EMBEDDING BUSINESS ENGLISH COMPONENTS IN AN EST PRACTICAL COURSE FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS - A CASE STUDY

Alexandra Georgiana Sălcianu

Assist. Prof., PhD, Politehnica University of Bucharest

Abstract: As we are progressing into the 21st century, the landscape of the labour market worldwide is characterized by quite high expectations of most employers from the young engineers in search of first employment positions. They are supposed to bring along a wide portfolio of skills, of the hard and, not least important, soft type. Therefore, the role of the academia has increased in this respect, with most universities, including the technical ones, providing various courses meant to develop the specific abilities required from an engineer. Against this background, the EST practical course is a significant tool by means of which the short- and medium-term needs of the learners can be fulfilled. A particular educational context is discussed in this paper, which refers to the necessary amendments to be operated in the course syllabus when it is offered to students of a faculty which combines engineering and business oriented tuition. The proposed approach is presented as a proposal of the manner in which the EST syllabus can, and indeed it is, supplemented by a range of Business English focused units. Various viewpoints are reviewed, the context features are taken into consideration in designing original materials, a needs analysis stage is included, and the resulting findings are transposed into the creation of several Business English flavoured units, whose description and rationale are also provided, to be embedded in the EST course.

Keywords: EST, Business English, course design, needs analysis, case study

1. Paper background and aims

In today's world of economic activities, with numerous companies gradually reducing the funds meant for in-service training of junior employees, mostly due to various fluctuations of the market and unexpected crises, it goes somehow as a natural prerequisite from people in search of (first) employment to possess sound skills of both types, technical/*hard*, and non-technical ones, also labelled as *soft* abilities.

In the case of engineers, the expectations are even higher, as they are supposed to be able to perform and display such skills in English as well, since there are numerous companies with staff originating from several countries and that use the *lingua franca* of communication today, English, as their working language. Moreover, in certain cases engineers are involved in job duties of the business type, which requires specific skills and knowledge, beside the technical ones.

In response to the market expectations, in the Bucharest Polytechnic a new faculty was established (the Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management – *FAIMA*), and it has been operating for over a decade now; it takes into consideration in a realistic manner the context outside the academic world, where engineers are appointed in managerial/business positions, which implies an educational background rooted in both domains, as the curriculum of this faculty shows.

Naturally, the language practical course provided to the FAIMA students at bachelor level, in the first and second years of study, which is an EST one, based on an in-house course book (English for Professional Communication, 2005, Printech, Bucharest), and on updates

and supplementary materials designed by most teachers for the profiles of the faculties where they deliver the course, has to be adapted to the FAIMA *mixed* profile.

Consequently, the multiple *aims* of this paper are to: (i) investigate viewpoints on how such a combined course profile can be best created, (ii) present the findings of a needs analysis carried out with the help of the students, and, accordingly, (iii) propose a flexible approach by means of which the business component of interest for the trainees should be incorporated in an appropriate and efficient manner in the EST course, by designing original tasks with a Business oriented character.

2. Key theoretical viewpoints on Business English within ESP

The revisitation of the main literature on the topics of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and its subdivisions should necessarily start from certain recent studies (Nurpahmi, 2016) that attempt to integrate in a constructive manner the various foci of the concept. They form together an approach based on:

- *teacher centred learning,*
- *learner centred learning,* and
- *learning centred components*.

These are seen as a form of synergy between the teacher and the students, working together in order to identify the right pace of the learning process itself. The *syllabus* which is generated should represent an integration of topic- and task-based focuses, turned into materials designed for a specific course, within which *content* input and *functional language* input should be present.

Ever since the beginning of the years 2000 one can find interest in establishing the key issues in ESP curriculum design, in important research studies (Gatehouse, 2001). The *abilities* that matter for successful communication in occupational settings seem to be, in a non-prioritized order: (i) using the jargon specific to the occupation, (ii) using a wider, more general, set of academic skills, and, equally important, although some may object to this emphasis, (iii) using everyday language for informal communication instances in any occupational context.

A remark in the same study is particularly interesting as a starting point for an approach meant to create the framework of principles underlying the course design for special settings that are combinations of several elements, such as the FAIMA case. It maintains that in fact ESP is not a subject, rigid and clearly defined once and for ever; on the contrary, it is rather an *approach*, within which materials can – and should be – flexibly selected and put together, in a manner that has to reflect the features of the context for which they are intended. For such a background, *authentic* materials are recommendable, processed into tasks generated by the teacher with a view to foster specific skill development.

The key differences between ESP programs and General English ones, as seen in the literature (Emmersion, 2020), consist in observing the profile of the learners as far as their specific *needs*, *content* and *authenticity* of input are concerned, as well as in using adapted teaching methodology to each educational situation. To the above, one more point is emphasized, namely the importance of *promoting cultural awareness* and seeking to *improve intercultural competency*.

One word of warning is required at this moment, as there are different meanings of the compound *Business English* in the literature. With the above cited study, Business English, as a subset of ESP, can be further broken down into English specific to various areas of occupation, for instance Technical English, Medical English etc. According to the same study, there are *common* areas of business English (in this sense of the term), such as English for: presentations, negotiations, writing reports, and meetings.

However, on the other hand, given the importance of the context, and the fact that in English there are many multiple meaning words, confusions can occur between the General English

meaning of a term and its Business English sense (e.g. *liquidate* = pay or settle in Gen Engl vs close a business and divide up the proceeds to pay its debts in Business Engl; *acquisition* = an asset or object bought or obtained, in Gen Engl vs an act of taking over another company, in Business Engl.).

The same sense attributed to the term Business English, this time with the *Business English for Engineers* under focus when constructing the course syllabus, can be found in another study (Dorneles, 2013). This clearly results from the listing of key components to be included in the course: *authentic activities, common topics of engineering, specific vocabulary and grammar*.

A necessary and subtle remark can be found in the literature (Depierro, 2020), as regards the differences between *Academic English* and *Business English*, the former specific as a language of *school*, while the latter being used in the *context of business and places of work*.

At this stage, it might be significant to mention at least one very recent study (Chettiar, 2023) that points to the particular *value of language skills in the workplace*; it provides four top *reasons*, very briefly expressed as:

- *enhanced communication* – including that with people from various cultures and walks of life,
- *career opportunities* – since expectations are that engineers/managers be able to connect at all levels, thus increasing their chances of promotion,
- *cultural awareness* – which is an asset in multicultural instances of communication within the professions, and not only,
- *personal growth* – enabled by language learning, brain development triggers cognitive development and problem-solving skills, all factors contributing to an enriching experience of the person.

A second and different sense of the syntagm Business English, and the one that is of interest for our study, can be found in recent literature, as well (Rao, 2019). The author discusses *English for Business Purposes*, its needs and uses in the domain of business, understanding it as a new branch of ESP. The characteristics of all the approaches to Business English are, it is maintained, utilitarian, practical and goal-oriented.

Quoting another study (Spbkowiak, 2008), it is shown that in fact Business English is rather a *methodology* of designing and running a *special-purpose* language course. It includes teaching a *specific language corpus* and a *particular* kind of communication in a specific context, thus representing a process, not a product.

One can sum up a series of basic *principles* in creating a Business English syllabus, stated in a very recent study (Ehsanfar, 2023). Key traits are its *flexibility*, the basic *multidimensional* character, as well as the need to make the trainess understand the *rationale* underlying the syllabus. An awareness of introducing new themes and topics is recommended, for instance that of *globalization*, under all its aspects. This element was already signalled as having a high significance ever since the beginning of the century (Riemer, 2002). Another particularly relevant aspect in this study should be mentioned, as it refers to fact that a well-structured and flexible language and communication course will foster the process of *life-long learning*.

A very recent study (Landry, 2023) mentions the top business-related skills required from every engineer, with *communication, business operations, leadership, management* among the first positions. To the items in this list, several others can be added, as pointed in another valuable study (Gavin, 2019): *an understanding of economics, data analysis skills, financial accounting skills*, and, additionally, *emotional intelligence* (defined as the *ability to understand your emotions and recognize and influence those of others*).

It is only natural that when designing the Business English component of an ESP course, some of these aspects should be observed, and flexibly amended by the characteristic features of each educational setting envisaged for the course.

3. The proposed approach to embedding Business English in the EST course

In this section, a description is attempted to presenting the design of genuine materials of the Business English type as an addition embedded in the EST practical course for the FAIMA bachelor level students. In turn, the educational *context key features* are given, then the *stages* of the approach, covering a *needs analysis* phase, followed by the materials design and their piloting.

Thus, the bachelor level first year students of the FAIMA faculty of the Bucharest Poly are offered an EST practical course for two semesters, while in the second year there is only one semester of English. Since the profile of the institution *combines* engineering and business and management tuition, with all the stakeholders (university and faculty management, students, potential employers and so on) expecting the graduates to be at least familiar with both the domains concepts and an English language proficiency of at least B2/C1 acc. to CEFR, it is paramount that the basic EST course structure valid and/or recommended for all the other faculties of the university should be amended by inserting the most appropriate Business English components, considering the factors characterizing the setting. It is perhaps useful to mention that some of the topics and skills that are common to EST and Business English are already covered and developed in the in-house course book, therefore one key aspect is to decide what elements of Business English should be included as a priority list in the practical course.

To reach a short list of such elements, several supporting activities provided key information, namely: daily classroom observation and occasional discussions with the groups of students, an analysis of the FAIMA curricula, as well as a needs analysis phase. These were carried out during the first year, alongside with the teaching of the EST course book (selected) units, and in preparation for the first term of the second year at bachelor level, seen as the right moment for the proposal implementation, as the learners would have already become more familiar with the faculty requirements and expectations.

Stage A comprised designing and using of a *Needs Analysis Student Questionnaire*, accompanied by a short explanation of its purpose. Although it was only applied in three groups of the FAIMA faculty, the findings could be considered as useful at least in indicating some trends, which were then triangulated with class discussions and other supporting elements.

In what follows, the *needs analysis questions* are presented, together with the *objectives* – in terms of envisaged information – underlying their design:

- *Q1 – Which of the topics in your course book so far do you consider most useful for you as future engineers AND managers? You can tick more than one*. Objective: to check to what extent students perceive the course book topic selection as being useful for them as future engineers but also as managers.
- *Q2 – What are your (a) strong points in English vs (b) not so strong points as of this date? – You can list more than one.* Objective: to find out level of awareness as to their own progress, also as an indicator of openness to assuming responsibility for success.
- *Q3 – What do you think your employers will expect you to be able to do using English as an engineer and/or manager? – You can list more than one, but at least five items*. Objective: to check level of students' awareness of the market and of the employers' expectations from FAIMA potential employees.
- *Q4 – Please rank the points mentioned under Q3 above in an order of priority for you personally, with 1=most important and 5=least important*. Objective: by asking them to personalize and prioritize, there are increased chances that they may not be influenced by external opinions, and that they get to reflect more deeply on their own learning activity.

- *Q5 – What Business English topics would you like to see introduced in the course in the second year? – List min. three*. Objective: to check level of knowledge about the business side of their future activity, as well as to identify most required topics.

In what follows, a sketchy presentation of the main findings is provided, as comments on each question:

- Q1 – *talking about one's company, meetings, presentations*. Comments: definitely students perceive the business activity-oriented units of the course book as useful for their profile.
- Q2 – *(a) reading, listening; (b) writing, speaking, grammar*. Comments: most students pointed to lacks in the area of subjective skills.
- Q3 – *negotiating, decision-making, communicating with various categories of people, writing documents, making presentations*. Comments: most answers cover the business /managerial side of an engineer's activity.
- Q4 – *various answers, quite balanced between written and oral production*. Comments: answers are in general consistent with those under Q2, strong vs weak points, which shows a good level of self-analysis and awareness of the respondents.
- Q5 – *various answers, most frequent ones being: discussing with colleagues and clients from abroad/various countries and/or cultures, writing/understanding various business documents (for instance contracts), avoiding mistakes/blunders in business relationships, speaking informally with various categories of people at work*. Comments: recurrent topics cover communication in multicultural contexts and reading/writing of business specific documents, with the necessary lexical and grammatical support.

The findings are useful not only in the further selection of the course book units which are most relevant for the specific context, but also for the choice of supplementary topics, skills and functions under focus in the Business English units proposed for the third semester.

It is important to discuss the *limitations* of the approach design, in terms of number of respondents to needs analysis questionnaire, lack of information from the teachers of Business subjects in the faculty and so on. Similarly, the time available for the implementing of the newly designed Business flavoured materials is rather limited, and it implies giving up certain units from the course book and other materials meant for year two. Such choices can certainly be made, with the taking into consideration of avoiding redundancy and of adding some out-of-class tasks, since the level of proficiency of the students would be higher at the end of the first year, thus enabling them to study more efficiently and develop a more responsible attitude towards their own learning process.

It is also mandatory that any amendments the teacher may propose should be accompanied by explaining their rationale to the learners, to get them to participate and even struggle their way through the course.

The *framework of pedagogical principles* underlying the design of the proposed embedded business materials is consistent with the *communicative/eclectic* approach to the teaching of English, with the observance of *skills integration*, as well as of the *authenticity* of texts and task types.

Stage B of the described approach can be subdivided into the design of the materials, and their piloting with the first series of second year students. In what follows, the presentation of the three units proposed is accompanied by the *rationale* for their creation. Links to the source texts are also provided, but they should only be seen as examples, as each teacher can, and for that matter should, select content input in function of the profile of the concrete educational setting.

The first unit proposed is focused on *intercultural communication* in engineering and mainly in business. The hidden agenda, which should be mentioned to the learners in an explicit

manner, refers to an awareness raising exercise as to the importance of permanent learning as a life-long attitude. The starting point is an input text (link: https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/IJEMS/article/view/4912) discussing sources of misunderstandings in intercultural business. The chain of tasks is the following: (i) students are invited to predict possible sources of misunderstanding in intercultural business; (ii) as homework, they have to search for examples of these misunderstandings and draw a *fact file* to be presented in class, where (iii) possible solutions to such situations are discussed, with the students making lists of possible ways of solving such problems, ranging from attitude changes, decision making and other, and the final product is a comprehensive list of acceptable suggestions from all the class; (iv) a possible follow-up, written or oral, could be that each student chooses one such misunderstanding and tries to solve/prevent it by applying one solution from the final list.

Next, a unit is proposed, in which the focus is mainly on *sub-skills typical for the domain of business*, such as negotiating, addressing various audience categories, with oral communication lexis as the hidden agenda. The suggested tasks are: (i) an initial bibliography list is provided to the students; as an example, some links are mentioned hereinafter:

- https://professional.mit.edu/news/articles/key-success-negotiating-101-engineers
- https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/four-keys-great-negotiations-engineers-jeff-perry
- https://eea.org.au/insights-articles/why-good-negotiation-skills-are-crucial-engineers
- https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/key-principles-negotiation-applications-real
- https://www.scu.edu/mobi/business-courses/business-expansion/develop-negotiating-skills/

The students are asked to analyse the source texts and extract a top 5 priorities for them personally and to explain their reasons with sound arguments. Then, (ii) a longer YouTube video is indicated to the students (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fP9g2OqnyI) for out-of-class study, with note taking of key ideas. In class, the next step (iii) is that a situation is given as a starting point for a *roleplay* in which the trainees have to concretely negotiate. This is a good opportunity of developing oral communication skills, with the useful phases of showing a first model of discussion, then allowing time for practice and finally getting the improved demo, with classroom observation and drawing some conclusions on the quality of the participants' performance.

The third proposal refers to the topic of *globalization* in business, and the agenda underneath includes lexical development, grammatical structures and typical phrases that are frequently used in business. The tasks are: (i) the source text provided to the trainees (link: https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/globalization.asp) is authentic, with a rich lexical variety and a controversial character, since it deals with pros and cons, which can stimulate the students in solving the tasks based on it. The activities are also meant to refine reading subskills, such as ordering paragraphs, determining headings and subheadings, building up arguments for and against.

For once, the *follow-up* (ii) can be a choice of several *quotes* dealing with the main topic; for instance, the following were used at the piloting phase:

- *Globalisation will make our societies more creative and prosperous, but also more vulnerable*. Lord Robertson
- *Ensuring that the benefits of globalisation are shared widely remains a challenge*. Sushma Swaraj
- *Globalisation, with inexorable speed, has changed the world we live in. For all of us. Jobs have changed, the way we trade has changed, who we employ has changed and the feel of where we live has changed*. Katty Kay

The students are asked to (a) explain in their own words the meaning of the quotes, and (b) express their agreement or disagreement, with sound arguments – a challenging and useful oral or written communication development exercise.

The *homework* (iii) then asks the learners to search for more information about the phenomenon of globalization and present their findings as fact files, to be kept in their evaluation portfolios, and also presented in class. A good conclusive task (iv) can be a competition of pros and cons speeches regarding globalization in business and engineering, with volunteers participating and having the possibility to be voted as winners, which can bring them some "incentives".

4. Open conclusions

Certainly, the proposal was only piloted once, so it is too early for the final conclusions. However, there are a few aspects that can be mentioned at this stage.

Firstly, the *specificity* of the educational context should be analyzed in all its components, checking how can envisaged limitations be kept under control, so as to ensure its success.

Secondly, a stage must be devoted to the carrying out of a needs analysis, whose results have to be triangulated with as many other sources as possible. For instance, a good collaboration with teachers of the subjects of business and engineering of the FAIMA faculty could provide valuable data in structuring the combined course.

Then it is the teacher's role to remain flexible and to permanently take into consideration significant changes in the context profile when new units are proposed, designed and used, as well as the new aspects that may occur (inter)nationally in terms of expectations from a FAIMA graduate.

Last but certainly not least, the permanent collaboration relationships of the teacher with the students is vital, as it provides useful feedback, while at the same time it may help them to develop an attitude of attention towards personal and professional self-development for their entire life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chettiar, Claire; (2023); *The value of language skills in the workplace*; https://www.pearson.com/languages/community/blogs/2023/05/the-value-of-language-skills-in-the-workplace.html
- Depierro, Samantha; 2020; *5 Differences Between Business English and Academic English*; https://peopledevelopmentmagazine.com/2020/12/17/business-english-and-academic-english/
- Dorneles, Evelise; (2013); *Business English for Engineers*; https://prezi.com/bvsymkuadtny/business-english-for-engineers/
- Ehsanfar, Elahe; (2023); *Business English syllabus*; https://www.rubeana.com/business-english-syllabus/
- Emmersion; (2020); *English for Specific Purposes (ESP): A Short Guide for Multinational Companies*; https://blog.emmersion.ai/english-for-specific-purposes-esp-a-short-guide-for-multinational-companies/
- Gatehouse, Kristen; (2001); *Key Issues in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Curriculum Development*; The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VII, No. 10, October 2001; http://iteslj.org/Articles/Gatehouse-ESP.html
- Gavin, Matt; (2019); *10 Important Business Skills Every Professional Needs*; https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/business-skills-every-professional-needs

- Landry, Lauren; (2023); *6 Business Skills Every Engineer Needs*; HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL ONLINE; https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/business-skills-for-engineers
- Nurpahmi, Sitti; (2016); *ESP Course Design: An Integrated Approach;* LENTERA PENDIDIKAN, VOL. 19 NO. 172 DESEMBER 2016: 172-181; https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/146791-EN-esp-course-design-an-integrated-approach.pdf
- Rao, V. Chandra Sekhar; (2019); *English for Business Purposes: An ESP Approach*; JRSP-ELT, Issue 15, Vol. 3, 2019; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336230809_English_for_Business_Purposes_An_ESP_Approach
- Riemer, Marc, J.; (2002); *English and Communication Skills for the Global Engineer*; Global J. of Engng. Educ., Vol.6, No.1 © 2002 UICEE*;* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/246071114_English_and_Communication_Skills_for_the_Global_Engineer
- Sobkowiak, P.; (2008); *Issues in ESP: Designing a Model for Teaching English for Business Purposes*; Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM