A Proposal for a Business English Portfolio

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As a consequence of the extremely positive feedback by students from the time of our initial application of an ESP portfolio, that of English for Tourism (presented at the 10th AICLU Seminar held at the Free University of Bozen, Italy, on 16th-17th Feb. 2006), the following is a proposal to experiment with the use of another ESP portfolio as a teaching/learning tool in the ESP classroom, that of Business English. The target class is the Year 2 Business English class at the Faculty of Political Science, International and Diplomatic Studies at the University of Trieste in Gorizia. The focus is on writing skills, for much attention is given to these skills during the course, which seem to be the easiest to monitor objectively in terms of preparation and performance. The levels are upper-intermediate to advanced (B2/C1).

If motivation stems from a clear understanding of the objectives, and the purpose of the porfolio is to clarify those objectives by expressing them in a "can do" format, our hypothesis is that the portfolio will be a valid teaching/learning tool for students of Business English. As most students are not yet familiar with the portfolio, the first step is to introduce the general portfolio and raise awareness as to its purpose. Thus we will firstly give the students a copy of the CercleS general porfolio[1] and ask them to evaluate their ability in English with especial regard to the writing skill. Once they have become familiar with the the general portfolio we will propose our Business-English portfolio.

The most difficult aspect of this proposal is the preparation of the specific Business-English portfolio. The final goal is to transfer the objectives of the linear, traditional program into a "can do" format. In order to achieve this goal, specificity of tasks is paramount. It is necessary to define precisely which tasks will be treated during the course and thus which specific skill will be developed. For example, the traditional program calls for "Reading comprehension and writing exercises involving current periodicals relevant to the discipline of International and Diplomatic Sciences." In order to prepare our portfolio, we must ask ourselves, "Exactly what exercises will be offered?" and "What themes and lexis will be covered? In what order? With what level of expertise?" The traditional program is, in reality, very open, whereas the portfolio must be narrowed down into descriptors and thus necessarily well-defined and delimited. In fact, this "program analysis" is the lengthiest step of our experiment. The anwers to our questions, carefully listed and placed at appropriate levels in order of difficulty (or evermore refined ability), become the descriptors of our portfolio grids. The following are the objectives, topics and class structure from the traditional program which constitutes our starting point:

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TRIESTE
FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE POLITICHE

Corso di laurea triennale in Scienze Internazionali e Diplomatiche:
Lingua inglese II (L-LIN/12) – 60 ore – 6 credits
Academic Year 2007-2008
Professor Kaylynn Horn, M.A.

OBJECTIVES

– Provide fundamental English grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension exercises appropriate to the students' proficiency level for English II with a focus on Business English;
– Present a comprehensive array of English learning activities within a framework and context of the discipline of International and Diplomatic Sciences in order to engage students with relevant and useful content;
– Improve students' familiarity with and comprehension of spoken English with an emphasis on conversation exercises and listening activities to further develop language fluency with a focus on Business English;
– Focus on improving the interpersonal and intercultural communication skills of second language speakers as well as their ability to participate in classroom discussion and oral presentation assignments in English;

– The course is designed to be both educational and enjoyable for the students recognizing that effective learning environments develop when learners are both comfortable with and engaged in the content presented.

TOPICS / SUBJECTS

– Fundamental English grammar structures and the exploration of Idioms, "False Friends, Phrasal Verbs, and other challenging characteristics of the English language
– Further development of vocabulary relevant to the discipline of International and Diplomatic Sciences and general business practices in English
– Oral Presentation standards, guidelines and practices within English speaking business environments
– Reading comprehension exercises involving current periodicals relevant to this discipline and writing exercises with a focus on practical and relevant business applications
– Conversation and Listening Comprehension activities relevant, but not limited to, political science and business industries
– Explore pronunciation differences among English speaking countries and explore cultural variants of English within diverse nations
– Review and explore various standardized English tests for second language speakers such as TOIEC (Test of English for International Communication), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), Cambridge ESOL (English of Speakers of Other Languages), etc.

CLASS STRUCTURE

– Course activities will include, but not be limited to:
– Power Point / lecture presentations and exercises focusing on grammar, reading, writing and business practices that are appropriate for the students' proficiency level of English II
– Exploration of current periodicals and publications with a focus on contemporary political issues
– Guest Speakers relevant to the discipline of International and Diplomatic Sciences and the presentation of documentary and/or popular films relevant to the discipline
– Presentation of listening activities including broadcast segments of BBC (British Broadcasting Services World Network, GB), NPR (National Public Radio, USA) C-SPAN (Public Service Programming for International Political Sciences, USA) etc.
– Conversation classes designed around topics relative to International and Diplomatic Science issues as well as guided conversations on various other related topics

This course will utilize various resources including, but not limited to, the following references:

Periodicals and Magazines:

Foreign Affairs	Business Week	The Economist
Time	Newsweek	Forbes
Wallstreet Journal		

TV, Internet & Radio Broadcast Segments:

BBC	NPR	PBS
C-SPAN	CNN	

<u>Required Text:</u>

Trappe, Tonya; Tullis, Graham. <u>Intelligent Business - Intermediate.</u>   Harlow: Pearson Education Limited (Longman), 2005

Emmerson, Paul. <u>Email English</u>. Oxford: Macmillan Education, 2004

<u>Suggested Text</u>
Trappe, Tonya; Tullis, Graham. <u>Intelligent Business – Upper Intermediate.</u> Harlow: Pearson Education Limited (Longman), 2006

We have attempted to transfer the above objectives, especially those regarding the writing skills, into the "can do" format. The result thusfar is the Business English Portfolio presented below. It is to be given to the students after they have gained familiarity with the general CercleS portfolio:

> **BUSINESS-ENGLISH PORTFOLIO: Goal-setting and Self-assessment Checklist**
> **Language:** _____   **Skill: Writing**

Use the following checklist (a) to set personal learning goals and (b) to record your progress in achieving these goals. Decide what evaluative criteria you want to use in the three righthand columns, and enter dates to record your progress. For example:

I can do this *with a lot of help, **with a little help, ***on my own
I can do this *with a lot of effort, **under normal circumstances, ***easily
in any context

Evaluative criteria: *   _____   **   _____   ***   _____

(Format adapted from the CercleS version of the European Language Portfolio
(accredited by the Council of Europe's Validation Committee, Accreditation no:
29.2002).)

Level B2	My next goal	*	**	***
I can write a curriculum vitae highlighting my qualifications and experience using the correct style and register.				
I can write a cover letter introducing myself and supporting my candidature for any given position in detail.				
I can write clear and precise minutes of a meeting.				
I can write a formal e-mail giving /requesting such specific information as online ordering procedures, the rearrangement of a meeting, or clarification on/ confirmation of a given order.				
I can write a "letter to the editor" expressing personal feelings and commenting on such political topics as the importance of military service, women and military service, treatment of prisoners of war, war and its justification, self-defence, past-versus-present attitudes on the above issues.				
I can write a "letter to the editor" regarding the economic situation of my country and give my views supported by convincing argumentation.				
I can write a summary of a conversation on topics of academic or professional interest such as English as a common European or global language, transportation, music and cinema celebrities and their effect on the business world.				
I can write a summary of a Business-English lesson.				
I can write a summary of an article on complex and holistic topics such as the economic situation of any given country or, more specifically, the Lisbon Agenda.				
I can write specific questions to any given job interview based on the job definition and the candidate's qualifications.				

Level C1	My next goal	*	**	***
I can write a cover letter introducing myself and supporting my candidature for any given position in detail, with the ability to choose from a wide range of terms and distinguish nuances.				
I can write a detailed, clear and smooth report on technical and professional topics.				
I can write a "letter to the editor" expressing personal feelings through effective, natural and accurate language and comment on such political topics as the importance of military service, women and military service, treatment of prisoners of war, war and its justification, self-defence, past-versus-present attitudes on the above issues.				
I can write a "letter to the editor" regarding the economic situation of my country and give my views supported by convincing argumentation in clear, natural and accurate language.				
I can write a summary of/commentary on a conversation on topics of academic or professional interest such as English as a common European or global language, transportation, music and cinema celebrities and their effect on the business world in a confident and convincing manner.				
I can apply the vocabulary of a given semantic field (such as transportation) to idioms and quote them in my writing.				
I can write a commentary on a Business-English lesson giving examples and using smooth, complex sentences..				
I can write a commentary on an article on complex and holistic topics such as the economic situation of any given country or, more specifically, the Lisbon Agenda and develop my views giving well supported examples.				
I can write specific questions to any given job interview based on the job definition and the candidate's qualifications with the aim to lead the interview as I please.				

It is worthy of note that during the preparation of the Business English Portfolio, teacher awareness was increased. In order to complete the ESP portfolio, clarity and precision of expectations were imperative. We were compelled to define exactly what goals we were addressing and thus made fully cognizant of the importance of each single classroom task. In this way the Business English Portfolio has already proved itself an effective teaching tool.

Our next query is how effective is the Business English Portfolio as an instrument for teaching/learning, and how will we know? We intend to anwer this in two ways: through direct feedback from the students and based on their performance at the final exam. Students' comments are extremely significant in assessing this potential tool in the classroom. If the portfolio is appreciated and even requested by the students, we may confirm its efficacy. As teachers and examiners, we intend to compare the performance of the students at the final exam to their own previous self assessment. We hypothesize that performance will be comparable or even better than that expressed in their own self evaluations as through self analysis awareness of the objectives and tasks required will have been reached. As a result of this awareness, students should be motivated to improve the skills they feel they have not yet mastered.

In conclusion, our aim is to test the application of the portfolio in the ESP classroom, namely, that of Business English at B2/C1 levels at the Faculty of Political Science, International and Diplomatic Studies at the University of Trieste, in Gorizia. Our attention is given especially to the writing skills as they appear to be the simplest ones to monitor objectively. We intend to familiarize students firstly with the general CercleS Portfolio as a teaching/learning tool for self-assessment and then to propose a specific Business English portfolio. This portfolio is the result of the transferring of the objectives and topics from the traditional classroom program into the portfolio "can do" format through specific descriptors centered on task and level. The task at hand has already led to teacher awareness. We foresee that the "can do" format will enhance learner awareness and thereby increase motivation. Its effectiveness will be verified through feedback from the students as well as performance in the final exam.

NOTES

1 Validation number 29.2002. See official ELP website: http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?L=E&M=/main_pages/portfolios.html

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Katholieke Universiteit Leuven ILT, Interfacultair Instituut Levende Talen, *European Language Portfolio* from the website http://www.kuleuven.bel/itt/lut