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EFL Elementary-Level Learners' Perceptions of the Influence of Business English Content on the Enhancement of their Communication Skills.

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Abstract:

This study aims to explore EFL elementary-level learners' perceptions of the impact of business English content on their communication skills development. This study is exploratory qualitative in nature as it seeks to identify learners' perceptions via a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions webbed to the participants. The sample selected using the total population purposive sampling technique consists of five (05) employees at the Real Estate company of Setif, Algeria. Data obtained are analyzed thematically. The results reveal that a significant number of participants believe that being taught business English helped them develop their communication skills particularly, listening and speaking. Yet, the majority maintains that even though they were highly motivated in this course, they find it difficult compared to general English courses. All in all, even though learning business English is appealing, it is still considered a challenge to low-level learners.

Keywords: *Business English; Communication skills; Elementary level; EFL learners.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The demand for English is notably significant in non-native English-speaking countries, and Algeria is no exception. This demand is driven by the country's market dynamics and the necessity to establish international connections. Consequently, English serves as a lingua franca, facilitating communication between parties with different native languages. As Jenkins (2007) defines, a lingua franca is a common language used among individuals who do not share the same native language, often functioning as their second language. Although French is a common second language for many Algerians, its utility in international contexts has diminished, with English emerging as the dominant language.

In response to this shift, English for specific purposes courses has become the preferred solution to enable effective communication with international contacts. Notably, prominent private and government entities in Algeria have enrolled their staff in English courses as part of their professional development and to support the international expansion of their businesses. In-service learners, despite having a low proficiency in English, often opt to study business English from the outset. This decision is influenced by the evolving nature of working conditions in Algerian companies, where employees find themselves constrained by time and lack the patience to develop their English proficiency before delving into business English courses. Their decision stems from the pressing need to expedite business growth.

Hence, companies collaborate with private language schools on a learning journey to achieve this objective. However, the prevailing policy in most Algerian private language schools requires a minimum pre-intermediate proficiency level for acceptance into business English courses. Learners are typically directed to undergo general English courses first, as business English content proves to be challenging for those at elementary and beginner levels (Chaalane, 2020). Trainers commonly recommend that learners enhance their proficiency before enrolling in business-customized courses. This precaution is based on the understanding that business English content often incorporates intricate vocabulary and specific jargon essential for various professional contexts such as meetings, phone conversations, negotiation appointments, and report and email writing. To illustrate potential challenges, learners are presented with case studies representing situations that may prove difficult without the necessary language mastery. Consequently, schools emphasize the importance of this prerequisite to streamline the learning process for both the learner and the trainer.

However, teaching business English to EFL Learners with basic language knowledge is still controversial as to whether such courses may affect their learning development, particularly communication skills. Consequently, any investigation into this subject adds valuable insights to both theoretical and practical considerations for future research. Thereof, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are EFL learners' perceptions of studying business English?
2. What are EFL learners' perceptions of the impact of business English content on their communication skills development?

II. Literature Review

English Language Teaching (ELT) has two differing branches, namely General English (GE) and English for specific purposes (ESP). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) assert that "though the content of learning may vary, there is no reason to suppose that the processes of learning should be any different for the ESP learner than the general English learner" (18). However, the common ground of ELT, GE, and ESP are different types of language learning in terms of purpose, content, methodology, and the nature of learners. According to Bernard and Zemach (2003), what distinguishes ESP from GE is that the latter courses have more focused objectives and use a more

restricted range of topics. ESP courses can be viewed as miniature versions of regular ELT courses with appropriate specialized vocabulary stressed in them (Richards, 2001). These courses are carefully selected upon the needs of the learners. ESP is a response to the incapacity of GE courses to fulfill learners' needs. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1991), "What distinguishes ESP from general English is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need" (p.53). In other words, GE courses are language-oriented, whereas ESP courses are designed and tailored to meet the learners' needs.

As part of the growing awareness of learners' needs, English for Business Purposes has emerged as a dominant branch of ESP. Belcher (2009) believes that EBP has gained attention within the field of ESP and is flourishing in both teaching and research. Frendo (2005) describes business English as "An umbrella term for a mixture of general everyday English, general business English, and ESP. It is not limited to words and phrases that only appear in some special business world" (p.7). The content of BE combines a particular area of industry and a general range associated with the general ability to communicate effectively in business contexts and environments (Ellis and Johnson, 1994).

In this context, English is considered a lingua franca used for business purposes and, more importantly, "used more frequently to communicate 'about business' with groups around the world such as (potential) employees, consumers, and investors, for whom English may not necessarily be their mother tongue (Planken et al., 2010, pp. 225–226). Consequently, learners of business English are always driven by the ability to communicate in business contexts, such as international trade, finance, real estate, insurance, and many office settings, for the prosperity of their business. They expect to acquire field-related lexicon and grammatical structures for international communications. It is worth mentioning that Business English content is heavily linked to the linguistic aspect of language. The context determines the vocabulary of business English and is very different from general English. Thoma (2011) postulates that "Business English vocabulary is accordingly the most distinctive feature of business English" (p.101). He further emphasized the importance of specialized vocabulary in the description of business English.

Given the desire and willingness of many companies to expand their international horizon, the teaching of Business English is always in demand in many non-native countries. business English courses in Algeria are usually taught in private schools, which rely on ready-made textbooks like "Market Leader and "In Company "to fulfill their learner's needs (Chaalane, 2020). The real estate company of Setif is an example of a company aspiring to gain international buyers and investors. Henceforth, it had its staff enrolled in the Center for Intensive Languages (CEIL) to learn English. In the current study, learners from the real estate company are instead taught business English at the elementary level to explore their perceptions on the matter and whether the course content impacts their communication skills development, considering their poor mastery of the language.

III. Methods and Materials:

This study is exploratory and qualitative. It seeks to explore EFL learners' perceptions of the impact of business English content on developing their communication skills. It is qualitative rather than quantitative as data are collected via a semi-structured interview constituting open-ended questions. Accordingly, Sutton and Austin (2015) believe that open-ended questions are often used to allow respondents to express their opinions about issues freely. They further add that qualitative research gives researchers access to the participants' feelings and thoughts, thus building an understanding of their experiences.

III.1. Participants

The sample of this study constitutes five employees (one female and four males) working at the real estate company of Setif City - Algeria (OPGI de Setif). Their ages range between 36 and 59. They are in-service learners having four up to 28 years of work experience. The sampling technique used in this study is purposive. Kelly (2010) claims that the aim of using purposive sampling is "to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information" (p.317). The type of purposive sampling chosen is the total population, as only five learners were in the class. Sugiyono (2014) maintains that total population sampling is a technique where the

whole population members are treated as a sample and used when the population members are less than 30.

III.2. Instruments

The instrument used in the current research is a semi-structured interview. According to Dawson (2002), there are three types of interviews, that is, structured interview, unstructured interview, and semi-structured interview.

Magaldi and Berler (2020) behold that a semi-structured interview is a guide-based interview focusing on the main topic that provides a general pattern to the data obtained. The semi-structured interview of the study in hand constitutes open-ended questions to give participants the freedom to answer and express their opinions. Given (2018) states that

“Qualitative researchers pose open-ended questions that encourage participants to create and share their options for responding. To encourage participants to express their perspectives freely, these questions should be stated in a neutral way in addition to being stated as open-ended” (p.556).

The semi-structured interview of this study constitutes questions about the participants’ motive for learning English and how they perceive their progress and achievement in BE class compared to GE class. Furthermore, participants have the chance to report their beliefs about the least and most developed skills in the BE class, the difficulties they face, and how they think of the impact of the content of BE on their communication skills development. Also, they are asked to report their opinions of the level of the lessons in business English class given their elementary level.

III.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

In this study, a semi-structured interview is used as the research tool for data collection. It was written in the google form template. Before it was webbed to the participants, the teacher read the questions and explained any difficulties learners had in their mother language. The teacher intended to ensure participants’ complete understanding of the questions to receive in-depth perceptions. In an attempt to answer the research questions previously mentioned, data obtained from the semi-structured interview is analyzed thematically. Braun and Clarke (2012) define thematic analysis as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset” (p.2).

In doing the analysis, Braun & Clarke (2006) suggested two distinctive methods, namely a top-down thematic analysis, driven by the researcher’s specific research questions, and a bottom-up which is driven by the data obtained. The researcher in this study uses the top-down type as the abovementioned questions drive the analysis. The steps followed in the analysis are the six-phase framework that Braun and Clarke (2006) demonstrated in the table below.

Table (1): Braun & Clarke’s six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis.

Step 1: Become familiar with the data, Step 2: Generate initial codes, Step 3: Search for themes,	Step 4: Review themes, Step 5: Define themes, Step 6: Write-up.
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The source: Braun and Clarke (2006)

IV. Results and discussion :

After analyzing the data collected thematically, significant themes have been identified. First, English necessity is shown in participants’ answers. Participants confirm that they need English and consider it a fundamental language in their business. In this regard, Wozniak (2010) asserts that the primary purpose of teaching business English is to meet the student’s requirements and

needs. Another theme identified is communication skills. One of the most needs reported by the participants is developing their communication skills and effectively communicating in their workplace with foreigners. This claim goes with Huang (2022), who claims the purpose of designing any business English course is to "effectively help business people improve their communication skills to achieve higher-value collaboration." A student or an employee registering for these courses undoubtedly wants to learn how to converse with foreigners. Wang et al. (2014) support this and mentioned that "business English conversation and presentation" are paramount to students and employers.

Furthermore, listening and speaking progress is another theme spotted. Participants believe that they noticed some improvement in their speaking and listening skills in the BE class more than in the GE class. Even though their scores on the final test were not encouraging, they believe they are fulfilling the need set for the course, viz., learning to communicate in English. Improving listening and speaking skills entails reaching effective communication. In addition, vocabulary difficulty is another theme recognized in their answers. All participants find it challenging to grasp and memorize field-related terminologies. They maintain that vocabulary in GE class is more straightforward than in BE class. This perception is supported by comparing test scores in both courses, as they scored higher in GE.

As for the level of motivation, participants were highly motivated due to the contextualization of the content they were exposed to. They stated that the case studies related to their real estate business elevated their motivation to learn more than in GE class. However, when asked about the suitability of the content to their level, all believe that business English content is complex compared to the content received in the general English class. They behold that the content needed to be up to their elementary level. It was challenging, and they felt the need to develop their level first and then enroll in this course to communicate better and fully grasp its lexicon. By the end, they said they were somewhat satisfied with the class. Thoma (2011) claims "the capacity of that business English vocabulary size to accurately predict communicative ability in business English settings" (p.444). In other words, communicating effectively also requires a significant number of business English lexicons.

All in all, this BE course designed for in-service EFL learners aims to meet learners' needs to communicate in English in their workplace. Many participants believe that being taught business English helped them develop their communication skills, mainly listening and speaking. Yet, the majority maintains that even though they were highly motivated in this course, they find it difficult compared to general English courses. Even though learning business English is appealing, it is still considered a challenge to low-level learners.

V. Conclusion:

Participants in this study have been taught business English after being exposed to general English while having an elementary level. They showed significant development in speaking and listening skills, enabling them to see progress in their communication skills in general. They were more exposed to contextual business content that aimed at developing their ability to communicate effectively and accurately in situations alike. They were motivated to learn in the BE course due to similar scenarios in their real estate company. However, considering their poor language level, they believe that BE jargon is a significant challenge.

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- Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-structured interview

1. **Questions 1:** How many years of work experience do you have?
2. **Questions 2:** Why do you want to learn English?
3. **Question 3:** How important is English in your job?
4. **Question 4:** How do you see your progress in BE class compared to GE class?
5. **Question 5:** Which skill is the least developed in BE?
6. **Question 6:** Which skill is the most developed?
7. **Question 7:** How do you see the impact of BE content on your communication skills development?
8. **Question 8:** What are the difficulties you faced in this class?

9. **Question 9:** How motivated are you in this class?

10. **Question 10:** What do you think of the level of the lessons in BE class?

Appendix B

A summary of the participants' responses on the questions

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Q1	15 years	04 years	4 years	28 years	11 years
Q2	I need it for Speaking, communication, In my job	Approximately 70 percent of my computer work and presentations requires dealing with English	To improve myself in the computing sciences and to be able to understand and speak with people like me	I need to use English in job when I have training outside Algeria	Because same times when i travel for business all over the world...i need it....
Q3	Very important	Somewhat important	Very important	Somewhat important	Very important
Q4	Know i can read and write and lisning then i can understand	I more understand listening.	Yes, i think i'm better in listening and speaking	Yes , The way to ask questions.. The way to ask something from another person politely.	Yes, more ability to read and speak
Q5	Writing	Writing	Reading	writing	writing
Q6	Reading , speaking and listening	Little in listening	Listening	Listening and speaking	Speaking
Q7	Good impact	I can communicate in speaking activity	It helped me i understand easier english when i hear it now.	Yes, positively i think i'm better in listening and speaking	My speaking is acceptable now
Q8	Grammar and vocabulary is very rich	unlike GE There are many difficult and technical words that require memorizing many words and verbs.	This (BE) is more challenging	BE, because I have to use BE vocabulary which is special and difficult	Be...maybe the terminologie
Q9	Very motivated I like BE	Little motivated	I feel motivated	BE is more interesting	Very motivated because I need it
Q10	Always I have to focus	I think very it difficult	Not very difficult but GE is easy	Sometimes difficult	GE is easy then BE