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Business English in Practical Terms

Abstract

The article is an attempt to look at the reality of teaching English for Business Purposes (EBP)/ Business English (BE) from a practical point of view. It approaches the term BE as if through a funnel with English as an International Language (EIL) at the top, English Language Teaching/General English (ELT/GE) as its sloping sides, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/English as a Second Language (ESL) at the top of the funnel's narrow tube, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the very bottom, just above where BE, one of its main arms is placed. Special emphasis is laid on key distinctions between BE and ELT/GE, the function of BE teachers and the variety of roles that they assume in BE, on BE teachers as connoisseurs of specialist business expertise, and the importance of carrying out needs analysis as it brings to light some very important information about learners of BE.

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Introduction

More and more people are nowadays required to learn English as the importance of EIL is still anything but decreasing. Nobody can deny the fact that, at the present time, English is the leading language of international communication, and the established language of science and business in the world. Although it is only one of several languages being promoted internationally in similar ways, its hegemony cannot be disputed. As a result, with the spread of English a huge demand has been created for teachers of English, and ELT/GE has become a billion-pound business.

Curiously enough, there is another particular aspect within ELT/GE that has been in great demand—a fast-growing activity, and already a major one around the world today, namely the teaching of ESP.¹ ESP must be seen as one of the branches of EFL/ESL, which are themselves the main branches of ELT/GE. Although ESP has had

¹ Note the emphasis on *Specific*, rather than *Special* purposes. The term English for *Special* Purposes was common earlier but is now thought to suggest special languages, i.e. restricted languages which constitute only a small part of ESP. In practice, the acronym ESP is used without having to clarify what it stands for. The very term emphasises purpose or purposefulness. In other words, it implies that the use of English is specific, and associated with professions, institutional procedures and occupational requirements.

considerable influence on the whole field of ELT/GE in the last thirty years or so, especially in the field of materials and syllabus design, the relationship of ESP to ELT is still not quite clear. The consensus nowadays is that ESP is '*clearly a type of ELT*' (Robinson, in Coleman 1989: 396)². However, the focus of the article goes even deeper into the area of ESP, namely in the realm of EBP/BE -a major and the most entrepreneurial arm of ESP, almost an industry in itself.³

Business English

BE is most definitely the current growth area in ESP which, in the two or three decades, attracted increasing interest and awareness. BE course books and other teaching/learning materials are proliferating, and language schools offering BE courses are blossoming. Several developments may have contributed to the expansion of BE, but speaking from the pedagogical point of view, the demand for BE must have originated from a particular kind of learners, often adults, who already had both grammatical knowledge of English, and also a specific purpose in learning English. In short, they were looking for a different approach, one which would provide them with an opportunity to use this knowledge more productively than had been previously possible, and therefore approached BE courses with heightened expectations.

BE must be seen in the overall context of ESP because it relies on and utilizes elements common to all fields of work in ESP, such as needs analysis, syllabus design, selection and development of teaching/learning materials, course design etc. Just like other varieties of ESP, BE works with a number of contexts, requires and uses specific language corpora, and lays emphasis on specific kinds of communication.

Teaching BE is believed to be the teaching of English to adults working in businesses, or preparing to work in the field of business, i.e. a needs-directed teaching in which as much as possible must be made job-related, focused on learners' needs and relevant to them. Successful use of English is seen in terms of a successful outcome to the business transaction. Cost-effectiveness is required by both adults paying for themselves, and companies sponsoring their staff, so learners' bosses and supervisors or the person setting up the language training in a company may expect reports on learners' progress on a regular basis. Business is competitive, and learners' attendance can be even tracked, especially if the company is financing the course.

² Strangely enough, it has become fashionable to maintain that ESP does not exist and that various specialisations within the ESP process are '*only degrees of general English*' (Kennedy and Bolitho 1984: 135). Needless to say, it would be a bit premature to support such a view. In his article, Strevens (in Tickoo 1988: 1) provides a similar definition: '*ESP is a particular case of the general category of special-purpose language teaching*'. Kennedy and Bolitho (1984: 135) are sure that '*Whatever the niceties of the argument, ESP very clearly does exist*'.

³ EBP/BE is a part of English for Professional Purposes (EPP) which is itself a part of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). The latter is one of the two main branches of ESP-the other being English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

Key distinctions between BE and ELT/GE

BE is not a clearly defined area of ESP, and neither is the demarcation line between BE and ELT/GE. The term covers a variety of Englishes, some very specific, others very general but is said to have much in common with ELT/GE. This may have been caused by the fact that most BE teachers have been primarily trained to teach ELT/GE, and therefore have no relevant training or experience in the BE field. Secondly, BE has always tried to draw on the key developments in the area of ELT/GE teaching. As Brieger (1997: 3) points out *'BE, which appeared on the ELT stage as a course programme and learning objective in the late seventies, has been shaped by a range of influences from both the ELT and the non-ELT world'*. To remind ourselves of an indicative example- the need to focus on functional formulaic key language lists in BE comes from the mid-1970s and 80s ELT/GE development (Ellis and Johnson 1994). Strangely enough, the underlying principles of this approach are readily ascribed to BE only by the laymen. Similarly, learners' needs are considered equally important in teaching ELT/GE and BE, and should govern both, not just BE methodology.⁴ However, there is an important distinction in ELT/GE where the purpose of needs analysis is to assess the existing language knowledge and language needs of the learners, and not to define the language required by their job.⁵

Another similarity is the constant attempt of BE to put as much emphasis as possible on the general content, i.e. learners' general ability to communicate more effectively, usually in business situations. Also no major differences are to be found in the area of learners, since in BE and ELT/GE learners are drawn from pre-service and in-service.

However, there are some quite important distinctions between BE and ELT/GE. To start with, in BE general content is normally mixed with specific content which relates to a particular job area or industry. To turn to learners' needs, in GE they are rarely as immediate and urgent as in BE where the most important characteristic is the sense of purpose, i.e. the fact that language is used to achieve an end. As already mentioned, the aims of BE will always relate to learners' work, and to fulfilling their occupational and professional language needs for English most completely, so the aims of BE courses might be eventually considered radically different from the aims of ELT/GE courses. The claims for BE are that it is more cost-effective than ELT/GE, focused on learners' needs, relevant to them, and successful in imparting learning (Strevens 1988, as cited in Celce-Murcia 2001).

Next two key contrasts arise from the area of programmes. Namely, the focus in BE is not merely on learners' accuracy (the correct use of language forms) and fluency (getting the message over) but also on developing the effectiveness of communication, i.e. the total performance-linguistic and non-linguistic. Similarly, BE aims to develop also specialist language knowledge and professional communication skills, not just general language knowledge and general communication skills (Brieger 1997).

⁴ The author of this article refers to Dudley-Evans and St John's definition of ESP methodology (1998: 4).

⁵ Ellis and Johnson (1994: 10-13) summarize the differences between BE and ELT/GE.

Another important distinction is represented by the fact that the knowledge of business content and communication skills training is instrumental to BE trainers, not just the knowledge of ELT methodology. The BE syllabus is likely to be defined primarily in relation to business performance skills⁶ and certain concepts, typically further broken down into formulaic functional language.⁷

Finally, to turn to the two roles, the role of BE and ELT/GE teacher, they are not be too different. However, the difference between them is, as Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 53) claim, *'in theory nothing, in practice a great deal'*. What lies at the core of the problem of the BE teacher's role is that in practical ways ELT/GE and BE teacher's work differ very much. Johns and Price-Machado (2001: 46) are quite sure that *'Inexperienced or 'traditional' teachers cannot work within an experimental ESP context'*.

BE Teachers

And that brings us to the very important and quite controversial question of the role of the BE teacher. BE teachers experience all the challenges that ELT/GE teachers have to face, but they face also additional roles that ELT/GE teachers may not have to assume. In practical terms, all ESP, not just BE, teachers are above all self-made language teachers who have trained themselves, mostly through self-study in a specific area of ESP. According to a survey on the Internet *'only 5 per cent of the ESP practitioners had a special University degree or practical experience in the field they were practising the teaching profession'* (Master 1997, as cited by Mateva in Slavičkova 2001: 66). Knowing that the teaching of BE brings together three areas, namely the pedagogic skills of teaching, the knowledge of the foreign language and its typical communication, and finally, business, it is not very difficult to understand that BE teachers' role consists of many parts, and extends well beyond teaching.

In order to reflect an extremely varied scope of the BE teacher role, some authors prefer to use terms like practitioner, monitor, facilitator, trainer rather than the term teacher. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 13) believe that BE teachers seem to have five key roles, some the same as EFL/GE teachers, some in addition to those, namely a teacher, a course designer and materials provider, a researcher, a collaborator, and an evaluator.

Being 'merely' a language teacher, i.e. a provider of input and a controller of classroom activities, is most definitely a traditional role that most learners expect of BE teachers. Learners' institutional and cultural expectations must not be forgotten when discussing the role of BE teachers, as certain cultures may not welcome the BE teachers' adoption of other, more facilitating, roles. BE teachers' stance should constantly move on the

⁶ Business performance skills are vital for holding meetings, having presentations, socializing or report-writing in English.

⁷ Formulaic functional areas typically include language for making appointments, introductions, business lunches, confirming plans, recommending, giving opinions, showing agreement etc.

continuum that extends from BE teachers as controllers of teaching/learning activities at one end to BE teachers as facilitators at the other end. Generally speaking, the more specific the courses and the more complicated the carrier content of the teaching material, the more are BE teachers required to take up the stance of consultants. Such a role is quite difficult to adopt, and depends on a number of factors, such as learners' culture, their existing language knowledge, subject or professional knowledge, their status, other stakeholders' expectations-not just learners' wishes and needs, size of group, timetabling, course length and type,⁸ available resources and physical facilities, BE teachers' level of business expertise, and many others.

To look at BE teachers' roles in harsh every-day practice, they could be quite different even from one BE teacher's situation to another. The only common thread seems to be the role of classroom organizers, since this is the role that they almost always have to play. Professionals and business people as language learners may for example place on BE teachers the demands that differ substantially from those of tertiary or secondary level students – the expectation of minute groups, if not one-to-one tuition, or maybe telephone classes, tutored distance-learning, but always short intensive courses, task-based deep-end approach, in one word – high quality for money. As such learners usually decide to build language learning into their busy schedules, and not the other way around, BE teachers should respond by providing high standard up-market language teaching/learning strategies and approaches, and most definitely not just blurred handouts.

Similarly, in reality not all BE teachers may make the decisions about the course design but be forced into negotiating with learners about the most appropriate topics. A fixed course design laid down in advance and rarely deviated from is a rare thing in BE. Many BE teachers do not even play the role of input and materials' providers as they have to depend on their learners to bring job-specific materials in class, especially if BE teachers are not particularly knowledgeable about the subject content that is being taught. Even when in their role of providers of teaching/learning materials, it is rarely possible for them to just use ready-made BE textbooks without the need to adapt the published materials, use supplementary, or even write their own materials when no published material exists for a specific target group of learners. The culmination of the role of a mere organizer of the information, facilitator or consultant could be a BE teacher as a go-between intermediating between subject specialists on the one hand, and language learners on the other. In practical terms, this role is quite difficult to assume by BE teachers, also because of the subject teachers' aversion to disseminating their greater knowledge of the subject content to language teachers. In tertiary level situations where subject teachers' status is generally deemed higher than language teachers', such subject expert-cum-language teacher cooperation, collaboration or team-teaching is virtually non-existent.⁹

⁸ During intensive BE courses the learners' time is totally committed to the course. In contrast, extensive courses occupy a smaller part of their timetable.

⁹ For subject-specific work there are three levels of cooperation, namely *co-operation* (language teachers take the initiative in gathering information about learners' subject course and their discipline), *collaboration* (more direct working together of a subject and language experts outside the classroom), and *team-teaching* (the actual working together in the classroom) (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998).

However, the problem is not only that the role of the BE teacher is manifold but also that BE teachers have not been trained as such. Given the tradition in education of separating the humanities from the sciences, this is not surprising. To aggravate matters, not very many BE teachers have completed any ESP teacher training. A great deal of BE teachers, who normally graduate from The Faculty of Arts, have been exclusively trained for teaching literature and EFL/GE. They feel alienated by the more specialised carrier content,¹⁰ i.e. ESP subject matter that they are supposed to teach. Suddenly, arts-trained teachers find themselves having to teach subject content that they know little or nothing about. Most of the time they lack an in-depth understanding of learners' area of knowledge, and will have to struggle to master the subject matter in situations in which they are not in the position of being the '*primary knowers*' of the carrier content (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998: 13). The biggest challenge that BE teachers face relates to ESP content, i.e. discerning the particular ESP vocabulary and discourses within specialized contexts that are essential to the training of their special group of students (Johns and Price-Machado 2001). It is absolutely vital for future generations of BE teachers that their fear of ESP subject matter be dispelled as soon as possible, well before they have to be able to cope with unfamiliar business topics.

Overall, BE teachers and learners should try to build a constructive working relationship or a partnership in which learners are, first and foremost, clients, and BE teachers providers of language services. In such situations, learners' level of satisfaction is very important, so BE teachers should always try to be results-oriented.

BE teachers as connoisseurs of specialist business expertise

Knowing what the real and carrier contents are in teaching BE is of utmost importance to BE teachers. Unfortunately, the difference between the two types of content in BE is not always quite clear. In other words, should BE teachers teach and then assess the learners' knowledge of business, or should they teach a language and assess solely the learners' knowledge of English? One of the skills, therefore, that BE teachers have to acquire is the ability to balance content level, sometimes quite specialized, and language level. No matter how fine the demarcation line, the general consensus is that specialist subject matter is only a framework through which the real content of English is to be brought out. BE teachers are first and foremost language experts, and should never attempt to become 'real authorities' of the specialised carrier content of their students' area of work or field of study.

How much specialist knowledge should BE teachers be able to understand then? The answer to that question is that they certainly must know something about the subject matter if there is to be meaningful communication in the classroom. Many BE teachers are sure that if they can analyze the language and discourses, and study the language use, they 'do not need specialist expertise' (Johns and Price-Machado 2001: 46). However, coming up with a reasonable answer to that dilemma might require us to look at this question in a broader context. One thing is sure, BE teachers should not become teachers of the subject matter, although they should be genuinely interested in the

¹⁰ BE teachers deal with two types of content - *the real content*, i.e. language, and *the carrier content* or the business. Focusing on English as the real content is of vital importance to BE teachers.

learners' subject matter. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out that BE teachers require 3 things only: a positive attitude towards ESP content, knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area, and an awareness of how much they probably already know. All this can be summed up as *'the ability to ask intelligent questions'*. (ibid: 163)

In order to be able to determine how much specialist knowledge BE teachers require, it is important that we remember one more source of information for BE teachers: BE learners. As well as being a learner, the BE student is also a provider of information and material, if not expertise, to a BE teacher. Unfortunately, when dealing with BE learners who are not experts in their fields yet, i.e. pre-experience or low-experience learners, no opportunities are provided for BE teachers to draw on their students' knowledge of the subject content. They simply do not have experience of the target situation at the time of the BE course. Likewise, younger learners are not always very likely to be experts in their field as their knowledge of business largely comes from books. On the other hand, job-experienced learners will have gained some practical experience of having to communicate on the job. They will be more aware of communicating in real-life business situations, not requiring BE teachers to train them in social interaction, meeting skills, commercial correspondence, and other behavioural skills. The practical use of the language will be more important than theoretical knowledge about the language that is the essential characteristic of BE for job-experienced learners. However, the downside could be that some learners may be very peremptory because of the superior knowledge of their work area.

The level of business expertise required of BE teachers is somewhat lower with job-experienced than with pre-experience learners or when the subject content is so specific that the help of experts is absolutely vital. Špiljak (1999: 181) uses the term *'a seemingly paradoxical 'reverse principle''* to illustrate this interesting BE teaching phenomenon. It is especially the so-called *'hard-core ESP materials where the nature of the business forms the interaction'* (St John 1996: 9) that are BE teachers' worst nightmares. Špiljak (1999: 180) is sure that BE teachers need to be able to explain *'WHAT something is and WHO does it, but not so much about HOW and WHY. How and why should be responsibilities of other teachers'*.

The BE teaching situation seems threatening until BE teachers realise that the learners do not expect the teachers to have specialist knowledge. In a sense, the BE teacher becomes equal with the students, *'but uses his or her greater knowledge of the language and the nature of communication to help them interpret what is happening in the specialist course or training'* (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998: 150).

BE teachers as 'knowers' of types of needs and needs analyses

BE learners need to speak English primarily to achieve more in their jobs so practically everything should be governed by learners' needs, from the types of language studied to the classroom techniques used. In order to achieve that, BE teachers should devote a great deal of attention to the first step carried out before any BE course, and a process considered the corner stone of any BE course - analyzing the learners' needs

in the first place.¹¹ Their needs are usually very specific, and cover a wide range of language, from having to perform tasks typically associated with the workplace, such as use the phone, report to superiors, reply to or write faxes and e-mails, to surviving on business trips and negotiating contracts, having presentations and discussing their work in English.

Although huge amounts of expert literature on needs analysis have been made available to BE teachers setting out to assess learners' needs, the information obtained from the needs analysis is only as good as the questions asked and the analysis of the information. Besides, there are dangers in interpreting data, especially when little information has been obtained. In order to be a good data-collector, a BE teacher has to ask appropriate questions which is quite impossible unless they are really knowledgeable about their special teaching/learning situation. The way in which a needs analysis is actually approached and conducted by BE teachers should vary according to the differing BE situations, i.e. what type of course BE teachers are involved in,¹² the number and job experience of learners, where classes are taught,¹³ grouping,¹⁴ type of class,¹⁵ timetabling of classes, to mention but a few.

The concepts of needs and needs analysis have been constantly changing for the last forty years or so. Therefore, in order to carry out a successful needs analysis, BE teachers should be also familiar with a number of different terms which have been introduced in expert literature for a variety of factors and viewpoints in the concept of needs analysis. However, this often means that they are made to work with an unreasonable and perplexing mix of expressions through which every inexperienced BE teacher has to know how to work their way through.

To establish a workable course design BE teachers usually need to perform at least three most important types of needs analysis, namely TSA (Target Situation Analysis), LSA (Learning Situation Analysis), and PSA (Present Situation Analysis) (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998: 123).

To start with, before conducting needs analysis, it is quite important for BE teachers to distinguish between the learners' overall needs and their course needs as no BE course

¹¹ The concept of needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching nor within the latter to ESP or BE since it has been the basis of training programmes in business for quite some time.

¹² Combinations of types of BE course/programme as shown on a course cline by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 127) are four, namely short, intensive and one-off, secondly short intensive and repeated, thirdly long, extensive and one-off, and finally long, extensive and repeated. Pairs of types of courses from the cline are therefore long vs. short, intensive vs. extensive, repeatable (courses taught again after a period of time) vs. one-off courses (run just for a particular target group of learners).

¹³ BE classes are normally taught in-company, in language schools, and at tertiary institutions. There are also telephone classes, distance self-study on the Internet, and one-to-one tuition.

¹⁴ Learners could be grouped into homogenous classes with learners from one discipline or profession, or heterogeneous classes with learners from different disciplines or professions.

¹⁵ Mixed-level classes are classes of learners with differing test scores. Mixed-status classes are classes of learners with both high and low professional status. (Donna 2000).

lasts long enough to cover all learners' overall needs. A constant characteristic of BE courses is limited time, so needs will invariably exceed the allotted time.

Briefly, experienced BE teachers know that TSA brings professional information about the learners. To carry it out, they should include a consideration of the learners' objective, perceived¹⁶ and product-oriented needs¹⁷ which enables them to find out about the tasks and activities the learners will be using (Business) English for. The second type of needs analysis, LSA, includes a consideration of learners' wants, subjectively felt and process-oriented needs.¹⁸ It brings to light personal and cultural information about the learners, exposes their previous learning experience as well as the reasons and expectations of learning BE. In contrast to both previously mentioned needs analyses, PSA looks at the learners' current language use with the aim of assessing their lacks, i.e. the knowledge missing in present but defined by TSA as necessary for their future language use. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), in addition to the above mentioned, a thorough needs analysis requires also an acknowledgement of the learners' learning needs,¹⁹ linguistic, discourse and genre analysis, and finally a means analysis, which analyses the environment, i.e. *'the classroom culture and the management infrastructure and culture'* (ibid). Although for BE teachers a needs analysis seems to be a never-ending continuous process of questioning, checking and evaluating, they should also take care that the feedback of the needs analysis results is always provided for all the stakeholders by BE teachers. A good ongoing liaison between all key stakeholders is instrumental in maintaining a necessary dialogue between all the interested parties.

Final thoughts in lighter vein

A unifying principle of BE is the fact that it is an evolving practice born out of the needs of business people to do business internationally in English with BE teachers as the obvious providers of language instruction. Around the world, BE may take a variety of forms, depending on a number of cultural and local practices. However, its status is unlikely to be clearly defined in near future as long as it remains an umbrella term for a wide range of course types. The fact that seems to raise its status are also compulsory BE courses in tertiary institutions where learners' performance in English is assessed and tested along with other subjects at the end of the academic year. In the same way, there is a lot of logic in integrating BE courses in subject courses and in team-teaching, or at least running BE courses parallel with subject courses to prepare learners more specifically for their professional work in English. Such teaching/learning

¹⁶ In contrast with learners' wants/subjective/felt needs, which are derived by insiders and are cognitively-affective, their objective and perceived needs are derived by outsiders from facts (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998: 123).

¹⁷ Product-oriented needs derive from the learners' goal or target situation requirements. (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998: 123).

¹⁸ Process-oriented needs derive from the learners' learning situation.

¹⁹ Learning needs encompass effective ways to learn the language and skills.

co-operation at tertiary institutions would exert a beneficial effect primarily on BE learners but would also ensure that BE is taken seriously by other subject teachers.

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