

**BUSINESS ENGLISH /VS/ GENERAL ENGLISH. A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** *The paper refers to methods, strategies and approaches adopted in teaching English for business purposes, categories of business students, vocabulary drills used in the business English class. It also highlights the differences arising in teaching business English and general English, these mainly refer to the course design, the teaching methods and approach, the skills acquired by the students, as well as to the role performed by the teacher. The business English teacher has the advantage that he/she can resort to genuine material which can facilitate students' acquisition of business English lexicon. In order to integrate business vocabulary, to facilitate the acquisition process as well as to raise students' awareness of the business lexicon, we designed a series of lexical drills. The set of vocabulary drills used in the Business English class is similar to the one in the general English class, business English students also need to acquire soft skills and specialized vocabulary. These differences will be exploited both from lexical and from pedagogical perspectives. The aim of the paper is also to dwell on the characteristics of the business English genre and its sub-genres.*

**Key words:** *business English, general English, business lexicon, foreign language teaching.*

### **1 Introduction**

During the last decades English has developed and turned into the language of business, negotiation, business partnerships. Among the factors which have influenced and have led to the spread of English as the language of business, mention should be made of the globalisation of business, the development of technology, the video conferencing system which enables distance business meetings, the increasing use of professional networking websites. The development of the international business world has called forth the integration of entrepreneurs into this professional environment. Entrepreneurs need English to conduct global businesses and due to the process of globalisation business English has conquered a wide use. This integration was made possible mainly through linguistic means, thus business English was imposed as the lingua franca

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of international business. As a consequence of the globalisation process, lots of business English courses have been designed with the aim of facilitating learners' access to a business environment and labour market and of improving their business English skills. Thus, there has been an increase in the number of business English courses, either designed as part of university curriculum, or corporate English courses aimed at adult learners who have already fostered a career in business and/or who are working in professional business English environments. The topics of these courses span from advertising, marketing, human resources to finances, banking and accounting. The high number of business English manuals entails an increase in the number of the teaching approaches: teaching strategies, the integration of business vocabulary and the acquisition of business English skills.

Teaching English for Business Purposes EBP differs from teaching English for General Purposes EGP in terms of aim, course design, target learners, content and purpose. The aim of a business English course is to develop business skills to professionals working in a business environment. Basically, the set of skills acquired by a student who learns English for general purposes is very similar with the one a business English student will be empowered with, the business English student will not acquire extra skills, yet the focus differs.

While business students learn English for professional purposes (fostering a career in an (international) business environment, setting up a business which requires communication and partnership with worldwide business partners), general students learn English for general purposes: passing their exams, furthering their studies, travelling. General English can be used in the business English class, when target students are corporate employees, successful entrepreneurs or sales reps who have a background in economics or international finances. These students are able to conduct a sales meeting, draw up budgets, prepare business presentations, yet they might find it difficult to master general English vocabulary. On the other hand, university undergraduates have a good command of general English, but they do not master business English terminology. Within the first category of business students there are two sub-categories:

1. entrepreneurs or business professionals who need English to conduct international businesses and use/learn English to communicate;
2. undergraduate students enrolled in a business degree who need to integrate into the labour market. In our paper we mainly address to the second sub-category of business students, university undergraduates who major in economics. There are two types of business English courses:
  - a. designed to serve the needs of business communities;
  - b. designed by universities which offer programs in business and economics.

From a pedagogical point of view business English is studied under the umbrella of ESP, which encompasses business English and which refers to teaching it to business professionals. Business English can also be referred to as

EAP, English for Academic Purposes which aims at teaching business English to undergraduate business students.

## **2 Problem statement**

Business English genre has long been a topic of interdisciplinary research in specialist literature. Like every professional genre, business English one exists as a genre in itself, with many subgenres and it is characterized by certain lexical, semantic and stylistic patterns. Business English exfoliates in sub-genres and so does its vocabulary: advertising, finances, marketing, accounting, advertising.

On the one hand, ESP specialists have been preoccupied to find and exploit the best and the most suitable teaching methods and approaches emphasising the functional and notional aspect of business English. On the other hand, linguists have focused on analysing the lexical, semantic and stylistic features of business English genre.

General English terms acquire new meanings in business English, the basic meanings of lexical units are sometimes used figuratively in the business English genre. Often these terms used figuratively, or metaphorical extensions as Jeannette Littlemore 2008 calls them have origins in other domains than business. According to Charteris-Black & Ennis 2001 and Resche 2012 most of these terms originate from biology.

## **3 Purpose of study**

There are several main aspects a business English teacher must take into consideration when designing a business English course, among these: integration of business vocabulary and terminology; the focus on specific communication skills; the target learners, their needs and their aims; objectives; structure. Before embarking on the teaching process the teacher should take into account the following stages:

1. Conducting a needs analysis survey to test the students' level and identify their needs. This stage helps the teacher establish on the one hand what level of English to teach and on the other hand what sub-genre of business English to teach. To this end, the teacher must administer a placement test in order to identify and meet target students' needs.

2. Based on the interpretation of results from the needs analysis survey, the teacher can establish the content of the course as well as what skills to teach or develop. These are important aspects for the teachers to take into account in designing the course. If the course addresses to undergraduate students, their specialization must be taken into account and a sub-genre of business English must be taught to these students.

Business English courses encompassed in university curricula respond to students' professional needs, empowering them with the skills necessary in a(n) (international) business working environment and helping them better integrate into the labour market after graduation. The teaching strategies must be in

accordance with the target students' needs, for example in case of corporate courses the teaching process should focus more on improving students' soft skills. Entrepreneurs need English to conduct global businesses, they communicate a lot, they convey their messages via podcasts, slides, video conferences. To this end, the focus must be on developing oral communication skills: presentations, interviews, problem-solving tasks, phone/ skype conversations, negotiating, socializing. The second focus is on developing written communication skills: report-writing, letters, estimations, inquiries, drawing up balance sheets.

Teachers have to adjust their teaching methods so as to keep up with the students' needs and pace, thus they change the content of teaching in order to respond to the needs of the class: corporate learners might find it hard to learn and practise grammar structures. The range of grammar topics is more limited in the business English class, among these there are: The Present Continuous Tense –in making arrangements, the Passive Voice, The Present Tense Simple. The rhythm of teaching is dictated by the aim of the lesson as well as by the group of target learners.

#### **4 Methods**

As shown before, teaching English for Business Purposes requires teaching vocabulary, productive skills, writing skills (emails, letters), cultural aspects. Among the similar teaching methods used successfully both during the business English class and during the general English class there are: interactive methods, student-oriented teaching methods such as brainstorming; discussions; role-play. The range of speaking skills business students are empowered with differs from that taught in the general English class: in business English class the focus is on productive skills such as phone conversations, role play, business presentations, business interactions. Through these activities the teaching process must equally integrate specialized vocabulary. Business English teachers have the tendency to transfer general English teaching methods in the business English class, including methods of teaching vocabulary.

The main aspect of teaching English for business purposes is related to teaching vocabulary. One step in our approach to teaching business English would be increasing students' awareness of the business English vocabulary and of the differences existing between general English lexicon and business English one. Nowadays corpora are very beneficial resources in teaching vocabulary. Researchers focusing on ESP advocate and promote corpora as resources for teaching ESP: Paltridge and Starfield 2017, Popescu, 2011.

For the business English teacher corpora represent an advantage and at the same time an opportunity as they can facilitate students' acquisition of the business English vocabulary, they encompass genuine, authentic material. Corpora prove to be very useful tools for teachers, as, based on them teachers can better exploit the lexical differences arising between general English and the business English genre. Thanks to corpora there is a large range of teaching

materials which business English teachers can make use of, it is therefore easier for teachers to resort to corpora to facilitate the acquisition of business English vocabulary. The teachers who decide to resort to corpora in teaching business English have two options: to compile their own corpus or to resort to ready-made corpora. The first option, tailor-made corpora, has the advantage that teachers can select the content of the corpus and adjust it to the needs of the students, the content can range from companies websites to business newspapers and magazines. The business English teacher turns into a compiler and amasses a corpus of genuine business English texts to be used in the class. The more authentic the teaching material is, the more chances there are for the business English students to produce natural language. Corpora can also be used as resources for reading comprehension activities. The teacher plays an important role in the selection of the texts for reading comprehension and establishes the aims and results of the teaching process. Based on the texts selected the teacher helps them develop and expand their business English vocabulary, focusing less on teaching grammar items and structures. Corpora also represent useful resources in compiling business and economics dictionaries.

### **5 Teaching business vocabulary**

In teaching business English vocabulary is taught in context. The range of vocabulary drills used in teaching business English does not differ from the one used in teaching English for General Purposes. They work after and rely on the same principles (word association, semantic mapping), the content is different. In introducing new words teachers should take into account the context, encouraging students to practise newly introduced words in contexts of their own. The teacher's task is to exploit active vocabulary, to encourage students' autonomy in learning business English vocabulary, to acquaint students with all sub-genres of business English and not in the least to focus on the (re-) activation of previously acquired vocabulary. The best way to do this is to resort to authentic vocabulary, including: specialized websites, business newspapers, databases, corporate websites, podcasts. The use of genuine material leads to an active acquisition of business English vocabulary. Training students to work with genuine material might have as immediate result an increase in their autonomy of learning business English. The structure of business English vocabulary mainly consists of nouns. Usually in business English nouns acquire extra meanings, unless trained to make the difference, a beginner might encounter difficulties in telling the difference between business and general English vocabulary. In order to yield results and to be better captured by business students these drills have to rely on and activate semantic mappings. An important aspect pertaining to teaching business vocabulary is teaching business metaphors. The topic was drawn on by Charteris-Black & Ennis 2001, Charteris-Black 2000, Resche 2012, Littlemore 2008 who suggest different strategies and methods to be adopted by teachers. The strategies applied in teaching the basic meaning of

business vocabulary differ from those applied in introducing figurative meanings. In teaching figurative language to business English students teachers have to resort to an array of methods and strategies: the first stage includes raising students' awareness of metaphors, drawing on the entailment between general meaning and figurative meaning, as well as resorting to visual images. The relationship establishing between the basic meaning and the figurative one is often based on polysemy, this facilitates students' retention of business English terms.

The author compiled a corpus encompassing business English texts drawn from business newspapers. Based on the corpus the author extracted lexical units which have different meanings in business English than in general English, these words were introduced in vocabulary drills, aimed to improve students' retention. The types of vocabulary drills include fill in, matching, T/F sentences, multiple choice. In this way business English students are more prepared to make the difference between business English vocabulary and general English one and they will acquire more easily words which might create problems to business English students: *interest, futures, securities, assets*. Below we present a list of vocabulary items that might create difficulties to Romanian students who study business English:

Table 1. Lexical differences between business English vocabulary and general English one

Business English	General English
<p><b>Assets</b> (n.pl.) = the entries on a balance sheet showing all properties, both tangible and intangible The funding ratio, a measure of <b>assets</b> to liabilities, also fell to 84 per cent in April this year, down from 85 per cent a month earlier, according to Mercer's monthly survey. (FT, 2014)</p> <p><b>Balance</b> (n.) = equality of totals in the debit and credit sides of an account All this leaves India exposed to supply interruptions in the Middle</p>	<p><b>Asset</b> (n.) = a useful quality, person, thing Dr. Luis R. Marcos, a former president of the hospitals corporation, said of Dr. Raju, "He's a charming person, which is <b>an asset</b> in this field which is so complicated and so filled with competing interests." (NYT, 2014)</p> <p><b>Balance</b> (n.) = a state of equilibrium Gymnasts must have good <b>balance</b> (free online dictionary)</p>

<p>East and elsewhere, and strains its <b>balance of payments</b>. (EC, 2013). In Italy, 90% of companies fall into that category, and banks' <b>balance-sheets</b> are in particularly bad shape (EC, 2014).</p> <p><b>Blue chip</b> (n) = a stock considered reliable with respect to both dividend income and capital value <b>Blue chips</b> in other industries can borrow even more cheaply: on December 9th Visa paid a premium of less than one percentage point to borrow \$16 billion. (EC, 2015)</p> <p><b>Encumbrance</b> (n.) = debt, mortgage, leverage</p> <p><b>Futures</b> (n.pl.) =commodities / stocks bought or sold upon agreement of delivery in time to come Palm oil <b>futures</b> for November delivery on Bursa Malaysia have fallen almost 30 per cent since March to M\$1,982 (\$622) per tonne on Wednesday. (FT, 2014)</p> <p><b>Interest</b> (n.) = a charge for a loan The recent <b>interest</b> rate jumps were far from unprecedented (FT, 2014)</p> <p><b>Liabilities</b> (n.pl.) = debts The company listed assets and <b>liabilities</b> of between \$100m and</p>	<p><b>Blue chip</b> (n.) = a gambling chip with the highest value</p> <p><b>Encumbrance</b> (n.) = obstacle</p> <p><b>Future</b> (adj.)</p> <p><b>Interest</b> (n.) = a state of curiosity or concern about attention to do sth. With new towns and garden cities attracting renewed political <b>interest</b> amid the lowest rates of peacetime building since the 1920s, the West Midlands project is a test bed for what a new settlement might look like. (FT, 2014)</p> <p><b>Liability</b> (n.) = responsibility In parallel, the limited <b>liability</b> company was born and so was the sort of corporate bureaucracy that</p>
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<p>\$500m in its bankruptcy filing. (The Guardian, 2015)</p> <p><b>Securities</b> (n.pl.) = the specific assets that a creditor can claim title to in the event of default on an obligation; guarantee With more than 20 kinds of shares, warrants and debt <b>securities</b>, even Mr Kinder was probably exasperated by his creation (EC, 2014)</p> <p><b>Turnover</b> (n.) = the volume of a business In Nigeria, the most recent results for Unilever, the maker of Flora margarine and Dove shampoo, and Nestlé, the world’s largest food group by sales, showed a significant slowdown in <b>turnover</b> and profit. (FT, 2014)</p> <p><b>Yield</b> (n.) = a profit obtained from an investment But while the initial fall in <b>yields</b> from their panicky heights was welcome and justified, the epic rally this year is taking them into bubble territory. (FT, 2014)</p>	<p>constantly threatens to sink companies under the weight of their own superstructure (FT, 2015)</p> <p><b>Security</b> (n.) = safety Pingit offers <b>security</b> by allowing the payer to remain within the app, meaning no bank details would need to be provided at either end. (FT, 2015).</p> <p><b>Turnover</b> (n.) = a reversal</p> <p><b>Yield</b> (n.) = a product</p>
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Table 2. Self-designed exercise: Match the payee with the type of payment

<b>Payee</b>	<b>Type of payment</b>
workers	fee
clerks	commission
authors	tax
shareholder	dividend
government	royalty

retired people	wages
sales representative	salary
consultant	pension

Example of multiple choice task:

e.g.: Owners who want to insure premises and assets against natural phenomena choose:

- a. health insurance
- b. business property insurance
- c. theft insurance

These types of drills are created on the basis of corpus.

## 6 Findings and results

From a teacher`s perspective the teaching of business English entails both advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages mention should be made of:

-Students` motivation for learning business English is increased as this enables learners`access to economic and business information through financial newspapers, magazines, TV broadcasts.

-Business English is used in a professional context which facilitates learners`professional development.

The disadvantages refer to the fact that undergraduates find it difficult to acquire specialized vocabulary, as business English is taught at university level and comes to complete their knowledge in the field of business and economics. Teachers`opinions regarding teaching business English are divided, some argue that it is better to focus on communication skills, some others believe that the teaching of specialised vocabulary is of utmost importance. Although these two components go hand in hand, one cannot develop business students` communication skills without a proper integration of business vocabulary. The preparation of the business English teacher is also a subject of controversy: some argue that this one should have a second degree in economics, some other state that the business English teacher must be an expert in foreign language teaching. Among the arguments which support the latest statement there are: the business English teacher does not teach business concepts, he/she teaches students how to interact in a business environment, how to conduct an interview and deliver a business presentation, without transferring information from the economic sphere, we mainly opt for this argument.

Table 3. Differences between teaching business English and general English

BUSINESS ENGLISH	GENERAL ENGLISH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•A smaller range of oral communication tasks, usually task-based communication activities;</li> <li>•Specific communication skills; empowers students with hands-on communicative competences and skills, necessary in a business working environment;</li> <li>•Specialized vocabulary;</li> <li>•Structure of the business English course: one-to-one lessons, intensive courses;</li> <li>•Business English students learn less grammar;</li> <li>•Increased motivation;</li> <li>•Tailor-made approaches;</li> <li>•Use of authentic material;</li> <li>•The age of the business English students differs, they are university undergraduates and adult learners;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•A larger range of oral communication tasks, general and task-based communication skills;</li> <li>•General communication activities;</li> <li>•General vocabulary;</li> <li>•Structure of the general English course: traditional classes;</li> <li>•General English students learn more grammar structures;</li> </ul>

## 7 Conclusions

From a pedagogical point of view the main differences existing between teaching general English and business English refer to the teaching methods, approaches and strategies which should integrate authentic material into the business English class and to the course design, which should focus on the communication skills and tasks as well as integration of business vocabulary. Empowering business English students with soft skills, task-based activities, such as case studies, role play and simulation and intercultural communication will increase their chances to better perform in their job.

From a lexical point of view the most important difference between general English and business English lies in vocabulary. This makes it difficult for undergraduates to identify and acquire specialized vocabulary. Such difficulties may arise in producing language, when learners use lexical units which are not appropriate for the business context, when they associate lexical units which do not usually collocate, or in translation when students easily mistake and consequently mistranslate general English lexical units for business English ones. To overcome these difficulties, business English teacher should

activate students' vocabulary, improve their communication skills and help them use business English vocabulary effectively which is not an easy task as: "Business English seems to be much more complex than any other area of ESP, especially considering the need for an interface with the general public" (Popescu, 2011: 20).

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