

## Teaching Business English to Non Economics Majors

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### Abstract

*Teaching specialized English or ESP (English for Specialized Purposes) is a challenging endeavor for a teacher of English especially in the countries where English is neither the native language/ mother tongue/ first language nor the second language used and spoken in that society. This paper aims at showing such challenges and a suggested syllabus that might help the students who major in American Studies get acquainted with concepts, terms and phenomena which "rock the world". The former part of this study will consider the syllabus, the concepts, terms and issues concerned with the U.S. and world economy. The latter part will deal with the design of some research focused on preparing students of non economic background for a variety of work experiences; the research design envisages the following steps: teaching the course over an academic year through interactive lectures, administration of a questionnaire at the end of the semester after the students' completion of the course and data analysis.*

**Key words:** ESP, economics, syllabus, concepts, terms

**J.E.L. classification:** K00

### 1. Introduction

Lots of people are interested in what has "made America great", how its economy works, what challenges it has faced so far. In 1987, Robert B. Reich was talking about "America's two competitors", the U.S.A. being "engaged in two global contests", namely "a political rivalry with the Soviet Union and an economic rivalry with Japan", both involving high technology and finance. Nowadays, more and more media (see books, scientific articles, online news, TV shows, Facebook, Blog and Twitter posts), and specialists in economics argue about the consequences of trade wars on the economies of countries such as the U.S.A. and China (see Ka Zeng's book "Trade Threats, Trade Wars", 2004; Lawrence Lau, "The China-U.S. Trade War and Future Economic Relations", 2019).

Everybody enjoys telling or being told stories. Therefore, reading the history of U.S. economy could be an appealing approach for students. In his book, entitled "An Empire of Wealth. The Epic History of American Economic Power" (2004), John Steele Gordon suggests that "the story of the empire of wealth is an epic one, full of triumph and disaster, daring and timidity, new ideas, and old prejudices, great men and utter fools" (p. XVIII). This is how we can understand the progress made by "The New World" from a colonial economy to a small farming economy and later on to a complex industrial, high-technology (high-tech) economy.

"The American Story" is told from another perspective, in "Tales of a New America" (1987) by Robert B. Reich, the author of "The Next American Frontier" (1983). In the former book, the author tells "four morality tales", refers to "The Boomerang Principle", "The Ecology of the World Economy", and among others, the "Collective Entrepreneurialism", which "suggests that a business firm, if it is to remain consistently profitable, should have a portfolio of Big Ideas at different stages of their life cycle. The typical large firm does not generate Big Ideas internally, but buys start-ups that seem likely to yield high profits when their Big Ideas reach full-blown mass production" (p.118). Another "tale" is linked to a fable: "Give a man a fish and he will beg for another tomorrow. But teach him to fish and he will feed himself forever". Consequently, "the new fisherman joins and thus enriches the productive system. Once he learns to catch more fish than he

can eat himself, or tires of an all-seafood diet, he starts to trade with the gardener, the butcher [...]. He expands the network of mutually beneficial interdependencies. Our initial contribution to his education was thus not simply a donation meant to ease his dependency; it was also an investment in our own future prosperity" (p.192).

## 2. Theoretical background - Syllabus design: objectives and content

Teaching economics to students of noneconomic background poses several challenges. Therefore, one major aim of a syllabus for non economics majors could be: to help students understand, learn to define and eventually apply the various key concepts used in the study of U.S. economic system and to explain and use them in a coherent discourse; to identify the structure and features of the American economic system; to make them aware of the role played by the (historical, social, cultural, economic, etc.) context in understanding the American economic system in general and the business world in the U.S.A., in particular; to understand how the American economy works (small businesses and corporations, commodity exchanges and circuits, monetary and fiscal policy, foreign trade and global economic policies, labor force issues in the U.S., ethics and ideology issues; to compare the American economic system to the Romanian one; to make comparisons between the branches of the U.S. and Romanian economy; to formulate personal opinions and argue in a coherent way both in writing and orally.

The main objectives are connected to teaching and learning the structure of American economy; its historical evolution, the terminology specific to the U.S. economic system; to understanding its economic traditions; noticing the major differences between the U.S. and Romanian economic systems; highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the American economic system; understanding the economic aspects of U.S. higher education. Another major objective could be to provide students with the necessary vocabulary for explaining and discussing issues related to the U.S. economy, but at the same time for answering questions related to "the future of jobs and jobs training", AI (artificial intelligence) tools, online training, "the most important skills needed to succeed in the workforce of the future", jobs at risk, new "credentialing systems" (see Rainie and Anderson, 2017), the role of the teacher as prompter becoming essential.

In our opinion, every lecture should deal with concepts and terminology, based on solid knowledge of general English. For example, the first lecture could introduce concepts such as: *economy and economics, microeconomics and macroeconomics, types of economies, GDP*. The teacher could also ask the students to pay attention to the words which could express the ups (*to go up, to rise, to increase, to move up, to inch up, to surge*, i.e. a sudden powerful forward or upward movement, *to balloon, to soar*, i.e. to increase rapidly above the usual level, to skyrocket) and downs (*to go down, to fall, to drop, to decrease, to sag, to slump, to sink, to plummet, to collapse*) of an economy and even its recovery (*to recover, to look up, to turn up, to pick up, to improve*) (see Marcheteau *et al*, 2000, p.18). The same authors consider important the study of globalization in relation to business firms, trade, telecommunications, financial markets, the stock market, banking, accounting, marketing, transportation, advertising, insurance, legal issues.

Another source of inspiration for a teacher of English could be the volume "Outline of the U.S. Economy", "prepared for the U.S. Department of State by Christopher Conte, a former editor and reporter for the Wall Street Journal, with Albert R. Karr", also "a former reporter for the Wall Street Journal" (2001, p.1). The issues explained in the book concern "How the U.S. Economy Works", its history, "small business and corporation", stocks, markets, economic policies, trade. The book concludes in its afterword: "Labor, agriculture, small businesses, large corporations, financial markets, the Federal Reserve System, and government all interact in complex ways to make America's economic system work" (p.142).

## 3. Teaching methods and aids

Interactive activities in the ESP classroom are a key feature of modern teaching which enables students to have access to learning resources wherever they are (see, for example, Buzarna-Tihenea 2017; 2019). Audio aids help present knowledge differently and enable different forms of

interaction with learners. They can be used to enhance the potential of learning resources by showing real life situations and triggering discussions.

The ESP teacher can transform a great variety of visual aids into successful learning tools, making the foreign language class a more attractive, collaborative and inspiring one. The progress of technology has brought a series of new audio and visual materials such as videos, podcasts, audio software which can make the learning more fun and appealing to the students. One of the new listening techniques combines audio aids with visual ones - pictures. Thus, the teaching-learning-assessment process can be performed by choosing pictures, which are physical or electronic illustrations from magazines, newspapers or other (online) sources. In our case, they can be mostly photographs, drawings, collages, maps, charts, grids or other illustrations, accompanied or not by printed texts. These colorful and varied materials are collected by teachers or students. Teachers usually select pictures for describing and explaining economic phenomena, for discussing economic issues, at the same time enhancing students' vocabulary and communication skills. In the EFL classroom, the students should also have the opportunity to listen to conversations, negotiations, interviews, short functional texts, even monologues in English. The subsidiary aim of such activities is to make them get used to the English words, phrases, sentences, asking and answering questions. In this way, students can understand the economic concepts and terms beyond the linguistic aspects, helping them to apply their listening skills in real world communication contexts.

The internet is the richest source of authentic material with plenty of materials in video, audio or written format. An audio/video recorded interview is by definition a formal meeting in person, for the assessment of the qualifications of an applicant or conducted by a reporter to elicit facts or statements from another party. Videos offer some advantages for enhancing listening skills, as well. Whenever the teacher decides to use audio and visual aids, s/he has to make students understand that they are also given instructions and that they are supposed to provide feedback or perform a particular task.

Visuals can illustrate presentations, describe microeconomic and macroeconomic processes, tell/explain why an economy works in a certain way, tell what they would do if a certain situation occurred or if they lived in the U.S.A., share their experience about the topic, prompt students' creativity, support them for guessing names, definitions, explanations. Visual narratives contribute to the development of abstractization skills and multisensory learning. Eliciting the analysis and interpretation of visuals means to make sense of the storyline told by the juxtaposed pictures; such aids can be used in multiple ways: they contribute strongly to content verbalization and to the expansion of the students' learning horizon, by developing their abilities to connect images and words. Visual narratives are complex in terms of "the nature of relations between images in a sequence, the range of possibilities for point of view in a visual narrative and the visual resources for emotional engagement with the reader in such texts" (Painter et al., 2014). Learners can be asked to verbalize what they see and the sequence of events.

Another advantage of visual narratives is that, besides boosting the students' linguistic knowledge and speeding the pace of the learning process, they can also be used in order to develop thinking skills. During the learning process, students can be required to solve various tasks involving meaning extraction, problem solving, data assessment and interpretation, decision making, establishment of different connections and relationship patterns, outcome prediction. Moreover, the teacher can also develop their critical thinking by involving them into activities focused on grounding or discarding various hypotheses, examining and questioning the content, etc. Animations can be used for teenagers and adult learners. For teenagers, animations can be used to teach a moral point, empathy, or help develop positive character and personality traits in addition to teaching economics and language. Social and thinking skills can be enhanced with the help of the right animation.

As a multi-sensory technique, animations involve seeing, hearing, talking and, perhaps, even touching, which is an extremely effective manner of improving learning that creates several neural pathways for retrieving the same information. It is engaging, interactive and interesting. At the same time, a limited number of minutes can convey a lot of information and have an incredible impact on the social dynamics of the classroom as well, in building groups with shared experience. Also, the use of a favorite character or a pleasant and interesting animation may tear down barriers

made up of fear of expressing one's opinions, while creating a more open, safe, and light-hearted learning environment. In this environment, learners feel more encouraged to come up with new ideas, learn communicative strategies, discuss or debate issues with their peers in a respectful and constructive manner.

Teachers can also use online videos, films and clips or they can produce their own videos or recorded materials in order to boost the students' attention and to make their courses and seminars more relevant and engaging. According to Scrivener (2011), before choosing the videos that they want to use during their lessons, courses or seminars, teachers should consider certain important elements, such as images, characters interacting with each other, sounds (e.g. track the characters' voices, tonality/ pitch), body language cues, mimicry, etc. Videos can be used as "warm up" tools, or to introduce a vast array of activities aimed at developing listening, writing, communication skills (e.g. debates, discussions, asking and answering questions, essay or project writing). A longer video can be split into sections and used intermittently or throughout several lessons, integrated with traditional learning activities.

#### **4. Research methodology and expected results**

Using both audio and visual aids in teaching ESP has benefits as they provide diverse teaching techniques for learning, simplify and explain complex problems, give students access to the learning materials, and make them reflect on the topics for discussion. They also allow students to learn at their own pace and can be reused.

##### **Problem Statement**

Our approach involves working with a group of students willing to take an elective course in U.S. economy (an introductory course). The bottom line is that by using appealing texts tailored on their needs and interests along with audio and visual materials their knowledge of economics in English along with their listening and speaking skills will improve. The truth is that students show great interest in learning English with media tools such as computer and Internet and enjoy the English classes based on modern/alternative teaching and learning techniques.

##### **Research Question**

Can students of non economic background be prepared for a variety of work experiences by teachers of English?

In order to answer this question, we are going to rely on an English teacher's twenty-year experience in teaching English for economics, who has been attending several courses in English teaching methodology, dozens of webinars, and meetings with economists from various countries. The approach will be based on the use of modern teaching techniques in the classroom, on stressing the idea of understanding the occurrence of certain economic phenomena and events especially in our current, globalized world in connection with social and political factors, the need for information to socially act and pursue a career by getting in touch with the American culture and experience.

The study will consist of designing a course syllabus, preparation of interactive lectures, teaching the course over an academic year, a questionnaire after the course completion, data analysis.

The main research methods employed in this study will be the observation and the questionnaire, the latter being aimed at assessing the students' reactions and attitudes towards the modern teaching techniques, materials and content used in order to teach them English for economics and to prepare them for an array of work experiences. Moreover, the students' answers will help the teacher improve the teaching strategies, tools and content, so as to make this course more appealing to the future generation of students. The questionnaire will include both close- and open-ended questions, focused on assessing course materials, workload, assignments, tests/examination and grading; student engagement, involvement, interest, expectations, attendance and learning experience; course structure and learning outcomes; general rating (of the course and the instructor); the students' further recommendations, comments, opinions.

It should also be noted that "a student-centered approach, with modern teacher roles, provides many advantages, such as adequate and increased exposure to language, to interesting material, in a relaxed and tension-free learning environment" (Buzarna-Tihenea, 2019, p. 237). Therefore, in

terms of expected results, we believe that the employment of modern teaching approaches and techniques and the use of digital media tools, such as videos and recordings, will greatly contribute to the achievement of the main course objectives. Furthermore, the students will acquire or improve their knowledge of the structure of American economy, of the terminology specific to the U.S. economic system. They will understand better the U.S. economic traditions and the economic aspects of U.S. higher education; they will be able to identify the main differences between the U.S. and Romanian economic systems and highlight their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, students will develop their vocabulary and will be able to explain and discuss issues related to the U.S. economy.

## 5. Conclusions

The challenging endeavor of teaching specialized English or ESP (English for Specialized Purposes) in countries where English is neither the native language nor the second language used and spoken can be overcome by the application of modern teaching approaches, strategies and techniques and the use of interactive and attractive teaching tools, in order to raise the students' interest and to meet their learning needs. Moreover, the ESP teacher should also design a syllabus that might help students get acquainted with and expand their knowledge of various concepts, terms and phenomena which "rock the world".

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