

Bridging Theory and Practice: Teaching Business English Vocabulary through Communicative Approaches

Wafa Mohamed Asghiyer Abo Baker *

Department of English Language, Faculty of Education, Bani Waleed University, Bani Walid, Libya

*Email (for reference researcher): wafamohammed@bwu.edu.ly

جسر الهوة بين النظرية والتطبيق: تدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية الخاصة بمجال الأعمال باستخدام المناهج التواصلية

وفاء محمد الصغير *

قسم اللغة الانجليزية، كلية التربية، جامعة بني وليد، بني وليد، ليبيا

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Abstract:

This article explores the gap between traditional and communicative approaches to teaching Business English vocabulary. A needs analysis of 55 high school students revealed strong preferences for communicative skills (presentations, customer relations) over grammar-focused instruction. Subsequently, an experiment compared vocabulary retention under three conditions: preparation for a standard test, a written essay, or a simulated job interview. Students expecting to use vocabulary communicatively — especially orally — significantly outperformed those preparing for rote memorization. The findings suggest that even partial integration of communicative strategies, grounded in CLT principles, can transform vocabulary learning from mechanical repetition into meaningful, context-rich acquisition. Theory, the article concludes, offers practical tools rather than abstract burdens for language teachers.

Keywords: ESP, Business English, vocabulary, CLT, needs analysis.

المخلص

تسعى هذه المقالة إلى سد الفجوة بين الأساليب التقليدية والتواصلية في تدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية للأعمال. كشف تحليل احتياجات أجري على 55 طالبًا في المرحلة الثانوية عن تفضيل واضح للمهارات التواصلية (كالمحاضرات التقديمية وعلاقات العملاء) على التعليم القائم على القواعد النحوية. كما قارنت تجربة لاحقة بين ثلاث طرق لتعلم المفردات: الاستعداد لاختبار تقليدي، أو كتابة مقال، أو محاكاة مقابلة عمل. وقد تفوق الطلاب الذين توقعوا استخدام المفردات بشكل تواصلية — وخصوصًا شفهيًا — تفوقًا كبيرًا على أولئك الذين اعتمدوا على الحفظ الآلي. تشير النتائج إلى أن حتى التطبيق الجزئي للاستراتيجيات التواصلية، المستندة إلى مبادئ تعليم اللغة التواصلية، يمكن أن يحول تعلم المفردات من تكرار ميكانيكي إلى اكتساب هادف وسياقي. أظهرت النتائج أن النظرية زوّدت معلمي اللغة بأدوات عملية تعينه وليس مجرد عبء نظري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة (ESP)، الإنجليزية للأعمال، المفردات، تدريس اللغة التواصلية (CLT)، تحليل الاحتياجات.

Introduction

Teaching Business English vocabulary in secondary schools requires navigating a persistent tension: scholarly theories offer rich guidance, but classroom practice is constrained by limited time, fixed curricula, and large classes. This article examines how Business English vocabulary has traditionally been taught, how contemporary ESP research proposes it should be taught, and how it can be taught effectively within the specific context of a Serbian high school. Based on a needs analysis and a small-scale experiment involving 55 students, the study argues that even a partial engagement with theory — particularly the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) — can significantly improve vocabulary retention and learner motivation. The article does not claim definitive solutions, but aims to offer practical insights for language teachers facing similar real-world constraints.

1. From General English to English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged relatively late in the twentieth century as a shift from teaching abstract grammatical structures to addressing how language is used in real communication (Widdowson, 1978). Unlike General English (GE), which serves broad educational goals, ESP is defined not by a specific type of language or materials, but by an **approach** grounded in learner needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1991: 19). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 4) later refined this view by identifying **absolute characteristics** of ESP: it

meets specific learner needs, draws on the methodology of the target discipline, and focuses on the language appropriate to that field (grammar, lexis, discourse). **Variable characteristics** include the possibility of being designed for specific disciplines, for adult learners (though secondary students are also included), and for intermediate or advanced levels.

Business English is widely considered a branch of ESP. Ellis and Johnson (1994: 3) argue that Business English shares core ESP elements: needs analysis, syllabus design, materials selection, and course development. What distinguishes Business English from GE is a strong **sense of purpose**, an intercultural dimension, and a demand for efficient communication (Harmer, 2006: 14; Donna, 2000: 6).

2. Vocabulary and Motivation in ESP

Learners of ESP are typically more goal-oriented than GE learners. Their specific professional or academic needs trigger **intrinsic motivation**, which enhances learning efficiency (Brown, 2007: 168-175). Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguish between **integrative motivation** (learning for personal enrichment) and **instrumental motivation** (learning for practical ends). Both types are relevant to ESP, as students often need the language for immediate, real-world tasks.

The teacher plays a crucial role in sustaining motivation. Harmer (2006: 57-64) outlines flexible teacher roles: controller, organizer, prompter, participant, tutor, and observer. Swales (1985) prefers the term **ESP practitioner**, emphasizing that ESP teachers must understand the specific vocabulary of the field they teach — without necessarily being experts, they should consult specialists when needed.

Thornbury (2002: 18-25) offers practical strategies for vocabulary teaching. Learning a word involves not just form and meaning, but building a **mental lexicon** through networks of association. Key principles for retention include:

- **Repetition and retrieval:** active use prevents forgetting.
- **Cognitive depth:** the more decisions a learner makes about a word, the better it is remembered.
- **Personal organizing and imaging:** visualizing words stores them in long-term memory.
- **Mnemonic techniques:** e.g., the keyword method (associating a new word with a familiar sound and image).

3. Two Contrasting Methods: GTM and CLT

Despite the availability of more communicative methods, many teachers still rely on the **Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)**. This traditional approach focuses on grammar rules, translation of sentences, and memorization of bilingual word lists. Reading and writing are emphasized; speaking and listening are neglected. The teacher is the authority, the medium is the native language, and students remain passive (Larsen-Freeman, 2003: 11-20). GTM persists partly because it demands little preparation and does not require the teacher to be fluent in the target language.

In contrast, **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)** aims to develop **communicative competence** — knowing what to say, how to say it, and when to adjust style according to context (Hymes, 1972: 281). CLT is not a single method but an **eclectic approach** drawing on cognitive science, educational psychology, and second language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 66-71).

Richards (2006: 12) summarizes CLT principles: real communication is the focus; learners discover grammar rules through use; fluency and accuracy are both developed. Howatt (1984: 279) distinguishes a **weak version** (learning to use English) from a **strong version** (using English to learn it).

Littlewood (2001: 16-64) categorizes CLT activities into:

- **Functional communication activities:** sharing information (with restricted or unrestricted cooperation), processing information, solving problems from shared clues.
- **Social interaction activities:** role plays, simulations, debates — where learners practice appropriate social and linguistic behavior.

The teacher in CLT is a **facilitator**, not a commander. Breen and Candlin (1980: 99) describe two main roles: facilitating communication and participating as a co-communicator. Medgyes (1986) acknowledges that CLT demands more from teachers — lessons are less predictable — but the rewards in student engagement are substantial.

4. Needs Analysis: What Students Want

A needs analysis was conducted with 55 second-grade high school students (Law and Administration School) using a questionnaire adapted from Emmerson (2002).

Summary

a) Preferred communication skills (in descending order):

- Presentations (190)
- Customer relations (140)
- Discussions/Meetings, Business Correspondence, Job Interviews (130 each)

- Negotiating (120)
- Telephoning (110)
- Business Reports (75)

b) Preferred business topics:

- Travel (50 students)
- Entertainment (45)
- Management, Finance, New Technology (35 each)
- Sales/Marketing, Recent Business News (15 each)
- International Trade, Production, Human Resources (5 each)
- Political/Economic Context (0)

c) Grammar vs. communication: Approximately 75% preferred more everyday communication, 20% wanted more grammar, and 5% were neutral.

Interpretation

Students favor communicative skills that yield **direct, visible benefits** (presentations, customer relations). Less popular activities (job interviews, negotiating) may reflect Serbia’s relatively short tradition of competitive job markets and liberal business culture. The high interest in travel and entertainment is typical for teenagers, but suggests that older or university students might prioritize different topics.

The strong preference for communication over grammar is predictable, yet teachers must resist oversimplifying “practice” as mere conversation. As Ellis and Johnson (1994: 6) note, in Business English, **performance objectives take priority** — but grammatical accuracy remains a foundation for effective communication.

5. The Experiment

To test whether communicative expectations improve vocabulary retention, a small experiment was designed with the same 55 students. They were given 60 Business English words to learn in one week — a mix of ordinary words with specialized business meanings (e.g., *active customer, charge, clear a profit*) and technical terms or slang (e.g., *hot desking, superleadership*).

Students were **unknowingly divided into three groups**:

Group	Task Expectation (announced)	Actual Test
1 (n=18)	Standard vocabulary test (word list)	Same word list test
2 (n=18)	Write an essay using the words (topics announced)	Same word list test
3 (n=19)	Participate in a simulated job interview (15 min)	Same word list test

Results

Group	Average words learned (out of 60)	Students scoring >30	Preferred test format
1	~22	3	Serbian translation
2	~43	15	English paraphrase
3	~50	19 (all)	English paraphrase

Two students in Group 3 achieved a perfect score (60/60).

Interpretation

The group that expected only rote memorization (Group 1) performed worst. Groups that expected to **use** the words communicatively — especially orally (Group 3) — significantly outperformed them, even though everyone ultimately took the same simple word-list test.

Why? Students in Groups 2 and 3 believed they would need to produce sentences, not just recognize meanings. They likely practiced formulations, built associations, and mentally rehearsed contexts. Group 3 had the additional advantage of preparing for an **improvised, time-pressured dialogue**, which demands fluency and instant recall. Moreover, the oral task aligned with student preferences (presentations ranked highest in the needs analysis), boosting engagement.

Notably, only Group 1 chose to learn words via **Serbian translation** — the path of least resistance. Groups expecting production preferred **English paraphrases**, indicating deeper processing (Thornbury's "cognitive depth").

Conclusion

Teaching is indeed stressful, and educational theories can sometimes feel like distant, intimidating abstractions. Yet this study suggests otherwise.

A comparison of GTM and CLT reveals that the teacher's role shifts from dominant authority to reserved facilitator — paradoxically becoming more active by stepping back. No teaching field requires more continuous updating than language teaching, especially ESP. Business purposes evolve rapidly; teachers cannot rely solely on old textbooks.

The experiment offers a simple but powerful lesson: **vocabulary is better learned when supplied with context**. Even a temporary, invented, or even "false" context (students believed they would use the words, though they never did) improved retention dramatically. Memorization need not be dry and mechanical. By borrowing insights from CLT — role plays, simulations, information-gap activities — teachers can place "flesh on the bone" of word lists.

Thus, theory becomes practical. After reading Thornbury, Littlewood, Richards, Rodgers, or Hutchinson and Waters, any teacher can develop a **personal, workable theory** that transforms daily practice. The gap between theory and practice is not unbridgeable. It only requires a small step toward communication.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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