

MANAGING WORDS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Abstract: *The paper wants to draw attention on the importance the vocabulary plays in a language. Defining and explain some terms with the help of certain specialists, providing a good theoretical background, the paper aims at incorporating the experiment carried out during an academic semester into the rich world of teaching/learning Business English, especially business vocabulary.*
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1. Introduction

Vocabulary is defined as ‘the aggregate of words in the use or comprehension of a specified person, class, profession, etc’. (*Collins English Dictionary*) But what is ‘comprehension’? Full knowledge and understanding of the meaning of something, for example, a word. What does ‘knowledge of a word’ mean? Being able to recognize one? Managing, i.e. using one? Sometimes, when people, even some specialists, talk about knowing a word, they mean knowing its definition. But knowing a definition is not the same thing as being able to manage that word, to use it in speech and writing or to understand the text in which that word appears. Perhaps the long answer is that when students really know a word, they know not only the definition of the word, but they also know how that word functions in different contexts. As Juel and Deffes (2004) put it, knowledge of a word includes knowing how it sounds, how it is written, how it is used as a part of speech, and its multiple meanings. Or as Stahl (2005, p. 55) said, ‘vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also

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implies how that word fits into the world'. Moreover, from Dale and O'Rourke (1986) we have a model of four levels of word knowledge, each level being characterized by a statement: 1. I never saw it before 2. I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means 3. I recognize it in context and I can tell you what it is related to 4. I know it well.

Is *knowing* general vocabulary different from *knowing* business vocabulary? We consider that in order to fully learn a word and its connotations, a student needs multiple exposures to the word in different reading contexts. No matter if a word is part of the general or business vocabulary, 'word meanings are not just unrelated bits of information, as Stahl contended, but are part of larger knowledge structures'. (Stahl, 1999).

Now it is time we made a brief but worthwhile digression: we will define some terms and make a distinction between general vocabulary and English Language Teaching (ELT) and business vocabulary and English for Specific Purposes.

General vocabulary is made up of all the words of a language, the lexis. Barcroft, Sunderman and Schmitt (2011, p. 571) inform us that lexis 'refers to all the words in a language, the entire vocabulary of a language'. Specialists contend that vocabulary also includes lexical chunks, phrases of two or more words, such as *Good afternoon* and *Here you are*, which are essential for everyone who tries learning a language, be it a native or a second language. In fact, it takes a great deal of practice after acquiring words and lexical chunks (and some grammar, we agree) to achieve fluency in a language so teachers should be teaching students how they can manage words and use language effectively to achieve their aims.

English Language Teaching is the teaching of English to people whose native or first language is not English. Although it has not always been the case, teaching vocabulary is seen nowadays as the most important task. Vocabulary learning involves the learning of new concepts or new labels for already known concepts. It is very important to keep in mind that both general lexis and specialized lexis are better acquired if taught in contexts, according to the needs of mastering a particular subject. Content areas are distinguishable by the terminology and language they use, particularly the labels they use to identify important concepts. Most word learning takes place in content area study or thematic units.

Business vocabulary is what specialists name 'focal vocabulary', because it is a specialized set of terms that is particularly important to a

certain group, in this case, to those with a particular focus of experience or activity in business.

Business vocabulary is part of Business English, which is the type of English used in business contexts, such as international trade, commerce, management, finance, insurance, banking, and so on. It involves expectations of clarity, particular vocabulary. Business English is part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

ESP is a term that refers to teaching or learning English for a particular career. Dudley-Evans (1997) defines ESP in terms of absolute characteristics (ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners; it makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; it is centred on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre) and variable characteristics (ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines; it may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English; it is likely to be designed for adult learners; it is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students; most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems), which helps understanding ESP better.

Business English involves a specific language corpus and emphasis on specific types of communication in a specific context, while using a mix of specific content and general content (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). Business English students need to concentrate on vocabulary and phrases used within the business world. Moreover, they should be familiar with understanding and writing business letters/emails, memos, invitations, proposals and reports, and, also, they should be good at preparing and delivering presentations within the business contexts.

2. An experiment

2.1. Purpose

The purpose of this experiment was to receive feedback on my work: teaching Business English, especially, teaching Business vocabulary. We wanted to know how many students of the 25 students chosen from those enrolled on the Business English course 'know' Business words/phrases at the beginning and at the end of the course and after a period of six months. The course lasted one academic semester, i.e. 14 weeks. We introduced

specialized vocabulary by using it in context, that is by reading a text, by listening to a conversation or by involving students in a conversation, because, as Thornbury (2002, p. 53) says, it seems that ‘for vocabulary building purposes, texts – whether spoken or written – have enormous advantages. [...] The fact that words are in context increases the chances of learners appreciating not only their meaning but their typical environments, such as their associated collocations or grammatical structures’. We have to specify that most of the materials used during the Business English course are directly related to the students’ main subject or future profession thus integrating ‘the learning of language with the learning of some other content, often academic subject matter’. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p.137) We used several methods (sometimes one or two of them, sometimes all of them) in order to clarify the meaning(s) of a new word/phrase which would be met or was met in the context provided: providing another example situation, giving one or two example sentences, giving synonyms and/or antonyms, giving a full definition, giving the corresponding translation of the word into the students’ native language. To optimize vocabulary learning a variety of vocabulary exercises was provided especially after the reading of the text or the listening.

2.2. Participants

The subjects of this study were selected from the subject pool of 100 students from the first year of study of the same major Management. We chose 25 students with ages ranged from 26 to 42, because they met the criteria considered for the purpose of this study: it was their first exposure to learning Business English vocabulary and their English level was similar: they were low-intermediate.

Before and during the whole period of the course and six months after the course ended, none of the students knew they were under experiment.

2.3. Aids

A Business English coursebook, authentic materials (newspaper and magazine articles, videotape recorded news, TED talks, advertisements, songs and movies fragments, official documents, www information), test papers and MP3 audio materials were used during the course. All of the materials were on business topics.

We also took Dale and O'Rourke's (1986) model of four levels of word knowledge and asked the students to tick the statement they mostly agree with after reading 30 sentences containing 25 business words/phrases. This questionnaire was given to the students before and at the end of the English course and six months after the course ended.

2.4. Procedure and summary of data analysis

Before the course started, the students took a placement test so that only the low-intermediate ones were chosen for this experiment. After that, the 25 chosen students were asked to do a questionnaire: to tick the statement they mostly agree with after reading sentences with 25 business words/phrases. This time the test told us how they appreciate their knowledge of business vocabulary.

In order not to take up a lot of space with all the data analysis, we will briefly summarise them:

Statement 1. I never saw it before.

- 6 words/phrases got 60%; 3 words/phrases got 56%; 8 words/phrases got 32%; 8 words/phrases got 40%.

Statement 2. I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means.

- 5 words/phrases got 14%; 3 words/phrases got 13%; 11 words/phrases got 11%; 2 words/phrases got 40%; 4 words/phrases got 32%.

Statement 3. I recognize it in context and I can tell you what it is related to.

- 9 words/phrases got 32%; 11 words/phrases got 4%.

Statement 4. I know it well.

- 3 words/phrases got 4%

During the course, specialized vocabulary in context was introduced with the help of a Business English course book and authentic materials. Several methods were used to clarify the meaning of the new words/phrases: example situations, example sentences, synonyms and/or antonyms, a full definition, the translation of the word into Romanian, i.e. students' mother tongue. A variety of vocabulary exercises was provided before, during and after the reading of the text or the listening. All the 25 business words/phrases that accompanied the questionnaire given to the students before the course were taught during the English classes so that, at the end of the course, all the students were, theoretically, managing them efficiently. Several tests were administered during the course and at its end. Given throughout the learning process, formative assessments seek to determine how students are progressing through a certain learning goal. Given at the

end of the year or unit, summative assessments assess a student's mastery of a topic after instruction.

At the end of the course, the 25 students had to tick again the statement they mostly agree with after reading the sentences containing the 25 business words/phrases they learnt during the English classes.

Below you can read the percentage of students 'knowing' a part of the business vocabulary, according to their answers for each and every of the 25 business words/phrases.

Statement 1. I never saw it before.

- 2 words/phrases got 4%.

Statement 2. I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means.

- 5 words/phrases got 8%; 4 words/phrases got 4%.

Statement 3. I recognize it in context and I can tell you what it is related to.

-11 words/phrases got 60%; 10 words/phrases got 52%; 1 word/phrase got 48%; 1 word/phrase got 28%; 1 word/phrase got 12%, 1 word/phrase got 8%.

Statement 4. I know it well.

- 9 words/phrases got 72%; 5 words/phrases got 52%; 6 words/phrases got 16%; 2 words/phrases got 12%, 2 words/phrases got 8%, 1 word/phrase got 4%.

We appreciate the results as being very good as the students thought that they can recognize more than half of the words, that is 21 words/phrases out of 25 in context and they can tell us what they are related to, while 14 words/phrases got more than half for the statement 'I know the word well'.

Six months after the course ended, we asked, again, the 25 students to do the questionnaire based on Dale and O'Rourke's (1986) model of four levels of word knowledge, ticking the statement they mostly agree with after reading the 25 business words/phrases. During the six months that followed the course, the students attended neither a Business English course, nor a General English course – in their academic curriculum Business English was elective once they passed the first year English course. The results are:

Statement 1. I never saw it before.

- 3 words/phrases got 8%, 2 words/phrases got 4%.

Statement 2. I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means.

- 6 words/phrases got 52%; 4 words/phrases got 36%, 6 words/phrases got 12%.

Statement 3. I recognize it in context and I can tell you what it is related to.

-9 words/phrases got 72%; 12 words/phrases got 52%; 8 words/phrases got 36%; 2 words/phrases got 24%; 1 word/phrase got 16%, 1 word/phrase got 8%.

Statement 4. I know it well.

- 8 words/phrases got 72%; 4 words/phrases got 44%; 7 words/phrases got 16%; 3 words/phrases got 12%, 2 words/phrases got 8%, 1 word/phrase got 4%.

We can notice a decrease in the number of business words/phrases that the students 'knew'. As they did not have any English course – neither Business nor General English – during the six months that passed from the last class to the filling-in of the questionnaire, we consider that this drop in the number of the words/phrases known is normal. Only 8 words/phrases were known well and 21 words/phrases were recognized in context.

3. Conclusions

As one would expect, before the Business English course, only few students knew only a few business words/phrases as both the placement test and the questionnaire showed. Because we know that the mastery of vocabulary is essential in order to manage words in a business environment, we used the explicit vocabulary instruction due to the fact that it is more effective in vocabulary acquisition than incidental learning since many specialists, Schmitt (2008) among them conclude that this way of teaching vocabulary results in greater and faster gains and better retention. Once again, this proved to be true. At the end of the course, both the questionnaire and the summative test had satisfactory results. Only 2 words/phrases got 4% at the statement 'I never saw the word before', while 35 words/phrases got more than half for the statements 'I recognize the word in context and I can tell you what it is related to' and 'I know the word well'. Six months after the course ended, only 29 words/phrases were known well and were recognized in context. Maybe, one of the conclusions that should be drawn is that, in order to use words effectively in business contexts, students should learn Business English for a longer period of time – more than one semester. The nowadays students are the prospective business people who should be able not only to understand English, but also to use fluently.

Enriching vocabulary should be regarded as one of the winning strategies in maintaining high competence and efficiency not only as a business communicator but at the organizational level, too. Developed

vocabulary skills are of a great advantage to the business people. As the manager of an international corporation, a leader should convey their message in an effective and efficient way on the basis of their rich vocabulary, so that they can guide successfully their employees towards the accomplishment of the organization's goals and objectives.

Since vocabulary plays an important role in communicating in general, and business vocabulary plays a crucial role in communicating in business situations or business-like ones, teachers should focus on teaching it especially through direct vocabulary instruction as it improves comprehension and, as we could show, helps learners acquire it in an efficient way. Hence, another conclusion: let learners assess themselves, help them be aware of what they know and how well they know it. The data analysis of our small experiment support the findings in the literature: knowing a word is something complex in that it involves not only the ability to recognize its form, or to provide its definition, but it also includes the knowledge of using it correctly, of managing it appropriately in a certain context.

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