awareness and the approach considering culture in practice gained further prevalence. The prejudice of learners, likely to consider speakers of the target language as a collective group behaving similarly gave birth to a stereotyped image of a foreign culture. The study of a culture does not necessarily lead to a positive attitude towards the target language whereas culture cannot be considered the sum of certain behaviors to be acquired or facts to learn by heart. Here on, researchers started to look deeper into intercultural issues and the learning process started to include cultural differences as well. Further on, researchers like Risager summarized this evolution in the teaching of language and culture into two distinct models: the national model and the transnational model (Risager 39). The first considers language as independent of culture, history, people and mentality. On the other hand, the second model acknowledges the geopolitical influences in language and culture, the worldwide movements of people, goods and ideas.

Communicative competence, cornered by Hymes in 1972 represents the aptitude to apply the grammar knowledge acquired so far and also to know when, where, and with whom

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to use it, in an appropriate manner. Communicative competence means not only that the student knows a language, but also the ability to use it properly in a specific cultural-setting.

> A normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others (Hymes 277).

Canale identified four different components of communication competence: grammatical competence, social-linguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. According to Canale and Swain (Canale 1-47), the grammatical or linguistic competence represent the knowledge of the language per se, of its grammar, vocabulary and its written conventions. It represents what is normally associated with mastering a language. Discourse competence is the knowledge of combining language structures in a meaningful whole, so as to create a series of cohesive and coherent utterances. Social-linguistic competence represents the knowledge of the social-cultural rules of languages. In other words, it is the ability to be appropriate, polite and politically correct, to have the right attitude in interacting with people etc. Strategic competence is the ability to sustain communication despite the occasional obstacles or interruptions. In other words, the inseparable relationship between language and culture suggests that learning a foreign language means to learn an aspect of the foreign culture, as well.

And last but not least, Business English teaching has to overcome certain obstacles, especially in the case of state universities, where students are taught in large, mixed-abilities classes, but still need to acquire all the above-mentioned abilities and competences, perhaps even more as they are at the beginning of a possible business career. Thronbury explains that mixed-ability classes are those with a marked difference between students' aptitudes, learning styles and motivation (Thronbury 132). Such classes may comprise students with different language levels of proficiency, but in fact all classes, even those which were place tested beforehand, include a certain degree of mixed abilities. The problems a teacher has to tackle in such cases are numerous: class management, selecting the right teaching materials, keeping students interested and motivated and so on. When too big a diversity threatens the general dynamics of a class, or when there are disruptive students, teachers need to take even stricter measures to ensure the flow of teaching. For example, in the case of a faulty class management, teachers may assign more group work or project work, rather than pair-work, so as to involve as many students as possible. Also, a more attentive monitoring is required in such cases, to make sure students remain on task. Also, taking advantage of the mixed abilities by grouping weaker students with stronger ones may be of great help. The same goes for asking the more proficient students to help their peers in need. For example, the homework or tests can be corrected in class, by colleagues. Students who teach or help other students reinforce their knowledge and sometimes even clarify some language items for themselves. Another problem, as Thornbury points out, is that there is a need of achieving the same standards and passing similar final tests, disregard of the initial level of the students and their progress over the semester (Thornbury 132). In such cases, perhaps the teacher can adjust the level of tests devised, taking into consideration the level of students. If not possible, an ongoing evaluation is important, the teacher making sure he or she is assessing the students continuously, offering them equal chances to a good final grade. Thornbury also discusses the issues related to the syllabus, which in his perspective may be narrow or broad. The first allows for little freedom, as each stage of the syllabus is very specific and the staging of the learning process is very strict. This is, for example, the case of primary,

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secondary and high school students in state or even private schools. However, the university syllabus is more flexible, allowing for a certain degree of flexibility: the learning is not as segmented and sequential as in the case of the narrow syllabus. The second type of curriculum, according to Thornbury is the broad-band one. This one implies more broadly defined teaching objectives and the acquiring of competencies rather than precise, exact knowledge. This means that teaching and learning may cover a variety of language areas at the same time.

> Learning is viewed as holistic, emergent and concurrent. It is argued that a broad-band curriculum is not only better suited to cope with diversity, but is able to exploit diversity and turn it into a resource rather than a problem (Thornbury 133).

However, there are certain advantages of a large, mixed ability class than need to be taken into consideration. For example, the teacher is forced to build a new toolkit of teaching skills and strategies to cope with such challenging classes and once acquired, this set of methods will serve for future purposes, too. Next, there is always a greater choice when dealing with large multi-leveled classes: more opinions to debate, more ideas to share, more points raised. The learning process is more interactive and interesting, at the same time. There is very little space for the boredom that may appear in smaller classes. Also, students have a lot of chances for interaction and communication. More students mean more differences, different backgrounds and perspectives, allowing for a fruitful communication. Furthermore, there is a lot of room for group-work and project work, which increase collaboration between students. There is room for improvement for everyone and a diverse, large learning environment may spring positive competition, allowing for progress. Also, stronger students get the chance of helping their peers, thus creating a pleasant class atmosphere and a chance to learn better, too. All in all, with a positive attitude, multi leveled large classes may represent an opportunity for growth, both for students and teachers.

Having said these, the article will conclude with a quotation from Sylvie Donna, an authoritative voice in the Business English world, author of *Teach Business English*.

> The challenge of improving communication in the world's workplace is well worth taking up. Teach Business English – so as to help to lay the groundwork for a world in which people are better able to communicate. […] If taught with a sense of responsibility, Business English classes cam make a small but important contribution to increased global understanding (Donna 329).

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