

Methodological particularities in teaching business vocabulary

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Abstract

The study aims to put forward several approaches in teaching special vocabulary to students in economics. After an overview of standard methods involved in introducing general vocabulary of the English language, an analysis comes, of the particularities presented by the provision / acquisition of Business English terminology, i.e. significant differences in methodology brought about by the special nature of the economic language context. From among the classic methods of teaching English vocabulary some prove to be more suitable and efficient for the purpose of introducing business terms. The commonly used method of didactic texts that introduce standard vocabulary becomes a less proper device in the specialized field of economics, where authentic texts are to be employed, this triggering a distinct approach. Appealing methods such as puzzle games, deduction tables or matching drills can be used in dealing with compounds, borrowings, word formation or etymology. Both providers and receivers of business English vocabulary shall find useful the examples and findings implied.

Key words: Business English, introducing vocabulary, methodological particularities, authentic texts, interactive methods.

Introduction

Vocabulary teaching is an aspect sometimes debated in terms of both methodology and importance. If some researchers may say it is not the main thing to focus on during classes, some others develop remarkable procedures and give it utmost relevance. Altogether, distinct methods might be felt as more appropriate than others when it comes to introducing Business English terms than when dealing with standard vocabulary.

In terms of both efficiency and applicability, various approaches are considered more adequate. Interactive methods are generally better received by the beneficiaries of the didactic process and the instructors shall find methods and devices to meet halfway, so that serious, professional terminology is well assimilated by the recipients of the educational process in an agreeable, natural and effective manner, to ensure both familiarization and accumulation of knowledge and further good use of it.

Instructors shall find it more peculiar to deal with, for instance, specific, authentic texts, where the primary reason for their production was not didactic but informative, and which – taken from specialised sources as:

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magazines, almanacs, newspapers – were designed for the masses of readers that are already users of English. To take such texts and apply in class, for didactic purposes, will be more demanding than when dealing with regular texts that can be adequately found or even produced quite easily for this very purpose of vocabulary introduction.

Introducing vocabulary – standard methods

Teaching vocabulary in regular English classes has come to involve the production of a series of strategies and has since become an even more common subject matter for research studies. As a basic approach in teaching standard vocabulary, conclusively rendered by several authors in the field, we can agree that “it is important that we as teachers only introduce a little at a time, starting with the most frequent, useful, and learnable vocabulary, and returning later to more difficult vocabulary and less frequent uses of previously learned items. We need to repeat vocabulary often, because students must work with a word or phrase many times before acquisition takes place, and we must offer variety to keep the exercises fresh and to cater to different learning styles.” (McCarten, 26)

Classic methods that can be used for introducing vocabulary might range from the following (Joseph Pettigrew): matching (synonyms, opposites, beginnings and endings, terms and definitions, parts of phrases etc.), filling in the blank sentences, choosing the possible answers, completing phrases / sentences, correcting the mistakes, labelling / drawing a picture, crossing out the word that doesn’t belong with the others in the group, indicating categories, completing and discussing word sheets, looking for words that mean something given by a synonyms or a definition, filling in crossword puzzles, acting out (pantomime) for guessing the word, asking y/n questions for finding the word (e.g. jobs).

Then, for distinguishing shades of meaning & near synonyms, several types of drills can be employed, such as: discussing analogies, choosing multiple possible answers that can complete a structure or sentence, identifying semantic categories, arranging the words on a scale, discussing which word in a pair or a group is *stronger*, is *slang*, is *more polite*, has a more *positive connotation*, etc., completing definitions with one of several variants given.

When approaching a reading material, a reading passage, vocabulary can be introduced by teachers indicating students to guess word meaning from the context, giving the definitions and letting them find the words, teaching them when *not* to look up a word/ parts of speech/ different meanings of familiar vocabulary or explaining to them how to guess word meaning from the context (by relying on aspects such as: cause & effect, opposite/contrast, general sense, synonyms or paraphrases, recognizing definitions or examples from the subcategory implied by the notion etc.). (Pettigrew, 4-5)

Business English vocabulary – general particularities

Special characteristics of the economic terminology

Several BE words present particularities that entail one best way or another to introduce them. For some it may be more appropriate, for instance, to consider most part of the word family when one of the items is introduced, thus distinguishing between similar forms that trigger distinct meanings and, at the same time, providing instances of word formation rules that might come in later as useful. Words that are better taught in group, after a series of occurrences in texts or just when one more sophisticated member of the word family comes along, are, for example, the words formed from: ‘economy,’ ‘to employ’ or ‘advertise.’ Thus, considering the first example, distinction is made from the start between *economic* and *economical(ly)*, *economics* and *economy*, and other relevant word formation strategies are depicted from the exemplification with other words from the given family: *economist*, *economise*. *Economicity* or *econometrics* can also be mentioned. For the second example, students will meet a series of derivations from the verb to form nouns of diverse categories, from the person performing the action (*employer*) to the person on whom it was performed (*employee*), they will come across affixations that produce nouns showing the status implied by the action of the given verb, reflecting upon an individual or upon community (*unemployed*, *unemployment*, *employment*), and can discuss upon forms such as *employability* or *employable*. Short forms *ad* and *advert* along with the long form *advertisement* are normally also presented when the verb *to advertise* is introduced, pronunciation being here emphasised as well.

When dealing with borrowing, or international words, there is no particular need for sophisticated explanations except mentioning this particular nature of the word – when the aforementioned word’s equivalent in English is required, which is, generally, in the case of translations. Words like *economy*, *international*, *management*, *marketing*, *finance*, *bank*, *piracy* etc. are normally known or felt as familiar and, more often than not, when a text in the mother tongue is given for translation into English, such notions are ‘back-translated’ without difficulty.

Compound words in the field of Business English are a category that can offer incentive devices. Besides being a very large category, as quite many notions in business language are formed from more basic terms to get a suggestive structure, they are interesting to work with, from first considering both the separate meanings of the composing words and the resulting one, of the new structure, to the actual way of dealing with them, as various interactive activities can be used to introduce these compounds.

Significant differences in the approaches

When tackling BE, several interactive and more appealing methods of vocabulary introduction, such as: matching drills, substitution tables, puzzle or domino games shall prove easier to create and more didactic- or instructor-friendly than a text containing specific economic terminology at the same time respecting standards of vocabulary introduction, i.e. starting from general, easy words and gradually moving to more specialised ones. Such texts are unlikely to be found in authentic materials. Normally, the level of difficulty is constant and consistent all along a genuine business text as such texts do not abide by the didactic principles; it is not their purpose to do so. They are of course intended for something else than class work. Business magazines, authentic articles, internet texts that are used as didactic materials had been produced by specialists in business and by specialised journalists in order to inform a large mass of English-users, most of whom with good fundamentals in economics, on facts concerning aspects of the economy. Therefore, for the simple, primary step of introducing vocabulary, an authentic text is not very helpful, though it represents the basic unit of teaching BE. The contextual occurrence, though often felt as pretentious or rather dull, is, after all, priceless – the only instance that provides the true significance of the term at stake. As other researchers would also argue, “there seems to be a tendency, especially in ESP courses, to provide students with word-lists and ready-made glossaries to help them acquire specialised vocabulary. Vocabulary, however, does not mean simply ‘words’ because words are seldom found in isolation. [...] Students should be taught to not translate word-for-word because ESP lexical items are context-bound and can have a wide range of possible meanings according to the context.” (Leonardi, 148)

On the other hand, to create, just for didactic purposes, a text with BE terms is not in itself very usual, for it would be neither easy to produce nor too relevant in the real context – lacking precisely what makes it germane, the reality touch. Consequently, it is the authentic text that shall eventually be used, except maybe for a very basic or elementary level where just a few business terms, almost Standard English notions, are introduced, case in which, indeed, teachers may themselves undertake to produce some didactic ‘economic’ texts – with less fear of sounding too artificial and farfetched.

All in all, for all but the most elementary levels, authentic texts are the ones that are normally used in class, and for the reasons stated – of their insufficiency in providing a good methodological way for vocabulary acquisition and enforcement – they shall be complemented with a series of more likable ‘devices’ as the above-mentioned, thus introducing the new terms by various attractive activities, and smoothing out the sophisticated, specialised and blunt language by a playful approach in a laxer registry. Somewhere in between we have the combination of text analysis and play – a well-received method to meet both ends: “One of the best vocabulary strategies to teach is to ‘guess unknown words from context.’ This task consists in teaching students to determine first a word’s part of speech, and then they should look for clues around the word to

help with the meaning. The next step is to ask them to replace that word with a synonym and see whether it makes sense.” (Leonardi, 149-150)

Domino games, crosswords, matching halves, completing structures etc. will provide appealing ways of tackling vocabulary. So will activities such as finding in a table of letters words denoting notions belonging to a certain economic field or playing the ‘odd-man-out,’ with terms belonging to vaster or restrictive categories, ranging from economic domains and narrowing down to much more limiting headlines such as *bank, delivery, contract* etc.

Instances of dealing with BE terms

Text approach

An interactive approach would be (as in the exemplification in Table 1) to first play a kind of vocabulary game such as presenting the class with a multiple choice drill of choosing either the only one right or the only one wrong definition of several words. Due to the warm-up nature and lax register of this first activity the method will be more appealing.

The checking will be performed not by simple disclosure from the instructor but by the students’ own discovery, providing the context too. After consulting the text, thus considering the words in the authentic context, the students can reconsider their answer. This insures keeping focus and passive creation of cognitive connections that would constitute a memo technique device allowing better assimilation.

Only then are they given a list of definitions and by this the newly accumulated knowledge/ concept already enters the process of reinforcement.

Table 1. Exemplification

Multiple choice drills - The students are asked to choose the right or the wrong definition:		
<i>Circle the wrong definitions in each case:</i>		
debt =	owe money =	shortfall =
A an obligation to pay or perform something	A detain finances	A deficiency
B the state of owing something	B have to pay funds	B shortage
C something owned	C be in debt	C cold weather
D ownership	D keep coins and banknotes	D early autumn
<i>Circle the right definition in each case:</i>		
economic output =	roll over =	plunge into crisis =
A exports	A total revenue of the company	A search the cause of a crisis
B profit or loss	B postpone payment	B experience a distressful situation
C quantity of goods produced	C purchase a smaller company	C fear of diving
Vocabulary in Context - The students are required to read a relatively facile, though authentic text and pay attention to the words in italics, identifying the right answer to the multiple choices drill above, in this new light of the contextual occurrence:		
“Every second, it seems, someone in the world takes on more <i>debt</i> . The idea of a debt clock for an individual nation is familiar to anyone who has been to Times Square in New York, where the American public <i>shortfall</i> is revealed. Our clock (updated September 2012) shows the global figure for almost all government debts in dollar terms. Does it matter? After all, world governments <i>owe the money</i> to their own citizens, not to the Martians. But the rising total is		

important for two reasons. First, when debt rises faster than *economic output* (as it has been doing in recent years), higher government debt implies more state interference in the economy and higher taxes in the future. Second, debt must be *rolled over* at regular intervals. This creates a recurring popularity test for individual governments; rather as reality TV show contestants face a public phone vote every week. Fail that vote, as various euro-zone governments have done, and the country (and its neighbours) can be *plunged into crisis*." (*The global debt clock*)

Dictionary definitions (*thefreedictionary.com*) - Students will have to consider the definitions of the words or phrases studied above and make final corrections if there are still mistakes in their choices:

debt¹
 = an obligation to pay or perform something; liability
 = the state of owing something or of being under an obligation

shortfall²
 = a failure to attain a specified amount or level; a shortage.
 = the amount by which a supply falls short of expectation, need, or demand.
 = failure to meet a goal or a requirement
 = the amount of such a failure; deficiency
 = the lack of forces, equipment, personnel, materiel, or capability, reflected as the difference between the resources identified as a plan requirement and those apportioned to a combatant commander for planning, that would adversely affect the command's ability to accomplish its mission.
 = the property of being an amount by which something is less than expected or required

owe³
 = to have a legal duty to pay funds to another. However, to owe does not make the amount "payable" if the date for payment has not yet arrived. (See: debt, due, payable)
 = be beholden, be bound, be due, be in debt, be indebted, be liable, be obligated, be under obligation, contract a debt, have a loan, have an obligation, incur a debt
 -associated concepts: debt owed, debtor-creditor laws, legally owed, taxes owed

economic output⁴
 -output in economics is the "quantity of goods or services produced in a given time period, by a firm, industry, or country," whether consumed or used for further production.
 - *net output*, sometimes called *netput* is a quantity, in the context of production, which is positive if the quantity is output by the production process and negative if it is an input to the production process.

to roll over⁵
 = to defer or postpone payment of (an obligation).
 = to renegotiate the terms of (a financial deal).
 = to reinvest (funds from a maturing security or from a tax-deferred account) into a similar security or account.

to plunge into
 = to suddenly experience a difficult or unpleasant situation (*Longman Exams Dictionary*)
 = to make someone / something pass through hardships

Further on, discussion of some of the vocabulary in the first activity can be felt as relevant. It shall prove useful especially in the situations of easily mistakable notions (e. g. owe, own). It may also come in handy to discuss all entries of the multiple choice in order to emphasize the difference, to point out what distinguishes the variants listed and brings them together, or what confusions they might imply, i.e., to justify their occurrence in the multiple choice drill.

Economic words games

¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/debt>

² <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/shortfall>

³ <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/owe>

⁴ <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/economic+output>

⁵ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/roll+over>

Creating a domino of words of a certain category, finances for instance (as in Figure 1), shall induce a catching and relaxed atmosphere, ensuring acquisition of the structures even passively, due to the focus on the game.

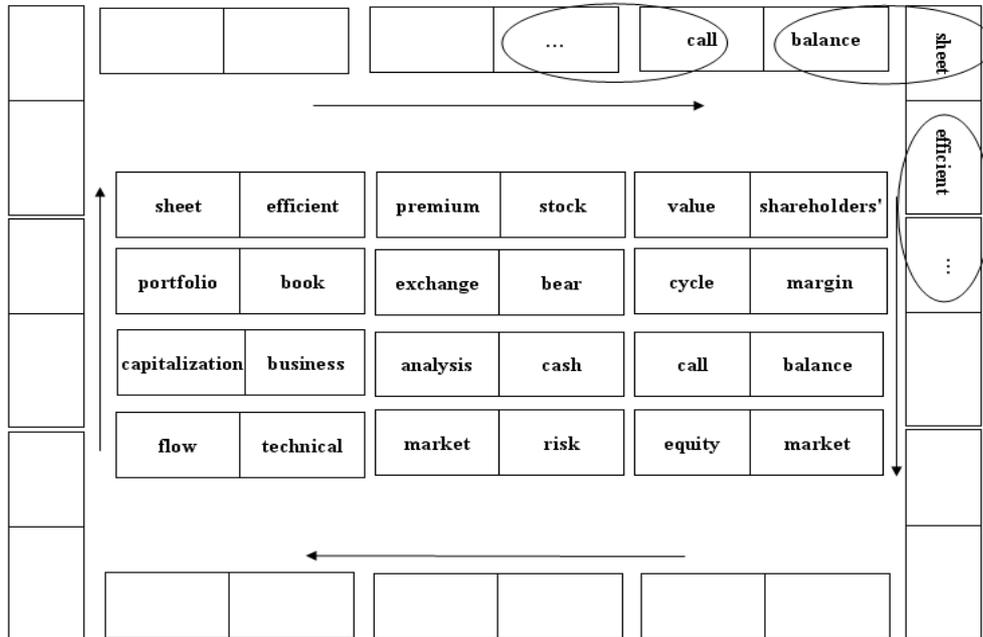


Figure 1. Domino of finances

It can raise the appetite for work through the provision of more rewarding goals than just learning, assimilating knowledge and getting the right answers that would delight the teacher, i.e. satisfaction of winning the competition, being the first to finish the game; apart from the fact that games as such are a well-received approach in general. The compounds that shall be formed putting the domino pieces in the right order are shown in Figure 2:

balance sheet	margin call	bear market	technical analysis	efficient portfolio	market capitalization
business cycle	book value	cash flow	risk premium	stock exchange	shareholders' equity

Figure 2. Finances' compounds

A puzzle game would also draw interest when considering easy vocabulary of finances, crosswords (such as in Figure 3, left side) being not very difficult to create. After having been given the definitions of the words across (from 1 to 7) and indicating that down (from α to ω) there is the name of an economic field, the students shall spend some pleasant time trying to complete the crosswords and again involuntary, passive acquisition of language is implied, which will be felt as easy and shall have positive results. The filled in crosswords can be seen in Figure 3, right side. The definitions to be given to the students in order to fill in the required words can

be taken from various dictionaries. The following examples are from the free version of WordWeb software. (<http://wordweb.info/>)

1. The excess of revenues over outlays in a given period of time
2. An obligation to pay money to another party
3. The entire amount of income before any deductions are made
4. A useful or valuable quality
5. A financial institution that accepts deposits and channels the money into lending activities
6. The total spent for goods or services
7. Amounts paid for goods and services

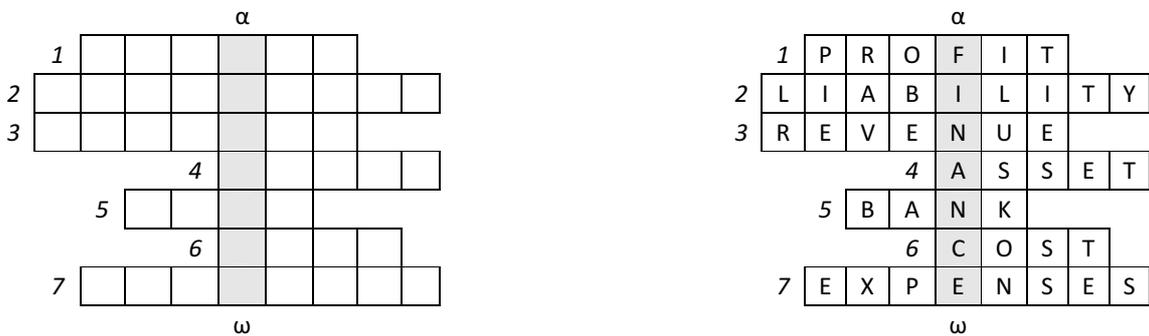


Figure 3. Crosswords puzzle of finances and solution

Word searching can be found as interesting and appealing as well. Various programmes can help teachers create word search puzzles, like the one used for producing the example underneath (<http://www.armoredpenguin.com/wordsearch/>). The students can be given a table of letters (as seen in Figure 4, left side – the right side showing the answers of the puzzle) and asked to circle terms connected to a particular field, terms that can be disposed in various ways (horizontally, vertically, diagonally, reversed - combined), in accordance with the students’ level.

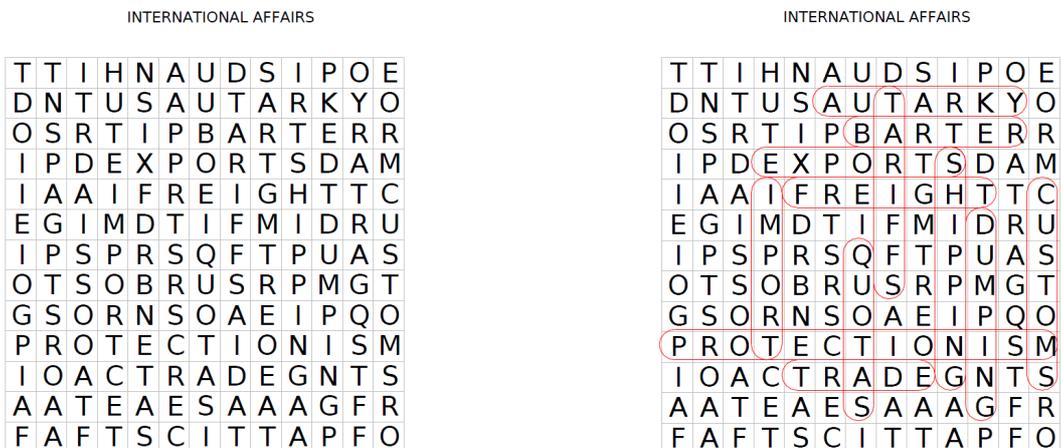


Figure 4. Word search game and solution

Conclusions and recommendations

The study brought into discussion the degree of appropriateness of several methods of teaching Business English vocabulary. The specificity of the economic language context triggers particularities in what the introduction of this terminology is regarded. Contextual approach remains among the most relevant ones, with authentic texts brought to classes as reading material, which implies certain distinctness from the use of Standard English texts. While Standard English texts are easily to be found or produced so as to meet various needs of registers of speech, categories at stake or levels of knowledge, the special economic reading materials do not make allowance of any of these aspects being intended for other than didactic reasons. Hence, teachers are faced with a need for different approaches.

On the other hand, exercises and games prove to be very good ways of tackling specific vocabulary, coming to complete the contextual method. Thus, for instance, various word games can be produced and are well received in class being both interesting and efficient. At the same time, diverse types of matching drills are very common and particularly useful. Consequently, these methods are recommendable for introducing vocabulary at most levels, proving adaptable to a multitude of situations. The best approach of vocabulary introduction is a combination of the traditional contextual method, updated permanently with authentic material, and several more appealing and flexible exercises and games.

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