

ATELIERUL 3. DIDACTICA LIMBILOR-CULTURI ROMANO-GERMANICE

THE DIDACTICS OF TEACHING CORPORATE ENGLISH

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With the rise of English as the main language of business communication, more and more companies call on trainers to teach it to their employees, on the one hand to enable them to communicate freely with overseas partners and, on the other hand, as an additional benefit to motivate them to stay in the company. However, practice shows that teaching English - especially specialized English - to staff, middle and top management is extremely different from teaching English in an academic environment. Expectations, motivation, and outcomes differ largely from students to trainees and there is an entire set of challenges that accompany such a process, which encompass the linguistic level, the grammar level, or the didactic level. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to shed some light on the main challenges encountered in teaching English at a corporate level, as well as on the best ways to adapt the more conservative academic style of teaching to the fast-paced, demanding, and flexible approach required by companies.

Keywords: corporate English, didactic, linguistic approaches, creativity in teaching.

Introduction

In an article published on linguistic diversity (2001), Thomas Homer-Dixon, a Canadian scholar and professor at the University of Toronto argues that linguistic diversity is as unconditionally indispensable to us as biodiversity; he shows then how humanity has tended to homogenize agriculture in an attempt to make it more efficient. Today we are "homogenizing our ecosystems on a global scale, turning forests and grasslands into monocultures of trees and grains, paving over our wetlands for housing developments and shopping malls, and replacing our depleted natural fishing grounds with aquaculture ponds" (ibidem). It is not just a metaphor that Homer-Dixon compares the homogenization of agriculture with the current evolution of languages. "Linguistic and cultural differences hinder trade and profit; global capitalism needs a more transparent and manageable environment to function." It goes without saying that people everywhere want to take advantage of the global economic system. That is why "from the top down and from the bottom up, they are trying to dismantle the barriers. Two of the main instruments of this dismantling are the English language, and the Western culture it conveys" (ibidem). In other words, according to Homer-Dixon, the peoples themselves are the agents of the homogenization of ecosystems as well as of linguistic systems.

According to a Harvard Business Review (2012), English is currently spoken at a useful level by approximately 1.75 billion people worldwide, which means that roughly one in every four people in the world are able to communicate in this language. In today's world, where borders are disappearing more and more, the language skills of its inhabitants are becoming more important than ever. With figures speaking of more than 80% of the data on the internet being in English and with

English becoming the international language of business, science, and technology, it is no wonder that more and more companies invest more and more in English courses for their employees. Thus, according to an American report on the training industry (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/788521/training-expenditures-united-states/>), the companies' budget for training activities reached 83 billion dollars in 2019, a clear indication that raising the competence and performance of employees is a must for every company. However, as large sums of money are paid on such training programs that are meant to boost employees' skills of communicating in a foreign language, there arises a problem of efficiency and finding the best way to teach should always be the primary goal of every trainer.

There are various approaches to teaching English as a foreign language and most of them have evolved with a shift in focus, from finding the best ways to teach to identifying the best ways to communicate freely. However, practice has shown that the environment also plays a crucial role and carries with it a series of traits that influence the very process of teaching. As opposed to teaching English as a foreign language in non-specialized faculties, teaching English in corporations comes with many challenges and requires a profound understanding of how businesses work and what their expectations are. A professor becomes a trainer and their students become trainees. Delivering language courses to companies involves much more than merely disseminating knowledge; it encompasses aspects that range from empathy to being able to stimulate motivation and from identifying psychological barriers to blending public speaking skills.

Main Differences Between Teaching in an Academic Environment vs. Companies

Although a little counterintuitive, not all good teachers become good trainers. And there are many reasons behind this fact. One of the main reasons is that by leaving the academic world one leaves an entire *status* behind. In most countries, teachers are usually held in high esteem because teaching should never be a simple job to earn a living. It is a career of great responsibility for the process of teaching forms the citizens of tomorrow. Society in general views teaching as a challenging and highly valued profession and therefore teachers are treated with a higher level of consideration than workers in other fields. Trainers, on the other hand, are bound to earn that consideration which no longer comes for granted. It is not like trainers are not respected; it is just that they are not respected simply for who they are but rather for what they do. Most of the time trainers are regarded with suspicion at first and they need to make efforts to prove themselves worthy of admiration and respect as a professional. Many teachers who decide to become corporate trainers can feel a bit uncomfortable in front of people who no longer view them on a pedestal but on a stage, where they don't have their audience's attention by default and they need to fight for it. Moreover, teachers or professors have certain *leverage* on their students (such as grades, exams, etc.) which they lose on corporate ground. Thus, they can't rely on any sort of extrinsic motivation and should strive to foster any intrinsic motivation trainees might have. The teaching approach changes drastically therefore because intrinsic motivation is non-instrumental in nature, whereas extrinsic motivation is contingent upon reaching an outcome: "In general, when the social environment supports autonomy by increasing an internal perceived locus of causality (i.e., the behavior stems from personal choice and internal causation rather than external pressure), then intrinsic motivation is enhanced. In contrast, when the social environment neglects or thwarts autonomy by increasing an external perceived locus of causality (e.g., by offering extrinsic rewards or making demands), then intrinsic motivation is undermined. Thus, to the extent that the social environment uses controlling behavioral strategies and external constraints, reinforcers, and punishers, then motivation will become less intrinsic and more extrinsic – because personal autonomy is compromised" (Legault, 2016, p.2). While ideally teachers should also nourish intrinsic motivation in schools and universities as it is the optimum form of motivation, the reality is that many times students learn to pass an exam or get a higher grade while in corporations the trainees' goals are oriented more on what they can benefit from a course and less on what happens if they don't. The ways to enhance intrinsic motivation should focus on making courses fun,

captivating and correctly challenging. To put it more simply, intrinsic motivation is a form of curiosity that leads one to want to learn because the object of learning arouses an interest. It directly influences the quality of learning because it fosters cognitive processes such as intensity of attention, ability to concentrate, efficiency of memory, and courage to venture into the unknown and take risks.

Another major difference between teaching English in an academic environment and in corporations is the *time* allocated to learning. While typically a foreign language is taught for eight to ten years in schools and universities, corporate English courses rarely last for more than six to twelve months on average. This has a powerful impact on both curricular choices and expectations. The concentrated nature of business language teaching carries with it a careful selection of grammatical notions to be introduced and shifts even more the focus from theory to practice. Given the limited time, a trainer should aim at introducing only the fundamental organizing principles of a language and choose only practical, simple examples that allow trainees to communicate while leaving out elaborate details, exceptions and archaic norms. From the perspective of corporate English didactic, time is not an ally since many trainees (as well as their employers) have unrealistic expectations related to the time needed to become proficient in English and hence demotivation can frequently occur. Misled by tons of advertisements that promise a quick and easy familiarization with English and disillusioned by the rather large amount of effort and dedication they need to put in, trainees can become easily demotivated and lose track. Unlike in the academic environment, where time seems to be on students' side, in corporations time can become an enemy and teaching should keep up with this fast-paced approach. Another key aspect here is the formation of training groups, which should be made only after rigorous testing and which should include only trainees of a similar level of proficiency in English, to allow the trainer to timely introduce the right topics and to monitor closely their individual performances.

The didactics of business or corporate English also differs from the didactics of teaching English in an academic environment considering the *level of linguistic expertise* or knowledge on the part of the trainees. Especially in specialized faculties (such as faculties of letters or faculties with intensive teaching in English) students are aware of grammar concepts (tense, mood, degrees of comparison, etc.) whereas in companies most trainees are adults who have long forgotten these notions or who have never been interested in them. Therefore, teaching should become less abstract and more practice-oriented. Names of clauses, elaborate notions of syntax and morphology, tenses and aspects of voices should be introduced in a friendlier manner, with many practical examples, to avoid confusion and cognitive overload on the part of the trainees. Trainers of business English should always be aware that the ultimate goal of learning of a foreign language has been, and continues to be, "to learn to behave appropriately in communicative situations in which the learner will have some chance of being found using the codes of the target language" (Puren, 1988, p.371). Following this axiom, in recent years, the teaching-learning process has shifted from abstract theoretical concepts and focused on the development of general and communicative language skills of the user/learner. Among these competencies, the development of intercultural knowledge and skills is at the heart of didactic concerns since these are set as the main objectives to be achieved by learners.

In this perspective of success for learners, and, in this case, for English trainees, the first question that arises is to examine whether (and to what degree) the mastery of language skills can ensure and reveal intercultural competence. Consequently, it seems useful to reflect critically on the contribution and impact of linguistic skills on the operationalization, or even the proceduralization, of intercultural know-how insofar as the latter is supposed to be associated with - and derived from - the mastery of linguistic knowledge. To this end, questions should be asked on the intelligibility and comprehensibility of linguistic statements and whether they provide the learners with the possibility of having an effective exchange with their English-speaking interlocutors without encountering difficulties at the communicative, even cultural level. Thus, instead of explicit and theoretical out-of-context grammar learners should be given an opportunity to understand language in more meaningful ways (Morisey, Young, 2005).

One of the differences with the biggest impact on the act of teaching that trainers should take into consideration when choosing a career as a corporate language trainer is *the nature of the job* itself. In schools and universities, teachers and professors provide education; in companies, trainers provide a service. Thus, they will be appreciated, judged and – why not – hired according to slightly different criteria, which include, among others, the ability to achieve fast results in a short time, professionalism, reliability, and flexibility. Every company is an individual micro-universe with its own characteristics, organizational culture, and requirements, unlike an established institution where change permeates with greater difficulty. Continuous innovation is a prerequisite of success in corporate English teaching, in line with the description put forward in 2009 by Lacroix and Potvin, who envisaged educational innovation based on four characteristics: (1) novelty, (2) product, (3) change and improvement, and (4) sustainability and transferability. The authors defined innovation as "something new in a particular context. This innovation represents "a new product, a new technology, an institutional device, a method, a new process". It is perceived as an action that "makes it possible to improve unsatisfactory situations or [...] to solve problems" (Lacroix, Potvin, 2009, p.1-6). In terms of corporate English teaching, it is mandatory for a good trainer to rely on a full arsenal of didactic approaches and to continuously alternate them until they find the best way to adapt to a specific environment and a specific group. What works with one group may very well fail with another. Adaptability and flexibility should be a teacher's best weapons and sessions need to vary from case studies to technical presentations, from the use of music and jokes to the art of public speaking and from role plays to various simulated business scenarios. Furthermore, although corporate English is commonly referred to as business English in the literature, companies come from various fields (machine tools, automotive, IT, lawyer's offices, accounting, etc.) and each field has a specific vocabulary, which makes it even more demanding for a trainer.

Conclusion

The world of corporate training comes with a whole array of challenges and peculiarities which exert a lot of pressure on English trainers, especially if they come from the academic world. Once they leave the academic environment, they should become aware of the fact that many things work differently and that didactic approaches that bring good results in schools and universities may fail lamentably in corporations. Almost everything changes, from attitude to motivation and from goals and aspirations to short-term success requirements. While it is true that no amount of warning and preparation can fully prevent the psychological shock on future trainers once they leave the safety of educational institutions, better knowledge of the nature and expectations of the corporate world can prove highly beneficial. Learning to deal with potential negative attitudes, good anticipation of likely obstacles, handling frustration, stress and demotivation are essential in the didactics of corporate English teaching and the success of such training builds upon a different kind of teaching experience. Mastering various didactic approaches, continuous self-improvement and familiarization with public speaking techniques are crucial for any future corporate English trainer.

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