

## TEACHING ESP AND BUSINESS ENGLISH: MAIN POINTS

### ENGLESKI ZA POSEBNE NAMENE I POSLOVNI ENGLESKI: KLJUČNE TAČKE

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**Abstract:** In the era of the rapid and increasing economic globalization the necessity of teaching Business English cannot be disputed. The paper addresses the basic concepts of Business English (BE), emphasizing the importance of the learner's needs, i.e. usage of English in a business setting. The focus is also placed on the main topics covered in BE courses, skill areas and lesson formats. The teaching of BE is regarded through the necessary context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), whose part it doubtlessly is. Moreover, the paper tackles the origins and difficulties one encounters when trying to define the very concepts of both ESP and BE.

**Key words:** ESP, Business English, globalization, teaching, origins, learner's needs, business skills.

**Rezime:** U doba neprekidne i nezaustavljive ekonomske globalizacije, neophodnost učenja poslovnog engleskog se ne može poreći. Rad se bavi osnovnim konceptima poslovnog engleskog jezika, stavljajući akcenat na potrebe učenika, odnosno upotrebu engleskog jezika u poslovnom okruženju. Navode se osnovne teme koje kursevi poslovnog jezika najčešće pokrivaju, format lekcija i poslovne veštine na koje se takvi kursevi fokusiraju. U okviru rada poslovni jezik se posmatra u kontekstu engleskog jezika za posebne namene, kome, bez svake sumnje, pripada. Iz tog razloga, rad obuhvata i osvrt na poreklo engleskog jezika za posebne namene, kao i poteškoće u definisanju samih termina poslovni engleski i engleski jezik za posebne namene.

**Ključne reči:** engleski jezik za posebne namene, poslovni engleski jezik, globalizacija, učenje, potrebe učenika, poslovne veštine.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The fact that the era we live in is the era of globalization is indisputable. Commonly defined as the action or procedure of international integration arising from the exchange of world views, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture, the general term of

globalization, increasingly used since the 1980s and especially 1990s, covers a broad set of processes which concern multiple networks of economic, political, and cultural interchange. As one of the three main dimensions of globalization, economic globalization is the rapidly growing economic integration and interdependence of national, regional, and local economies across the world. It is triggered by international trade and investment and aided by information technology, marketization and developments in science and technology [1].

The steady globalization of the world economy necessitates one significant factor: efficient and effective communication in foreign languages. According to Gita Galova [2], the success of the professionals and specialists is "conditional on their ability to manage language and cultural barriers, i.e. on the language skills and competences with respect to their professional areas". There is no doubt that, at the present time, the dominant language of international communication is English. It is the leading and established language in international business, science and technology, travel, education, immigration, academia, diplomacy and entertainment, being spoken by over one billion people<sup>6</sup>. The author in [5] provides an impressive statistics concerning English language: "85% of international associations use English officially, 85% of the world film market is in English, 85% of the scientific articles in the world are written in English, 80% of the world electronically stored information is in English nowadays and 70% of the linguistics journals in the world are published in English". Since it is so widely spoken, English has often been referred to as a "world language", the *lingua franca* of the modern era [6] and while it is not an official language in most countries, it is currently the language most often taught as a foreign language.

Since the significance of EIL (English as an International Language) is anything but decreasing, more and more people are nowadays required to learn English, which has resulted in a huge demand for the teachers of English. However, the gradual economic globalization, among other factors, has brought about the great demand of one other aspect within English Language Teaching (ELT)/ General English (GE) – that is, the teaching of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). It is important at the beginning to make a distinction between these activities, although, the paper clearly suggests that the relationships between them are not as clear-cut as we might wish: ESP must be seen as one of the branches of English as Foreign Language (EFL)/English as Second Language (ESL), which are themselves the main branches of ELT/GE. The focus of the paper will be on the definition and the origins of ESP, but it will go even further into the field of ESP – a special emphasis will be placed on the area of Business English (BE) – a major and the most entrepreneurial branch of ESP.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In [3] David Crystal claims that approximately 330 to 360 million people speak English as their first language. Estimates that include second language speakers vary greatly, from 470 million to more than 1 billion. Crystal calculates that non-native speakers as of 2003 outnumbered native speakers by a ratio of 3 to 1 [4]. When combining native and non-native speakers, English is the most widely spoken language worldwide.

<sup>7</sup> For making a clearer picture of the afore-mentioned fields, an illustration provided by Slavica Čepon in [7] could be useful. She approaches the term BE as of through "a funnel with English as an International Language (EIL) at the top, English Language

## 2. ORIGINS OF ESP

English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain. Although the acronym ESP had earlier stood for English for Special Purposes, the word Special was soon replaced with Specific, since it places more emphasis on purpose or purposefulness. In other words, it implies that the use of English is specific, and connected to professions, institutional procedures and occupational requirements.

Although the emergence of ESP in the late 1960s was not a planned and coherent movement, it is possible to determine the factors that led to it, as well as theoretical and practical forces which shaped its subsequent development. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 6-8) in [8] distinguish the three main reasons that paved the way to ESP. The first of them, romantically named “the Demands of a Brave New World” implies that the years following the end of the Second World War brought about an “age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale” (p.6). The relentless progress of international commerce and technology generated the demand for an international language: “for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role fell to English” (p. 6). Whereas previously knowledge of a foreign language had been considered a sign of a well-rounded education, now it has become a useful and necessary business tool. The second reason cited by Hutchinson and Waters is a revolution in linguistics which basically happened at the same time as the growing demand for English courses tailored to specific needs. The revolutionary pioneers in linguistics shifted the focus from the descriptions of the rules of English usage, i.e. grammar, to the ways in which language is used in real communication. The realization that the language varies from one context to another (e.g. commerce and engineering) led to the conclusion that it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations, and then, make these features the basis of the learner’s language course. Hence, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s there were many attempts to describe English for Science and Technology (EST). The final reason Hutchinson and Waters cite as having caused the emergence of ESP lies in the educational psychology. Rather than simply focus on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners were seen to have different skills, needs and interests which would have a significant influence on their motivation to learn and effectiveness on their learning. From then on, as Kristen Gatehouse (2001) observes in [9] “the catchword in ESL circles is learner-centered or learning-centered”.

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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”.

### 3. WHAT IS ESP?

Despite the fact that ESP as an approach has been widely used over the last four decades, having a relatively long time to mature, there is still no unified definition of what ESP means.<sup>8</sup> What is certain is that a key feature of an ESP course is that the content and objectives of the course are directed towards the specific needs of the learners. This means that ESP courses focus on the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English. The most important difference between ESP and general ELT lies therefore in the learners and their purposes for learning English. Typically (although not always) ESP students are adult learners who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. ESP focuses more on language in context than on teaching the structures of grammar and language. As Lorenzo Fiorito states in [12]: “the ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners”. What is in question here is that ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching. This is extremely stimulating for the students since they are enabled to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study, whether it be economics, business management, accounting, IT, or engineering. The opportunity to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context not only increases their motivation but also reinforces what is taught. The process of learning here is two-field since the students' knowledge and abilities in their subject-matter fields also enhance their ability to acquire English. Subject-matter knowledge serves as the context necessary for them to understand the English taught in the classroom. [12]

Although there is no doubt that ESP is different from the so-called General English in terms of preference of some grammatical structures to others, stylistic characteristics, and field-specific vocabulary (determined by the specific purposes, as already stated above),

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<sup>8</sup> In [10] Anthony (1997) notes that there has been considerable recent debate about the meaning of ESP. The debate can be slightly alleviated by the definition of ESP provided by Dudley-Evans and St. John in [11] (1998: 4-5) concerning the absolute and variable characteristics of ESP:

*Absolute Characteristics*

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

*Variable Characteristics*

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems

it has nevertheless inherited the patterns of word formation, syntactic and discourse organization from the larger system of language. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that the attempt to make a distinction between ESP and ESL/GE is not an easy task since the groundwork behind teaching ESP is provided by teaching English as a Second Language or as a Foreign Language. Having analyzed many definitions of ESP, Helen Basturkmen (2010: 3) concludes that the only thing certain to say is that ESP is somewhat narrower in focus than general ELT because it centers on analysis of learners' needs, i.e. it views learners in terms of their work or study roles and places the emphasis on work- or study-related needs, not personal needs or general interests [13].

Since the teachers and researchers of ESP are interested in the distinctive features of the English language determined by the profession or branch of science where the students will function as second language users, it is possible to separate many types of ESP (e.g. Medical English, English for IT, English for Law, English for Tourism, Business English, etc.). However, as in the case of differentiating ESP from ELT, the attempt to identify the types of EST proves to be utterly problematic. David Carter (1983) in [14] identifies three types of ESP: 1) English as a restricted language<sup>9</sup>, 2) English for Academic and Occupational Purposes and 3) English with specific topics<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, Hutchinson & Waters (1987: 16-17) in [8] provide the "tree of ELT" where ESP is divided into three branches: a) English for Science and Technology (EST), b) English for Business and Economics (EBE), and c) English for Social Studies (ESS). They further divide each of these branches into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), but they admit that these two branches are not strictly separated: "people can work and study simultaneously". It is safe to say that EAP and EOP serve the same end purpose: employment, although the means to achieve this purpose are different. Gatehouse [9] follows Cummins (1979)<sup>11</sup> and categorizes the focuses of EAP and EOP as cognitive academic proficiency versus basic interpersonal skills, respectively.

The following chapter looks at the main points and topics covered by the courses in Business English, which is a part of English for Professional Purposes (EPP) which is

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<sup>9</sup> The example of this type may be the language used by air traffic controllers, which is strictly limited and can be accurately determined based on the situation it is used in. However, it may not be regarded as the language in a strict sense of the word since it is restricted to the very specific vocation/situation and it cannot be used outside the context of vocational environment.

<sup>10</sup> The emphasis here shifts from purpose to topic. This type of ESP is uniquely concerned with anticipated future English needs of, e.g., scientists requiring English for postgraduate reading studies, attending conferences or working in foreign institutions. However, this definition of Carter (1983) is arguable. Gatehouse (2001) insists it should not be a separate type of ESP, but an integral component of ESP courses or programs which focus on situational language.

<sup>11</sup> Cummins, J. (1979). Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. Working Papers on Bilingualism, 19, 121-129.

itself a part of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), one of two major branches of ESP.

#### 4. BUSINESS ENGLISH

BE is most definitely the current growth area in ESP which, in the last two or three decades, has won over increasing interest and awareness. Čepon [7] identifies BE as “an industry in itself”, where the number of BE course books and other teaching/learning materials is rapidly growing, and language schools offering BE courses are more and more popular. Čepon [7] further insists that BE must be regarded in the overall context of ESP because it depends on and employs elements common to all fields of ESP, such as syllabus design, needs analysis, selection and development of 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”.

Rosemary Richey [15] simply defines BE as language development in a business setting, i.e. BE courses deliberately present grammar and lexis in a workplace setting. Special business focus is a direct result of the learners’ needs – they are mostly professionals needing the English language to meet the function of their daily work tasks. In other words, the learners of BE are usually adults already working in businesses, or preparing to work in the field of business. This means that teaching BE is the teaching in which as much as possible must be made job-related, since the successful use of English is seen with regard to a successful outcome to the business transaction. Thus the ideal BE teaching/learning environment has a balanced aim of combining language and business skills.

When talking about business skills, one must bear in mind that it is not that a student may not know these skills in his/her own language and business context, but BE emphasizes the differences in style that are necessary for conducting business in English. This determines the lexical focus of BE which must be placed on polite language that invites, establishes and maintains good business. The activities included in BE courses are always oriented towards communication necessary for dealing with customers or clients, colleagues and other professionals in business. The topics covered by BE range from general to specific business situations. In [15] Richey provides a list of the skill areas that are usually included in BE:

- 1) **Core business area functions:** general management, administration, marketing, finance/accountancy, human resources/personnel
- 2) **Speaking skills:** socializing, telephoning, presentations, negotiations, meetings
- 3) **Writing skills:** emails, letters, faxes, memos, reports, minutes, announcements, notices

Target language that is typical for BE includes register (formality/informality), using polite and conditional forms and appropriate lexis. Teaching grammar is not in the immediate focus, since the major objective is effective and efficient communication, and majority of BE courses include only the basic grammar rules necessary for achieving this goal.

When it comes to lesson formats or structures, the typical formats utilized in teaching BE are one-to-one lessons or group lessons with a limited number of participants (the less the better). In terms of the course duration the courses can be organized as intensive seminars or workshops (up to 5-7 days maximum) or extensive short courses (4-10 week duration). Given the lesson format (small number of learners), BE is primarily oriented to interactive, student-oriented teaching methods. The teacher should strive to actively engage his/her students in communication activities that can be easily transferred to their real work situations. For example, typical activities that can be almost identical to the real-life work situations are brainstorming, round-table discussions, role-play, pros and cons debates, etc. BE coursebooks should therefore be chosen carefully so as to meet both the language and skills needs of the learners, while the authentic materials could be used from the students' own work (e.g. their emails, reports, meeting agendas, etc.).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The unstoppable economic globalization has gradually deepened the link among different countries and nations. In such a world where the borders between the countries are slowly fading, Business English has become an important communication tool. Teaching BE is one of the fastest growing areas of teaching EFL, with BE courses designed to meet the demands of modern business in a globalized world. However, many aspects of it are still insufficiently investigated. As it is the case with other areas of EST, there is a strong necessity for further research, basically resulting from the fact that the existent research tends to concentrate on written communication while in practice, the teaching focuses mostly on the spoken language.<sup>12</sup>

This paper addressed the basic points of BE, its main topics, skill areas and lesson formats, through the necessary context of its "parent" ESP, tackling the origins and difficulties in defining the very concepts of ESP and BE. Many other tasks, like teacher's role in BE courses, classroom organization, intercultural dimension of BE, etc., are yet to be dealt with in future research.

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<sup>12</sup> For the detailed information on the research in BE, see Bargiela-Chiapini, F. and Zhang, Z. "Business English", in The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes (2013), edited by Paltridge, B. and Starfield, S.

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