

Challenges of teaching Business English in higher education

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Abstract: *The present paper focuses on teaching business English at university level, given the place of the English language in the European Union and the general objective to have a common European higher education area. The paper is divided into four parts: the first part presents some aspects related to foreign languages in Europe and the advantages they offer on an increasingly dynamic labour market, the second part gives an overview of business English in some Romanian and European universities offering programmes of study in economics, the third part makes reference to the competences that students in economics should develop during their undergraduate and graduate studies and to the challenges involved, while the last part presents some conclusions.*

Key-words: *business English, higher education, competences*

1. Foreign languages in the European education area

Over the recent decades, especially after the fall of Communism in the eastern and south-eastern part of Central Europe, the changes occurring at European level in all fields of activity have been extremely significant. The map of Europe has changed, diplomatic relations between countries have been redefined, business relationships have been enhanced, the cooperation between the countries' institutions has become more prominent, workforce has become much more mobile, more and more students have benefited from exchange programmes.

Within this context, the need has arisen to rethink the place of foreign languages in Europe and especially in the European educational establishments, from primary to tertiary education. In this respect, the Bologna Declaration of June 1999 can be considered a benchmark, because, by clearly encouraging integrated programmes of study, training and research in all European countries, for both students and teachers, it indirectly referred to the importance of foreign languages.

The genuine preoccupation to help students develop the foreign language competences required in their educational environment and on the labour market has been particularly visible in higher education, being reflected in the initiatives taken

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by the European Language Council and the European Commission, as well as in the communiqués following the Bologna Declaration (Prague, Berlin and Bergen).

The official documents issued at European level with respect to languages have emphasized the need for European citizens to be proficient in at least two foreign languages. And, even if not explicitly stated, it seems natural that one of these languages be English. The statistics issued in 2017 on the languages taught and learnt in Europe revealed that English is by far the most studied language in the European Union in upper secondary education (96%), only a quarter of the students studying French or Spanish and only one fifth German. The situation is similar for primary and lower secondary education (European Commission, 2017). As regards foreign languages in higher education, no recent statistics are available, but the fact that English is the dominating language in this area has become almost a general truth (Fortanet-Gómez, I., Räisänen, Ch. A., 2008, p. 2). The study on foreign language proficiency and employability published by the European Commission in 2015 clearly acknowledged the place of English: “English is by far the most important language in international trade and the provision of services. Over four in five employers interviewed and three quarters of advertised online vacancies stating that this was the most useful language for the jobs discussed/reviewed in all sectors and in almost all non-English speaking countries” (European Commission, 2015).

Considering the aforementioned facts, the important place English should hold in foreign language education, generally speaking, and in the higher education in economics, in particular, is obvious. But the implementation of the necessary pedagogical principles which ensure the quality in its teaching and learning is far from being a smooth and unchallenging process.

2. Business English in higher education

Business English is considered a branch of English for Specific Purposes, together with English for Science and Technology and English for Social Studies (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987, p. 16), featuring the characteristics which Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, pp. 4-5) established for ESP. Thus, unlike English for general purposes, business English focuses on more special needs of learners who are or are to become specialists in one particular field, i.e. economics, as well as on the elements specific to the language, skills, types of discourse and genres that underlie their future business activity.

Frendo argues that, as far as the learners' needs are concerned, there are people with very specific needs, who need very specific lexis in very specialized contexts and fields (accounting, financial analysis, statistics etc.). Then, there are the learners with more general needs, who either want to use general English in a business environment or who need more general business English, a kind of language that is not so difficult to understand by proficient speakers of general

English (Frendo, 2005, pp. 6-7). In our situation, at university level, the beneficiaries of the business English classes are the students, who are specialists in the making.

At European level, business English is part of the curricula in the field of economic studies both during the Bachelor's and Master's degree. In a study on ESP in Europe, Fortanet-Gómez and Räisänen (2008, pp. 44, 168) show that the business English courses are designed to develop students' language proficiency, including business content and raising cultural awareness. At B.A. level, the courses have a more general character, focusing mainly on the modality of speech, with certain countries prioritizing certain skills. At Master levels, they become more specialised and focus is shifted to written communication, although oral skills remain important. They also add that the general language courses at B.A. level are usually mandatory, while the more specialised ones and those at M.A. level are elective.

In order to have an overview on the languages studied in the Romanian faculties specialized in economics, we have studied the official documents posted on the websites of five Romanian universities of advanced research and education offering programmes of studies in the field of economics. Our research has revealed that, during the Bachelor's degree, in most of these faculties students who do not attend programmes of study taught in English have to study one foreign language two hours/ week (courses and/ or seminars and/ or practical courses) for four semesters, under the following possible names: Foreign Language, Foreign Language in Business, The Language of Business Communication, Communicating in a Foreign Language, Business Communication in a Foreign Language, Commercial Correspondence, Modern Languages Applied in Business.

But the variations that exist are sometimes striking. Thus, there is one case in which the foreign language is mandatory for just one semester, the students having the possibility to choose it as an elective course for the other five semesters. At the other end of the spectrum there are the faculties where, apart from those four semesters, students can study foreign languages during the third academic year, as mandatory or optional subjects, as well as study an additional foreign language throughout their undergraduate studies, as an elective course.

For most of the programmes of study, students can choose one out of several languages: English and French are the most frequent ones, but German, Spanish, Italian and even Russian are also proposed by certain universities. An exception is represented by the International Business programme of study, whose curriculum in certain universities includes English as a compulsory language. In this case, English is generally doubled by the study of one more foreign language.

The study of the curricula at Bachelor's degree level has also revealed a great heterogeneity as regards the status of the foreign language class. Thus, English, just like the other languages, can be a subject considered basic/ fundamental (DF), complementary (DC), specialized (DS) or even a subject that trains students in their field of study (DPD/ DD). The status sometimes changes from one semester to another, some other times it remains the same for all semesters.

As far as Master's degree programmes are concerned, the discrepancies existing among different faculties with respect to foreign languages are even more noticeable. The situation ranges from a total lack of foreign languages in the Master's curricula (in two cases), to the study of one foreign language for certain programmes of study, to cases in which one foreign language is comprised in the curriculum of all the programmes of study for one or even two semesters, each course having six ECTS points.

The first conclusion that can be drawn after considering the curricula is that, at national level, there does not seem to be a general principle or regulation which should be complied with as regards the foreign languages taught in the faculties of economics. It is obvious that, irrespective of the level of study, the choice of one type of discipline or another and the allocation of the number of classes per cycle or per semester vary a lot within the same programme of study. Consequently, one cannot talk about a coherent language policy in the higher education in this field. But things are more consistent at each university level. Thus, on the one hand, there are universities which seem to particularly value foreign languages and their study, offering a wide range of language courses during the Bachelor's and the Master's degree, while others are more restrictive with respect to foreign language teaching.

A general tendency which could be detected was that the programmes of study connected to international business, marketing and tourism put greater emphasis on foreign languages, allocating more classes and significantly more ECTS points to them, this being especially visible in the case of graduate studies.

Another common feature that could be remarked is one that concerns the type of foreign language studied. As the denomination of the subjects in the curricula shows (International Business Correspondence in a Foreign Language, Applied Specialized Language), towards the end of the Bachelor's degree focus is given to more specialized competences in the field, in line with the general European trend.

3. Developing students' competences

Whether in the curricula they are courses, seminars or practical courses, specialized, complementary or fundamental subjects, covering only undergraduate or also graduate studies, business English classes at university have undoubtedly the same two-fold objective: to endow students with all the language competences necessary for them to be competitive both in the academic environment and on the labour market, in their country and abroad.

But, in order for teachers to be able to develop these competences at the desired level, there is at least one prerequisite that should be fulfilled, i.e. the students' level of English when enrolling to university. From our perspective, if not satisfactory, this could become a great hindrance in the teaching and learning process. With the exception of beginner courses (which are almost always elective at

university level), all the others require students to have at least a B1 level in English, ensured by the preparation during upper secondary education and possibly proven by the language competence certificates at the end of high school. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, CERL, p. 33), this means that students should: understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters, regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc., deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken, produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest, describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. This is what students should know, but, unfortunately, most often than not, this language level is not practically attained.

Another issue connected to the students' language level that needs to be emphasized is that of distributing students in groups. This varies from one university to another, just like the size of the groups, so there may be cases in which groups are homogenous and of a decent size, but, unfortunately, the opposite case can also be encountered. Thus, it may happen that the number of students exceeds 70 for the courses and students' language level within the same group range between A2 and C1, which results in an utterly challenging class for the teacher.

In line with European regulations, the foreign language level that Romanian students in economics should reach at the end of their Bachelor's degree is B2. Consequently, they should be able to understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialisation, to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party, to produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options (Council of Europe, CEFRL, p. 33).

However, if we consider the course syllabi present on the websites of the faculties of economics, things appear to be even more complex. Here are some examples of objectives taken randomly: to consolidate and practise the main grammar structures, to express themselves fluently considering the communication situation, to develop the capacity to analyse specialized texts in the field of economics, to develop the capacity to write specialized texts belonging to different genres, to consolidate and develop specialized vocabulary which should ensure linguistic autonomy in various contexts, to interact efficiently with native and non-native speakers of English, to explain concepts in the field, to initiate and sustain dialogues, to master the economic jargon, to have different reading skills (skimming, scanning, reading for specific information), to summarize specialized texts.

Complex as they are, these objectives are in agreement with the main categories of competences proposed by language specialists for university students: the linguistic and the discourse competence. The former is a language specific

competence emphasizing phonology, grammar and vocabulary and connected to elements such as stress, rhythm, intonation, morphology and syntax, but also to structures specific to the formal or informal register. The discourse competence considers language in use, referring to the people's ability to produce appropriate language in different professional settings, involving all the four skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking (Frendo, 2005, pp. 8-10). Apart from these very specific competences, there are two more types of competences which, in the specialists' opinion, should also be developed during foreign language classes, the generic and the intercultural competences, which, even if not intrinsically connected to language learning, ensure good communication and bring added value to both students and future employees.

The efficiency of the competence development process and the degree to which learning outcomes have been achieved can only be proven by evaluating students. The course syllabi on the universities' websites show that, in most of the cases, the students' final grade takes into account both their activity throughout the term and their results in the end-of-term test, the weight of each significantly differing by university, specialism and semester.

The end-of-term examination generally consists of a complex written test which is meant to evaluate students' general language proficiency at the end of the course against the course objectives set at the beginning of the term. Consequently, it is an achievement test which, as Vizental (2008, pp. 321-322) argues, should rely on both objective and subjective tasks, following the language course and the syllabus with respect to content and methodology, thus providing a fair view on the students' language level, on the extent to which course objectives have been attained and, very importantly from the teacher's perspective, on the success of the course.

The main problem connected to this form of evaluation generally concerns the testing of the students' speaking skills. This is because the organization of oral examinations for several groups counting over 70 students each, during each session of exams, could prove daunting for the teacher, requiring resources of time and personnel that are not always available. That is why, unfortunately, it has become common practice for teachers to renounce the testing of this communicative competence at the end of the terms.

However, the teachers interested in comprehensive evaluation assess students' speaking skills throughout the term, either as part of progress tests or while students perform the work in the projects they are assigned, the assessment also involving the other skills, language and vocabulary. The advantage of such tests is that they allow the teacher to survey the students' advance along the term, providing information regarding the quality of the teacher's work and the students' ability to cope with the subsequent language courses during that particular semester.

4. Conclusions

The research conducted with respect to teaching business English at university level in the larger context of foreign language teaching in European educational establishments has confirmed the well-established status that the English language, in general, and business English, in particular, have both in the academic environment and on the labour market. In addition, it has revealed that the interest of European authorities and institutions in establishing coherent language policies for the teaching and learning of English at all educational levels has significantly increased over the last twenty years. Nevertheless, with all these efforts, it is obvious that there is still a long way to attain the coherence aimed at regarding the framework for teaching foreign languages and the actual implementation of the existing guidelines. This is undoubtedly a more general issue, but it involves the teaching of business English, as well.

Apart from this challenge, as also emphasized in other papers (Armăsar, 2014, pp. 141-148; Zagan-Zelter, D. and Zagan-Zelter, S., pp. 245-250), there are many other areas in which the language teacher's work is not at all undemanding: advocating the place of English in the academic curricula, assessing students' needs, preparing the course syllabi, deciding on the content to be taught so as to meet students' needs, deciding on the most appropriate teaching and learning methods, organizing remedial work when necessary, enhancing students' motivation, deciding on suitable and relevant assessment forms. The present paper aimed at raising awareness with respect to some of these issues, the others representing the focus of research to be conducted in the future.

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