

Experiential Business English Teaching

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Abstract

The present paper is aimed at undergoing a contrasting analysis of two different types of trainees, represented by students and professionals, both categories having the same status as language learners of Business English training courses.

Generally speaking, individualized teaching-learning strategies are shaped based on non-formal education content, which involves facilitating teamwork and an interdisciplinary approach.

Learning through experience helps learners develop skills necessary to adapt in the work environment. Thus, simulated and real situations can be contrasted and turned into an object of analysis.

My conclusion is that experiential learning opposes traditional education because it starts with practicing a skill, analyzes the practice and then repeats the practice at a more complex level.

Key words: teaching strategies, experiential learning, Business English, collaborative learning, case study

J.E.L. classification: I 25

1. Introduction

Identifying appropriate teaching and learning strategies that emphasize particular types of business communication in a specific context is what the present paper aims at. To this purpose, it takes into consideration, on the one hand, the increased interest in Business English training programs and, on the other hand, various types of learners and their needs for a specialized set of communication skills and knowledge which are required in the workplace.

2. Types of learners

Business English learners can be categorized into three types:

- pre-experienced learners, a category which includes students at business schools, not yet in work;
- low-experienced learners, who are junior company members or learners changing jobs;
- job-experienced learners, who are in work and need Business English for a broad variety of reasons.

Obviously, students need to attend business language courses to prepare for their future working life in the business field. Consequently, the types of English courses offered by universities are targeted at the kind of work the students will later be engaged in: finance, accounting, banking, marketing or tourism. Of course, they will differ in terms of the kinds of language knowledge and skills required. Low-experienced and job-experienced learners have to use Business English so that they could achieve more in their jobs. Since English is the language of business worldwide, many professionals are willing to learn/ to improve their Business English.

The high degree of globalization is largely due to the advances in the fields of communications,

politics, media, military and, last but not least, economy. As a consequence, English language has achieved a dominant status (Nadrag, Buzarna-Tihenea, 2013, p.135) The globalization of the world economy forces European companies to remain competitive and to enroll their non-English employees in Business English communication training programs.

A greater demand for additional business language education is generated by mergers, takeovers, or relocation. Business English skills are important to a large category of professionals, such as: executives with new international responsibilities, accountants, IT, people who are interested in building skills to qualify for a promotion.

As already stated, the language courses for low-experienced learners largely depend on the type of business they are involved in, their job requirements. That is why the trainer must assess the company needs, the learners' needs and their expectations.

Nowadays, particular emphasis is put on training in both written and oral communication skills, and also on specialist vocabulary items. That is the reason why the language courses provided tertiary education are supposed to help students develop the skills they will need to enter the business world in an effective way. First, students are introduced to the theoretical background of business communication, second they are encouraged to use the theoretical constructs of lecture materials to research various ways of communication by means of

- case studies;
- problem-solving tasks;
- projects and
- reports.

3. A theoretical approach to experiential learning

The strategies used in traditional education are replaced by non-traditional techniques based on active learning which can play a significant role in preparing students and professionals for their future career goals. The heart of all learning lies in the way people process experience, their critical reflection of experience. Learning is a cycle that begins with experience, continues with reflection and leads to action. According to David Kolb, in his *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, there are four cycles of learning:

- concrete experience;
- reflective observation;
- abstract conceptualization and
- active experimentation.

The specialist defines experiential learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.72) because his belief is that concrete experience motivates the learner to reflect on that experience and then test the concepts by actively experimenting with the world.

This idea of learning through direct experience is also promoted by John Dewey. He states that “Experiential learning takes place when a person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity” (Dewey, 1963, p. 86). He is one of the first to emphasize that learning should be grounded in experience and offers a theory of education based on the need of understanding the nature of experience. His experience learning model has five stages:

- experience the activity;
- share the results, reactions and observations publicly;
- process by discussing, looking at the experience;
- analyze and reflect, then
- generalize and apply what was learnt to a similar or different situation.

The importance of people being actively immersed into the process of learning is also stressed by Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget.

4. Practical benefits of experiential learning

The experience learning models can be adapted to training courses for professionals who have already passed through the first phase of experiential learning. By reflecting on previous work experience, they can improve their business communication skills. This stage of concrete experience allows professionals to link concepts and practices to the Business English course. Given their age and experience, adult education practices can move beyond the traditional model of teachers as knowledge-suppliers and learners as passive recipients. Instead, learners become knowledge gatherers and knowledge creators. At the critical reflection stage, professionals may be asked questions about their experience in terms of previous activities. Once the discoveries are made, they are asked to reflect on their experiences and thus new skills can be developed. At the abstract conceptualization stage, learners are prompted to find answers, make generalizations and draw conclusions. Further on, learning takes an active form in the phase of active experimentation. At this point, they can test what has been learnt in new and more complex situations.

It can be concluded that active learning based on reflections on professional experience allows adult learners to link their concrete workplace experience to theoretical understanding, which is then turned into classroom experience.

As far as students are concerned, this approach has some drawbacks: as they lack previous business experience, their knowledge is only theoretical, based only on books and class instruction. The deficiencies in workplace experience can be remedied by networking with local businesses and integrating them into classroom projects. In order to gain access to the information they need, students are advised to choose companies they are familiar with, a family business or a company where a friend or a relative works. This projects have at least two benefits: first, they provide the benefit of getting the students out of the classroom into real business environment and, second, these projects introduce them to future career opportunities.

Experiential education can be implemented in group-based learning projects which must be presented by students clearly and professionally in the form of displays and portfolios. Such projects and presentations represent useful ways of blurring the boundaries between classroom and the workplace. The tasks set as teamwork may include several stages: the research phase, where students become acquainted with the topic using techniques such as brainstorming, the problem-solving stage in which they are requested to make decisions. Next comes the writing stage when the presentation is drafted, the material is organized, visuals are introduced. Collaborative writing can prepare students for the workplace type of activity where multiple writers and readers help shape a document keeping within time limits. Last is the presentation stage which encourages students to exercise their oral communication skills and deal with live audience.

Collaborative learning is also an aspect that Business English training programs should also focus on. As adult learners, business people are more receptive to an active approach to learning than students, since their cooperative skills have already been acquired in their daily activity, as part of their careers. This cooperative learning experience, which is defined by specialists as a method used for instruction where students “learn techniques for analyzing, interpreting, negotiating and communicating their information as a team”(Adams, Hamm, 1996, p.121), stimulates critical thinking, develops leadership and interactive social skills.

5. Case studies

As far as student courses are concerned, another way of bridging the gap between the classroom and the business environment is the case method. When using this approach, instructors provide students with a story or a scenario of a real business situation. This case describes a problem and a place where the student is placed in a situation to participate by resolving it. The student assumes that (s)he is the protagonist of the case: drafts a memo, a letter or a fax to persuade a person of authority, responding to the situation which is frequently at a crisis point.

Given the students' lack of experience, cases require only minimal business background. If the cases are conceived for professionals, they may describe complex situations due to their previous knowledge in the field. Nevertheless, no matter who the target learner is, these cases should suggest multiple solutions, so that learners could profitably discuss the issue across a range of possible

solutions. Such open-ended situations are more in keeping with the typical problems of the workplace and offer more realistic practice.

Case studies are an effective way of teaching Business English to students and professionals as they help them improve their communicative competences by practicing a specific skill such as negotiating, interviewing, problem-solving, decision-making or preparing a presentation. Additionally, case studies improve the students' organizational skills as they can be quite dense in information. Last, they enhance the students' written and oral communication skills and train managerial communication skills such as holding a meeting, negotiating a contract, giving a presentation. To conclude, case studies involve students into real-life situations which require them to become involved in business communication.

6. Conclusions

As argued in the previous sections, experiential education might help both types of trainees—professionals and students—turn from passive recipients into active learners. Teachers should expose them to a variety of workplace documents that can be analyzed and used as patterns. This strategy can be used effectively with professionals who can bring in examples of documents from their own workplace for discussion and analysis.

While job-experienced learners may find these examples more important for them than examples taken from textbooks, students may encounter difficulties in this process of document modelling, largely because they are not familiar with them. Since the transition from academic textbooks to real documents is often a difficult one, an effective way to expose students to these types of documents is to ask them to conduct a research project to develop a 'speaking' and 'writing' a profile of a professional as part of the local business integration projects. On this occasion, students have the opportunity to interview professionals about the strategies they have developed for completing their tasks. This interactive method may reveal similarities, as well as differences between the classroom education and the workplace reality.

To conclude, unlike traditional education in which teachers and learners describe, analyze, apply and then implement new learning, experiential teaching and learning proceed from practicing a skill, analyze the practice and then repeat the practice at a more complex level.

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