



ORIGINAL PAPER

Students' Integration in Target Communities of Practice: an ESP Perspective

Eleonora Olivia Bălănescu¹⁾

Abstract:

After the fall of communism, Romania witnessed the rapid increase in number of foreign companies that opened subsidiaries or started new businesses in the country, and subsequently needed local workforce. The demand for English speakers has steadily grown, hence the importance of teaching English for Specific Purposes for the benefit of future employees, employers and customers. The aim of this paper is to approach the issue of learners' needs with respect to the requirements of target communities of practice, and to propose a range of activities that teachers can use in Business English classes, in order to support learners' integration in those communities. The classroom activities are designed on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, emphasising the social dimension of learning. As a method, we resort to researchers' considerations on needs' analysis, language and sociocultural skills in order to build the theoretical framework for the presentation of communicative teaching activities. The conclusion is that the shift from a linguistic to a communicative approach in language teaching has significantly changed ESP course design.

Keywords: *communicative competence; learning target; needs analysis; teaching; training gap.*

¹⁾ Associate Professor, PhD, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters, Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Romania, Phone: 0040723506212, E-mail: olivia.balanescu@edu.ucv.ro

Introduction

Back in the 1990s, Western investors became interested in Romania's economic potential sustained by qualified and fairly cheap workforce. Since then, the local market has accommodated an increasing number of foreign companies eager to employ Romanian specialists and further develop their businesses. At the same time, the West became professionally attractive for more and more Romanians who, since 1989, have opted to go abroad for work or/and studies. These phenomena greatly impacted the educational system that "started its curriculum reform" in order to adapt to "the challenges of the new, democratic, western-oriented market" (Marcu, 2020: 119). The reform included a greater emphasis on the study of foreign languages in general and English language in particular.

Given the growing importance of English for professional careers, it is widely acknowledged that "the design of any pedagogical curriculum should be dictated primarily by the long-term needs of its students" (Huckin, 1988: 61). In the case of students in business, the long-term needs are closely linked to the communities of practice to which they will belong. Therefore, the findings of a needs analysis should outline not only the Business English knowledge that students have to acquire, but also the specific requirements of future work communities. This approach echoes sociocultural studies which emphasise that learning is mediated by the social and semiotic context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is also in line with linguistic theories which state that the goal in language learning is the development of communicative competence, which takes into account both the linguistic aspect of the target language and sociocultural factors, that is, the context in which language will be used (Hymes, 1972). From this perspective, the challenge for teachers is to support students in constructing a community of learners that are trained in the practices, knowledge and language of the target communities, and to develop the students' communicative skills that will enable them to integrate in those communities.

In what follows, we shall first focus on learners' needs with an eye on the communities of practice within business organisations; then, present a series of classroom activities that teachers can use in order to create and develop students' communicative competence.

Determining the training gap

In terms of methodology, ESP teaching should not be regarded as a "product" which is different from other forms of language teaching, but rather as an "approach" directed by students' definable needs to communicate in English (Hutchinson & Waters, 1994: 18). Regarded as a data collection process (Nunan, 1988), needs analysis is linked to "the core mission of preparing students to use English in their target contexts" (Hyon, 2018: 3). It is therefore important for ESP teachers to identify their learners' key requirements in terms of skills and language use. In order to determine the needs, the teacher should find information related to the target situation (where the students need to be, or what they have to know) and the current situation (where the students are, or what they already know, as well as what their learning preferences and expectations are). The difference between the two is commonly referred to as *the training gap*, that is, "the gap between what the learners' actual needs are and what should be taught to them" (Brindley, 1989: 56). Once identified, the gap will form the basis of future teaching and learning.

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General English methodologies present a series of methods or tools that can be used for gathering information in the classroom, such as questionnaires, placement tests, interviews, informal discussions, social events, observation etc. (Scrivener, 2005: 70). In the case of ESP, the needs analysis has to transcend the exchange of information between teacher and learners, and “go outside” the classroom. The investigation is broader and involves other sources and methods, such as readings of specialist subject books, ESP journals, methodology guides, or discussions with peers, supervisors, people who are in the target situation (they may work in a particular department, field, company), or even former students who can provide valuable information as to what extent the English courses helped them when they started working.

In order to determine learners' target linguistic requirements, which have long been considered as the “heart” of ESP (Munby, 1978), the target situation must thoroughly be investigated. This involves understanding *the communities of practice* in which learners will seek integration. Discussing communities of practice and their role in the process of learning, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner point out that this relatively recent coined term refers to an old phenomenon of people working and learning together: “Communities of practice are groups of people who *share a concern* [domain] or a passion for something they do and *learn how to do it better* [practice] as they *interact regularly* [community].” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 1, our emphasis) The shared domain of interest, the community of members who work together, help each other and learn from each other, as well as the shared practice in the domain of interest are the main characteristics of a community of practice, and “it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 2).

Nowadays, communities of practice can virtually be found everywhere, connecting people within business, education, government, professional associations and other organisations. Business people were among the first who adopted this concept, because they understood the importance of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the collective responsibility for managing the knowledge. Another important aspect of these communities refers to the fact that they create connections among practitioners that cross over hierarchical structures and geographical borders. The result is that:

“... the knowledge of an organisation lives in a constellation of communities of practice each taking care of a specific aspect of the competence that the organisation needs. However, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge – autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries – are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations.”

(Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 4)

Starting from Lave and Wenger's theory, Taylor reiterates the idea that an ESP training classroom can function as a typical community of practice. Thus, the learners are gathered by a shared concern in the subject matters, participate in classroom activities, and learn to “negotiate and construct identities” by working and interacting with each other (Taylor: 2015, 150). According to Lave and Wenger, identities are “long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in the community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 53). As the students legitimately take part in the community of practice, they undergo a process of change from being

“peripheral/novices” to full participants. This process, articulated by a mechanism of learning, enables students to acquire an identity in practice.

Learning in a community of practice is holistic, as it relies on the interdependence of the learner, the community, and the environment, or, as Lave and Wenger point out, it “implies emphasis on [...] the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 32). Language is very important in this process, since the ability to communicate in the same way as the members of the community do is crucial to a practitioner’s recognition as a full member.

From a teaching perspective, to prepare students for participating in communities of practice within business organisations means to analyse the shared repertoire of the communities, that is, the way in which practitioners do things as they get to work together. It also implies adequate training in the discourse of these communities, characterised by specific genre which is discoverable through text analysis (Swales, 2008). Genre instruction can raise students’ awareness on the importance of understanding genre and its role or contribution to shared communicative purposes. John Flowerdew underlines the challenges posed by genre: “Someone participating in a genre who does not have a command of these specific patterns and the limits to their possible variability is quickly recognised as either incompetent or an outsider.” (Flowerdew, 2011: 124)

These sociocultural perspectives, which demonstrate that the domains of language, culture and socialisation are interconnected, have paved the way for an understanding of learning that goes beyond the classroom. According to Wenger-Trayner, “the class is not the primary learning event. It is life itself that is the main learning event.” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 5) By recreating the curriculum of practice in the school’s community of learners, teachers give students the opportunity to acquire the language and knowledge they need inside and outside the classroom.

Developing learners’ communicative competence

Noam Chomsky’s fundamental distinction between “*competence* (the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language) and *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations)” (Chomsky, 1965: 4) informed future theoretical considerations regarding effective language use and acquisition. Whereas Chomsky emphasised the role of form, structure and grammatical content in language learning, thus arguing that teachers should develop learners’ linguistic competence, Hymes asserted that the goal in language learning should be the development of communicative competence. This concept takes into account not only the linguistic component of the target language, but also the discourse and the context-related use of the language. The shift from a linguistic to a communicative approach in language teaching has shaped current teaching approaches and the design of courses and teaching materials. Hedge noted that:

“the concern with how learners can use and develop their communicative ability in addition to acquiring language knowledge of various kinds has led to the process approach to course design [...] the focus is not so much on *what* learners need to cover but on *how* they acquire language through performing it in the classroom.” (Hedge, 2000: 359)

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ESP theory and practice have greatly benefitted from the emphasis on communicative competence, since learners' ability to communicate is the main condition of their participation in future communities of practice. As a result, classroom activities are meant to derive from the information offered by needs' analysis, and are designed as the actual or approximate versions of real activities. Ideally, the classroom should function as an extension of the world, yet, teachers should be aware that students' behaviour in communities of learning will always be different from those in a community of practice. The way they respond to ESP teachers and activities will not necessarily be the same to the way they would behave in front of instructors in a workplace (Beer, 2000).

In terms of practice, Communicative Language Teaching stresses the necessity of introducing "classroom activities that best facilitate learning" (Richards, 2005: 1). From this perspective, we shall present a series of classroom activities based on real-life communication through discussion, negotiations or debates. Irina Boncea points out that these communicative activities often "give rise to challenges that are impossible to anticipate" (Boncea, 2018: 43). This unpredictability of the outcome in terms of students' ideas, solutions and ways of managing debates or solving dilemmas turns communicative activities into a challenge not only for students, but also for teachers whose role is one of mediator. The interesting fact is that teaching is accomplished through practice, and thus both teachers and students are getting involved in a process of learning.

Talking about oneself

This seems to be an enjoyable activity, as students often like to speak about themselves, but do not often get the chance to do it. With new groups, it works well as an ice breaker because the students may not find themselves at ease to work together in pairs or groups unless they get to know each other a little first. Here are two sample activities that can be quickly organised.

1. *What we have in common*

The students are asked to work in pairs and find five things that they have in common. The advantage of such a task is that students are free to choose whatever topic they want, such as families, dwelling places, studies, daily routines, career plans, things they like or dislike etc. The partners are encouraged to ask questions and reply, and their findings should stress the things which bring them together.

2. *The interview*

Students need to be trained to talk about themselves because this is common practice at the beginning of job interviews or language proficiency tests. The activity can be organised as a role-play.

Student A

You are the examiner. Ask the candidate the following questions and take notes:

- What is your name?
- Where are you from?
- How old are you?
- What do you do?
- What are your favourite school subjects?
- What do you do in your free time?
- What do you plan to do in the future?

Student B

You are the candidate. Listen carefully to the questions and give complete answers in full sentences. Prepare to talk about:

- your name, age, birth place, family, studies;
- how you spend your free time;
- plans for the future.

Communication games

Communication games are based on information gaps. For example, students are divided into four large groups. Each group receives a different picture to study. Each picture is a graph showing sales revenue of different products as a percentage of a company's turnover in a particular year. There are four graphs for four different years. The teacher then collects the pictures and makes new groups of four students. In the new group, each student tells what his/her picture was about, and by discussing, the group has to find out about that company's financial situation. When they finish, each group is asked to present the situation to the class.

Discussion

Spontaneous discussion often develops in class when a student says something, another one reacts, others join in, and so on. Such discussions are usually lively and quite successful, but they are not planned. At the same time, there are cases when students say nothing or are reluctant to voice their opinions, either because the topic is too difficult, or because they are afraid to speak freely in English in front of the whole class. In order to avoid these situations and get students talking, the teacher needs to prepare the activity carefully, using the following techniques (Harmer, 2003: 124):

1. Give students time to prepare. When the teacher announces the topic, the students should be allowed some time to think about it, make notes, shape their opinions etc. In this way, they will feel confident when they join the discussion.
2. Let students work in groups first. When discussing in small groups, students feel less afraid to speak than in front of the whole class. They will be more willing to express their opinions and brainstorm ideas. The initial group discussion is also useful for the teacher who has the possibility to try and see if the topic is interesting enough to arouse students' interest and make them talk. If the topic is not suitable, the teacher can end the discussion there, without expanding it into a whole class session.
3. Give students a clear task. The discussion will be more efficient if students receive not only a topic for discussion, but also a task, such as:

Task: How important are the following aspects in showing a person's status in an organisation? Give each one a score from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| - a reserved parking space | - a personal business card |
| - an office with a window | - the size of your desk |
| - a uniform | - taking holidays when you like |
| - your name on your door | - flying business class |
| - a personal secretary | - a company credit card |
| - your own office | - having flexible working hours |
| - more than one seat in your office | - a uniform |
| - a company car | |

(Cotton, Falvy & Kent: 2018, 22)

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The students will solve the task in pairs or in groups, and this works well as a warm-up activity and also as a preparation for any full-class session. For instance, in order to introduce a lesson on management, the teacher may choose a start-up up activity that involves group discussion. The students receive a list of skills and qualities that a good manager should have. Working in groups, they have to choose the six most important ones and discuss their choice.

To be a good manager you need to:

- be an expert.
- like people.
- enjoy giving orders.
- listen to others.
- make suggestions.
- control people.
- judge people's abilities.
- focus on tasks, not people.
- enjoy working with others.
- plan ahead.
- be older than your staff.
- be good with numbers.
- be good at managing conflict.

(Cotton, Falvy & Kent: 2012, 96)

Controversial statements are also good discussion provokers. The students are asked to form small groups and tell their opinions about the following statements:

1. At work appearance is more important than performance.
2. You should keep your private life totally separate from your work.
3. People don't change much during their working lives.
4. It is best to work for as few companies as possible.
5. Everybody should retire at 50.
6. People advance in their career if they use charm with superiors.
7. There are things that you can't plan for in your working life.
8. You should plan your retirement from an early age.

(Cotton, Falvy & Kent: 2018, 68)

Learners need certain skills to be able to handle discussions. Thus:

- they should clearly say what they think about the topic and why they think so;
- they need to listen carefully to what their colleagues have to say before they reply;
- they should ask their colleagues questions;
- they should be calm and polite if they disagree;
- they should finish the discussion by summarising their opinions.

Reaching a consensus

During this activity, students have to talk to each other and reach a consensus regarding a certain problem that they have to solve. This type of class activity encourages students to speak freely and express their own point of view. Here are two communicative activities that involve reaching a consensus.

1. Students are given several leaflets with cars advertisements. They are told that they are members of the Public Relation Department of a new cosmetics company. The company is expanding and it has been decided to purchase a new car for the use of the department. The car should be economical, easy to park, but it should also uphold the image of the company. Working in pairs, students should choose the car that they consider worth buying. When the pairs have reached an agreement, two pairs are joined together to negotiate a new choice. When they are ready, each group presents the car

that they have chosen and all the students discuss the options and decide which car to buy.

2. Another possible activity concerns moral dilemmas. Students are told that they have been offered a well-paid job by a rich employer, they badly need the money, but people have told them that the business is dishonest. The students are put in small groups and asked to brainstorm ideas in order to suggest possible, advisable or necessary courses of action. When they have finished, the groups have to justify their choices. Such a type of dilemma also gives students the opportunity to practise specific language items, in this case the use of modal verbs to express possibility, obligation and necessity.

Role-plays

Learners often enjoy “being” someone else, and in role-plays they have the chance to play a role which is given to them on a card. This type of activity has been very successful in ESP classes. Negotiations are quite appropriate in this case, as they prove to be interesting and challenging for students.

Task: Work in pairs, one of you playing the Sales Director of Amitta, the other playing the Chief Buyer of Magic World. Study your role-card and prepare to negotiate these points:

- different types of educational toys;
- delivery date;
- terms of payment;
- discount.

Student A

Sales Director, Amitta

Amitta, a medium-sized toy manufacturer in India, has some temporary cash flow problems. As Sales Director, you are eager to sign a contract with Magic World. It is October 1 and, because of your financial difficulties, you are behind schedule with your existing orders, and it would be difficult to make a wide range of toys in a short period of time. Your objectives are to:

1. sell Magic World 10 types of educational toys;
2. deliver by December 1;
3. get payment at sight;
4. offer 1% discount or no discount.

Student B

Chief Buyer, Magic World

Magic World is a major UK toy retail chain, based in London. As Chief-Buyer, you were impressed by the quality and diversity of Amitta’s latest toy releases, and want to place an order for 10,000 toys. You have been quoted a unit price of £100, including the cost of shipping. It is October 1, and you need to have your shops well-stocked six weeks before Christmas. Your objectives are to:

1. buy 20 types of educational toys;
2. receive goods by November 15;
3. pay by irrevocable letter of credit: 30 or 60 days presentation;
4. get 4% discount.

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Dilemmas also provide good material for role-plays. The situation presented as an example of reaching a consensus activity can be role-played. Thus students are divided into small groups: one of them is the person with the problem, that is, the person who is offered the well-paid but dishonest job, the other members of the group are the counsellors.

Simulations

Simulations are similar to role-plays, with the difference that, in simulations students are not playing any roles, they are themselves. The more realistic the simulations are, the more enthusiastic the students will be to take part in the activity. The idea of a simulation, as in the case of role-plays, is to recreate a real world situation in the classroom. For this type of activity to work, students must accept a certain function and see themselves not as language learners, but as the real people in the simulation. They must also accept a simulated environment, such as a meeting room or an airport (Harmer, 2003: 133). For instance, the students are told that the university has decided to stop the Erasmus exchange programme for students because of lack of funds. As members of the students' union, they have to meet in a conference room and come up with suggestions of what can be done for the exchange to continue. Initially, they are asked to work in groups of four and make a list of their ideas, and then they compare their suggestions with the rest of the students. The teacher may take part in the simulation as a participant (in this case, as a member of the students' union), or he may act as a prompter, making suggestions and helping the students during the activity.

Once the simulation is finished, the teacher needs to organise a feedback session in order to establish which decisions were reached and why, whether the activity was successful or not, whether all students got involved or not etc. The feedback is more efficient if the teacher records the whole activity. In this way, the students can see how effective their communication was, what mistakes they made, and also how linguistically accurate they were.

Problem solving

This type of activity encourages students to work together in order to solve a problem. It also involves reaching a consensus, since problems often have several possible solutions. The students are initially given some background information about the problem that they have to solve.

Background

Doré, a well-known brand of coffee, is owned by a company based in France. It is an exclusive product for customers who appreciate the taste of flavoured ground coffee, and who are willing to buy this product which costs more than other similar types of coffee on the market.

Problems

In the past 18 months, Doré's market share has declined by 25%. There are several factors which have led to this situation:

1. *Price*: There are similar products on the market sold at a considerably lower price, especially in supermarkets.
2. *Brand loyalty*: As the market offers a large variety of products, consumers are no longer attached to one particular brand.
3. *Brand image*: Doré no longer looks an attractive and up-to-date brand.

Possible solutions

- a. Enlarge the target market. Bring some changes to the product (taste, quality, logo, label etc.) so that it could appeal to other market segments.
- b. Reduce the price by 20-30%.
- c. Come up with a new product, such as a decaffeinated one or an instant coffee under the Doré brand.
- d. Stretch the brand by selling cafetieres or coffee machines under Doré's name.
- e. Make deals with important hotel chains or restaurants to sell the coffee.
- f. Relaunch the brand using a new advertising campaign. Consider having the brand endorsed by a celebrity.

Task: Work in groups of four. You are all members of the marketing team. Discuss Doré's case, considering the advantages and disadvantages of each solution. Decide what to do in order to solve the problem, that is, to increase the brand's market share and its profits.

In order to be successful and encourage speaking, communicative activities need to be well prepared. Apart from the "thinking" time that students should be allowed, preparation also involves physical arrangements into pairs or groups, or it may involve sitting or standing, or even the possibility of students talking secretly.

Conclusion

The concept of community of practice has changed the perspective on knowing and learning, and influenced theory and practice in many domains. In the field of ESP, it has broadened the area of investigation covered by needs' analysis by directing the research outside the classroom, in the real world of work. Sociologists' emphasis on the significant role of sociocultural factors in the process of learning parallels linguistic concerns with discourse features and the context in which language is used.

In the light of these theoretical considerations, teaching approaches have shifted their focus from competence to performance, that is, from "knowing" the language to "doing" something with the language. In the ESP class, students' communicative competence can be developed through a wide range of activities which are conceived as "mirrors" or "extensions" of real-life situations. Teachers have to conduct the activities in such a way as to ensure a high-degree of knowledge transfer and an efficient team work. In the end, the classroom itself functions as a community of practice in which learners negotiate their roles and acquire lifelong learning skills.

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