

SPECIFIC PURPOSE LANGUAGE ABILITY PARTICULARIZATION ON BUSINESS ENGLISH

Camelia ALIBEC¹

Anca SIRBU²

¹Senior lecturer PhD, Department of Naval and Port Engineering and Management, “Mircea cel Batran” Naval Academy, 1 Fulgerului Street, Constanta, e-mail: [cami_alibec@yahoo.com](mailto:cam_i_alibec@yahoo.com)

²Senior lecturer, PhD, Department of Fundamental Sciences and Humanities, Constanta Maritime University, 104 Mircea cel Batran Street, Constanta, e-mail: ancasirbu@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Specific purpose language ability is quite a complex concept which takes into consideration the relationship between language ability in general and specific background knowledge. This constitutes a very important issue as language is learned in communicative contexts and in turn, those contexts should affect the nature of the language acquired. The interaction between language knowledge and specific purpose content knowledge blended with the authenticity of task are the clearest defining features in testing LSP (language for specific purpose). In general purpose language testing, the factor of background knowledge is usually seen as a variable, while in LSP testing the background knowledge is a necessity and an important part of the concept of specific purpose language ability. Business English is part of ESP (English for specific purpose); therefore it also requires specific language ability and a little bit of knowledge in the respective domain. Specific purpose background knowledge related to academic or professional contexts and the ability to perform in a specific purpose language are important parts in LSP testing.*

Key words: LSP, ESP, language ability, background knowledge.

To know a language means to have the communicative competence and the communicative language ability and it also means to be able to produce communicative assertions and written sentences in the respective language. One needs the same competences when speaking about Language for specific purpose (LSP). A specific purpose course is in many ways very much alike with the general purpose teaching course and they have almost the same specifications, meet the objectives of different stages of achievement, however what distinguishes them “*is the way in which purpose is defined, and the manner of its implementation*” (Widdowson, 1983).

Dan Douglas, in his book *Assessing Languages for Specific Purposes*, presents an interesting framework for communicative language ability which consists of the following components: grammatical knowledge (vocabulary, morphology, syntax), textual knowledge (how to structure and organize language), functional knowledge (ideational, manipulative, imaginative functions of language), and sociolinguistic knowledge (dialects, registers, cultural references) (Douglas, 2000). Besides language knowledge, the communicative ability also needs a strategic competence which comprises the “processes of assessment, goal setting, planning, and control of execution” (Douglas, 2000). Having enumerating all these components, Douglas concludes that this

framework can be used in interpreting the performances of a test as evidence of specific purpose language ability. Douglas also asserts that “what is required in specific purpose background knowledge interacts with language knowledge to produce a communicative performance in specific purpose contexts” (Douglas, 2000). Both knowledge and the ability to use it are essential requisites for communication (Hymes, 1972).

The term “purpose” refers to “the eventual practical use to which the language will be put in achieving occupational and academic aims” (Widdowson, 1983). An ESP course is successful if it provides the learners with the competence they need to meet their requirements; the objectives of the course are set in accordance with what learners need the language for, and the course is designed in such a manner to converge on that need. In General English, purpose is not defined in this way; it is not about developing a restricted competence to be in the running with specific tasks, but developing a general capacity for language use. Therefore “purpose is a descriptive term in ESP, while in GPE it is a theoretical term in that it has to be defined by reference to an educational belief about what provides most effectively for a future ability to use language” (Widdowson, 1983).

In language teaching, any course should specify the objectives in terms of a set of lexical items or

syntactic structures, notions or functions, but its goals would be to develop an ability to exploit the knowledge of these elements in effective communication. Knowing how to define objectives when designing a specific purpose course is a central problem for teachers, in that these objectives launch students towards the achievement of goals; another issue for teachers is how to adjust particular subjects so that they have real-life applicability. In specific teaching situations, ESP makes use of methods which are different from the ones used in GPE. Most of the time, ESP is taught to students who already have some knowledge of general English, meaning they are at intermediate or advanced level of study (Anthony, 1997).

Some authors consider that the most important difference between ESP and ESL (English as a Second Language) is the purpose of learning the language. ESL is mainly focused on language structure and grammar; therefore all four skills are treated at the same level, while ESP concentrates on vocabulary mostly, content and topics as well. Language skills are also important, but they are taught in conformity with the learner's needs. The emphasis is most often on reading, listening and communication skills (Fiorito, 2005). One could add that ESP is a combination of certain subject matter and English language teaching.

Dudley-Evans and St John define the characteristics of ESP as follows:

“1. Absolute characteristics:

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
- ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register) skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

2. Variable characteristics

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
 - ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
 - ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level;
 - ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.” (Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998)
- “Moreover, the difference between ESP and general English teaching is not so much the

specificity of language, but rather the specific needs of people attending these courses.

General English and ESP are divergent not only in the nature of the student but also in the goal of teaching. While general English focuses on all four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking are supposed to be stressed upon to the same extent), ESP depends on the needs analysis to determine which skills are the most relevant for the students and syllabi thereof are designed accordingly. Engineers, for example, need to be able to convey ideas effectively, comprehensibly and influentially both in writing and orally, so the communication skills should prevail over all the other skills.” (Sirbu, 2015)

The fact that students have the opportunity to apply the acquired knowledge of English to their main field of interest is very motivating. Additionally, their technical knowledge in the given field facilitates English language learning (Fiorito, 2005).

Regarding the materials for an ESP course, the usual text books are not enough; it is about designing your own course according to the learners' needs and the course objectives. Teachers who teach ESP must have the plan for the course, as well as provide additional materials for it (Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998).

One can assume that ESP is actually a training exercise as it describes a particular area of language and after that it uses this description as a course specification in order to convey to learners the necessary competence to be able to cope with that particular field.

Business English, as part of ESP, is mainly the English of the international trade, and also a combination of the English language and the following areas: finance and banking, marketing and trade, business communication in general, etc. It is a variant of international English and focuses on vocabulary and especially on communication skills needed for business communication situations such as presentations, meetings, negotiations, small talk, all situations related to the business environment. Therefore one can say that communication in business English is by no means a very good example of communicative competence in a specific context; moreover it is specific purpose language ability.

However, Ellis and Johnson (2002) state: “Business English differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, especially in the business situations)”.

Communicating effectively is the ABC in each and every field of business and is very much valued as “employers in all occupational fields place greater value on employees’ communication skills than they do on their technical skills” (Wardrope, 2002). Effective communication is very important for business people within organizations in order to perform the basic of management (planning, organizing, leading and controlling). In other words, “effective business communication is the lifeblood of every organization, and a key to success in one’s career” (Liu, 2012).

Communication competence has always been strongly related to the communication environment. Communication competence in the business field has different facets: first of all, English competence, then fundamental business knowledge and skills, and last but not least excellent intercultural communication. The list should be completed with the technology - mediated communication competence and non - verbal communication competence. All these gathered together converge to language ability in a specific field that is actually specific purpose language ability.

In order to test ESP, there have been made specific tests for vocational purposes; in order to test business English one can mention the CEIBT (Certificate in English for International Business and Trade) which was introduced in 1990 by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, intended to allow non-native speakers of English to show their ability to perform effortlessly in a business or in an office where the English language is used. The test is built on the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and being set in the context of an international company, and all the prompts and the input data are thematically related to the respective company.

Another type of test is OIBEC (Oxford International Business English Certificate), developed by the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, is designed for business men and women who wish to obtain a certificate of competence In English Language skills and who have different goals, such as promotion or changing employment. The test has two levels: the First level for basic qualification and the Executive level for advanced qualification. The test covers all the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and lasts two and a quarter hours. OIBEC has an important component, meaning a case study booklet, which provides information about a problem that forms the context of the test. The candidates have to study the information (narrative, tables, memos, and

letters) for three days, and take it to the examination room, along with a dictionary.

Another fashionable test in the business field is Cambridge English: Business Certificates, also known as BEC (Business English Certificates) are a suite of three English language qualifications for international business. The levels are as follows: BEC Preliminary (CEFR B1); BEC Vantage (CEFR B2); BEC Higher (CEFR C1). They are designed on the well-known four skills and test one’s English in a business context, and show that someone can use English confidently in international business environments as well.

All the above mentioned tests (excepting BEC) are designed for testing language in a specific context, testing the language ability in a business context in our particular situation. The test taker needs to have some prior knowledge of international business, therefore the background knowledge is very important (specific vocabulary, idioms, figures of speech and cultural references). The OIBEC test especially, has a high degree of authenticity, the input data is wide-ranging and charges the test taker with a complex business problem that forms the basis of the test tasks. It appears to be a straightforward specific purpose test with many aspects of good test design that LSP testers would do well to take after. Going back to authenticity in the ESP testing, authentic tests and tasks are representative of the specific language use situation or similar to the tasks a test taker actually performs in the actual target situation.

ESP test are “contrived language use events” (Douglas, 2000) in which the test taker’s specific purpose language ability and knowledge of the specialized field are measured.

Acknowledging the fact that language ability refers to what a learner can do in or with a language, then one can state that the most important thing in ESP testing is whether learners can communicate in a specific target language and use knowledge of the field in order to achieve their goals, in order to understand and be understood, in order to get message across in English.

The main purpose of ESP tests is to obtain information about the learner’s specific purpose language ability, information which is quite often very useful and even necessary now and then.

To sum up, Douglas’ words depict best the theme of the paper as follows: “Specific purpose language ability results from the interaction between specific purpose background knowledge and language ability, by means of strategic competence engaged by specific purpose input in the form of test method characteristics” (Douglas, 2000).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Alderson, J. C., Clapham, C., and Wall, D. (1995). *Language Test Construction and Evaluation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Anthony, L., (1995). *ESP, What does it mean? Why is it different?*, [http://www.laurenceanthony.net/abstracts/ESP article](http://www.laurenceanthony.net/abstracts/ESP%20article).
- [3] Bachman, L. F., and Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Boskovic, V., Stanisik, N., (2015). *Business English vs. General English: students' attitudes and grades*, Synthesis, conference paper, International Scientific Conference of IT and Business related research, Belgrade, Serbia.
- [5] Douglas, D. (2000). *Assessing Languages for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Dudley, WiddEvans, T., and St. John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for Specific Purposes Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Dudley-Evans, T., & St John, M. J. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multi-disciplinary Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
- [8] Ellis, R., Johnson, W., (2002) .*Principles of Instructed Language*, University of Auckland.
- [9] Fiorito, L..(2005). [http// www. using english.com/articles/teaching ESP](http://www.usingenglish.com/articles/teaching%20ESP).
- [10] Hyme, D. (1972). *On Communicative Competence*. Sociolinguistics, Harmondworth: Penguin Press.
- [11] Liu, Y. (2012). *Modelling on the Criteria of Chinese BE Major's B-Communicative competence*. A Journal of arts and Humanities.
- [12] Sirbu, A. (2015). *Features of EST, a subfield of ESP, with a focus on Maritime (Engineering) English*, Constanta Maritime Annals, Year XVII, Vol. 24
- [13] Wardrope, J., W. (2002). *Department Chairs' Perceptions of the Importance of Business Communication Skills*. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 65(4), 60-72.
- [14] Widdowson, H. (1983). *Language purpose and language use*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.