

ALEKSANDRA BEATA MAKOWSKA
UNIwersYTET ŁÓDZKI

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BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE SYLLABUS FOR FUTURE EMPLOYEES OF MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

KEYWORDS: BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE, SYLLABUS, CULTURAL DIVERSITY, INTERNATIONAL WORKPLACE, TEACHING LSP

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalisation the need for teaching professional jargons is constantly growing because of the increasing volume of the international exchange and business contacts overseas. People no longer work in hermetically closed domestic markets, but spread to foreign ones, which “requires more interaction among people from diverse cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds than ever before” [Mazur, 2010: 5]. For this reason, there is growing demand for teaching English for Business Purposes (EBP) to answer to the educational market needs. However, the courses are rarely tailored for the specific needs of course participants, not only in terms of the linguistic part, but also in terms of the inclusion of cultural aspects.

At the tertiary level of education in Poland, academic teachers receive “few recommendations concerning the design of syllabi for foreign languages” [Dzięcioł-Pędlich, 2014: 83–84] from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Therefore, it is the teachers who design the courses of foreign languages which are based on the subject field the participants study. Moreover, in Poland students seldom participate in the process of the creation of the course of the foreign language learning and act as “its passive recipients” [Dzięcioł-Pędlich, 2014: 84]. For this reason, the course of the Business English at Linguistics for Business at the University of Łódź, was developed on the basis of the needs analyses, both from the employer and employee’s perspective. Moreover, the communicative approach is used and during the classes cross-cultural issues are tackled, which leads to developing the “general linguistic awareness and communicative strategies” in the specialised discourse in

order to prepare students for the international working environment [Gavrilova & Trostina, 2014: 7].

2. THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AT A WORKPLACE

In multinational companies, people are not limited to work in homogenous environments but collaborate with people from various backgrounds. Then, we deal with cultural diversity which “is characteristic of groups of two or more people and typically refers to demographic differences of one sort or another among group members” [Ely & Thomas, 2001: 230]. However, heterogeneity at a workplace may lead, on the one hand, to an increase in productivity and gaining the competitive edge for the company, but may also lead to conflicts, communication blockades among people and negative performance outcomes due to the culture clash, on the other. Moreover, the EU and the Polish government encourage companies to implement diversity management strategies which have proven that “attracting and retaining high quality employees from diverse backgrounds can bring tangible business benefits” [European Commission Justice, 2012: 13]. In order to do so, the EU implemented a special programme, i.e. the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007–2013), called Diversity and Innovation, a Business Opportunity For All. Furthermore, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the world’s largest association devoted to human resource management commissioned a study, whose findings will be incorporated “into future programming, including the SHRM Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Leadership Program; and use the knowledge gained to inform its global business strategy moving forward” [The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009]. Therefore, there is a need to include and emphasise aspects of cultural diversity in the teaching process of business jargons in the curriculum in order for the students to “value multicultural differences in both associates and customers so that everyone is treated with dignity” [Mazur, 2010: 5].

3. THE DESIGN OF A BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE

Employers expect the command of English from their employees since English has been treated as the language of international communication in business contexts. Therefore, university curricula include specialised language courses, i.e. EOP or EBP (English for Occupational Purposes and English for Business Purposes in particular) in order to educate students thoroughly. The EBP course should concentrate on the special linguistic needs of students: “the themes and topics related to business” [Widodo, 2007: 88] and to include cultural aspects to avoid unnecessary conflicts. In order to tailor the course to the students’ needs, the design of the course should take account of students’ expectations towards the BE course. The BE curriculum should also include cultural issues to sensitise learners to differences among cultures. Moreover, cultural diversity has become a hot issue nowadays, because “the European Commission encourages employers to put diversity management more firmly on their strategic business agenda” [European Commission Justice: 6].

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE

4.1. BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE INFO

The presented syllabus was designed for the Business English course taught in the second, third and sixth semester at the BA programme „Linguistics for Business” at the University of Łódź which comprises 84 teaching hours (28 hours per semester). Together with the General English (28 hours taught at the first semester) and Legal English (28 hours taught at the fourth semester) they exceed the University requirement for the English classes at the BA programme, i.e. 104 teaching hours.

4.2. THE EXPECTED PROFILE OF THE L4B STUDENT

The students at Linguistics for Business are expected to be general secondary school graduates whose required level of the language competence for English is B2 (in accordance to the requirements set by CEFR). The students are supposed to develop multilingual skills as they are to work in multinational companies or businesses where the command of foreign languages is a necessity.

5. STUDENTS’ NEEDS ANALYSIS

At the beginning of the BE course, 50 first year students were selected at random in order to conduct the needs analysis. The purpose of the survey was to check students’ expectations towards the contents of the course and the focus of the course on developing language skills in business contexts.

The results of the survey reveal a considerable variety as to experience and business contacts among the L4B students. 43 students have never participated in specialised language courses. The remaining 7 students consider courses at language schools or exam preparatory to be specialised. 29 respondents possess some prior working experience and 20 none. 18 out of 49 students had the opportunity to use English in specialised contexts. The circumstances included situations at the workplace: customer service, telephoning, financial audit, translation, English teaching or situations in private life, like insurance problems, plumbing, and lectures in English. 1 student did not respond to the question. 33 survey participants think their English is sufficient for communication, whereas 11 not (6 respondents did not provide the answer). The main areas of problems in the communication in English for the majority of respondents include terminology vocabulary, grammar, speaking, fluency, lack of skills or experience in formal writing. The survey also gauged the importance of the language skills. Table 1 presents the results of the students’ expectations survey.

TABLE 1. THE RESULTS OF THE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS SURVEY CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

skill	reading	listening	speaking	writing
very important	7	25	47	20
important	31	23	2	26
not very important	10	2	1	3
unimportant	2	0	0	1

The results show that for 31 students reading skills are important and for 7 – very important. The vast majority of students, i.e. 25 & 23 consider listening to be very important and important. 46 course participants want to concentrate on writing and for almost all respondents speaking skills are of overriding importance and importance.

The questionnaire also checked how respondents feel about the usefulness of the selection of topics. Table 2 presents the results of the conducted survey.

TABLE 2. THE RESULTS OF THE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS SURVEY CONCERNING THE USEFULNESS OF TOPICS

topic												
scale	HRM	Management	Legal issues in business	Import & export	Finance	Negotiations	Marketing & advertising	Sales & supply	Accounting & taxation	Challenges of the career path	Presentations	Relations with clients
very useful	12	23	14	4	16	33	24	13	13	10	21	36
useful	28	22	28	10	22	13	19	23	16	21	18	10
of limited use	8	4	9	30	10	4	5	10	18	14	10	3
not useful	0	0	0	5	2	0	1	3	3	1	1	0

Table 2 shows that for the majority of respondents the selection of topics is either very useful or useful. However, import and export procedures were considered of limited usefulness, which is the most surprising. Workers with the command of English are often employed in logistics where they deal with the international exchange of goods. All topic areas are connected with the international communication with a high probability of dealing with people from other cultures. As a result, they include cultural issues in the process of learning Business English at L4B.

The respondents also had the opportunity to provide their own topic areas which include: social media, writing professional documents, relations in business, finance and accounting, IT terminology, business email writing, business meetings, logistics, cultural aspects, communication in business, motivation, networking, brands, law, negotiations (mentioned in the questionnaire), problems at work, real job scenarios, informal language at work, technology in business, politics and job interviews. The results of the survey were taken into account during the design stage of the Business English course at L4B.

6. THE DESIGN OF THE COURSE CONTENTS

The course of Business English needs to be comprehensive and practical. For this reason, the course designer needs to take the opinions of different interests groups into account. The conducted students' expectations survey showed their areas of interest. However, the syllabus needs to reflect the needs of potential employers, too. As a result, the design contains the lists of topics given by the representatives of multinationals, and local businesses (gathered during the consultations) as well as it contains the most common topics from the local working environment. The syllabus was developed in accordance with the university policy concerning foreign language teaching. The underlying idea behind the creation of the Business English curriculum was to produce an all-embracing, communication-oriented method of teaching EBP to university students to provide them with effective linguistic means in the business for their future professional careers in multinational companies.

The course is focused on the four language skills, i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing in business settings and covers a broad scope of business topics to provide the future employees of international companies with communicative skills to deal with professional issues.

It also takes cultural issues into account in order to sensitise students to different ways of doing business in different parts of the world to avoid culture clash and blunders.

7. THE TOPICS OF THE LESSONS BE COURSE AT L4B

The content of the course includes topics from different business areas. However, all topics are connected with the international exchange so they are connected with the cultural issues, which need to be emphasised.

TABLE 3. THE TOPICS OF THE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE AT LINGUISTICS FOR BUSINESS

1	2
2 nd Semester	
HRM	Creating a professional CV and cover letter in English, job interview
Franchising	Characteristic features, pros and cons of running a franchise
Outsourcing	Characteristic features, types of outsourcing and its use, opportunities and threats
Real estate	Types of real estate, documentation
Logistics	Incoterms, import-export and EU documentation, EU procedures
Banking and stock market	Types of assets: shares and bonds; forms of money
Trends	Describing graphs and the interpretation of numerical data
Negotiations	Negotiation strategies and negotiation practice
3 rd Semester	
Types of businesses	Forms of the formal organisation of companies
Marketing	Marketing mix, criteria of market segmentation, determining the target customer

TABLE 3 (CONT.)

1	2
Advertising	Types of advertisements, controversial practices of advertisers, the successes and failures of advertising campaigns, creating a social advertising spot
Media and business	The role and impacts of social media in business
Sales	Customer service, dealing with telephone orders, complaints, business correspondence
Supply	Factors of production, suppliers, supply strategies, business correspondence
E-marketing	Online shopping, advantages and disadvantages of e-marketing
Brands	The importance of brands in commerce and for consumers, brand management, creating a brand image
Taxes	Direct and indirect taxes, the effects of tax avoidance, different forms of employment and taxation
6 th Semester	
Career path	Difference between the career ladder and the career snake – holding formal meetings
Accounting	Basic concepts, audits and legal issues, types of assets
Finance	Trends in finance and banking, financial problems of international companies
Presentations	Creating professional business presentations and strategies of making presentations
Cultural diversity	Basic concepts: culture, time, distance; business etiquette and communication
Corporate entertainment	Company events, creating good relations with customers during outdoor events
Relations with customers	Telephoning and mailing, customer service and solving problems
Problems at work	Sources of problems at work and ways of solving them, life balance (between private and business life), stress management

The topics tackle problems and issues connected with the international exchange and different ways of doing business overseas. Most of them emphasise the cultural diversity in the workplace, so that the students become sensitive to existing differences and are prepared to do business with people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

8. INTEGRATED SKILLS IN BUSINESS SETTINGS AS THE PREDOMINANT AIM OF THE COURSE

The course aims at developing integrated communicative skills in business contexts and include cultural issues. The linguistic skills on which the course puts its emphasis are in agreement with the list in the Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education on the National Framework for Qualifications in Higher Education published in the Journal of Laws from 2011, No. 253, item 1520 (Dz.U. 2011, nr 253, poz. 1520).

After completing the Business English course, the participant should possess the following skills (table 4).

TABLE 4. THE LIST SKILLS DEVELOPED AT THE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE AT LINGUISTICS FOR BUSINESS

Skills listed in the National Framework for Qualifications in Higher Education	Skills developed at the Business English course
H1A_W03, H1A_W05	Knowing basic terms in HRM, management, marketing, advertising, finance, banking, accounting, logistics, negotiations, customer service and creating company image in English
H1A_U01, H1P_U13	Distinguishing, reading, comprehending and analysing the main genres of specialised texts
H1P_U11	Listening and comprehending specialised texts (distinguish terminology and language functions)
H1P_U01	Using correctly typical terminology from the domains mentioned in point 1 in appropriate contexts
H1A_U09, H1P_U13	Individually using terminology and phrases necessary in specialised oral communication (pragmatic aspects of specialised communication)
H1A_U08, H1P_U12	Creating selected business texts in English
H1P_K02, H1P_K04, H1P_K05	Developing the following attitudes: openness to cultural varieties, sensitivity to other ways of doing business in different cultures
H1P_U14	Developing and maintaining a linguistic competence of English at the level B2 (according to CEFR)

One of the target skills includes developing a desired attitude towards cultural differences (skills H1P_K02, H1P_K04, H1P_K05), which might be helpful in students' future professional careers.

9. TEACHING METHODS

The Business English course is based on two basic teaching methods: expository and practical both of which are to provide necessary linguistic means to communicate effectively in business settings.

Expository methods are in the form of informative lectures and discussions which are illustrated with audiovisual input preceded by elements of distance learning (students receive handouts before classes). New business terms and issues that arise and appear during the classes are also explained.

Practical classes and exercises on the subject comprise the **practical methods**. They include group work, simulation games, case studies, discussions, project work and brainstorming.

10. ASSESSMENT CRITERIA OF STUDENT'S PERFORMANCE

Students are assessed on the basis of different criteria. First of all, the students need to take an active part in exercises (during classes students need to answer

questions, discuss, argue and use a target foreign language). Secondly, students are to hand in 2 written projects connected with the topics (practical applications of terminology and theoretical knowledge gained during classes), graded on the 2–5 scale. Thirdly, students' progress is assessed by three progress tests, testing their knowledge of terminology and specialised knowledge gained during classes in the form of open and closed tests. The borderline of passing is 50% minimum. The final grade is the average of all grades gathered during the whole semester.

11. CONCLUSION

Cultural diversity has become a widely discussed issue as companies have been expanding their operation to foreign markets. Dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds might be challenging and motivating on the one hand, on the other the culture clash might hinder the company's performance. Therefore, developing sensitivity to cultural issues at foreign business language courses has been seen as a necessity. As a result, the Business English course at Linguistics for Business was designed in such a way so as to include cultural issues in the curriculum.

The syllabus takes account of results of the students' expectations survey, needs analysis conducted among potential target employers (after consultations with business representatives), and analysis of the most common topic areas from the local business. It was created in accordance with the university policy as well as the Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education on the National Framework for Qualifications in Higher Education. The overall aim of the course is to create an all-embracing, communicative method of training English in business contexts (EOP) for future employees of multinational companies and businesses with contacts overseas and develops all language skills, i.e. reading, listening speaking and writing in business contexts. In order to fulfil its aim, the course covers a wide scope of business topics from different areas to anticipate particular needs of future employers and make students aware of the cultural diversity they are to encounter.

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