

Modern Approaches to Teaching Business English

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Abstract

In the ESP domain, grammar teaching has always been regarded as a challenging issue, requesting great pedagogical skills, no matter the learners' level and field of expertise. The paper looks at a range of techniques for introducing grammar that focus on meaning, techniques that use tasks meant to maximize interaction and create an opportunity for meaning-focused language use. A more learner-centered approach, inductive teaching offers learners of Business English opportunities to actively create rules, to be more engaged and remember more. We will further explore how blended learning can be used as a helpful tool for guided discovery. In this way, learners discover the form and/or use of the target language with less input on the teacher's part. Moreover, the switch from traditional to blended learning will certainly benefit students and will naturally appeal to their identity as digital natives.

Key words: ESP, blended learning, Business English, digital technologies, educational approaches
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1. Introduction

In the recent years, conventional views of grammar teaching have come under much scrutiny and challenge. The solution provided by some specialists in the field of methodology is finding methods to teach grammar that are coherent with the contemporary theories. D. Larsen-Freeman highlights the need to move past analyzing grammatical form well by using a meaning-based or communicative approach and by employing inductive activities:

“An inductive approach such as using a consciousness-raising task is desirable because by using such an approach one is nurturing within the students a way of thinking, through which they can arrive at their own generalizations. In addition, an inductive approach allows teachers to assess what the students already know about a particular structure and to make any necessary adjustments in their lesson plan.” (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 264)

If teachers want to maximize interaction and create opportunities for meaning-focused language use, task-based activities are a solution. Task-based Learning (TBL) tasks should be things you do in real life, like planning a trip, finding out about a topic to give a presentation, or writing a blog article.

When planning an inductive approach, teachers find contexts where the language occurs in a natural manner, prepare texts and get ready to draw attention to language and offer feedback to learners' own interpretations of rules. It is advisable to select a video/audio material or a text that is easily accessible so that learners aren't more concerned with the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary and they can then pay more attention to the grammar.

2. Literature review

Nowadays, task-based models of language teaching are largely being promoted and adopted at the academic level (Fisher et al, 2011, p 15). Being close to the real world, this life models offer the students an opportunity to prepare for their future careers. Willis and Willis offer the following criteria, originally, in the form of questions (Willis, J., & Willis, D.,1996):

- The activity aims at engaging learners' interest
- Meaning represents a primary focus
- The activity has a clear goal/outcome
- Its success is assessed in terms of outcome
- The priority is its completion
- The activity can be related to day-to-day activities

Following the authors' logic, the activity represents a task provided that an affirmative answer is offered to each of these questions.

Task-based learning is considered to be an extension of the communicative approach to language teaching:

“The hallmarks of the communicative approach include a focus on communicating meaning, using authentic materials, integrating skills, and centering instruction students and their communicative needs. What the task-based approach adds is an emphasis on embedding holistic communicative acts into a specific context and situation, with the specific aim that mirrors the actual or future communicative aims of the learner.” (Fisher *et al*, 2011, p.18)

Therefore, this approach aims at supporting the learners' autonomy as far as the use of language is concerned, regardless of the complexity of the communicative situation.

As the task-based approach regards communication to assist action, the authors' intention is to switch from the simple activity of speaking, i.e. ‘INTERACTION’, to ‘COMMUNIC-ATION’, which means “acting with others” (p. 20)

Teaching language skills for specific purposes is a core activity of language departments in the European universities. When teaching at the academic level, all language skills are equally focused on and, since LSP is used, the context is particularly important.

3. Research methodology

An ESP definition needs to take into account the following characteristics, seen by M. Johns and Donna Price-Machado as ‘absolute’ in terms of

- design: designed to meet the specific needs of the learner
- content: related to particular subjects, occupations, or activities
- vocabulary: centered on the language appropriate to these activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, and the analysis of this discourse
- specificity: in contrast to “General English” (cf. M. Johns and Donna Price-Machado, 2001, p. 44).

The definition they arrive at is that

“English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a movement based on the proposition that all language teaching should be tailored to the specific learning and language use needs of identified groups of students— and also sensitize to the sociocultural contexts in which these students will be using English. Most of the movement's practitioners are teachers of adults, those students whose needs are more readily identified within academic, occupational, or professional settings.” (2001, p. 44)

Using TBL, the reference point is no longer only acquiring academic knowledge. With this approach, learning and social tasks are closely connected: as a participant in a project, or a case study, the learner uses grammar and vocabulary in an active way based on the objectives provided and the circumstances of the given situation. to sum it up, there is a connection between various language teaching and testing approaches as illustrated by the team of GULT researchers: first, the grammar-translation approach includes only words and rules, to those, role plays are added in the communicative approach, finally, the task-based approach incorporates all these ingredients and mixes them with “situational embedding” (Fisher *et al*, 2011, p. 21).

The communicative tasks and the activities used in task-based teaching should be comparable with the ones that are likely to occur outside the context of language classroom. The example given is one of the role play, where for students of business the role play can be between an intern and a manager, because this situation bears the marks of authenticity.

Case studies and project works are two possible options to be used by a task-based approach in grammar teaching as well. Case studies are best suited for subject areas such as business law medicine social sciences, while project work and simulations are recommended for scientific areas.

4. Findings

As shown by some scholars, case studies represent a good opportunity to run pedagogical experiments on how to better improve students' skills needed in the business field. Using either traditional methods or online materials in order to enhance the reading skills (cf. Buzarna, 2021, p. 230), the speaking, or the writing skills (Sinkus, 2021, p. 304), case studies proved their efficiency and contributed to developing learners' business vocabulary.

As argued by many specialists in the field, there is a difference between global simulations and project work on the one hand and case studies on the other hand. Whereas the former are characterized by creativity as they focus on the productive skills such as speaking and writing, the latter need a rather detailed analysis, they are “problem – based an start with an important receptive phase that is essential for the outcome of the activity” (Fisher *et al*, 2011, p. 23).

When structuring the activity, the first stage is the introduction of the topic, a very important one because students understand the requirements, the information they need in order to solve the task. This is the point where digital technologies can be used very effectively.

As far as learning and teaching are concerned, digital technologies are a solution in terms of information storage, accessibility and the variety of media forms. Affordability and availability represent another plus (Popescu, 2020). In this way, learners possess control over the selection of the materials that can be offered in generous amount, on the one hand, and, on the other, over the timespan spent in order to process them. Besides, such activities may function in an interactive way if feedback is provided on the learners' decision concerning the selected items. As a matter of fact, all these features can be blended with our traditional methods in order to provide the students with a powerful infusion of learning opportunities.

What is important is the fact that instructors have to investigate modes in which to use digital technology to render the teaching-learning process more accommodating.

For example, for business students the teacher provides the link for on YouTube video in Google Classroom. The content of the video refers to a business context such as a meeting or a job interview, situations where businesspeople develop solutions to existing problems. The students are requested to listen to the dialogues, with or without captions in English, for how many times they think suitable in order to spot the situations where modal verbs are used or the structure of the interrogative sentences. If the video renders the discussions that take place for negotiation purposes, the learners may have to note examples of conditional sentences. This is possible because a precondition of a business English class is for the students to have at least B1 level. Thus, they may recap on the grammar they learned in high school but within a business framework. By doing this assignment at home, there is no need for students to wait for their colleagues to finish the tasks and they can manage the study time by themselves. Therefore, there is clearly some correspondence to the real life situation where they will be free to organize their work in their future jobs. After working on the task individually, learners working pairs or teams and discuss their own findings using Skype or Google meetings.

By using Evernote for example, they may upload notes with ideas, brainstorm, and count to a common conclusion on the use of modal verbs. For the conditional sentences, they may fill in a chart with examples from the video material listed according to the type each conditional sentence fits in. While working out the rules for why a certain modal verb has been used or what a conditional sentence may express, the learners may use online resources.

It must be noted that resource usage help students to get ready to manage realistic situations that will likely occur in their future careers. In order to present the findings, the students may have to hand in a report or to deliver a brief presentation. In this approach grammar and vocabulary, the receptive skills blended with the productive skills, are motivating students to persuade their classmates. It's critical that teachers monitor effectively and then provide feedback on task performance.

It should be acknowledged that there is a concern is about the degree of difficulty involved when monitoring these tasks, since they are mainly learner centered.

Also, it is difficult to assess the individual input each student has, the share of student’s work. Besides, there may be an increased workload for teacher to check the resources used, to give feedback and to rectify possible but inherent misapprehension. As for the suitability of the resources used by the students, the solution could be providing them with bibliography.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, with the assistance of blended learning, task- based approaches focus on the development of the skills needed by learners of Business English for a successful integration on the job market, extending the application from the language study.

Regardless of the techniques used, a brief note on regulating classroom activity with the help of online assessment forms might be seen as useful at this point of our discussion. Microsoft Forms, Google Forms, Survey Monkey or QuestionPro are some of the free online tools that create surveys to get feedback on your Business English course at scale and in real time.

Using such appraisals has multiple benefits. To name a few, it is worth mentioning:

- improving student-teacher interaction,
- getting feedback on the shortcomings of the course,
- engaging students in the instructional process,
- helping teachers to adjust the teaching style and
- assisting teachers in improving the course structure and content in the future.

If the purpose is assessing the overall course, the survey form could include general or particular questions. the general closed-ended questions may refer to the overall rating, one the open-ended once May reflect the strengths and the weaknesses of the course. On the other hand, the particular questions may be aimed at the students’ own involvement and/or the teachers’ performance, their attitude, their effectiveness in delivering the course materials. In order to answer, either preset grading scales or ratings can be employed. For recommendations of what should be improved and other aspects of the course structure/content, open questions are seen as a suitable option. Bearing a quantitative descriptive design, the anonymous answers can be based on an online questionnaire that interviews undergraduate students majoring in Business, either at the end of the first semester (cf. Băcă, 2021a), or at the end of the academic year (cf. Băcă, 2021b).

Undoubtedly, whether the classroom activity should focus primarily on form or on meaning, whether traditional or modern teaching methods need to be used, will continue to be the topic of debate among the scholars whose research focuses on how to teach Business English more efficiently. In S.J. Savignon’s opinion (2001, p. 25), the perfect combination should take into consideration aspects such as the students’ year of study, their prior learning experience and last but not least, the timespan of the instructional process. To these, we could add the teacher’s familiarity with the online tools, the size of the teaching unit in terms of student number, the availability of devices/internet network, etc. As the same author admits, „Grammar is important, and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences” and this is the reason why it is highly recommended that exercises that focus on integrating grammar rules be mixed with other elements, such as „features of discourse, sociolinguistic rules of appropriateness, and communication strategies” (2001, p. 25).

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