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Business English and Business French: a comparative analysis of teaching strategies and firms' needs.

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Abstract

Following T. Dudley-Evans' suggestions, in order to analyse languages for specific purposes, it is possible to argue that present teaching experience is characterized by certain common aspects, such as teachers' insufficient extra-linguistic knowledge; lack of adequate teaching materials; learners' different levels of linguistic competence and lack of motivation. Furthermore, Business Languages imply an additional aspect to be investigated, a sort of 'side effect': rapid changes in the market determine a necessity, that of naming new features and conditions, hence the question of word-formation and transparency arises. Moving from an analysis of language curricula at the University of Catania, Department of Business Economics, this paper will seek to explore adopted teaching methods in order to point out the importance of integrating language and content, as stated by Fortanet-Gómez and Räisänen. The study's diachronic and synchronic evaluation of the applied approaches will lead to suggestions in the design of modules, taking into account the role played by both Business English and Business French, in terms of teaching implications and job opportunities. The main aim is to provide a potential answer to the following question: To what extent are companies aware of the need to invest in languages, intercultural and interpreting skills, and the management of linguistic diversity?

Keywords: Business languages, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), FOS (Français sur Objectifs Spécifiques)

1 Foreign Language teaching in Tertiary Education: preliminary considerations¹

During the past few years, Languages for Specific Purposes teaching has gained a central role in the international debate about Modern Languages teaching. This attention is due to the new awareness that university students need paths that highlight specific features of languages in crucial fields, such as Business, Engineering, and Medicine. It has also to be considered that, as Fortanet-Gómez and Räisänen (2008) pointed out, students who decide to come into higher education have prior knowledge of the language. For this reason, proposing topics related to specific fields has become a necessity, to satisfy both universities' requirements and students' needs, supporting their motivation and providing useful tools for future careers. In fact, according to Hyland (2006), even if syllabuses are structured by teachers according to needs analysis, students themselves are able to appreciate the importance of linguistic competence as a key to success, to achieve a satisfying professional position, not only in the academic field.

¹ Benzo V.: section 2 and conclusion. Di Gregorio G.: sections 1 and 3.

In order to define the context of this analysis, it is necessary to consider the distinction between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), as well as between Français Langue Professionnelle (FLP) and Français sur Objectif Universitaire (FOU). Both of these dimensions belong to the wider field of Languages for Specific Purposes, but they have been treated as antithetical perspectives. We argue that in a tertiary education context an integrated approach should be adopted, where teaching methods and materials are designed to link these two dimensions of Foreign Language Teaching. The aim is to foster students' learning processes, to make them competitive and to provide an answer to the needs of the job market, i.e. "higher education geared toward preparing students for the multifaceted challenges of the marketplace" (Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008).

Concerning suitable teaching methods to achieve this goal, Fortanet-Gómez and Räisänen suggest (2008: 1)

a shift from traditional input-driven and theory-focused teaching to a focus on the learners and the learning outcomes and objectives of that being thought.

Unfortunately, although this point of view has become a sort of commonplace, the vast majority of language courses are actually structured according to traditional teaching methods such as the grammar-translation method, or treating grammar and vocabulary as distinct paths. We maintain that, considering prior knowledge both in terms of language and of specific contents of the related fields, as well as the crucial role played by motivation when dealing with adults' learning, the best approach is the Project-based learning (PBL), supported by Cooperative learning. In fact, thanks to PBL it is possible to engage students from the cognitive point of view, with exercises that are interesting and stimulating, providing the opportunity to produce examples, to make analogies and draw inferences, thus allowing them to master competences and contents that will be applied to other contexts. By adopting this approach, it is also possible to grant students the support of teachers, but at the same time to leave them free to find the best solutions by relying on their own forces and, thanks to Cooperative learning, to face difficulties related to the lack of sufficient linguistic skills. Moreover, it is possible to enhance the development of those soft skills requested by the market, namely professional and ethical responsibility (to provide some examples), as well as critical thinking.

As we will discuss in the following section, we have designed our courses following two different paths. The first path is related to specific Languages courses, both English and French, while the second one is related to the relationship between languages and firms, highlighting the "academic/occupational" dimension, both from the point of view of materials design and exam structure. Our aim is to use activities that reflect the real business and academic world in terms of competences and skills, such as team work, time management, project management, report writing, power point design and conference presentations.

The European Union has issued several directives defining languages learning, but each country, not to say each University, has wide discretionary margins. Following the Bologna declaration, there have been several reports: one of the most important is the Bucharest Communiqué in 2012, where some crucial points emerged:

[...] cooperation between employers and higher education institutions as an important means to enhance the employability of higher education graduates. Indeed, consulting or involving employers, employers' organisations and business representatives in the various steps of developing and evaluating higher education study programmes is a direct and more decentralised mechanism through which labour market information can be included in higher education. Employers and

business representatives are aware of the skills graduates need when entering the labour market, and higher education institutions can use this knowledge when designing degree programmes².

Starting from these premises, in order to verify the feasibility of the suggestions contained in the Communiqué, and bearing in mind the peculiarities of our territory, we decided to analyse the situation at the Department of Economics and Business at the University of Catania.

2 A Case Study: the Business and Economics Department of the University of Catania

Nowadays, in order to train students not only from the point of view of content transferral, but also from the point of view of the development of soft skills, which are pivotal to enhance theoretical knowledge (Benzo, 2012), a teacher has to work as a manager. In fact, it is pivotal to analyze the following factors: contexts; audience; available resources; objectives to be achieved.

Higher education teachers have to assess opportunities for students once they have a degree, considering the fields where they will work, and what skills will be required, in order to find a suitable job. Furthermore, today's labour market is very complex: the scenario is no longer a local one but is increasingly characterized by an international exchange of goods, knowledge, and people. Firms can no longer focus on a single territory: even small firms have to deal with a global dimension since, for example, e-commerce implies a constant comparison with different countries.

In identifying the political-economic context of reference, states frequently offer cutting-edge educational policies with efficient reforms of school systems and universities. For example, former members of the communist area (including Poland) faced a great challenge due to the necessity of communicating with new economic partners: they decided to replace Russian from their school systems, introducing Western languages³.

At the 'macrolevel', the European Union has issued some guidelines to frame language training, given that recent studies have demonstrated the added value of language skills related to the labour market (Grin, 2013). Europe calls upon member States to foster the learning of at least two foreign languages besides the mother tongue. Faced with this necessity, some countries, including Italy, have responded with an almost monolingual education policy, where English becomes the recommended language: this is what happened to the Italian Faculties (now Departments) of Economics⁴. Clearly, English is essential for everyone: just as it is not possible to disregard native languages, in the same way it is not possible to disregard English: it would be like being illiterate. In this paper we argue that the added value of a graduate who wishes to enter the world of work is not the knowledge of a single language, i.e. English (whose knowledge is considered a basic requirement), but it is the knowledge of additional languages that makes the

² Retrieved from [http://www.ehea.info/uploads/\(1\)/bucharest%20communiqué%202012\(1\).pdf](http://www.ehea.info/uploads/(1)/bucharest%20communiqué%202012(1).pdf).

³ Cf. Eurobarometer surveys in 2006 and 2010. For example, in Italy, currently 28% of companies adopt linguistic criteria as parameters for recruiting staff; in Germany it is already 59%, in France 61%, while the European average is 40%. Eurobarometer, in 2010, conducted interviews with 7000 hiring managers from various private and public companies from 31 countries, and it was found that more than half of the businesses of those with worldwide activities believe that language knowledge is the most important knowledge for the future. German is the language that is currently emerging in the UK as the language demanded by employers.

⁴ Cf. the study carried out by V. Benzo that aims at analyzing the university language system of the Italian Faculties of Economics before the reform of 2007, and the current system of Departments of Economics. There has been a significant reduction in the number of foreign languages learned, the relative number of CFU (sometimes a simple pass or fail text), and the number of hours devoted to teaching activities.

difference. Choosing a single language is reductive and it determines a loss of possibilities. Several ‘emerging’ languages have gained importance in international business relations and even a ‘minor’ language could be decisive in attracting new customers and overcoming cultural barriers. We assume that a language acquires relevance according to the target audience of a given economic actor (manufacturer, investor, employer or employee).

The political, economic and social context of a specific country influences the choices related to language learning. However, we believe that each teacher, if equipped with good ‘managerial’ skills, can create the most favorable conditions not only for a more effective learning of the proposed foreign language, but, above all, for multilingual learning of different disciplines. It is in this direction that language teachers of the Department of Economics and Business of Catania have been operating since 2012. If we had accepted unconditionally the present situation of the Italian tertiary education system, we would have led students of our Department to mere monolingualism. On the contrary, we have decided to promote the study of two languages, English and French, adopting several teaching techniques and promoting different activities, to encourage students and to support their learning processes.

As managers of our teaching, we developed an in-depth analysis of the market, considering the internal market (our students) and the external one (the labour market). Therefore, we have planned our syllabi according to these results: we thought it was important to propose contents that were ‘familiar’ to our students of business economics, in order to recall what has been learned in Italian, underlying a multilingual approach. In fact, if the same topics are considered from different points of view using more than one language, students will be able to master these topics in any work environment. It must be highlighted that firms are not looking for ‘simple graduates’, but true ‘talents’, and universities have the task of training them, linking students’ needs and firms expectations.

The Department of Economics and Business of Catania has always paid attention to foreign languages. During the 1960s and 1970s, the teaching of foreign languages covered three years and, given the number of lesson hours available, it was possible to achieve high levels of preparation. Consider that, before 1972, a degree in Economics and Commerce granted access to teaching in middle schools and technical high schools. From these data, we assume that a graduate had not only solid language skills, which are essential for approaching the working world, but also a particularly adequate preparation to teach what we today define as ‘specific languages’ in a CLIL course.

Over the years, as a result of the various higher education reforms, the number of hours devoted to language teaching has decreased. For this reason, if in the past (DM 509/99) a student could choose two foreign languages worth 9 credits (English mandatory and a language chosen among French, Spanish and German), the present situation (DM 204/2004) forces students to make a difficult choice, between English and French, for 9 credits, with the possibility of adding a second language as additional credits. This new situation has been unsettling for students, and even for us as teachers. Which foreign language to choose, and what language to recommend? What are the criteria used by students when choosing? Two problems arise: the first is related to the choice itself, since studying a single language implies reduced job opportunities; the second problem is related to the year, since first year students have no tools to evaluate what their future job will be, for example in Marketing or in Finance. We think that a monolingual approach, which is the mainstream approach of universities towards English, is not rewarding.

It was this sort of ‘destabilizing’ situation that led to the acceptance of national Do.Ri.F.⁵ proposal, to organize a traveling conference on *Multilingualism and the world of work*. This project, which in 2011/12 involved nineteen Italian universities, has laid the foundation in Sicily for a close collaboration among different higher education institutions and between these institutions and firms, with the aim of increasing the value of territory and of allowing students to experience business realities, to link theory and practice. Universities no longer have to deal with the education of students in terms of contents alone, they have to work to transmit skills and to facilitate the integration of their graduates. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to create synergies between different agents operating in the area, and this implied the realization of various projects that received positive feedback. A radio program accompanied the first conference, where representatives of educational institutions and firms were interviewed: the aim was to get out of university classrooms to meet people through radio, to highlight the importance of multilingualism. Following the conference, a series of professionalizing seminars was organized (*Multilingualism and the world of work*), this time addressed to the students only, in order to enhance the awareness of our target audience. Being multilingual is what the world of work requires, both in terms of culture and relations, since it is not enough to know a foreign language, but it is necessary to know the culture of a given country: there is a recent discipline that seeks to explore the issue and Prof. François Grin is the pioneer.

These initiatives, rather theoretical, though very formative, were followed by seminars more related to ‘practice’, for example:

- *The Internationalization of Businesses and Foreign Languages* (now in its third edition): by leveraging the strengths of the territory, this initiative has proved to be fundamental in the education of business economics students, since this series of seminars was held directly at local companies’ premises, where students had the possibility to experience production models, as well as administrative and commercial contexts (local, national and international) and to enhance what they have learned in class.
- *Business English Communication* addressed students with a good knowledge of the language (B1+/B2), and supports their writing and speaking skills related to specific language functions and communicative contexts.
- *Memory Techniques and Mind Maps for an effective study of French*: with this series of seminars, we addressed those students who felt discouraged from learning a new language as complete beginners, engaging them with a new teaching method that breaks conventions.

Furthermore, several other activities were planned to support and encourage the study of foreign languages: for example, *Job Placement and foreign languages* where students focus their attention on job applications and interviews. They have also the possibility to meet experts of several fields to have practical suggestions, for example in the field of banking. On the other hand, *Foreign Languages and movies* was useful to analyse ‘Business movies’, both in English and French, while *Europe meets students* (with EURES) provided the opportunity to know something more about job opportunities abroad.

Project-based learning and Cooperative learning support these kinds of activities. Once students understood the importance of choosing more than a language, we planned our courses

⁵ Cf. <http://www.dorif.it/>

using motivating contents and materials for our ‘target’ audience, adopting teaching methodologies that would allow them to develop skills, such as how to write an email. This does not mean avoiding grammar mistakes, but being able to establish a relationship with someone using written texts, to get his/her attention, to overcome cultural barriers. For this reason, our courses are focused on different components: communicative functions and genres on the one hand, to underline the importance of effective exchanges, and grammar and vocabulary on the other hand, in order to highlight the importance of accuracy.

The following table summarizes the offer of our degree course:

Table1: Language courses (per year, language and credits) at the University of Catania, Department of Business Economics – BA Course of Business Economics⁶

Courses	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
Main Language Course		(I SEMESTER) Business English (9 credits – final exam) Business French (9 credits – final exam)	
Additional Courses	(II SEMESTER) Boost your English (without credits – according to entry test results)		
Other activities, seminars, etc.	(I SEMESTER) Strategic students (2 extra credits)	(II SEMESTER) Business English Communication (6 extra credits) Job placement and foreign languages – English and French (6 extra credits) Foreign Languages and movies – English and French (2 extra credits)	(II SEMESTER) Internationalization of Businesses – English and French (2 extra credits) Business English Communication (6 extra credits) Job placement and foreign languages – English and French (6 extra credits) ‘Off-course students’⁷ Course (without credits)

Knowing how to ask for information and directions, how to manage a job interview and hold a meeting, or to be able to ask questions and provide answers, is not simply related to language alone, but it implies a series of elements that fall within the non-verbal sphere, because it affects more than verbal language. To treat the development of these skills, we introduced, about 5 years

⁶ CLIL Courses are organized for students of MA Degree Courses, Business Administration and Corporate Finance. They are taught by content professors who have good linguistic competences, and they refer to the following subjects: Finance and Strategic Management; International Economic and Financial Policy; Probability for Finance; Public Finance; Business Valuation and Financial Planning.

⁷ The term ‘off-course’ refers to those students who are not able to achieve the minimum number of credits that are required to access the following step of their academic career, and are forced to add ‘extra-semesters’ in order to pass all the required exams.

ago, a final test: the presentation of three role-plays on DVD, for French, while for the English exam, students have to create a ppt presentation to describe a Business Plan, working in groups. In this way, they can practice how to deliver a paper at a conference and, at the same time, they can re-use their knowledge of SWOT analysis or Business Model Canvas.

The results were very positive. Students overcame their reluctance, gaining greater confidence in themselves. Furthermore, we received very positive feedback, because students perceived something new: for the first time, business was part of the academic course, no longer theory but practice: this is a section of a larger project, the “Upturned University”, managed by Professor Rosario Faraci and our Department, to promote a student-centred approach.

3 Potential answers to the question “To what extent are companies aware of the need to invest in languages, intercultural and interpreting skills, and the management of linguistic diversity?”

In 2007, Paolo Citterio (founder of the Association of Human resources directors) stated that, in order to become part of major business undertakings, new graduates have to speak at least two languages, thus recalling what was stated in the Bologna Declaration in 1999. One of these languages is English, and the other is the language of the group that will hire them. On the other hand, in a piece of research by Adip of 2007, it was found that a positive factor for being employed was a “perfect knowledge of a foreign language”, scoring 35.10%, but, on the other hand, “a second foreign language” was considered by 10% of experts who answered enquiry questions: these data prove the existence of a sort of discrepancy between awareness and ‘facts’, since the importance attributed to the knowledge of several languages does not influence hiring process criteria.

Unfortunately, in 2015, Amalaurea results show a situation that has not improved: Italian graduates have a good knowledge of English, oral production 66.4% and written production 72.8%, while in French, these percentages decrease to around 18% (both oral and written production). These languages are followed by Spanish, with 13%, and German with 3%. It is important to consider that we are talking about four European languages, without taking into consideration a strategic knowledge of languages such as Chinese, Russian and Arabic. Moreover, there is a difference between written and oral production, confirming that traditional lessons are focused on texts more than on conversation.

If we consider the ELAN report about the “Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Languages skills in Enterprises”, it emerges that “a significant amount of business is being lost to European enterprises as a result of lack of language skills”, which are perceived as communication barriers. A similar result was found by F. Bargiela-Chiappini and C. Nickerson (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2014) several years ago, thus demonstrating that the adopted language learning policies are not effective. Furthermore, in terms of strategies used by firms, ‘staff with language skills’ is one of the five identified elements of ‘language management’, while the others are: native speakers, local agents and/or distributors, external translator/interpreters, adaptation of websites. Within this perspective, the choices of Italian firms are quite interesting, both from the point of view of awareness and strategies adopted. In fact, according to answers provided, 55% of Italian firms (more than the European average that is 48%) has a “formal language strategy”: this first datum is crucial, since this kind of awareness allows for the adoption of effective strategies according to market’s needs.

Regarding the adopted strategies for language management, there is a marked preference for translating websites, with 61% of firms using it, while other strategies are external translators/interpreters services, used by 39% of Italian firms, more than local agents (32%), native speakers (19%) and staff with language skills (28%). If we consider this last figure, which is below the European average (40%), it is possible to explain other data about the poor offer of linguistic training (32%) for employees: firms prefer to rely on external services rather than organizing courses for internal resources. These data are linked to required investments and administrative difficulties: we argue that firms decide to use other strategies to reduce investments and to avoid problems related to hiring processes. In fact, as the survey LET IT FLY (2006) demonstrated, hiring staff with language competences implies an assessment method, while the vast majority of firms that adopt this strategy rely on personal declarations (Benzo & Di Gregorio, 2016).

Compared to the results of other European firms, Italian firms seem to be aware of future needs since they think that, in the next three years, they will need to acquire additional expertise in languages: on the other hand, while 76% think it is necessary to know languages, 51% believe it is not worth organizing language courses. Moreover, while 85.9% of firms think it is necessary to know foreign cultures to develop good trade, 65.9% think it is sufficient to have low language competences (to be able to read websites) to work. The same discrepancy can be detected in the Sicilian context, as emerged from the analysis we conducted on Family SMEs.

Results from the ELAN research show that “recruitment of staff with language skills is commonplace” and that

English appeared to be more extensively used as an intermediary language [...] reflecting its use also as a corporate language in many multi-nationals.

From this analysis it emerges that previous data are confirmed for Italian SMEs, which consider English as the most useful language (99.9%), followed by German (31.9%), French (25.5%) and Spanish (24.2%). Furthermore, during the hiring process, language competences are assessed for employees (33.9%) and commercial agents (33.5%), but courses are organized for managers and shareholders, and their content is based on grammar (57%) and not on languages for specific purposes (16.4%). One question arises: is English a Lingua Franca or a Tyrannosaurus rex? Tardy suggests the existence of two main roles played by English:

One is that of a common language, a lingua franca, which allows for ease of information storage and retrieval that may be more efficient than translation and provides a means for knowledge advancement. At the same time, English may be seen more nefariously, acting as something of a Tyrannosaurus rex —“a powerful carnivore gobbling up the other denizens of the academic linguistic grazing grounds”.

We argue that for the vast majority of firms, it is not possible to consider these hypotheses, because the use of English is due to the fact that it is the only ‘available’ language, both in terms of workers’ knowledge and training courses.

This is the *status quaestionis*, but if we consider the section of the report that deals with recommendations, we read that the acquisition of a second foreign language is an additional value, since it is seen as a medium to foster communication opportunities between different countries, different cultures. In fact, to improve matching employer needs, it is necessary:

- to diversify the range of languages taught, particularly in tertiary and vocationally-oriented education;

- improve the contextualization of courses and qualifications to the business context;
- embed periods of work experience abroad, with explicit opportunities to use the target language, within courses which combine languages with other subject areas relevant to business;
- improve flexibility to meet changing employer needs.

The importance of this issue has increased during the last few years, and several business journals, such as *Forbes* or *Il Sole 24*, have started to create specific sections related to recruitment and foreign languages, to highlight the importance of language skills. *Forbes*' 'verdict', in particular, following an analysis conducted with RosettaStone Business, is:

In global, multicultural organizations, simply expecting all employees to speak one common language, such as English, marginalizes the potential impact of international talent and leaves monolingual staff ill-equipped to help the organization compete effectively in a globalized environment.

“To what extent are companies aware of the need to invest in languages?” This was one of our initial questions. We argue that firms are aware of their needs to be competitive thanks to enhanced language knowledge, but there is a gap between their needs and what universities offer. We tried to analyse the case of Catania, underlining the results we have achieved, but this is only the beginning. Our proposal is to refer to a sort of Didactic marketing, an adaptation of the 4 Ps rule for tertiary education teachers who want to design effective courses, sustaining students' motivation and taking into account firms' needs: the Product is represented by English and French and Place is related to the resources provided by the University of Catania and its territory, to foster a synergy between University and firms. Concerning Promotion, it is possible to say that a good teacher has to enhance students' awareness through an effective advertising campaign, in order to help students to decide which language they want to study or, and this is the winning approach, to study more than one language: this is our mission. Finally, Price can be considered as students' efforts in the learning process, how much they are willing to invest in their future: and we think this is the additional value of this approach.

Conclusion

In light of all these considerations, we can conclude by stating that the results of the proposed work in our department are more than satisfactory, in terms of

1. awareness: students are aware of what the market requires and they know that they would be cut off without language knowledge;
2. advancement: students have improved their language competences, and the number of students who pass languages exams has increased;
3. synergies: especially among teaching staff, and between experts and students. This allows everyone to work with greater enthusiasm and better results;
4. job opportunities: our students begin to be employed thanks to their language competence.

In fact, working with institutions such as EURES network at a European level, and some firms, such as Ikea, we have created opportunities linking students and companies. In recent years, it has increased the number of students hired (even with short-term contracts), becoming

part of the world of work before obtaining a degree. We believe that this is the biggest reward that a teacher can hope for, as it completes the life cycle of university education in a given discipline, which begins with the first day of class, it is developed through lessons and culminates with the implementation of the acquired knowledge and job opportunities. The knowledge that we promote is not simply theoretical, it becomes immediately useful and functional. In terms of motivation, all the ‘actors’ operating in the foreign languages section of the Department of Economics and Business at the University of Catania will be more motivated because the results of their efforts are tangible.

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