

The Business Lexis: Issues for Teachers and Researchers

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Learning English for different purposes (academic, occupational, tourist, etc.) is now an important issue on everybody's agenda. With the "threat" of globalisation, in an era of mergers and acquisitions, of global alliances, when traditional borders no longer exist, it is therefore essential for educators and learners alike to re-think language policies and curricula.

The command of business lexis in the case of business people is a constant pre-occupation of employers, employees and of course, educators. Business English is traditionally categorised as a sub-division of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), which may be said to go as far back as the Greek and Roman Empires (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998: 1). Nevertheless, although people have always felt the need for specialist knowledge of a foreign language, in order to be able to function in a certain number of settings and carry out specific tasks (telephone conversations, meetings, negotiations, travelling abroad, writing reports, etc.); it is safer to place the ESP movement in the second half of the 20th century. The expansion of ESP is probably the result of two separate though related developments: economic and educational. The rising economic imperialism of the USA has led to the need to communicate in English, mainly in the language of science and technology. The educational shift brought about an emphasis on learner-centeredness, and along with it a change in how language and teaching were approached.

We have witnessed several stages in the development of ESP. These have been, in turn, *Register Analysis*, *Discourse or Rhetorical Analysis* (which later developed the *Genre Analysis* approach), *Needs Analysis*, *Skills and Strategies*; and *the Learning-Centred approach*. Underlying all these approaches has been the issue

whether specific situations where language is used can generate situational or subject-specific language. There has been a consensus, that, while the situations do not engender separate, special language per se, there is a restriction of language choice and a certain amount of specialist lexis. The acquisition of this restricted, specialised language, by both teachers, who need to teach it, and students, who will use it, has created a learning dynamics which is rather different from that of general English.

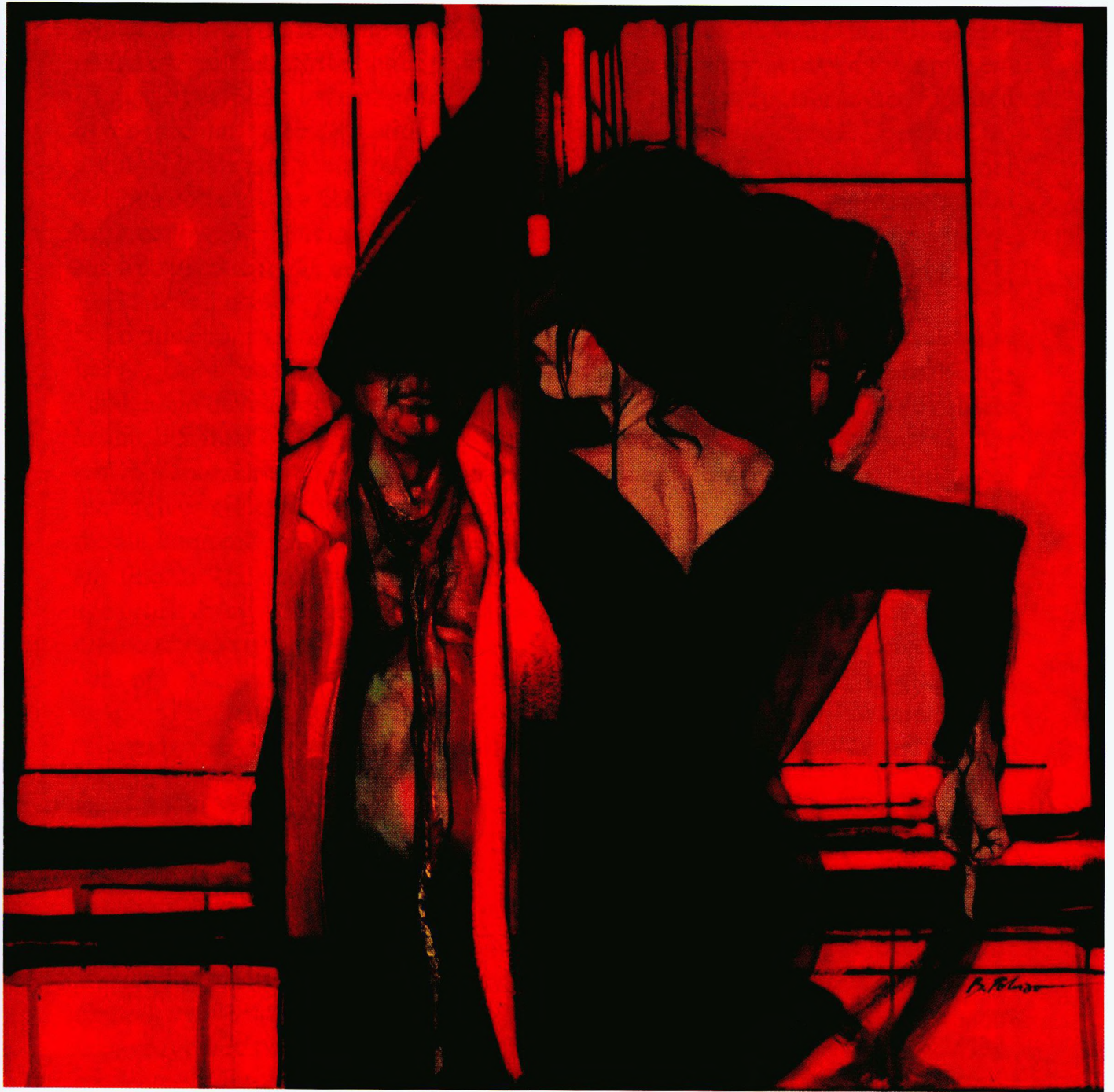
Although there are quite many studies on the practical aspect of teaching Business English, there is relatively limited research into the characteristics of the business lexis, as most teachers of Business English actually teach business professionals who are interested in the functionality of the language rather than in the linguistic mechanisms behind it. In the following we will concentrate on issues of teaching and learning, as well as specialist materials and will try to analyse some of the features of Business English.

Teaching/Learning Business English

The most important issues that concern teachers and learners of business English are a thorough and detailed needs analysis in order to be able to decide on (negotiate) an appropriate syllabus; decisions on language and specialist content, as well as selection, adaptation or creation of suitable teaching materials and decision on appropriate methodology.

A. Needs Analysis

The most important step in designing and implementing a business language course is a thorough needs analysis process. As we mentioned above, business English courses providers (universities, language centres) offer their educational packages to would-be business people (business or economics students) or actual tradespeople, financiers, entrepreneurs, etc., who all know, to a larger or smaller extent, what the reason for their learning effort is. Business people are goal-oriented by definition, which means that business English students learn with a view to the utility of their language acquisition process. *"The purpose for their language learning is that of functioning properly in the target situation, be that a business presentation, a meeting, a negotiation or some piece of business writing"* (Popescu 2005: 206). When course providers and syllabus designers make decisions on business language courses they have to take into consideration the learners' objective needs, by





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which we mean the fact that business students / professionals will primarily be language users. That further entails that there is a discrepancy between their present language performance in the business area and the language performance required in a particular communication situation, personal, or professional. Learners' individual goals and social roles are of crucial importance when a course designer decides on language content/materials/methodology. Information obtained from different business environments and strata, ranging from management to employees who need to make use of the English language on a routine basis will be highly relevant and useful (Popescu 2005: 2006).

To this end, statistical data gathered from the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry, or from different Business Centres could be an invaluable instrument for curriculum developers. At the same time company management could provide relevant information concerning the occurrence of employment opportunities for which a sound knowledge of English is an essential requirement. The employees themselves are actually the most important and reliable source of information in the above-mentioned respect, as they use the language in specific target situations and they are the ones who know exactly what they need in terms of English language proficiency, communicative and social competence, i.e., whether they need to draft contracts or only to write faxes in English, whether they need to deliver speeches or make presentations, or participate in negotiations where the working language is English. It should also be borne in mind that in the case of ESP orientation, "*language users learn more effectively if programme content is relevant to their specific area of need or interest*" (Johnson 1989: 12).

B. Language Content

Brieger (1997) also discusses Business English in terms of what learners should acquire i.e. on the one hand, what he calls language knowledge and secondly, communication skills: "*the legitimate scope of our pedagogic activities as Business English trainers...is to design and deliver courses which aim to increase language knowledge and communication skills*" (1997: 35). In terms of language knowledge, learners have to acquire grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, whereas communication skills refer mainly to presentations, meetings, telephoning and report-writing. He also provides at the back of the book a check-list of useful business phrases, although these are based on teaching experience rather than on any in-depth study into the language of business.

C. Tasks and Activities / Business English Materials

More recent business English textbooks (designed in order to meet the specifications of ALTE¹ and Council of Europe 'Can-do' Statements) focus on an extended list of communication skills, generally clustered around several topic areas: personal identification (greeting people and responding to greetings, completing forms with personal or company details, etc.), the office, general business environment and routine (arranging and re-arranging appointments and meetings, understanding office communications – reports, letters, memos, etc.), entertainment of clients, free time, relationships with colleagues and clients (discussing interest and leisure activities, making, accepting and refusing offers, etc.), travel and conference meetings (making enquiries, reservations, orders and bookings, following directions, etc.), using the telephone (giving and interpreting numerical data, common abbreviations and acronyms, etc.), health and safety, buying and selling, company structures, systems, processes, products and services (describing and presenting products, explaining how something works, apologising and accepting apologies, etc.), results and achievements, business issues (management skills, promotional strategies, etc.), as well as other topic areas of general interest, such as food and drink, education, consumer goods, weather, etc. (cf. BEC Handbook 2004: 5).

Common tasks are: matching (reading – scanning and gist; informational texts), matching (reading – understanding text structure), multiple choice (reading for gist and specific information), multiple choice cloze (vocabulary and structure), open cloze (reading – structure and discourse features), proof-reading (reading – understanding sentence structure / error identification). Therefore, the area of language knowledge is extended to discourse, style, semantics, etc.

Generally speaking, materials focus mainly on authentic written or audio materials, taken from different business media: company descriptions/journals, web sites, the business press, etc.

Business English vs General English

And still, what makes Business English different from General English?

Some important research into this issue has been made by Douglass Pickett, who managed to pinpoint some important aspects concerning the nature and characteristics of Business English. He agreed that Business English is a part of ESP *but*

1 Association of Language Testers in Europe

...as business and commerce are by definition an interface between the general public and the specialist producer...it must be a lot nearer the everyday language spoken by the general public than many other segments of ESP (Pickett 1986a: 1).

His main idea is that business English has actually two aspects, one imposed by the relationship of the business world with the "lay world" and the other, which refers to the business intra-world communications:

Conversely, of course, the extent to which it departs from lay language depends more on the nature of the business than on any autonomous subject area it occupies all to itself. Thus if we take three different firms, one in insurance, one in pharmaceuticals and one in fashion, their language to the public will be much the same and no more specialised than can be avoided. Their internal specialist languages, however, will be respectively those of insurance, pharmaceuticals and fashion, not business in general (Pickett 1986a: 1).

As concerns the written business communications, there are universal actions that will always take place, e.g. in international negotiations: Incoterms (FOB, CIF, etc.), methods of payment (Bill of Lading, money transfer, etc.), whereas spoken language is less easy to define and

...what makes for real business communication is a whole gamut of subtly graded conversations sensitive to the subject matter, the occasion, the shared knowledge and social relationships holding between speakers (Pickett 1986a: 2).

Pickett considers Business English to be much more complex than any other area of ESP, given the need for a link to the general public. Broadly speaking there are two main communication areas, with the public and among businesses. Therefore, in terms of register, Pickett refers to two domains: register as defined by subject matter, i.e. special language entailed by the subject area, such as football or cookery, and register as defined by situation, i.e. by the special situation a speaker might find themselves in. "*In other words, the individual can switch his linguistic code to conform to his role, just as a bi-lingual can shift languages*" (1986a: 8).

In both major senses of the word 'register' business English includes register but is not confined by it. In so far as register is defined by subject matter, business English embraces at least two subject matters. One is the specialist language of whatever sort of business one happens to be in - transport, petroleum, jewellery, hairdressing, banking, catering, etc. The other is the language of business in general that occupies a neutral place between particular businesses. Thus, terms like 'order', 'issue', 'bad debt', 'invest', 'boom', 'slump', 'invoice', 'depreciation', 'stock', 'discount', 'turnover', would belong there, since they are part of a framework of concepts that would

probably be used in any business. Insofar as a register is defined by situation, we might also speak of a 'business register', since there are certain situations peculiar to business which shape the language used in them (Pickett 1986a: 9).

Pickett's main tenet is that *sociolinguistic* factors play a far more important role in the production of business language, as Business English "*depends much more on the setting and social relations than upon the subject matter*" (1986a: 2).

Characteristics of the business language

In the following we will look into some the characteristics of business English, with some relevant examples taken mainly from authentic sources (business press, business correspondence, business conversations, etc).

1. a certain fixedness of lexical associations, i.e. less free lexical combinations:
e.g.

to have a *vested interest* in V-ing (= a strong personal interest in something because you could benefit from it); syn. dominant interest, equitable interest, etc., which might mean almost the same thing, but with less semantic load and frequency of occurrence/usage.

current liabilities (= a balance sheet item which equals the sum of all money owed by a company and due within one year); syn. current debts, although less frequent used.

hedge funds (= funds, usually used by wealthy individuals and institutions, which are allowed to use aggressive strategies that are unavailable to mutual funds, including selling short, leverage, program trading, swaps, arbitrage, and derivatives).

Net Interest Margin (NIM) (= the percentage difference between a bank's yield on earning assets [mostly loans] and interest paid to depositors).

asset-stripping (= the practice of buying an unsuccessful company at a low price and selling off its assets separately for a profit and with no regard for the future welfare of the company or its employees).

2. a certain degree of courtesy and formality which are to be found in the forms and frameworks of conventionalised transactions, e.g.

Dear Sir, / Yours faithfully,

Dear Mr. Jones / Yours sincerely,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been accepted for the above post ...

Enclosed are tow copies of the contract of employment.

I am writing to complain about a shipment ... we received yesterday against our invoice no. G 2932/3 ...

...
As we will be unable to retail this consignment in our stores, we are returning the shipment to you carriage forward and we shall expect a full refund.

3. sociolinguistic orientation, by which we mean that the language used by business people display “sensitivity to subject matter, the occasion, shared knowledge and social relations holding between companies and communicators” (Pickett 1986b: 2). e.g.

RECEPTIONIST: Good morning, Media Solutions, how can I help you?
DEREK: Can you put me through to Christine Moreau, please?
RECEPTIONIST: Of course, hold the line ... I'm sorry, I can't get through at the moment, the line's busy. Shall I ask her to call you back?
DEREK: It's OK, I'll leave a message then.
RECEPTIONIST: OK, hold on just a second while I look for a pen. ... Right, go ahead.
DEREK: My name is Derek Richardson, from Weston Security. Ms Moreau rang me up yesterday. She wanted me to look into the cost of installing an alarm system for your premises. I said I'd call get back to her today.
RECEPTIONIST: I'm sorry Mr Richardson, the line is very bad, could you speak up, please? Hello? Hello? I'm sorry, you're breaking up. Hello? ...
DEREK: Sorry about that. I'm on a train using my mobile and we were cut off in a tunnel. Er, yes, as I was saying, I've managed to sort something out. Can you tell her that I'll send her a quotation along with all the other details in the post?
RECEPTIONIST: Oh, right, er, can I just go over that again? Your name is Derek Richardson, from Weston Security, and you're going to send some details about an alarm system in the post.
DEREK: That's right. Er, thank you for your help. Goodbye.
(Emerson 2005: 105)

4. metaphoric load

The language used in business materials may be characterized by what we could called metaphoric load, i.e.

Business English

The union of television and the internet *is spawning* a wide variety of *offspring*
(www.economist.com)

General English

Surveys also provide valuable information about where fish have been seen and what species are *spawning* in the stream. (www.hylebos.org)

... one that threatened to *devastate* the television industry. (www.economist.com)

Joost, YouTube, iTunes and Netflix do not need their own networks to supply their video services; they can *piggyback* on fast internet links provided by others.

The yen carry trade has amplified global liquidity, further *inflating* asset-price bubbles across the world.

...the Japanese government announced a plan to recapitalize its *crippled* banks. (www.economist.com)

MOVEMENT / Describing trends:

Verbs (I):

The yen *jumped* by 13% within three days. (www.economist.com)

...causing the currency to *soar*...

V (T):

The Europeans would like some action to *push up* the currency, which, they say, is not bearing the fair share of the dollar's decline. (www.economist.com)

Nouns:

But the lower the yen slides, the greater the threat of an even sharper *rebound*. (www.economist.com)

... but an *upsurge* in currency *volatility* ... (www.economist.com)

Natural selection therefore favours parents which can produce a variety of offspring. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

The fire *devastated* the countryside.

Give me a *piggyback*, Daddy!

You can *inflate* a balloon, with either air or helium.

He was *crippled* by polio as a child.

The children were *jumping* up and down with excitement.

While he was out one of these eagles *soared* high over the village,...(www.mnh.si.edu/)

She *pushed up* her children when the policeman came by.

Giggs headed the *rebound* into the net.

... an *upsurge* of emotion that created a state of calm and self-understanding...

(<http://hemi.nyu.edu/>)

5. in close connection with the above trait, marked idiomaticity: e.g.

Instead, rather than undercutting television networks and producers, ... Joost might ... *give them new juice*. (= give vitality) (www.economist.com)

YouTube has been trying to *thrash out an agreement* with Viacom. (= discuss in order to reach an agreement) (www.economist.com)

The market *is chasing its own tail* in defiance of the economic fundamentals. (= to be very busy doing a lot of things, but achieving very little) (www.economist.com)

Japan's economy is no longer flat on its back. (= helpless, without recourse, defeated) (www.economist.com)

EA is now *ramping up its* development efforts... (= to increase the amount or size of something) (www.economist.com)

EA *hit a bumpy patch* in 2006. (combination between: patch = a period of time of the type mentioned, usually a difficult or unhappy one; bumpy as in have / give sb a bumpy ride to have a difficult time; to make a situation difficult for sb) (www.economist.com)

An extension: the ergolect and the poetics of Business English

In a subsequent article, Pickett (1989) introduces two important notions that have influenced further research into the nature of business English. He states that Business English

... is clearly a dialect of English but not exclusively of England. Indeed, it is not a dialect defined by place at all but by activity, occupation, subject matter or situation. For this we might coin the term *ergolect* - work language, though for many years linguists have been using the term *register* (Pickett 1989: 5).

Pickett discusses yet another concept – that of the *poetics* of Business English, by which he understands of process of creating this *work language* in a similar way to creating poetry. In other words, the business language is drawn from general English in order to create fresh meaning in different business contexts, which later on can easily flow back into general usage.

And indeed, we will find lots of metaphors at the place of work and hardly think of them as metaphors in the first place. If we say: "I talked to the boss and hope to have planted the seed" we actually mean that we've introduced our boss to the idea, in a gentle way, and now hope he will act upon it. No physical seed has actually been planted. Another widespread metaphor at the workplace, with reference to sex discrimination / or the avoidance of it, is "What's good for the goose is good for the gander" (meaning that the sexes should be treated the same way and not subjected to different standards). Nobody ever thinks that this idiom is derived from an earlier proverb "*What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander*" and represents an analogy with the animal world. Quite frequently employees will use the

expression "*We're swamped*" to refer either to "a situation or place fraught with difficulties and imponderables" or to "having a lot of work to deal with". Nobody would think of swamp as "*an area of ground that is very wet or covered with water and in which plants, trees, etc. are growing*". When people in a department can't reach an agreement, but nevertheless continue to disagree, we might say: "*They could argue till the cows come home and still to no avail*". Of course the actual animals have nothing to do with our situation.

Other authors too have given preference to the concept of *ergolect* over that of *register*, and have further analysed the characteristics of the management ergolect. Renata Fox (1999) considers that management, a group of substantial social influence, is in the privileged position to create through verbal means a genuine public image. Understandably enough, then, the managerial language will be used largely for socio-rhetoric purposes. Through computational analysis of a text corpus, she described and analysed selected lexical, discourse and stylistic elements of English used in international management, which were proved to contribute to the public identification of management and the manager.

Conclusion

The present study was an introductory exploration into the business lexis from a double perspective: pedagogic and linguistic, and it will hopefully pave the way for further research in the field of the pedagogy and linguistic analysis of professional communication in English. We are certain that a sound knowledge of the mechanisms governing the structure and functions of business English will help language policy makers, course providers, educators and researchers to better cater for the needs of business people who perform in an international milieu where the working language is English.

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The Business Lexis: Issues for teachers and researchers

The aim of this article is to analyse the business lexis from two broad perspectives: its functions and its form. The first part of the article is devoted to aspects pertaining to pedagogical issues, i.e. teaching and learning the business lexis, whereas the second part deals with the most important characteristics of business English, as opposed to general English. The most important issues for a teacher of business English are the curricular activities involved: needs analysis, setting of objectives, decisions on syllabus design and lesson planning, choice of teaching materials and methodology, whereas for the researcher it is important to pinpoint the elements that make up the substance of the business lexis.

Keywords: *business lexis, business metaphors, ergolect.*