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List of high frequency business English terms: A didactic perspective on its practical applications

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Abstract. Global business environment requires a new approach to needs analysis in Business English courses for adult learners. With increasing demand for excellent business communicators from multinational corporations, language teachers and course-book writers are expected to offer more effective teaching materials. We can no longer rely on intuition; we need to identify business terms that are used with the highest frequency in authentic business communication. The aim of the paper is to present research into business terminology carried out for teaching purposes in tertiary education courses. A corpus-based study into word frequencies in authentic business texts was conducted and by means of a quantitative analysis it was possible to measure the frequencies of business terms excerpted from the corpus. These terms if presented in the form of a frequency list can be used by course-book authors and language teachers. First, the paper discusses the importance of terminology in English for Specific Purposes courses, next it demonstrates why corpus studies are of fundamental importance in materials development, and finally it presents the results of a study into business terms frequencies and recommends practical applications of its results. To further increase the effectiveness of teaching materials other elements of the language of business (the highest-frequency business lexis items, collocations, multi-word phrases, etc.) need to be identified as well.

Keywords. Business English, corpus studies, tertiary education, word list.

1. Introduction

Today, more than ever before, teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to adult learners is a complex and demanding task. Students require fast, intensive and effective courses that will help them acquire good language competence needed for professional communication. In the case of business English the strain is huge since business students who are in their tertiary education know how heavily their future employability depends on their language and communication skills.

In the teaching/learning process the effectiveness results from three basic factors: the teacher, the learner and the teaching materials that are included in a syllabus. On the teacher's side we have qualifications, methodology, involvement and motivation, while on the student's side there are: intelligence, hard work, motivation, abilities and involvement. These are human factors and usually they cannot be changed easily and quickly. The third component in the teaching/learning process, i.e. teaching materials, gives the didactic input to students. For this input to be highly effective we need materials that teach the language that is most frequently used in typical real-life business situations.

The issue of high didactic value of input materials is very important because ESP courses in the future can be more effective than they are now if teaching materials are prepared based on a corpus instrument that will be presented in this paper. This instrument is quantitative, unbiased and can identify the kind of language that professionals use in business communication. It allows for a completely new approach to materials design. It helps create teaching materials that are based not on experience and intuition of course-book writers and not on a random selection of input in didactic texts but on the hard evidence of corpus studies.

The history of teaching ESP goes back to the 1960s. ESP courses appeared because there was

a need for learning a foreign language for professional purposes. The importance of learners' needs has always been central to all ESP courses. Now ESP is used as an umbrella term including many wide branches such as English for technology, science, business, medicine, management, law, tourism, finance and others to English for vocational purposes with its narrow branches like e.g. English for secretaries or English for nurses.

'Learners' needs' is a broad term and includes two basic types of needs: immediate needs and future needs. In order to identify learners' future needs, it is necessary to analyze typical target situations in which the learners will find themselves in the future. They will have to communicate with other professionals in areas that are specific and that need to be analyzed by means of quantitative research methods used in corpus studies. They will also have to communicate about business matters with laymen, they will need to socialize, telephone, and network.

Today we still witness that demand for English for Specific Purposes continues to increase and expand throughout the world. Mobility of the global workforce increases. Emerging economies demand good language skills – English functions as Lingua Franca (ELF) in all types of professional communication. Multinational organizations recruit employees who have excellent linguistic competence coupled with nonlinguistic competences and skills – called 'global communicative competence'. To sum up, language skills and Communication for Specific Purposes (CSP) are essential for professionals of today and tomorrow.

That is why language teachers face new challenges and have to respond to changing learners' needs. They have to learn many new things including non-linguistic skills and fundamentals of subject matter (content knowledge in business, economics, management and finance). They also have to learn how to make use of corpus tools to evaluate teaching materials. They need to know what language elements to prioritize in the course. As Swan says, it is now becoming increasingly necessary to revise what we are teaching (2005).

2. Didactic relevance of teaching materials

The didactic relevance of teaching materials is crucial in the process of effective language learning/teaching. Materials that are didactically highly relevant can help acquire good language competence in a shorter period of time than those that are not. What makes teaching materials relevant? It is the selection and concentration of those language elements which are most frequently used in authentic professional business communication. Proper selection and concentration of input materials are likely to make the teaching/learning process faster and more effective. Students who will be exposed to such materials are likely to increase their intake and benefit the courses more.

Therefore it can be expected that the high didactic relevance of teaching materials will translate into better intake. Students will be able to concentrate on the language elements that will be most useful for them in the future. Knowing that they are learning the most useful language will probably give them an incentive to learn more intensively. It is likely to increase students' motivation and satisfaction with the course.

In ESP courses the role of professional terminology is paramount. It is specialist terminology which, more than any other language element, makes the language specific, professional or technical. Grammar and functional language are the same in ESP and in general English. Business specific terms make the language of business different from other varieties of English. Terms carry on specific meaning, they are clearly defined and they create grounds for common understanding of specialized knowledge among professionals.

Teaching/learning specialized terminology has always been a priority in ESP courses. However, in an attempt to increase the didactic relevance of teaching materials, it is necessary to know exactly which business terms will be most useful for students in the future. Here the answer is simple: students need to learn the most frequent specialized terms early in a course. They need to be exposed to relevant teaching materials prioritizing the most frequent business

terms. Business terms, however, have to be coupled with high-frequency business lexis items, common collocations, multi-word phrases, standard business metaphors, acronyms, symbols and abbreviations. Teaching materials that are rich in the most common language elements will have a higher didactic relevance than those in which the selection of texts seems to be made, to a great extent, at random.

3. A corpus study into high frequency business terms conducted for teaching purposes

According to the definition given in *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* “a corpus is a collection of materials that has been made for a particular purpose, such as a set of textbooks which are being analyzed and compared or a sample of sentences or utterances which are being analyzed for their linguistic features” (Richards and Schmidt 1996: 88).

One of the major considerations in developing teaching materials for effective ESP courses is to prioritize high frequency language elements. In an attempt to identify the most frequent business specific terms a well-balanced authentic business corpus consisting of more than 200,000 running words was examined by hand. A ‘term’ was defined as a word whose occurrence is limited to a particular field or domain and which has a specialized meaning (Richards and Schmidt 2002).

Corpus studies for teaching purposes usually follow at least five basic stages:

1. selection of texts and a balanced composition of a business corpus,
2. excerpting of all business lexis items from the corpus and lemmatizing them,
3. identification of business terms,
4. establishing the criterion or criteria for inclusion,
5. organization of the selected high-frequency terms into a frequency list.

In this study business terms were first excerpted from the corpus of business texts and lemmatized. Then the occurrence of each business term (so called ‘type’) that had been identified in the corpus texts was counted. This way it was possible to determine how many times a given term was used (so called ‘tokens’) in the corpus. The terms (‘types’) that occurred at least five times in the corpus texts were selected. As a result of this procedure it was possible to make a list of the highest frequency business terms. It included slightly more than 1000 terms most frequently used in the corpus texts.

The high frequency list was organized according to the criterion of frequency in a descending order. It was also organized semantically depending on which area of business a given term referred to. These areas included economics, management, human resources, production, marketing, advertising and promotion, distribution, transport and logistics, trade and services to trade, and business law. There was also a group of terms collectively called ‘general business terms’ since they referred semantically to more than one area of business.

The most frequent terms on the list included for example company, business, customer, work, product, staff, market, money, and manager. This finding is most probably in line with the intuition and experience of most business English teachers. However, going down the list to lower frequency terms, it is clearly evident that the quantitative results could be much more informative, objective and discriminative than reliance solely on experience and intuition of language teachers. The same holds true for course-books writers who do not use of the results of corpus studies to find information about word frequencies. With lower frequency terms on the list the evidence of corpus studies is not always in line with what we expect and often reveals surprising facts about language use.

The high frequency list of business terms can have diverse practical applications. Teachers can use this list to produce or to choose more relevant supplementary materials for their students.

VII. Corpus-studies for LSP practice and research

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They can also use it as a benchmark when designing tests and exams. Knowledge and proper use of specialized terminology is one of the core elements which is tested in tertiary education courses of ESP.

The high frequency business terminology list can also be used as a stand-alone teaching material for students. Thornbury says that core word lists help students to memorize core vocabulary items; students know that the words contained in the list are most important and need to be remembered. "Some researchers estimate that up to thirty words an hour can be learned this way" (Thornbury 2002: 33). "Research (...) suggests that vocabulary gains may be quite impressive (up to 2500 new words per year) if the learner (...) adapts a more specialized focus, for example, on academic vocabulary (Coxhead 2000), where up to a 10% leap in comprehension can be gained simply by learning small, carefully chosen academic word lists consisting of fewer than 1,000 common core words" (O'Keefy, McCarthy, Carter 2007: 50).

Additionally, the highest frequency list can be used by the learner to monitor the progress made during the course. Such a self-evaluation instrument increases learner's autonomy and contributes to their greater involvement and motivation. It can, on the one hand, greatly enhance a sense of achievement and, on the other, be a stimulus to harder work.

Not all authors, however, are optimistic about using highest frequency lists. Looking at the problem of specialist vocabulary acquisition it cannot be expected that teachers introduce new language elements and have students use them instantly in communicative activities (Harmer 2003, Burgess & Head 2005). Such a claim would be unrealistic. According to Harmer, "where speaking is concerned, we should remember that language which students have only just met for the first time is often not available for instant use in spontaneous conversation; more exposure and practice is usually necessary before people can use new language fluently" (2003: 252).

McGrath is of the opinion that "vocabulary learning is not just about learning more words; it is also concerned with knowing more about the words you already know (e.g. how they relate to other words with a similar meaning" (2002: 101). This aspect of vocabulary teaching and learning is strongly correlated with productive language skills. Knowing how specialized terms function in ESP (e.g. how they collocate) helps to eliminate mistakes in productive language use. A study into concordances can be recommended as useful to both learners and teachers. Knowing the degree of language formality in which a given term can be used is also important in productive language use.

It takes time, effort and practice to master the key terms and business lexis items and be able to use them fluently and appropriately in professional communication. Therefore high concentration of the highest frequency terms needs to be combined with adequate language input given by the teacher. Much of what students learn in the course comes from teacher's language. Teacher's input is often easier to intake by learners. It is more condensed and students are exposed to it frequently. From this viewpoint, teachers who incorporate the highest frequency business terms into their repertoire and use them frequently in class will be in a position to enhance the terminology input they give to their students.

Tomlinson is of the opinion that "in order to acquire the ability to use the language effectively the learners need a lot of experience of the language being used in a variety of different ways for a variety of purposes. They need to be able to understand enough of this input to gain positive access to it and it needs to be meaningful to them" (2010: 87) Increased business terminology input is likely to make teaching materials more meaningful for ESP students.

To sum up, core business vocabulary lists, containing from 400 to 1000 terms can be a useful instrument in specialized vocabulary acquisition. Lessard-Clouston gives a recent (2000–2013) literature review of word lists used for vocabulary learning and teaching and concludes saying that "word lists can guide both English teacher and student attention and efforts for both comprehension and production of English vocabulary". He also adds that "it seems high time to (re)consider what lists are available and creative ways to use them both in and out of

ESL/EFL classes” (2013: 299). The two examples of Business Word Lists he gives include that by Konstantakis (2007, www.publius.us.es/en/node/177) including 560 words and that by Hsu (2011, www.asian-esp-journal.com/Dec-2011-wh.php) including 426 word families.

4. The need for further corpus studies

Identifying business terms from the corpus by hand was a time-consuming task, but a rewarding one since it gave an opportunity to reveal many interesting facts about how English is used in business texts. The aim of the corpus study was only to excerpt business terminology. However, when examining the texts by hand it was also possible to analyze:

- how business terms and business lexis items were used,
- how they collocated,
- in which phrases they appeared,
- in which form they appeared: full, abbreviated or as acronyms,
- how concentrated they were in a particular text,
- what their repetition rate was.

Additionally, it was possible to compare the concentration of business terminology in different corpus texts.

This method of corpus study can give a much deeper insight into language use. Research of the corpus by hand provides a unique opportunity for a qualitative assessment of all typical elements of business English and shows that further qualitative and quantitative corpus studies are needed into other important language elements, such as business lexis items, popular business collocations, multi-word phrases, standard business metaphors, language formulae, word sequences typical for written and spoken business communication, abbreviations, symbols and acronyms.

These elements have to be identified by means of corpus studies. Then the elements with the highest frequencies have to be incorporated into the learning/teaching practice. Similarly to the highest frequency business terms, they should also be prioritized by course-book writers and teachers. If a given language element appears only once in a text, the exposure is not intensive enough for the learner to memorize it. If the exposure to all most characteristic elements of language is high, learners will learn how to use them correctly and in what contexts.

There is a need for more corpus studies carried out for teaching purposes that would reveal a true picture of how language is used in typical business situations. The results of corpus studies can have many practical applications. For example, Coxhead’s Academic Word List (2000) of about 1000 most frequent words has had many practical applications and proved to be a useful tool for authors of course-books teaching academic writing (e.g. McCarthy & O’Dell 2008) as well as for dictionary writers and dictionary users (e.g. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners 2009).

There is also a need for periodic adjustments made to high frequency lists. Business English terminology changes over time – now, in the era of globalization and information and communication technology (ICT), probably faster than ever before. Therefore lists of core business English terms should be up-dated regularly. It is in the recent decades that the words like ‘advertorial’, ‘ageism’, ‘apps’, ‘business angel’, ‘cafeteria plan’, ‘cold calling’, ‘deshopper’, ‘e-tailing’, ‘desk banking’, ‘hot desking’, ‘hybrid car’, ‘financial/fiscal cliff’, ‘financial supermarket’, ‘flagstore’, ‘flexitime’, ‘knowledge economy’, ‘mystery shopper’, ‘subprime mortgage’, ‘teleworking’, ‘tax haven’ and ‘toxic assets’ have appeared.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Nowadays teaching ESP has become more complex because of more complex students' needs. It is more challenging and demanding for teachers who have to learn how to teach more effectively. The shortest and quickest way to reach this goal is to evaluate the didactic value of teaching materials and to produce/choose those that offer the best quality of didactic input.

The most accurate and reliable way to improve the didactic relevance of teaching materials is by means of corpus studies into authentic language use. Evaluation carried out in a quantitative way provides evidence of what to prioritize in a course. It seems reasonable to assume that if course-book writers used this quantitative research instrument, language teachers would no longer feel that they need to prepare additional materials for their students. Most likely they would forget about supplementation of course-books.

If ESP practitioners want to address learners' needs in a more effective way, they have to revise all the determinants of the teaching/learning process. First of all, emphasis should be put on the didactic qualities of teaching materials. In order to channel learners' efforts and to make the courses more effective, ESP practitioners, both teachers and course-book writers, are recommended to make extensive use of the corpus instrument presented in the paper. Corpus evidence of language use is invaluable in making the right choices regarding teaching materials. The use of high frequency terms in a course-book guarantees that - using Coxhead's words (2000) - 'high incidence and high-utility' words will be prioritized.

To further increase the effectiveness of teaching materials other elements of the language of business (the highest-frequency business lexis items, popular collocations, compounds, multi-word phrases, standard business metaphors, abbreviations, etc.) need to be identified in corpus studies as well. It can be hoped that greater selectiveness in designing teaching materials, reliance on the results of corpus studies and quantitative analysis of the language input given in course-book texts can be beneficial for students.

In conclusion, course-book writers should produce texts that are didactically more relevant and student friendly. Teaching materials should always meet the learners' needs in terms of both quality and quantity. Using a course-book containing many key business terms and having intensive exposure to these terms helps to make the course more effective. The quality of business terms (measured in terms of their usefulness in business communication, i.e. prioritizing key, high frequency terms in didactic texts) needs to be coupled with sufficient quantity (i.e. exposure) that allows for memorization of each term.

Additionally, more and more students understand the importance of business and managerial skills, the role of intercultural skills and professional business writing. Teachers have to address these needs as well. As a result of changing learners' needs the teaching process is more complex now than it used to be ten or twenty years ago. Teachers are expected to teach more than just the language of business. In short business English courses it is difficult or impossible to provide students with all these sociolinguistic, pragmatic and intercultural skills.

With the increased challenges facing business English teachers, it is crucial that they can rely on high quality course-books containing a very strong didactic input. This way ESP teachers can be relieved of the burden of supplementing course-books and adapting teaching materials. Their time will be used more productively and effectively when they can concentrate on designing tasks and class activities rather than on supplementation and adaptation of teaching materials.

From the point of view of tertiary students, strong specialized ESP terminology input is likely to result in greater intake and better memorization of the core terms which they will need most when communicating with other professionals in typical business situations in the future.

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