Essence of Teaching Business Communication Skills to IT Students in ELT in Serbia

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Abstract: This paper deals with the needs of IT students in ELT in the context of business communication skills. The results presented in this paper are a part of much greater research. The mix-method research was conducted at eight IT departments in five cities in Serbia during the academic year 2011/2012. The quantitative sample included 775 IT students at II and III year of their studies and 77 professors and assistants teaching domain content courses while the subsample for the structured interview included 16 students, 10 professors and 10 assistants. One of the aims of this research was to establish a detailed framework of English language courses suitable for IT students in Serbia. Among the courses that emerged, as the ones that meet the needs of IT students in ELT at tertiary level in Serbia, was the course of Business Communication. In this paper, the authors present the aims of the Business English Communication Course and elaborate on the specific activities and genres that emerged essential for this type of course. The findings may be useful for all ESP teachers teaching at Technical faculties, especially the ones teaching IT students.

Keywords: ESP, business communication, IT students, tertiary education.

1. Introduction

One of the major consequences of the current phase of economic globalization has been the emergence of English as the leading lingua franca of international business (Graddol 1997, Ku & Zussman 2010, Gak 2013), and this in turn has increasing demand for courses of various kinds in Business English (BE). Although the precise nature and purpose of these courses vary according to factors such as the participants' age, proficiency and context, they all usually have the same

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objective: to develop students' ability to use English effectively in the increasingly globalized world of work (Dejica-Carțis 2013, Evans 2013). Due to the growing language requirements and the impact of globalization, this paper has the aim to present a framework for ELT at IT departments in Serbia, with the main focus on skills and competencies required in the field of Business Communication that emerged as an essential separate course in the provided framework.

2. Theoretical background

Business English is difficult to define and limit in linguistic terms (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 54). Defining BE Pickett (1986: 16) highlighted the fact that there was more than one face to business communication with some being a lot closer to the everyday language spoken by the general public than many other segments. Due to many facets that Business English holds, a needs analysis may be even more fundamental in Business English than in, for example English for Science and Technology as learners needs can be much more varied and the spectrum of language, skills and expertise less foreseen (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 57). The approach to needs analysis depends on the situation and context. Pilbeam (1979) proposes the needs analysis to be concerned with establishing both a target profile of language skills, which lists the actual activities that the participants have to carry out (Target Situation Analysis) and a profile of personal ability in which the participants' proficiency in these activities is evaluated (Present Situation Analysis).

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 61) discuss the notions of language and communication in Business English under four categories: (a) discourse community, (b) business genres, (c) key communicative events and (d) functions, grammar and lexis.

a) *discourse community*: in the area of Business English, the trend towards finding out how a discourse community operates is increasingly important. A great amount of Business English research has the aim to discover how the language and discourse used in business communication relate to context defining existing relationships and key events (Charles 1994). The discourse and thus the language stem from the relationship. Three factors seem particularly significant: whether the relationship is new or old, where the balance of power lies and cultural values and attitudes (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 61).

b) *business genres*: Language teacher realized for a great number of activities to be typical for specific discipline and on the basis of their findings, they have come to conclusion that the best way to prepare their students for future tasks in English is enabling them to understand those tasks. Experiences in this field led to a movement that is more focused on the target genres bringing the spirit and culture of a specific discipline to students (Hyland 2006: 19). Swales (1990: 54), one of the major contributors to the field of genre, notes that "a discourse community's nomenclature for genres is an important

source of insight". The genre analysis helped in enlightening the communication processes in a specific genre. The genres that are mostly addressed in Business English world are oriented towards business oral and written communication (e.g. emails, meetings and negotiations) with more attention paid to oral communication (Hafizoah & Fatimah 2010). Nevertheless, there were recorded mismatches concerning business terminology (memos, project, report, presentation etc.) between the researchers/teachers and organisations (Barbara *et al*. 1996).

c) *key communicative events*: There is more of a consensus on the key communicative events of business. Some of the findings of needs analysis (Holden 1993, Khoo 1994) and current published materials identify seven core events in BE. The five events requiring primarily oral language are referred to as: telephoning, socialising, making presentations, taking part in meeting and negotiating, those that require written form are corresponding and reporting (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 64). Key communicative events considered important for engineers are: teleconferencing, networking for contacts and advice, and presenting new ideas and alternative strategies (Hafizoah & Fatimah 2010: 168). Besides specific written tasks (such are product and project documentation, various reports etc.) that are expected to be handled in English, IT engineers, very often have to exchange emails with their co-workers, partners and/or employers from other countries. Ineffective and poor written communication in engineering job positions leads to misinterpretation, inefficiency and time wastage, thereby gradually affecting problem resolution (Reimer 2007: 92). For such miscommunications, it was found to contribute to the escalation of mistrust and aggression at the same time giving the impression of an engineer being unprofessional and unproductive (Keane & Gibson 1999).

d) *functions, grammar and lexis*: Until recently, Business English has been and experience, intuition and materials led movement and reported research findings have been slow to emerge and feed into practise. Thus earlier textbooks taught more elaborate gambits for functions such as taking turns, expressing opinions and disagreeing (e.g. It is my considered opinion…on the whole I agree with you but could I say…) (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 64). However, the ESP practitioners realised that in many situations much shorter and more informal phrases are used (Linde, 1991). Robinson (1991) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1996) note on much less research in the area of grammar in BE. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 79) draw up a list of grammar areas that business grammar reference books single out. All place emphasis on the verbs and tenses, voice and modals. Brieger and Sweeney (1994) and Duckworth (1995) also list some key functions of Business English and give a number of grammatical realisations for each one: ability and inability, agreeing and disagreeing, assertion and downtoning and checking and confirming.

At the global level, there are already some organisation, such as ABET or Pearson Education Limited, that has the sheer purpose to evaluate and accredit the existing curricula in the field of engineering and technology at the same time evaluating the stated knowledge and skills of English language that should be acquired by a future graduate of technical orientation (Baum 2000; Stretton 2012). In this context, high demands are being placed on the oral and written business communication (Reimer 2007, Šafranj 2009, Đurić & Stojković 2011, Đurić 2013) and technical writing skills (Mort *et al.* 2012, Alameddine 2013). Unfortunately, the findings indicate that the skills and expertise of future and graduated engineers in this field do not meet the world standards (Reimer, 2007).

3. Methodology

The mix-method research was conducted from November 2011 to April 2012 at the IT departments at the following institutions of tertiary education in Serbia: Faculty of Organizational Sciences and Faculty of Electrical Engineering in Belgrade, Faculty of Technical Science, Faculty of Science and Higher Technical School of Professional Studies in Novi Sad, Technical Faculty "Mihajlo Pupin" in Zrenjanin, Faculty of Technical Science in Čačak and Higher Technological School of Professional Studies in Šabac. The aim of the research was to elicit the needs related to four basic skills of IT students in Serbia and to provide a new framework for the organization of English Language Teaching at IT departments in Serbia. The sample included 775 informants (II and III year students) and 77 professors and assistants teaching domain content courses. SPSS software was used to analyse these data.

The subsample for the interview included 34 participants (10 professors, 10 assistants and 14 students). These three subsamples were relevant for gaining different perspectives on the needs of IT students in ELT in Serbia. All interviews were recorded in the field and later transcribed and analyzed. To analyse them the authors followed some of the techniques provided by Kathy Charmaz, one of the followers of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006, Corbin & Strauss 2008). The main techniques used to analyse the interviews were Initial Coding (Line-by-Line Coding), Focused Coding, Constant Comparison and Memos. The categories that emerged are discussed by the means of properties that define them.

4. Findings

At the very beginning of this section, the framework for English courses organisation at IT departments in Serbia (Figure 1) will be presented in order to provide the exact location of Business Communication course. Afterwards, the course components and outcomes, along with the research findings, will be further discussed in the context of Dudley-Evans and St John's (1998: 61) classification of key issues in Business English (discourse community, business genres, key communicative events and functions, grammar and lexis).
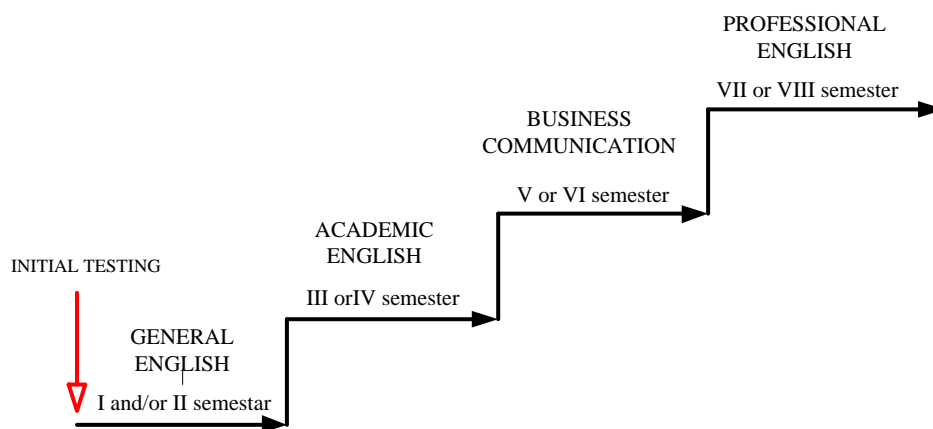
PROFESSIONAL
ENGLISH

VII or VIII semester

BUSINESS
COMMUNICATION

V or VI semester

ACADEMIC
ENGLISH

INITIAL TESTING   III orIV semester

GENERAL
ENGLISH

I and/or II semestar

Figure 1. The framework for English courses organisation at IT departments in Serbia

The model provided in Figure 1 presents the framework for the organization of English language courses at IT departments in Serbia (240 ECTS points - for studies that are organized for 180 ECTS points the only difference is that the Business Communication Course is placed in the V semester and Professional English Course in the VI semester). As we can see, Business Communication Course is placed on the III year of studies (V or VI semester). The purpose of this course is to raise the students' competence to required standards of academics and future professional needs in the business world. The course is focused on equipping students with the skills essential for written and oral communication with their potential future clients, colleagues and employers. The required level for this course is B1 in order to provide learning situation where all the students are able to communicate their ideas and thoughts in both oral and written manner. The courses that are placed before the Business Communication Course are meant to provide them with satisfying knowledge level to embark on this course.

Upon successful completion of the course, the student will be able to:
- manage written business communication (write formal and informal emails);
- manage oral communication using formal and informal vocabulary in business environment;
- to simulate telephone and Skype calls with people from different countries;
- represent an imaginary company where a student is an employee or one of the founders (being able to discuss the following issues: the owners and ownership, the target market and customers, the products and services it provides, the vision of the company and the future plans);
- describe his/her job position in the company specifying the responsibilities;

- write a CV and a cover letter and make a CV video;
- answer the most frequent job interview questions.

In the following texts, the presented findings will be analyzed in the context of Key Issues for Business English (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 61), in this case for IT engineers to-be.

A. DISCOURSE COMMUNITY: Concerning the great demand that is currently present in the world for IT engineers their labour market can be the whole world while their office can be in their home. They can be freelancers or do outsourcing, they can be employed in foreign and domestic companies where the level of English language usage can vary on the demand of the workers structure or job position. The possibilities are numerous. Due to such a state, it is not an easy task to define the discourse community for IT engineers. Bearing in mind three listed factors in defining relationships in discourse community (new or old, balance of power and culture values and attitudes) (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998: 61), it can be concluded for all three of them to be of immense value for IT engineers. At the very outset of their career, most of the relationships for them will be new, frequently with the balance of power on the other side, so they should be prepared how to communicate respectfully to their future employers, new colleagues and potential clients (Dabić 2013; Dabić, Suzić & Ćirković-Miladinović 2013). The element of culture values and attitudes is significant, but not of English culture, due to the fact that the greatest amount of conversations in English can be expected with non-native speakers (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013) especially when working on projects in multinational teams (Dabić, 2014). Accordingly, some time in the course should be devoted to business communication ethics.

B. BUSINESS GENRES: As it was stated earlier in the paper, a discourse community is one of key cornerstones in defining the genres in a specific discourse community (Swales 1990, Dudley-Evans & St John 1998, Hyland 2006). Business genres that our informants found relevant are: *emails* (formal and informal), *business meetings*, *CV*, *cover letter*, *job interviews*, *reports* (for product and project), *documentation* (for product and project) and *presentation* (product, project) (Dabić 2013; Dabić, Suzić & Ćirković-Miladinović 2013). Reports and documentation are the genres that are covered more in detail on the following course (Professional English) while *the presentation of job position and company* is introduced in the course by the authors as these themes are regular component of Business English textbooks and as such the authors see it relevant for future IT engineers.

C. KEY COMMUNICATIVE EVENTS: The main purpose of Business English courses is to develop students' ability to use English effectively in the increasingly globalized world of work (Gimenez 2000, Evans 2013). Having in mind that future IT engineers are at the threshold of their future employment, Business English course is designed to assist them in job search

and the most common communicative events. Key communicative events that request oral language are: *job interview*, *telephoning* (regular calls, Skype calls and teleconferencing), *socializing*, *presenting* (skills and expertise, product or project, job position and company), *taking part in a meeting or negotiation* while the ones that require written language are: *corresponding* and *reporting* (about the work progress on a product or project).

D. FUNCTIONS, GRAMMAR AND LEXIS: Before listing any specific function, grammar or lexis points, it should be stated that informants from all three subsample were not specific about any of these notions. Their main concern was to gain confidence in expressing themselves in English using effectively all four language skills (property *confidence*). They also did not specify any knowledge level, but pointed out fluency as one of the main benchmarks of successful communication. Hafizoah and Fatimah (2010: 168) investigating English communicative events and skills needed at the workplace confirmed this stating that:' Fluency in the English language is seen as an opportunity in the engineering field to advance towards becoming a 'global engineer.' Furthermore, when defining confidence in oral communication, IT engineers singled out fluency and correct pronunciation while in written communication they singled out correct grammar usage and good spelling. It is interesting, that never a specific knowledge level was mentioned, just the fluency and the accuracy. Furthermore, the informants stressed the need to learn to handle *real-time talk* and various *accents* of their potential speakers emphasizing the essence of being able to respond quickly in both writing and talking (Dabić, 2014). Concerning the lexis needed to successfully operate in the industry world, IT engineers are specific in a way that they acquire most of their key specific vocabulary in domain content courses because the terminology is mostly introduced in English. The only requirement they find important is not to begin with ESP courses before the III year because that is the time needed to acquire the basic technical vocabulary (Dabić, Ćirković-Miladinović & Suzić, 2013). In the end, the functions for English language usage are numerous: *ability* and *inability*, *agreeing* and *disagreeing*, *reporting*, *enquiring about a problem*, *offering solutions*, *discussing facts* and *opinions*, *providing explanation* and *exchanging ideas and attitudes*.

5. Conclusion

Taking into consideration all that was discussed in the paper, we can draw several conclusions. First, Business English or Business Communication course should be obligatory course in IT tertiary education that should be positioned on the III year of studies providing students with enough space to master General and Academic English and acquire sufficient amount of technical terms in their field in domain content courses. Second, IT discourse community spreads on the whole world

and as such requires IT engineers to be able to establish and handle numerous and various business relationships as freelancers, employers or employees. Third, business genres that emerged in our research have the purpose to prepare the students to enter the job market (*CV, cover letter and job interview*) and for the most common business situations after finding employment (*emails, presentations, telephoning/teleconferencing, business meetings, reports and documentation*). All these genres are interrelated with key communicative events. Finally, during the analysis of functions, grammar and lexis that meet the needs of IT students in Business English course, the researchers only detected numerous functions, while there were no specific grammatical and lexical points that singled out. However, the informants view confidence in both oral and written communication as a key benchmark of successful communication.

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