PREPARING STUDENTS FOR BUSINESS LANGUAGE EXAMINATION WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract: *Today public awareness of technical language knowledge and the social demand for related language skills are on the rise, and the Hungarian labour market requires an increasingly competent command of foreign languages from professionals involved in business and economics; compliance with these growing demands is reflected in the nature and structure of teaching foreign languages in the Hungarian higher education institutions Due to the high degree of institutional autonomy each Hungarian university has the right to work out its own language teaching policy and adopt it in its training programme. This paper will show that foreign language study at Hungarian universities can be devoted either to general language or language for specific purposes. These criteria can differ according to the field of study,*

Given that obtaining a language exam certificate is a pre-requisite of graduation, the role of academic education in providing students with the required knowledge base and successfully preparing them for language exams has become more important. The structure and content of modern business language exams reflect the need to meet the demands of the labour market. There has been a definite shift from grammar-oriented, translation-based tasks towards a more communicative approach which involves testing reading comprehension, writing skills and performance in situational role plays. However, while students generally cope well with understanding written business texts, many of them frequently fail in oral communication. Consequently, the question arises of whether it is possible to bridge the obvious gap between reading and speaking skills.

This paper aims to give a possible example of how a descriptive text can be adapted to prepare students for the situational role play tasks in business language exams at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Debrecen.

Keywords: business, economics, languages, skills, exams

1. Introduction

1.1. Labour market demand and Hungarian objective

Employees in Europe's multilingual labour market need more than a simple command of foreign languages in a general sense, they also need, according to the goals of their language usage, a complex combination of competences comprising the knowledge of general and technical language enriched with intercultural and communication skills and competences (Kurtán and Silye, 2006). It is generally acknowledged that nowadays job seekers who know the foreign

technical language of their professional area have a considerable advantage in getting a job compared to candidates who have only a general knowledge of the relevant foreign language. (Hajdu, 2008.)

Considering the above, language teaching in the Hungarian higher education has a two-fold objective: on the one hand it aims to provide students with the goal-oriented technical language skills required to meet the needs of the labour market, and, on the other, to prepare them for the language exam necessary for graduation (Czellér and Hajdu, 2014).

1.2. Institutional background

In Hungary it is up to individual universities to decide whether they regard it as important and effective to include language teaching in their study programmes, and it is the institutions' right and responsibility to determine the number and aim of foreign language courses. For this reason, the range of language training programmes at Hungarian universities varies considerably. Although universities have an autonomy to decide on their own language programme, the degree requirements towards foreign languages are determined at a national level (Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh, 2006). Due to these requirements, graduates cannot receive their degree without a successful completion of a foreign language examination certified by an accredited institution.   According to the field of study, the required focus can be general language or language for specific purposes.

The University of Debrecen integrates foreign language teaching into the degree programmes, and its main mission is to prepare students for the relevant state language examination as well as for the requirements of the international labour market.

2. Business language exams at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Debrecen

Nowadays, apart from general language exams, there are numerous technical language exams connected to specific areas which measure professional language skills, and this is also the case with our professional field, the language of business and economics.

2.1. Priorities and exam systems

In teaching foreign languages at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the University of Debrecen it is a priority to broaden the students' existing command of foreign languages with technical vocabulary and knowledge and to develop the language skills and competencies they will definitely need in their everyday working life. Furthermore, it is also in the interest of the institute to help students pass the business language exam, which is a prerequisite for acquiring a degree.

At the University of Debrecen's Faculty of Economics there are three different accredited business language exam systems (BGF, KITEX, and Zöld Út) for which we prepare our students. These three business language exams cover most of the professional areas our students major in. (The Faculty offers the following B.A. majors: Business Management, Trade and Marketing, International Business, Finance and Accounting, and Tourism and Catering, all of which require a certificate in a business language examination for graduation.)

2.2. The content of business language exams

It is our experience that although accredited general language exams in Hungary may differ in terms of their contents, they all aim to measure complex skills and knowledge. The same tendency applies to business language exam systems, too, so just as with general language exams, all the four basic language skills – listening, speaking, writing and reading – are also measured thoroughly in these exams.

A further common objective of business language exams is to require that students be familiar with language use in business contexts and the world of economics, emphasizing business communication in professional life and work activities and featuring the kind of lifelike written and oral tasks that the given profession requires.

As far as the written exams are concerned, students are supposed to solve reading tasks and do creative writing, the latter consisting of formal letter writing or translating authentic business texts

Taking everything into consideration, we can conclude that all the business language exam systems represent technical language use in an authentic manner. They attach great importance to professional background knowledge and professional language use, and at the same time they adequately measure language skills. (G. Havril, 2005.)

Our students tend to choose the language exam closest in content to their professional area; however, their choice is also influenced by the types of business language preparatory courses offered at our faculty.

It would be false to assume that any particular language exam is easier to pass than the others, since there are several factors leading to success or failure, the examination of which is beyond the scope of our study at present.

Nevertheless, the considerable role business language examinations play in fostering business language culture cannot be denied.

2.3. The Foreign Language Skills

Employers' demands for a highly qualified workforce with excellent communication skills and a decent command of one or more foreign languages has increased dramatically throughout Europe, and particularly in Hungary.

The structure and content of modern business language exams reflect the need to meet the demands of the labour market. While grammar-oriented, translation-based tasks dominated language exams in the past, nowadays much more emphasis has been placed on measuring communicative efficiency in business language examinations. Although proper grammar must not be neglected, comprehensive reading, creative writing and performance in situational role plays have tended to become the primary methods of testing language proficiency.

The shift in priorities has been made necessary by the very nature of the technical language of different professional fields – and in particular that of the business world - i.e. they differ from general, everyday language not only in terms of their specific vocabulary, but also because they tend to develop and change much faster in line with an ever-changing economic environment.

In addition, technical languages prefer direct communicative functions; as a result, certain genres (business letters, negotiations, presentations) receive more attention. (Balázs, 2008)

All the above must be taken into consideration by language teachers when teaching foreign business languages so that their students can successfully face the challenges they will meet, both in the language examination and throughout the course of their integration into working life.

The performance results of different language skills have also been observed to show significant differences both among our students and graduate specialists.

The indicators of the receptive skills of foreign language users are considerably better than those of the productive skills. To read and understand written business texts is the easiest of all tasks for the language learner. This is a natural phenomenon, because language learners can take their time to process the text at their own pace; there is no time pressure, and they can often return to the more difficult, less comprehensible parts without being required to produce immediate responses. In addition, the professional expertise they have acquired in their mother tongue and their knowledge of words of foreign origin already in use in Hungarian can considerably help them understand the message of the text.

Listening comprehension – still a receptive skill – is a somewhat greater challenge and depends to a great extent on the nature of the situation. If it is a live conversation, understanding a partner at B2 level is usually successful –facilitated by the possibility of asking for repetition and by face-to-face contact –, but if the text is a sound recording and the learner is supposed to listen to the text twice and answer questions based on the text on a worksheet (which is the usual procedure in a business language examination), the majority of students often fail.

In our experience, creative writing, i.e. writing letters and essays, which are already productive skills, lag just slightly behind reading comprehension at both B1+ and B2 levels.

Mention must be made of an unexpected phenomenon, however. While students and graduate specialists at an intermediate level of a foreign language can cope quite well when understanding (mainly written) business texts, and regularly use the knowledge they gain from reading such texts in a foreign language through the course of their studies or work (they might even publish in the given foreign language), they seem reluctant to get involved in oral communication.

It is a well-known fact that the active vocabulary of language learners is considerably smaller than their passive vocabulary and these learners may have difficulty utilising their vocabulary - either passive or active - in a spontaneous oral interaction.

Making a telephone call may prove especially difficult, because you cannot use non-verbal signals to help convey or understand the message.

2.4. The Result of a Survey

The above conclusions have been confirmed by research, including a comprehensive, representative research study carried out with the students of Budapest Business School by Ágnes Loch and Ágnes Dévény.

In 2005 they asked their students to fill in a detailed questionnaire about their language learning preferences, and their needs and expectations relating to efficient language learning. Five years later, in 2010, the same survey was repeated.

The students had to specify the kind of language skills they felt especially insecure about, and which of these they would prefer to develop in the course of their language classes at university.

Both surveys showed that speaking was considered by far the most difficult component of foreign language performance, while reading comprehension scored relatively well, representing the most easily manageable skill.

The responses students gave in the survey clearly indicated that speaking skills needed to be developed most during their studies (80% in 2005, 87% in 2010) (Loch-Dévény, 2011).

A further example is the research carried out by Katalin Varga Kiss in 2008. She looked at the technical foreign language usage of employees in financial and banking institutions.

Some of the questions in the survey aimed at examining people's business language skills and their needs and expectations. The results of the survey once again proved that much more emphasis must be placed on developing oral communication skills to make it easier for those in the survey to be comfortable when dealing with professional situations in a foreign language (Varga Kiss, 2008).

In view of these findings, it is obvious that there is a considerable difference between the reading comprehension and the oral communication skills of language learners and users. The question arises whether it is possible to bridge this obvious gap between reading and speaking skills during the preparatory courses for business language examinations and if so, how it should be done, since there is only a narrow time frame available.

While business language exam preparation course books provide adequate amounts of high quality materials to practice reading and writing skills, they tend to lack the situational role-play models needed for the acquisition of such communicative skills, as a set of instructions alone cannot guarantee success in acting out a variety of situations in class.

With the obvious and measurable improvement in reading skills, students are liable to assume a similar and simultaneous progress in their oral performance and fluency. This false assumption can only lead to frustration and impatience on the part of these learners. Therefore the teacher's task is to consciously apply the students' willingness to learn to focus attention to the oral aspects of language acquisition as well.

3. Descriptive Business Texts for Developing Speaking Skills

3.1. A sound solution

A possible solution lies in the analytical processing of written texts by the language instructor, as illustrated below.

This method enables us to efficiently use descriptive texts originally meant to test reading comprehension for developing speaking skills at the same time.

Apart from printed course books, however, increased emphasis should be placed on using up-to-date online resources, because, by their nature, economic phenomena change continuously, and we have to keep pace with them, and it is easier to upgrade vocabulary that is tailored to describe topical issues from the Internet rather than from course books written a couple of years ago.

3.2. The method

In this part of the article we attempt to give a detailed description of the application of this approach in 7 steps, using an authentic passage for illustration.

3.2.1. Step 1: Synthetic reading, traditional reading comprehension task

This approach is also referred to as "global comprehension", "listening for main ideas" etc.

Students are asked to read the given text – a segment of which can be seen below (Figure 1.) as an illustration - on their own, for a given period of time and solve traditional tasks designed to test reading comprehension (true-false statements, short answers to questions relating to the content of the text).

French telecom firms Orange and Bouygues in merger talks

French telecoms operators Orange and Bouygues have confirmed that they are in talks over a possible merger.

In separate statements, Orange said that the talks were "preliminary" while Bouygues said that "no decisions have been taken".

If the deal did go ahead it would reduce the number of French telecoms operators to three from four. The combined group would have a near-50% share of the French mobile and fixed telecoms market.

As a result, any deal is likely to be scrutinised by both domestic and European competition authorities.

French Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron opposed a previous bid by European telecoms group Altice to buy Bouygues, saying in June it risked creating a French operator that was "too big to fail".

But he has since said that he is not opposed in principle to further deals in the sector.

French newspaper reports have suggested that the deal could be worth €10bn (£7.3bn) in a combination of cash and shares.

In its statement, Bouygues said there was "no guarantee that there will be an outcome to these preliminary discussions".

Bouygues said it had signed a confidentiality agreement with Orange as "it is interested in opportunities that would enable it to bolster its long-term presence in the telecoms sector".

Orange said that the talks were not "limited by any particular calendar" and said there was "no commitment to any particular outcome".

Figure 1:Text
Source: http://www.bbc.com/news/business-33249048

3.2.2. Step 2: Highlight certain lexical items by underlining, then list them separately

In the majority of language classes – if the solutions of Step 1 are correct – the task can be considered well done, since students have clearly understood the general message of the text, so you can move on to try another similar task, giving the students further possibilities to improve their reading comprehension.

This time, however, our aim is to examine the passage in detail and to exploit its potential for developing oral skills.

First the students are supposed to underline the expressions and phrases they find useful, or the ones they are not familiar with. Then they read out their own lists

and compare them with other students' lists. They will probably produce very similar lists.

Subsequently, the teacher hands out a previously prepared new version of the passage (shown in Figure 2.) together with a separate list of the underlined phrases.

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telecoms operators; have confirmed; they are in talks over; a possible merger; statement; the talks were preliminary; no decisions have been taken; reduce; a near-50% share of; competition authorities; Economy Minister; opposed a previous bid; in principle; newspaper reports have suggested; in a combination of cash and shares; outcome; signed a confidentiality agreement with; commitment; outcome

Figure 2: Handout

3.2.3. Step 3: Identify the meaning (monolingual)
As a next step, students get a further list. This time the list contains synonyms (Figure 3.) or short explanations of the previously enlisted expressions and the task is to find the matching pairs.

By this time the learners have already encountered the expressions several times, which makes it easier for them to memorise them and use them as part of their active vocabulary.

1)	have said that something is true	have confirmed
2)	theoretically	in principle
3)	make something smaller or less	reduce

4) negotiate	…
5) an official organization that has the power to make decisions about competition	…

Figure 3: List of synonyms

3.2.4. Step 4: Drill the new expressions
It should be stressed at this point that it is essential to drill the new lexical items aloud, which will also help students learn the correct pronunciation.

3.2.4. Step 5: Ask questions
In our experience, when performing situational role plays, students tend to have difficulty in forming grammatically correct questions. However, asking questions cannot be avoided in the course of a conversation. For this reason this skill has to be practised as much as possible.

The questions can be yes-or-no questions first, then students should ask questions about the underlined parts of the sentences (Figure 4). Remember to check the correct intonation too, when students put their questions.

French telecoms operators Orange and Bouygues have confirmed that they are in talks over a possible merger. *What have French telecoms operators confirmed?*

Figure 4: Making questions

3.2.4. Step 6: Collect general linking words, drill them
After practicing the technical vocabulary seen above, move on to collecting and practicing general linking words, expressions, and components of conversational strategies (Figure 5.) that can be used flexibly in any situation or conversation.

actually; let me add; what's more; furthermore; let me emphasise, the point is; may I add that; I agree with you, etc*.*

Figure 5: Vocabulary practice

3.2.4. Step 7:Guided dialogues in pairs
A wide variety of conversational tasks (Figure 6.) can be given to students based on the given topic, the word list and the previously practiced questions and answers. The dialogues in which they are supposed to follow different instructions should be planned in pairs and then acted out in class, and always followed by the teacher's assessment.

a) give a time limit (e.g. 2 minutes)
b) use a certain number of expressions (a minimum of 10 expressions)
c) use echo-questions
d) use telephone conversations with requests for repetition

Figure 6: Conversational tasks

4. Conclusion
Although this approach is undoubtedly time-consuming and requires a great deal of input and preparation from the teacher, it is well worth the effort as it can contribute

to successful language examinations and at the same time increase our students' confidence in oral performance.

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