

The Business English Portfolio. The Listening Skill

IULIA DANIELA NEGRU
Università degli Studi di Trieste

INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

This talk will begin by outlining the case of the Trieste School of Interpreters and its Business English Course, the description of the IPEC Excellence Level for Proficient Users C1 – C2 exam and its objectives. It will go on to present the approach of this paper and conclude by proposing a draft self-assessment grid for the Listening Part of the Business English module of the IPEC Excellence Level exam.

OBJECTIVE

The Trieste School for Interpreters and Translators was created in 1953, then part of the Faculty of Economics, in answer to the ever-growing demand for skilled language operators, translators and interpreters in the post-war period. The Trieste School was also chosen for its strategical geographical position, at the crossroads between Western and Eastern Europe.

To this day, Trieste's Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori¹ (which became an independent Faculty in its own right in 1978) re-

mains universally recognized as a centre of excellence for training translators and interpreters for a very competitive international and national market.

The courses are structured according to the basic framework laid down in the Sorbonne and later the Bologna declarations – namely, the three cycle system of higher education. In the 1st cycle, students who have English in their curriculum attend various English classes – such as active and passive translation, general language and ESP, and liaison interpreting. At the end of the Business English module in the 2nd year of the first cycle, the students can choose to sit for the IPEC exam (International Professional English Certificate at Excellence Level for Proficient Users C1 – C2), created by the British Chamber of Commerce in Italy.

Starting this academic year 2007-2008, with the approval of the professor responsible for the Business English Module², the portfolio presented hereafter will be given to students at the beginning of the course, analyzed at the end of the year and then the results and conclusions of this case study will be published in a future paper. The objective is threefold:

- 1 to introduce the Portfolio to the students and to see if other language teachers adopt it in the School;
- 2 to encourage student use of the portfolio;
- 3 to observe how the portfolio and the descriptors were used by students.³

The BCCI exam was introduced in Trieste in 1999 and offers a very solid basis for what the Chamber of Commerce believes to be the requirements that a C1/C2 graduate should have in a Business context. The exam is comprehensive of the four skills (indeed there is even a short sight translation test from Italian/French/German into English for the fifth skill), consisting of Reading, Writing, Listening tests, as well as an Oral part.

The portfolio was created bearing in mind that it is meant to:

help learners to develop into competent self-confident language learners, motivated to reflect and build on their language and inter-cultural competence (Schärer:2007)⁴

Although Business English as an ESP is a wide area for study, the students have a limited number of hours and a limited curriculum to cover. Therefore, the current portfolio will take into consideration the specific needs of the students in the SSLMIT, so as to have a series of personalized profiles. Since it deals with ESP, the *General Language Skills* item has not been considered and preference was given to *Professional Language Skills*. The teaching context is characterized by a high number of students (depending on the year, the number may vary from 50 to 80) with a fairly common language experience and competence at entry level (B2). The reason for this uncommon homogeneity in the Italian Uni-

versity context is the fact that the SSLMITs in Italy have authorized entrance examinations. The SSLMIT in Trieste does have particularly gifted students as well and although the average exit level is C1 there are cases (around 15% of the candidates, although in one year, the percentage was as high as 21%) of 'ideal' learners who obtain a C2 in the exam, that is to say the highest exit level possible.

Even though not listed in previous works on the ESP portfolio, the cultural component of the Business course is an interesting issue. It is not business language per se but it is part of the metalinguistic area of a normal business situation. The aim of the course is to train students for real-life situations where lack of comprehension might occur not only because of a misspelled business-related word but also due to linguistic and extralinguistic factors (Negru, *English Business Talk in Italy*⁵). Students need to understand and organize information related to the cultural background of the speaker. In a real business situation, for example a meeting, the extralinguistic component of the discourse (gestures, tone of voice etc.) can change the course of the whole meeting. A cross-cultural component of the Portfolio is a fundamental aspect of a multicultural Europe, where languages are not just empty shells which must be learned for a future career but also the vehicle of culture.

During the courses that the students take, much emphasis is placed on Listening and Comprehension of business discourse, since the students see it as the most difficult component. Consequently, it is most frequently the component that gives rise to anxiety and stress on the part of the student, particularly as the text does not remain in front of students to be read and re-read at will, as with Reading and Writing tasks. The students have indicated that it is the test they feel weakest at upon entry and the one which they feel the most progress has been made between Entry and Exit.

Immediately prior to the test there is always a high level of anxiety. However, exit polls indicate that students come out rather more confident of having done well compared to, say, the Reading test.

As far as expectations are concerned, students' perception of the usefulness of the ELP from the start was not presumed *a priori*. First of all, due to a different teaching and evaluating tradition in Italy in general, and secondly, the students' view of the portfolio depends on whether they consider it an integral part of the course, an option or even just a whim on the part of the teacher.

Future developments of this project may include an electronic version of the ELP using the share function of Moodle (chat, forums, wikis). The students in the SSLMIT are mostly computer literate and internet literate and some of the materials of the Business English Course are available for them online, hence they are familiar with the e-learning environment.⁶

Taking the ELP from paper to electronic may thus be a next step. There are of course certain disadvantages to a paper portfolio that can be compensated by an electronic one. A paper portfolio is:

- *large and unwieldy*
- *awkward to transport*
- *difficult to navigate*
- *does not exploit opportunities offered by ICT⁷*

Electronic portfolios can also be a means of integrating traditional features with new ones, the latter including:

- *collecting*
- *selecting*
- *reflecting*
- *projecting*

Adding technology allows enhancement through:

- *archiving*
- *linking/thinking*
- *storytelling*
- *collaborating*
- *publishing⁸*

Target group

- Business people of all sorts, working in small and medium companies or in large multinationals, for whom English is an essential vehicle of communication or could be a determining factor in career advancement
- University students studying ESP in the Business sector, Economics, Finance, Banking, Company Law
- Secondary school students who have Business English in the curriculum

Position

- Directors and employees at international, national, regional businesses
- Trainees

Entry level

- Understanding:
 - Listening comprehension - B1/B2
 - Reading comprehension - B2
- Speaking:
 - Spoken interaction - B2
 - Spoken production - B2
- Writing
 - Writing - B1/B2

Exit level

- Understanding:
 - Listening comprehension - C1/C2
 - Reading comprehension - C1/C2
- Speaking:
 - Spoken interaction - C1/C2
 - Spoken production - C1/C2
- Writing
 - Writing - C1/C2

BUSINESS ENGLISH TRAINEE

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
listening						
reading						
spoken interaction						
spoken production						
writing						

	Entry level
	Exit level
	Ideal exit level

LEVEL OF LANGUAGE SKILLS	PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE SKILLS
<p><i>Listening (C1)</i></p>	<p>I can understand normal business discourse on a wide range of matters encountered at the work place.</p> <p>I can understand radio and TV programmes on business and financial topics of professional interest to me irrespective of speed of delivery and accent.</p> <p>I can listen to and can understand the main points of a given discourse when uttered with a regional inflection (Scottish, Welsh, Irish etc) as well as international language varieties such as the American, Indian, Australian pronunciation varieties.</p> <p>I can understand equally well monologue as well as the interaction in a dialogue.</p> <p>I can understand the use of English in specific Business contexts such as general business meetings, annual general meetings, meetings with clients on a variety of topics.</p> <p>I can also understand most of what happens in business telephone calls, voice mail and receiving via the conference mode.</p> <p>I can understand the reading of technical reports and delivered speeches on the part of participants at meetings of various kinds.</p> <p>I can understand and report back on all kinds of presentations.</p> <p>I can understand clients/business people expressing specific wishes or talking about problems connected with mergers, takeovers or bids for a company, public tenders.</p> <p>I can understand discourse related to investments, shares, the stock exchange, currency exchange, interest rates, brokerage and banking charges and services.</p> <p>I can understand language used in buying/selling a property, companies, mortgages, loans.</p> <p>I can understand the language of advertising and promotion.</p> <p>I can understand and I am aware of cultural differences in business context expressed through convoluted pompous inappropriate English.</p>

EXAMPLES

- daily departmental business from sales and purchasing to personnel logistics, organigrams
- trade union relations
- hiring and firing
- sales forecasts
- production costs
- delivery times
- guarantee and quality control
- complaints and claims
- meetings terminology: opening/closing, motions, seconding, amendments
- CEO reports, annual report, financial reports
- Presentations and visual verbal communications
- Figures, calculations, forecasts, turnover, balance sheets
- Auditing. Contracts, tender, subcontractors
- talking business over lunch

NOTES

- 1 Henceforth referred to as SSLMIT
- 2 Prof. John Dodds. For details on the Business English course <www.cla.units.it/dodds>
- 3 Capre: 2007.
- 4 Rolf Schärer is the Rapporteur General of the ELP project of the Council of Europe.
- 5 Talk presented at the 2006 Conference of the Romanian Translators Association (ATR), Sibiu, Romania.
- 6 www.cla.units.it/dodds.
- 7 Baten: 2007.
- 8 Barrett: 2005 in Baten: 2007.

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