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Students' Lack of Business Language Background

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting a problem that we are often confronted with as ESP teachers in the business field: students' lack of economic specialized vocabulary. Generally, in Romania, English as second language is taught only in the first two academic years when students are not familiar with the business terms, not even in their native language, making the task of the teacher more difficult. Therefore, in the present paper, I shall discuss this issue thoroughly by providing examples drawn out from my personal experience.

KEYWORDS: *background vocabulary, business terms, ESP*

"Understanding the ways in which English varies according to its use in particular situations lies at the centre of a major field of endeavour, namely English for special/specific purposes (ESP)" (Gramley & Patzold, 2003: 157).

Up to 1970, the term ESP meant English for Special Purposes but it was replaced by the name English for Specific Purposes since, "specific" implies the purposes of performing a task in English.

Over the past years, English has become the preferred language of international communication, being used in the daily communication as well as in specific areas of activity like business, technology, agriculture, informatics, etc. The students in ESP need to acquire a certain range of vocabulary and terminology, besides the general knowledge of English as a foreign language in order to use it as efficiently as possible in their future careers. Thus, the students are interested in the communication of information using clear grammar and unambiguous terminology.

The ESP classes are different from the ESL since, even though, the English language has the same morphology and word formation taught in both types of classes, there are specific skills that have to be presented to students in ESP. Concerning the English language needed in an ESP class, Gramley and Patzold believe that

> there may be different frequencies in the use of individual syntactic and morphological constructions as well as of word formation processes; the selection of vocabulary is influenced by field; terminology is partially standardized in order to eliminate ambiguity; certain conventions may appear regarding the elements and the structure of written texts and special phenomena not part of the everyday English language may be used.
>
> (*Ibidem*: 158)

ESP can be divided into several disciplines such as English for business and economics (EBE), English for vocational purposes, English for science and technology (EST), and English for academic purposes (EAP).

Teaching Business English is quite a challenge for the nowadays teacher. One of the reasons is that, especially in this field, the English language has evolved a lot lately, due to its greater use in the international business environment.

"Most European business people (with the possible exception of the British) must use at least one foreign language to do business. For most, that foreign language is English [...]." (Mirjaliisa , 1998: 2)

This remark certainly applies to Romanian businessmen who use English as a means of communicating with their foreign partners. This is due to the fact that in our country, in most cases, English is the first foreign language taught in schools. Moreover, at present, as Romania is about to become part of the European Union, more and more business students acknowledge the necessity of acquiring an advanced level of the English language. Thus, for the teacher the task has lately become more difficult. He/she has to deal with the complexity of the business English language which comprises, besides a basic business vocabulary, terms that are part of its numerous specialized (particular) areas such as: marketing, management, finance and banking, statistics, etc. The teacher has to keep a permanent close contact with all the changes that appear in the Business English language and to be able to select from the large amount of specialized books that have been published recently.

At the same time, the ESP teacher must take into consideration some differences that may appear in the language for specific purposes compared to general English. The sentences are usually more complex and longer, relative clauses are frequently used, there is a predominance of declarative sentences while imperatives are found only in certain instructions. All these must be presented to students while teaching the writing skills.

Besides all these aspects, the task of the English teacher in Romania is doubled by the necessity of having to adapt the Academic courses to students whose level of Basic English knowledge varies significantly. In fact, there are numerous problems that an ESP teacher in the business field is confronted with the problem of mastering the economic terminology as well as the problem of facing students' lack of business knowledge in their native language.

The main role of the ESP teachers is to become good practitioners. This means that they should *"have language teaching competence and specific-subject knowledge. To be a BE teacher, language competence includes English knowledge (grammar, lexis, syntax, rhetoric, style, etc), high level of language competence and English teaching methodology."* (Li, 2006: 5)

Generally, it has been highlighted that ESP teachers do not need to possess deep knowledge of the subject of study; just as Hutchinson states, an ESP teacher *"must know something about the subject matter of the ESP materials"* (Hutchinson & Walters, 1987: 169); however, this doesn't mean that he should become an expert in the business content area only that he has to familiarize with *"the specialized area of Business although he/she is not a subject specialist"* (*Ibidem*).

It is known that in order to attain proficiency in a second language, one needs to have the necessary skills and knowledge in his own native language.

> Much more important will be the ability to communicate well in ones own native language, to be able to carry on higher order thinking in one's local language, and to exercise what we call critical thinking that is the mark of an educated person in any culture.
>
> (***, 2005: 4)

This is one of the first problems that I encountered when I began to teach BE. First of all, I had to get acquainted with the specific economic terms. I had to read lots of business texts and use specialized dictionaries. I was able to translate the text in Romanian but I couldn't understand the meaning of certain phrases or words. This was the result of my lack of business knowledge background. Thus, the first step that I took was to find a book that explained economic terms. This helped me form a general overview of their explanation and use and hoped that my business students would provide me examples that would improve my business knowledge.

At the same time, in order to become proficient in English, not only the teachers but also the students in economics need to acquire the vocabulary specific to their specialization as well as to their future careers. Besides learning the new vocabulary, students have to become familiar with certain types of texts, to learn how to lead a dialogue, how to write minutes, business letters, invoices, contracts or even advertisements. Reports, schedules and essays are not to be forgotten when talking about a certain degree of proficiency that the student must acquire at the end of the ESP class.

However, the most important part is the vocabulary that the students need to acquire. This is usually done by reading-comprehension activities, making students realize the meaning of a word from the context presented in the text and improving their comprehension. The teacher must give the students the information about what a word means and how it can be used and make them use the word in other contexts using their creativity and the connections with their existing knowledge.

Yet, there are some problems that may appear during the ESP classes, since the students don't have the necessary background information in their native language. It is very hard for them to find out the definition of the word from the context since they didn't learn about what these words mean in their native language. It is just like the student is learning for the first time some words in his second language instead of having some information about them in their native language.

My students argued that, in Romania, business students are taught English mainly in the first academic year and just one semester in the second Academic year. They also pointed out that it is only at the end of the first year that students acquire the basic economic knowledge. Therefore, the teacher must provide a certain amount of information necessary to their specialization in a rather short time and may be surprised to find out that the specific vocabulary he or she tries to teach is totally new for the business student.

For example, while I was talking about accounting namely the issue of drawing up the balance sheet of a company, I realized that, in fact, they didn't possess the

economic vocabulary. Thus the translation of such terms as "assets" and "liabilities" in "active" and "pasive" didn't help them too much since they were unfamiliar with their meanings in Romanian. Therefore, I had to deepen my business knowledge in order to be able to explain the economic matters that were unfamiliar to them. At the same time, it becomes difficult for the teacher as well as for the student to deal with words or expressions such as "barter," "counter-trade sections," "clearing banks" or "trust companies" when the student doesn't know what these words represent in their native language. Hiebert and Kamil talk about the knowledge hypothesis, first offered in 1981 by Anderson and Freeboy, which

> emphasizes the role of readers' background knowledge in comprehension. Simply put, it is not knowing the meanings of words that causes readers to understand what they read; rather, knowing the meanings of words is an indication of the readers' knowledge of a topic or concept. It is this knowledge that helps readers comprehend.
>
> (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005: 31)

This is what the ESP teachers are actually confronted with: their students' lack of knowledge of a topic or concept. Further, the same authors mention:

> But it is not just knowing the words that is essential for comprehension. It is knowing the concepts and their relationships. According to the knowledge hypothesis, then, there is a causal link from knowledge to comprehension, and vocabulary knowledge is only one small part of the knowledge base that contributes to reading comprehension.
>
> (*Ibidem*)

As a conclusion, the only hope for the teacher to make the business students effective in their second language is to expose them intensely to both oral and written language, to promote oral vocabulary growth in order to make sure that they acquire the necessary vocabulary knowledge to get the meaning from the texts and use it successfully in communication.

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Teaching Language: Modern Methods and Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Any teacher's goal is to teach better and make students better learners. In order to achieve this, teachers should have a closer look at their own teaching method. They should be able to name it and to describe its main features and underlying principles. Once they do this, they can see whether the method they use is efficient in class, whether they should follow one single method, several methods, or no method at all. The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensible account of major trends in language teaching methods. The methods and approaches will be described in terms of their underlying theories of language and language learning; the roles of the teacher, learner and materials; and the classroom procedures and techniques that the method implies. We shall provide a sample activity for each method and approach.

KEYWORDS: *approach, method, procedure, technique*

A method is a way of teaching. The way we teach depends on our approach which refers to our beliefs about the nature of language, the nature of language learning and how our teaching can help students learn. In other words, the teaching of any subject matter does not refer solely to the subject matter, but also to the application of particular teaching and learning principles which are drawn from educational psychology. What emerges is a teaching method or approach which consists of certain teaching and learning principles, coupled with a set of classroom practices derived from them (Richards & Rodgers, 8).

Methods include various procedures and techniques. A technique is an exercise or an activity used in the class for realising lesson objectives. A procedure is an ordered sequence of techniques. For instance, when students have the task of reconstructing a story from different pictures, the procedure starts when students are put into small groups and each group is given a different picture to look at. Then the students are reorganised into new groups consisting of one member from each of the initial groups. Each group writes the reconstructed story and the representative of the group reads the story back to the class. This sequence of instructions is a procedure. In what follows we shall present some well-known methods and approaches.

1. Grammar-Translation

It is a traditional teaching method in which students study grammar and translate words into their own language and vice versa. Grammar-translation usually focuses on:

- grammar rules which are explained and a number of example sentences pro-vided;

- vocabulary, presented in the form of bilingual lists;

- reading activities with a special focus on the grammar rules and vocabulary explained;

- exercises for practicing the grammar rules and vocabulary explained. The ex-ercises include translations from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1. There is little con-cern with speaking and listening activities and the teaching is done in the native language of the students.

***Sample activity*:** different ways of expressing future time

The teacher gives the students different spider webs such as the following:
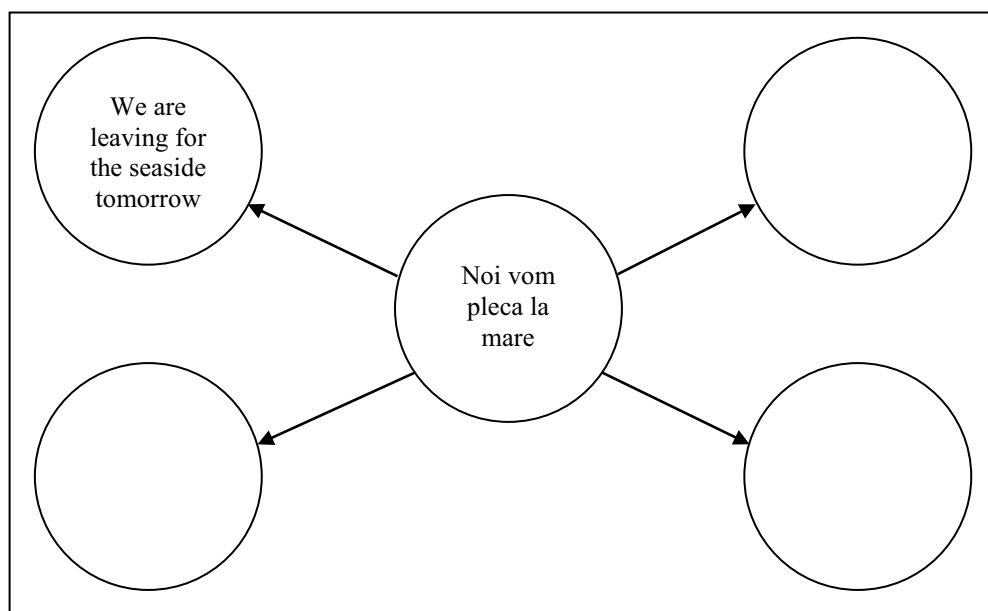
The teacher asks the students to translate the Romanian sentence into English, us-ing various future forms and adding any necessary adverbs which are to be under-lined, so that they fill in the spider webs. The students work together and complete the charts. Then, each student creates his/her own spider web and, working in pairs, asks his/her partner to fill it in with possible translations of the Romanian sentence in the centre.

2. The Direct Method

The direct method appeared as a reaction to the Grammar-Translation method and has the following characteristics:

- no use of L1 is permitted in the class;

- grammar is taught inductively, i.e. students are instructed to work out the grammar rules;
- the target culture is also taught inductively;
- to aid induction, the teacher asks meaningful questions and the students' response is used as an example of the particular language item which is being taught;
- accuracy is very important and all errors are corrected in class.

***Sample activity*:** use of comparative adjectives to compare subjects, based on single-word cues.

The teacher shows the students several nouns related to a certain theme. The nouns are laid out in a rough circle which can be displayed on the board.

manager

secretary   **housewife**

foreman   **hairdresser**

teacher   **pilot**

doctor
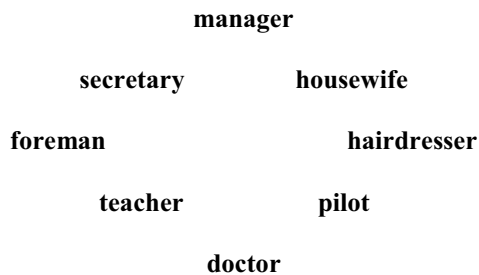
The students are asked to suggest a point of comparison between any two nouns, for example:

A housewife is busier than a secretary.

Then the teacher draws a line between "manager" and "secretary" to represent the comparison, and elicits another sentence comparing two other nouns. The students should use only known vocabulary, rather than asking the teacher for new words. In the end, based on their sentences, the students can work out the grammar rules concerning the comparative degree.

3. Audio-lingualism

The emergence of the Audio-lingual method resulted from the Behaviourist theories of learning. The Behaviourist theory suggests that learning is a mechanical process of habit formation based on the frequent reinforcement of a stimulus-response sequence. This is how babies learn to speak: hunger is the stimulus which generates crying as a response, and the milk which is given (or not) to the baby is the reinforcement. Later on, crying is substituted by words which get more and more refined in time. Starting from the Stimulus–Response–Reinforcement model, learning is based on a great deal of mechanical repetition. The main features of the method are: