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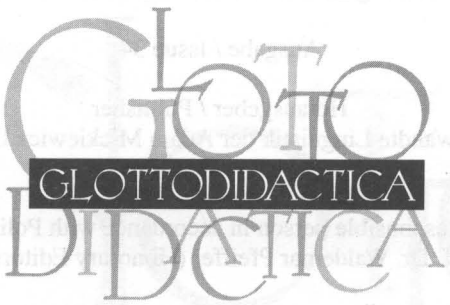

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Why should a Business English Teacher be a Constructivist Teacher?

ABSTARCT. The article provides some considerations related to the issue of learning and teaching Business English in Poland. It explains the difference between Business English, General English and English for Specific Purposes. The main aim of it is to present the characteristics of the Constructivist Business English Teachers. In order to this the constructivist approach to second language learning and teaching is briefly presented and a few valuable suggestions are provided on how to it can be employed in Business English teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for Business English Courses has grown considerably in recent years. As a result, Business English Courses are offered in language schools as an alternative to General English Courses since they no longer meet the special needs of people working in various companies and industries, in commerce and in trading, just to mention a few. Unfortunately, many teachers simply do not know how to satisfy the demands of such an exceptional group of learners. Consequently, they provide general language courses with a few business components. This, in turn, leads them to frustration and their students to the dissatisfaction with their classes. Becoming a constructivist teacher seems to be a good solution to this problem. Before we explain why it is so, we shall look at what Business English is and in what ways it is different from both General English and English for Specific Purposes.

WHAT IS BUSINESS ENGLISH?

"Business English must be seen in the overall context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as it shares the important elements of needs analysis, syllabus design, course design, materials selection and development, which

are common to all fields of work in ESP. As with other varieties of ESP, Business English implies the definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on particular kinds of communication in a specific context." (Johnson and Ellis 1994: 3). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) divide ESP into three branches: English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Business and Economics (EBE) and English for Social Studies (ESS). Each of these branches is further subdivided into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Similarly, Ellis and Johnson (1994: 5) distinguish between pre-experienced and job-experienced learners. While pre-experienced learners (usually students in universities and colleges) would like to prepare for their future work, job-experienced learners have already clearly set goals and needs connected with their job.

Although Business English is one of the areas of ESP, and thus they have a lot in common, it also differs considerably from ESP itself and other areas of it. The awareness of Business English being only one branch of English for Specific Purposes is of prior importance. Quite the contrary, there seems to be a tendency to use these two terms interchangeably. Moreover, many language schools and language teachers treat Business English as an overall term in order to distinguish it from General English. Although Business English has its own form of language, we must remember, however, that without basic General English knowledge, learners will have difficulty in grasping business content. Business content, in turn, is what differentiates General from Business English. Moreover, we must not forget that Business English Courses are designed to meet the specific needs and fulfill clearly stated aims, quite unlike the more broad and universal aims of General English courses. According to Pauline Robinson (1991: 97), Business English "caters for a multitude of users and activities, among whom there can often be very little similarity." The types of work these people are engaged in can differ considerably and hence the aims of the course should always refer to the individual's needs.

THE PURPOSE OF A BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE

The purpose of a Business English Course should always be related to students' work and its requirements, to their expectations and needs. The content of the course should also be adjusted accordingly. Donna (2000: 4) believes that "needs can usually be fulfilled if the content is chosen with students' learning and affective needs in mind, and if as much as possible is made job-related." Difficult though it may seem, the first step to be taken before the course commences is to conduct the so called needs analysis. In needs analysis students' views should be considered in depth so as to define the course objectives and its content properly.

Business English trainers should realize that very often they will have to deal with people who are experts in their field and, more importantly, who will urge to both express and achieve via English what they can already express and achieve via their native language. This puts the trainer in the position of a good actor preparing to play a certain role. Such an actor first spends some time in the environment of the character he or she is going to play. A good Business English trainer spends some time trying to understand the working environment of his or her student.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A CONSTRUCTIVIST BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHER

Constructivism assumes that all individuals construct their own versions of reality through their interactions with the environment. Although originally constructivism started as a philosophy rather than a theory of learning and teaching, it has become one since its proponents suggested taking a completely different approach to education. Since the aim of this article is to put forward the characteristics of constructivist business English teachers, we shall now discuss what makes constructivist teachers so exceptional in the context of business English learning and teaching. In order to accomplish this goal we shall examine the traits of the teachers emerging from the literature on constructivism as well as the demands made on them in Business English writing.

One of the main tenets of constructivism is that meaning is actively constructed by learners (e.g. Piaget and Inhelder 1969, Vygotsky 1978, 1986, von Glasersfeld 1995). Consequently, learning is defined as an active process in which learners construct new knowledge and awareness based on current knowledge and experience (Bruner 1977, Fosnot 1996, Wardsworth 1996). According to Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995), teaching does not include pouring information into learners' brains without any consideration on their side. Quite the contrary, it includes creating opportunities to generate students' own thinking. Teachers need to take into account that students are not tabula rasa on which knowledge is imprinted. They come to learning situations with already formulated knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and understandings. Thus, this previous knowledge is the raw material for the new knowledge they will create (Brooks and Brooks 1999). How accurate of business English contexts! Business English students construct new understandings using what they already know, and this prior experience influences the new knowledge that they create from new learning experiences. Therefore, as Ellis and Johnson (1994) suggest, the teacher's task is to conduct needs analysis in order to find out as much as possible about their learners. This may include some basic information like general data on the learner, their educational

background and the experience in language learning. Above all, however, the teacher has to identify the kind of job the learner is engaged in. Ellis and Johnson (1994) distinguish three categories of jobs, that is: managerial (managers - senior, junior and middle), technical (people who are into engineering or other specialized background) and secretarial/clerical positions (secretaries, clerical workers). What is more, they point to the importance of departmental differences: sales and marketing, human resources, finance and production, just to mention a few. Thus various work experiences influence the needs of individual learners and consequently, teachers are obliged to take it into account while designing business English courses. However, not only the learner's job has an impact on their performance. This may also be their previous language learning experience. Some students might have learned English many years ago and thus be reluctant to new approaches in language learning and teaching. Teachers should create opportunities for the learners to reflect on their past learning experiences. Actually, constructivism emphasizes the role of self-regulation and autonomy since they provide for the capability of individuals to control their thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions. Brooks and Brooks (1999: 103) emphasize that teachers should encourage their students to take responsibility for their own learning and to decide for themselves what is important and what is of no use to them. They write: "These students - in pursuit of new understandings - are led by their own ideas and informed by the ideas of others. These students ask for, if not demand, the freedom to play with ideas, explore issues, and encounter new information." This is especially important for business English students since they are perfectly aware of what they need English for. Their ideas are often based on their prior encounters with English. Actually, teachers can often encourage Business English learners to set goals and to make decisions concerning their learning.

In order to fulfill the needs of the learners, teachers should incite collaboration. Williams and Burden propose 'a social constructivist model of the teaching-learning process' in which there is a constant interplay between learners, teachers, tasks, and the context. Teachers select tasks which reflect their beliefs about teaching and learning. Learners interpret these tasks in ways that are meaningful and personal to them as individuals. Teachers and learners also interact with each other. Additionally, the context in which the learning takes place will play an important role in shaping what happens within it (Williams and Burden 1997: 42-44). It is especially true of business English contexts, where learners and teachers have to cooperate in order to create a friendly learning environment, on the one hand, and an environment where the learners can succeed in achieving their goal, on the other. Donna (2000: 5) believes that "On the most effective courses, students and teachers work in partnership to build a constructive learning environment

which is appropriate to individual students' professional and personal situations. As well as being a learner, the student is also a provider of information and material, if not also expertise. He is a client and the teacher an agent providing a service." Thus, learners and teachers can decide on the materials used during the course. Brooks and Brooks (1999: 103) point out that constructivist teachers use raw data and primary sources, along with manipulative, interactive and physical materials. The importance of using authentic materials during Business English courses is especially stressed by Ellis and Johnson (1994). According to them, authentic materials provide appropriate vocabulary and specific terminology or even sentence patterns. What is more, such materials also provide information about real-life situations so the content is useful to the learners. Finally, but not lastly, they may create a realistic context for role-plays, letter-writing, debates as well as for practice in various skills. Teachers should bear in mind that textbooks are often too general and not adjusted to the individual learner's needs.

From the above discussion we may conclude that teachers and learners should work closely together. Not only do the learners decide on the content of the course, but they may also alter it. Below is the summary of the characteristics of the Constructivist Business English teachers:

Constructivist Business English Teachers	Characteristics
Take students' past experiences into account	- they conduct needs analysis and identify their students' jobs which guides them into what experiences such students might have had - they incite reflection on the learners part in order to make them aware of their past language learning experiences and how they might shape their new learning
Encourage student autonomy and initiative, on the one hand, and collaboration on the other	- people who work in business have to be autonomous but at the same time they have to cooperate with others in order to achieve their goals - teachers should take advantage of it during the course - students are responsible for their own learning - students' ideas and suggestion are taken into account and have an impact on the progress of the course - teachers and learners should decide on the objectives and content of the course together
Favour active learning, problem-solving and creativity	- people working in business are very active and solve lots of intricate problems every day; their jobs usually require great creativity - if students discover things on their own, they will remember them better

Use authentic and interactive materials	- using authentic materials, job-specific materials is better than following the coursebook since coursebooks usually do not meet the needs of individual learners
They set the tasks in meaningful contexts in order to encourage communication and interaction; they not only ask questions themselves but most importantly encourage their students to pose them	- communication in the second language is the priority of business English students; they need to both comprehend and produce messages in order to become fluent - the context should be as real as possible, referring to their everyday life experiences students should be engaged in real-life simulations and role-plays - part of successful communication should be cultural awareness
Encourage strategy use	- business English students ought to know how to convey the message even though they lack some vocabulary items or expressions; developing compensation strategies should be the priority

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