UNIVERSITY BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES REVISITED

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Abstract The unexpected transition from in-person to online teaching in the spring of 2020 took university language instructors off guard. The objective of my research is to show that adapting to the new-normal (i.e. unplanned shift to online teaching) had a ripple effect on teaching methods, learning goals, student motivation. The setting of the research is a Business English course at a university in Budapest (Hungary). The autoetnographic research I carried out provides personal reflections both on the objective elements of the course: needs, learning objectives, teaching material and methods and evaluation, and on the affective elements: student motivation and emotions. The findings show that adverse circumstances can force teachers and students not only to set more realistic learning goals, focusing on the most relevant and important materials, but by keeping standards high, to find a new form of motivation.

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1   Introduction and Literature Review

ESP course-design

Business English (BE) is a sub-genre of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which is defined as the "language [that] is learnt not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education, but to smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in academic, professional or workplace environments" (Basturkmen, 2006, p. 18). This strong purpose determines the materials and methods used while teaching ESP. Both should be typical of the discipline (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). In case of BE it means focusing on genres, skills and discourse of business (e.g. reports, negotiations, meetings), and in terms of methodology, it means applying business-specific methods (e.g. case studies).

In order to meet learners' professional needs effectively, ESP course design follows this sequence: needs analysis → setting learning goals → choosing the appropriate classroom materials and methods → evaluation (Anthony, 2018, Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Syllabus is either the outcome of such design (Brown, 2016), or an organic part of it: needs analysis → objectives → evaluation → syllabus → classroom activities (Woodrow, 2018). Although both sequences seem linear, they are actually cyclical in nature, signifying the need for constant re-evaluation and re-designing of the courses (Woodrow, 2018).

Needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP course-design, giving direction to the whole course: "if there is no needs analysis, there is no ESP" (Brown, 2016 p. 5). Learner needs have to be investigated extensively and analyzed before the actual courses begin. But learner needs are not necessarily best defined by the learners themselves, especially in case of pre-experience university students. Apart from students, all who have interest in the curriculum (Brown, 2016): teachers, and other participants of the educational process, for instance, administrators, parents can be involved, and naturally, representatives of workplaces, field-experts as well.

Learning objectives translate learner needs to language skills and genres. Setting the learning objectives is basically a language instructor's task, as it requires more than simply defining what language should be used in a certain workplace situation. It requires professional planning, as to how to sequence the tasks according to their

level of difficulty, and what learning strategies to suggest to students (Anthony, 2018).

The next stage is selecting the right course material and methods. Course materials fall into two categories: real and carrier materials. Real materials have clear pedagogic purposes, a language form to teach, vocabulary to present etc., whereas carrier materials serve as means to deliver the content (Basturkmen, 2010). Selecting up-to-date materials, personalised topics are difficult, and the process raises the issue of authenticity. "the presence of authentic materials in a classroom is no automatic guarantee of authenticity" (Belcher, 2009). First, because any authentic material will lose its authenticity when used out of context (Widdowson, 1979). Second, authentic materials are meant for native speakers, or speakers of near-native language skills, cultural background, similar education, etc. Language learners may find inside jokes, cultural references, and allusions difficult to understand until they reach a high command of the language.

When it comes to choosing the right method, ESP instructors tend to adapt to their students' preferences. Two reasons can be mentioned here: most learners of ESP are adults, or university students, who are experienced language learners, having their preferred learning strategies (Woodrow, 2018). Second, there is a pressure both on teachers and students to achieve the learning goals as soon as possible, especially in case of in-company courses. Therefore ESP instructors chose the most effective methods depending on their learners' needs and preferences (Anthony, 2018).

Evaluation in ESP course design involves evaluating the students, the teacher, and the effectiveness of the course. There are two aspects to consider: students' perception of effectiveness, and objective measuring by administering tests to see if they have actually learned anything from the course (Basturkmen, 2010).Course evaluation is problematic because its actual effectiveness can be measured months after the course has finished, in a real target situation (Basturkmen, 2010).

Depending on the results of the evaluation process, new needs have to be defined, new learning goals need to be set, which means selecting course material, and finding new methodology. We have come full circle.

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ESP learners

Ideally, ESP learners are goal-driven, motivated as they know the purpose of learning ESP. This motivation is best described as instrumental, though some label it extrinsic (Woodrow, 2018). This very strong instrumental motivation can explain why needs analysis is at the heart of an effective course design (Long, 2005). In ESP courses learner needs are in the center: these will define the materials and the methods used by teachers, which enhances learner motivation. Consequently, learners can become demotivated if they perceive the classroom material irrelevant (Basturkmen, 2010).

2   Background

The research was conducted at a university where I have been teaching two BE groups of 19-20 first-year students of Commerce and Marketing. The students have roughly the same level of proficiency, B2-C1 level (CEFR). They started their studies in September 2020. Both groups have had two contact-hours a week, each lasting 90 minutes. The attendance is obligatory, and the course grade is based on quality of mid-term tests, and overall performance.

The courses started in person back in September 2020, but as the cases of Covid-19 increased, the Hungarian government issued a regulation in early November, ordering all higher-education institutes to go online. The pandemic has not ceased therefore the regulation was not lifted yet (it is now April 2021), and the academic year will be completed online.

Several students were affected by pandemic, many lost their jobs, their sources to finance their studies, they were rendered isolated that critically affected their emotional well-being, many got infected, had family members fall seriously ill, some experienced losses. All these factors have had considerable influence on students' motivation, and their attitude to learning.

In my paper I formulated two research questions:

How did the sudden shift to online teaching affect the business English courses?
How have the students' attitude and motivation changed over the academic year 2020/21?

3   Method

I applied autoetnography as a qualitative research method to address the research questions above analyzing my personal reflections (as primary source), and my students' feedback (as secondary source). The students were asked to answer open-ended questions about the course in English. The response rate was 59% (N=22/39). The two data sources will complement each other aiming to give a valid interpretation of an unusual situation. The original aim of autoetnography is to analyze personal experience to provide an insight into cultural experience (Ellis, 2011). The fact that this unplanned transition from in-person to online teaching affected all higher-educational institutions not only nationwide but worldwide as well, and the fact that it was a protective measure to keep teachers and students safe from infection, will make the findings of the present qualitative research transferable.

4   Findings

In this part I will discuss how I managed to adapt the existing course-design to the new normal, and what conscious and unconscious changes occurred. I will go through the four pillars of ESP teaching, needs analysis, learning objectives, teaching material and method, and evaluation, then I will discuss changes in students' motivation. At the end of each part there are some quotes from the students to illustrate their views.

5   Needs redefined

When we went online, I had to reassess the learner needs of our BE course: what needs can be met in spite of the different circumstances, and what needs cannot. Also, what new learner needs can be met only in the online teaching that otherwise cannot be met in the classroom. There are more than ten methods for analyzing ESP learners' needs, and I opted for the target-situation analysis (Brown, 2016), that is, visualizing the future workplace situations where students have to use English.
However temporary online teaching may seem to us, it is quite possible that my students will work in an international business environment where they will have to work online on a regular basis. Therefore I selected the following needs: online discussion and collaboration with colleagues, giving online presentations, collecting, organizing and summarizing information, negotiating.

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When selecting and rejecting needs, I had to take into consideration the technical constraints: unstable internet connection, malfunctioning microphones, smartphones with small screens and fewer functions than a laptop, and lack of cameras. These problems, and their adjustment would take up a considerable amount of time, making our classes shorter and less dynamic.

What did the students say?

I think, we learn more briefly and more useful things, the tasks and tests are well organized and well accomplished.

I have been learning about new things like interviews which will be really helpful in the future.

6   New learning objectives

After selecting the needs, the corresponding learning objectives had to be set. My criterion for selection was relevance. I knew that retaining students' attention is extremely difficult in an online class, therefore I kept emphasizing why a certain task or skill would be relevant for them in their future career.

We focused on presentation and negotiation skills, case studies, job interviews, writing a cover letter and a report, discussing leadership skills, and methods for team-building. From language learning point of view it meant that there were a lot of off-line reading assignments, which did not go down well at the beginning, but when I explained my business English students that reading and speaking are the two most needed language skills in workplaces (Cambridge English, 2016), reading was seen as a relevant skill to develop.

Negotiations and job interviews were done in the online classes but required preparation. Therefore students needed to collaborate with negotiating partners, and discuss the interview questions with the other panel members before the task was due.

Writing skills were also improved, and the tasks were selected on the basis of relevance. For instance, in the job application process, candidates were required to write a cover letter for an actual job opening (which they had to find on the internet), and panel members were requested to write a report after conducting the job interviews.

Giving online presentation was a new genre for the students and me. Learning the do's and don'ts was a beneficial, and long-term investment for the students, and quite useful for me, because most ideas could be transferred to online teaching.

What did the students say?

I gained lot of helpful information about online stuff, like efficient communication over teams, or fulfilling online tests and tasks, moreover I am more confident because of nobody sees me.

We have to do a lot of tasks in teams so I would say I can work better with others but at the same time I feel like I can't really cooperate well. But I had the opportunity to talk with a lot of people during these tasks and I feel like I have a great relationship with most of them and it is a very important thing for me.

7   Teaching materials and methods

When it came to selecting materials, there were two considerations: simplicity and accessibility. Therefore we used our set coursebook, Market Leader (Cotton et al., 2011) to as much extent as possible, and I uploaded online materials (tasks, videos, texts) to our common online platform in a clear and organized way.

Online learning has caused dramatic change in students' access to materials during classes or test-writing. It made our teacher-student relationship more equal, as they had access to the same sources, websites as I did. This resulted me not administering tests on vocabulary of any form of factual knowledge. I opted for questions which required using critical thinking skills, creativity, problem solving for which the Internet could provide background information but not the final answer.

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We also had lively debates, and actually I doubt if in the classroom they would have been that enjoyable. The fact that we could hear each other equally well (or badly), that anyone could speak without being seen (no one used the camera but me) had a liberating effect.

As a teacher I learned that high quality materials, both spoken and written, and carefully selected, appropriate methods can achieve the same positive effect as classroom teaching.

What did the students say?

I feel like You have tried you best to bring the same quality of learning online, I didn't feel like much have changed in this class, of course when we were offline we could talk more directly but overall the quality and the fun is still there.

The lesson itself hasn't really changed, the theme we need to learn and practice has also stayed the same, the tasks have become a little bit challenging since we are not in a physical contact.

8   Evaluation in progress

As I mentioned earlier, ESP course evaluation can be done by collecting feedback from the students, and also by making students write a diagnostic test at the beginning and an achievement test at the end of the course. The course has not finished yet, but I have collected some feedback from the students. The answers reveal that online learning improved their speaking skills and helped to fight their inhibition.

What did the students say?

Lots of lots of words actually. I used grammar and speaking pretty confidently but I learned a lots of new words here. I got a lot of experience not in speaking but how to speak properly.

I have learnt a lot about the business side of English and I think I am a bit more confident when it comes to speaking.

I think this class has the most fun and good vibe atmosphere at all, we can work in groups and we can talk to each other LIVE. I mean LIVE, and I'm glad I can hear other people voices.

9   Changing attitude and motivation

If there is one word that would aptly describe our attitude to online teaching, it is 'fluctuating'. What first only seemed a technical challenge turned into a sense of achievement: we learned how to use online tools. When our hopes of going back to the classroom were dashed, we felt desperate, and as more of our friends, family members fell ill due to the Covid-19, we felt bereaved, and no online game was able to take our mind off our solitude and loss. Now, in the middle of April, as the academic year is coming to an end our spirits are lifted. We learned to appreciate our discussions, we enjoy hearing each other's voice.

One potential negative effect of online learning is making students demotivated. One suggestion to this problem is that students need to be self-motivated (Kishnapatria, 2020). I find it quite controversial, because most business students' instrumental motivation is rooted in the hope that they would find a job in their field. This is not the case now.

During my teaching career I have equipped myself with a wide array of motivational tools. I know how to motivate the lazy, the shy, the tired, the anxious. But I did not know how to help those whose heart is heavy. Mercy is a new concept in my teaching practice. Mercy overrules motivation, because it does not ask students to pretend and behave as if everything was just normal, when they are emotionally drained. If they just attend the classes doing the bare minimum, and do not quit, I can hope that one day their motivation will return. Meanwhile, I show mercy.

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What did the students say?

a) How did you feel…?

in November 2020
I felt sad.
Excited, enthusiastic
I was really sad, because I loved to go to the uni.

in February 2021
I felt even more sad.
Sorrowful
I was disappointed.

now, in April 2021
I feel bored because every day is the same.
Thoughtful, excited
I am feeling okay right now, but I really want to go back to the university, or offline.

b) How has your attitude changed?

Less motivation, less focus.

At some point I am more motivated, because I don't have to travel more than 2 hours per day, but some days I don't have any motivation.

Sometimes I feel like I have become too comfortable at home, sometimes it is harder to get myself to learn. Homework and projects are helping me to keep motivated and dive into the materials.

I think this class has the most fun and good vibe atmosphere at all, we can work in groups and we can talk to each other LIVE. I mean LIVE, and I'm glad I can hear other people voices.

c) How do you see your teacher?

She is very kind, very helpful and very understanding. I think she sees the situation of her students and understands it and she is trying to do her best to teach us the things we will really need in our future life and she is trying to help where she can.

10   Conclusion

Redesigning our courses in the face of a pandemic has taught me valuable lessons. I could define the most relevant aspects and goals of a business English course, which enabled me to find the real purpose of it.

When one of my most motivated students complained that he had lost all his motivation, and he did not know why to study, I told him that we were studying because we had a purpose, and our efforts were not in vain. What we were doing would equip him with skills necessary for his future job awaiting him after the pandemic.

> *"If you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how."*
> *— Friedrich Nietzsche*

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