

## TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH TO FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS. A CASE STUDY ON NEEDS ANALYSIS

Oana Alexandra Alexa

Assist., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

*Abstract: Starting from the premise that the process of needs analysis is especially important in teaching ESP, this paper aims to offer a practical overview of the various categories of needs that ought to be considered when designing a Business English course for 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. I will start by briefly looking into the fundamental principles guiding the process of needs analysis, as they have been formulated by experienced teachers and learning consultants, and then the focus will be on my own experiences in the classroom, where any English course is best put to the test. This paper will show that even though there are a lot of factors to be considered, the process of needs analysis should permanently adjust to the realities of the classroom and will ultimately result in a negotiated "contract" between the students and their teacher.*

*Keywords: Business English, teaching, needs analysis, undergraduate students, case study*

### Introduction

Teaching Business English in Romania is somewhat limited to the academic environment, specifically to those faculties specialising in Economics and Business Administration. Private course providers largely focus on general English, but the demand seems to be on the rise for business English courses, particularly from corporate clients. About ten years ago, when I was teaching an English course to employees from a large company, I realised quite early on that their language needs were very specific, in sharp contrast to my (very superficial) initial briefing. I was supposed to come up with my own teaching material and no clear indication was given to me on how to approach the situation. Leaving the lack of proper input and my days of youthful inexperience aside, my instincts were completely right: I needed to teach business English, not just general English, and the first thing I had to do was to ask my students exactly what situations they were going to use the language in. I had reached the conclusion that "the hallmark of ESP courses is their specificity in relation to student needs." (Brieger 1997: 9)

My teaching experience in the private sector was brief, having since moved to the public sector, where I have been working for the past 8 years. Teaching business English to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration has proven to be quite as challenging, but still completely different from my above mentioned corporate experience.

### 1. Needs Analysis – General Considerations

The first major difference between university students and corporate students is their previous experience. "Pre-experienced students have little or no experience of the business world. Typically, they are learning business English because they intend to follow a business career. (...) Because of their lack of experience they will often need the teacher to provide a window into the business world." Conversely, my first students

were “job-experienced,” since they knew a lot about business and their own jobs and had very precise notions about why they needed (business) English. (Frendo 2012: 4)

This distinction leads us to the obvious conclusion that the needs of the two categories are also different. A “customer care” type of approach which involves “listening carefully to what individual students (or sponsors) say and then taking appropriate action” would have been excellent in the case of my job-experienced students. (Donna 2000: 12) However, as Evan Frendo points out, university students are usually part of relatively large classes (the norm in my case is 25-30 students), grouped according to specialisation. Their language levels and skills vary widely and “because such groups usually do not know exactly how they will be using their English in the future, it can be difficult to focus on specific target needs.” (Frendo 2012: 3) The upside, of course, is that the teacher has more flexibility in covering areas that may not be possible to focus on in a more constrained in-company group, due to the lack of time or the limited scope of the course.

The process of needs analysis in the case of 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration where I teach starts, not ideally, at our first seminar. The students had already been divided into groups according to their desired specialisation (Finance and Banking, Business Information Systems, Marketing, Management, Accounting etc.) and language preferences (they can choose from English, French, German, Spanish and Italian, but the majority of them choose English). All students at our University study a foreign language for four semesters, regardless of their specialisation. Given the large number of groups at our faculty (around 40 per year of study), the same English material is used for all 1<sup>st</sup> year students, so it has to cover the learning needs of the majority. We are thus talking about mixed-level and mixed-ability classes of up to 30, even 35 students, who have not been previously tested and who will be studying English for two years, two hours each week (one week they attend the course and the other they have the seminar) and who will be required to take a multiple choice test at the end of each semester. At the end of the four semesters, their level of English would be expected to be around C1-C2 (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which means that for most of them the “training gap” is rather large. (Frendo 2012: 15) More often than not, their initial level of English is intermediate or pre-intermediate.

## **2. Practical Aspects**

Going back to the process of needs analysis, it is only during the first seminar that the teacher actually has the chance to find out first hand if the “perceived needs” of his students correspond to their “felt needs” and, most importantly, where to start. (Frendo 2012: 15-16) Due to the lack of time and the large number of students and since the criteria for splitting them into groups are not relevant in terms of language level or skills, a placement test is not carried out. A priority for me at this stage is to assess their communication needs. Because it is our (and theirs) first meeting, I typically prefer to ask my students what their plans are for the future and those first few sentences that they utter in English provide me with a lot of information on what they know (both in terms of language skills and knowledge about the business world), what they expect and what they hope to find out. Some students have more definite plans than others, some start by saying that their level of English is not so good while others seem to be comfortable with delivering a short speech in front of a room full of people they have just met. These are mini needs analysis interviews disguised as personal introduction speeches. The reason why my questions are not straightforward is because I have noticed that, at this stage, students are not yet aware of what they need in terms of using

the language. They know they want to improve their communication skills, but being unfamiliar with ESP, cannot yet articulate any specific needs. Thus, it is the teacher's job to introduce them to the world of business (English).

In terms of pedagogic needs, the teacher needs to firstly be aware of the institutional requirements for the particular course. Since English is not one of the main subjects at this faculty, there might be a certain amount of flexibility in terms of what and how business English is taught. Conversely, this subject involves ongoing evaluation during the seminars, while the course component (which represents 40% of the final grade) concludes with a multiple-choice test at the end of each semester. The seminar is thus the most important part (60% of their final grade) and probably the most reliable in terms of evaluation methods. Keeping in mind the different learning needs and styles that students might have, I have the task to grade each student after each meeting, which can be difficult given the large groups. The facilities and equipment available are normally up to standards (there is a whiteboard and videoprojector in every room, while some rooms also have smartboards), but time is limited, which will automatically affect the process of evaluation.

In terms of business needs, it is the responsibility of the teacher to stay up to the institutional standards, to inform the students about the formal requirements for the course and to correlate the teaching material to what is being taught through other courses. These are clearly stated in learning institutions and made public, so that both teachers and students have access to them.

Obviously, the main reason for undergoing the process of needs analysis is to come up with the right teaching materials and methods so that the course is relevant and in tune with the realities faced by 1<sup>st</sup> year students. Nevertheless, the biggest obstacle I face is the aforementioned mixed-level classes situation. This is unfortunately the norm rather than the exception in most cases, so choosing a material that is flexible enough is key. By flexibility I mean offering the possibility to easily skip from one exercise to another, or from one chapter to the next according to the students' level, needs or preferences and without disrupting irremediably the overall flow of the lesson. No matter their level of English, each student in the class should ideally be able to find a few activities that are doable, so that everyone can be graded at the end of the day. This is probably one of the most important needs that students have at the beginning of the course: feeling confident that they can solve at least some of the activities in the material based on their previous knowledge.

Of course, my process of needs analysis does not end with the mini interviews at the first seminar. In teaching ESP, it most likely never ends, because it is essential for the course to always be relevant. This two-year course is often the students' last opportunity to improve their language skills before they enter the job market, which they soon realise is very competitive in terms of knowledge of foreign languages. Consequently, students benefit most from a course that is continuously adapting to their educational, professional and personal development needs.

Personalising the activities in the classroom offers valuable hints about the students' needs. Most students will state that they would like to study abroad, work for big multinational companies and/or set up their own business, which immediately tells me, the teacher, that (even if they haven't realised it yet) they will need to learn a few things about key business English skills like negotiating, emailing, socialising and networking, intercultural communication, will have to focus on specialised vocabulary and they would also need to brush up on their grammar.

However, the teacher should only be a part of the decision-making process, especially at this level. "A key feature of ESP courses is the negotiation and agreement

on course objectives.” (Brieger 1997: 97) A course can only be relevant if it is partly negotiated. University students may not be customers per se, but empowering them is a great motivator. I normally go through the main types of activities in the seminar material (which range from grammar-based drills to vocabulary matching exercises to listening tasks, speaking and case studies which usually involve group-work) and encourage them to try their hand at all of them but focus more on the ones that they feel more comfortable with or would like to improve at. We typically spend about 30 minutes at each seminar doing a case study activity because it combines two elements that I feel they would benefit from the most: authentic business-related situations and practising their speaking and negotiation skills. The students, however, always have a choice in terms of which activity we should do next.

Moreover, since they are graded at the end of each seminar, I think it is important for students to be able to track their progress because they need this information in order to feel more confident about taking the end-of-semester test. So I allow them to check their score for the day, which gives them an idea about their current level and if they need to improve the quality or quantity of their contributions at the next seminar. Recently, at the suggestion of one of my colleagues, I have adopted a system of points, since I feel it is more flexible; students get a score between 1 - which is minimum - to 8 and, at the end of the semester, those points are added to create a hierarchy of all the students in the group. Based on the position in the hierarchy, each student is graded, but the advantage of this system is that there are intervals of up to 5 or even up to 10 points between grades, so that the differences among students are not reflected in decimals. My aim is that the grades reflect their evolution throughout the semester and their position in the hierarchy).

Last but not least, I have noticed that beyond their learning needs, students also crave having a role model, someone who can inspire them both professionally and personally, who can teach them the subtleties of the business world, who can provide tips and tricks on how to navigate this new field they are just beginning to discover. English is just as important as Economics or Marketing because they may not be able to communicate the knowledge of either of them if they can't speak the lingua franca of international business. That is why activating their previous knowledge of the English language through activities infused with business vocabulary, real-life situations, conversations and authentic writing samples should lie at the basis of the 1<sup>st</sup> year course and, as feedback is obtained at regular intervals, the teacher can adapt the level or the types of activities to the students' needs.

### **3. Conclusions**

First year students are both a blank canvas and a confusing audience from the teacher's perspective. The course needs to be general enough and quite specific at the same time, since it is the students' first contact with business English, but they are also supposedly familiar with the major elements of grammar, vocabulary and civilisation. They have been practising both their hard and soft skills for a few years, but they are now suddenly required to become professionals, to learn about their prospective jobs and how to use a foreign language for work all at the same time, because some of them will start working directly in English. This is a big step and it puts a lot of pressure on the course and on the teacher.

I would therefore compare the process of needs analysis with the one of lifelong learning. Providing students with a material that is flexible enough is only the beginning of the learning and adaptation process on the teacher's part, since their needs change alongside their priorities and plans for the future. Starting with their second year, or

even with the second semester, it becomes clearer to them that using English in a work environment is substantially more difficult than for general purposes. It is only then that their needs become more specific, and it is the teacher's responsibility to reevaluate the basis of his/her course.

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