Teaching the pronunciation of Business English multi-word terms and loans to adult speakers of Romance languages

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Abstract

This article examines two features of the language of Business English, and it discusses teaching the pronunciation of these features in Business English courses or in General English courses in which Business English content is dealt with. Indeed, it refers to multi-word terms and loans, and it shows why teaching primary stress to adult speakers of French, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish as a first language is linked to the former and why teaching English sounds to the same student population is related to the latter. This is done by referring to previous research in the case of loans and also by comparing the language of Business English with that of Business French, Business Italian, Business Portuguese, and Business Spanish in the case of multi-word terms.

Introduction

The following discussion results partly from a survey of 1,452 free access abstracts or introductions from three journals of English for specific purposes (ESP) and one journal of languages for specific purposes (LSP). The former are *English for Specific Purposes World*, *ESP Today - Journal of English for Specific Purposes at Tertiary Level*, and *English for Specific Purposes*, whereas the latter is *Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos*. One of the goals of this survey has been to find out if there is any research on the language of Business English (BE) and the relation between this language and teaching BE pronunciation.

I have found out that none of the target abstracts or introductions appear to revolve around a systematic analysis of this issue.

Indeed, with respect to the articles whose abstracts or introductions addressed specific pronunciation features, Westerfield's (1989) description of a pre-MBA ESP case study course in which a video method "[...] helps to develop fluency in small group discussion, a skill that is important for other oral classroom activities" could be cited (p. 75). However, the author explains that the materials that are used in this course can be adapted in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and General English (GE) courses. Twenty-nine years later, Sanguanngarm (2018) discusses how other technological features, i.e. self-access digital learning, and more specifically, online models, improve students' pronunciation in an English for Airline Business class. Nonetheless, this study looks not only into students' pronunciation, but also into students' retention and self-efficacy. As far as pronunciation needs are concerned, those of students attending a first year BE course at an economics and management school are discussed by Fethi and Feriel (2016). Nevertheless, as in the previous study, pronunciation is not the sole subject of this article. For example, the authors look into grammar and motivation, as well. Needs are also dealt with in Warren's (2014) analyses of the views of 1,010 professionals in Hong Kong on meeting-related skills. Amongst these, listening to different accents is one of the aspects of communication in meetings the subjects found most difficult. Camiciottoli (2005) looks into a different communicative context: business lectures. The author compares speech rate in an L1 business lecture in the UK delivered by a native speaker with that in an L2 guest business lecture given by the same speaker in Italy. However, as in some of the studies cited above, other variables are inspected, e.g. redundancies, interpersonal features, and references to local culture.

Because of this research gap in my survey, I embarked on looking into salient characteristics of BE and into the influence of these characteristics on teaching pronunciation in BE lessons or in GE lessons that deal with BE content. In this paper, I shall refer to multi-word terms and loans. The former will be considered with respect to teaching primary stress, whereas the latter will be approached in relation to teaching English sounds. These two issues will be examined within the context of teaching BE to adult learners of French as a first language (L1 French speakers), of Italian as a first language (L1 Italian speakers), of Portuguese as a first language (L1 Portuguese speakers) and of Spanish as a first language (L1 Spanish speakers). The reason for this lies in the prominent differences between BE and Business French (BF), Business Italian (BI), Business Portuguese (BP), and Business Spanish (BS) as far as multi-word terms are concerned and in findings of previous research regarding English loans in French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. As a result, it is hoped that the following two sections will be useful to professionals involved in teaching BE not only in BE courses, but also in GE courses to adult L1 speakers of any of the above-mentioned Romance languages.

Multi-word terms and primary stress

It has been reported that BE is very rich in multi-word terms; Curado Fuentes (2002), for instance, asserts that, in a 193,786-token sub-corpus called *General Business*, "collocations and lexical phrases are two common devices […]" in the area of Business Technology (p. 18). In a "[…] linguistic description of Business English", and more specifically, of the lexis of BE, Cortés de los Ríos (2003) points out that nominal compounds are frequent (p. 76). The author illustrates these with the following groups of words: *basic economic laws* and *the tax collection system*.

However, when producing BE multi-word terms which are equivalent to BF, BI, BP and BS ones, several operations may have to be performed owing to differences in word order between English and the four Romance languages in question. These differences come to the surface when Alejo and McGinity (1997) discuss the word order of economic Anglicisms. The authors refer to binominal compounds and argue that for most of their students (Spanish speakers) "[…] this type of construction entails a certain difficulty since they do not always understand the adjectival function of the first noun" (p. 224). Indeed, a common word order of BS multi-word terms is NOUN + PREPOSITION + NOUN, e.g. *estudio de mercado*. However, to produce equivalent BE multi-word terms, the second noun may need to be shifted to the front. Furthermore, the word class *preposition* may need to be deleted, which results in NOUN + NOUN. Consequently, the BS multi-word term *estudio de mercado* may become, for example, *market research* in BE.[1] Another common word order of BS multi-word terms is NOUN + ADJECTIVE, e.g. *crecimiento económico*. A change in the order of these word classes may need to be performed, i.e. ADJECTIVE + NOUN, to produce equivalent BE multi-word terms. As a result, the BS multi-word term *crecimiento económico* may become, for example, *economic growth* in BE. Table 1 shows more examples of multi-word terms that undergo either of these transformations in relation to BF, BI, BP and BS.

Table 1
BF, BI, BP, and BS Multi-word Terms Compared with BE Multi-word Terms

French	English	Portuguese	English
Marché national	National market	Mercado nacional	National market
Carte de crédit	Credit card	Cartão de crédito	Credit card
Italian	English	Spanish	English
Mercato nazionale	National market	Mercado nacional	National market
Carta di credito	Credit card	Tarjeta de credito	Credit card

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1   The translation of five of the multi-word terms that are in this section has been confirmed by using the online *WordReference.com* dictionary. You may refer to the References.

It is worth mentioning that these differences in collocation between BE and BF, BI, BP, and BS are accompanied by a phonological trait that L1 speakers of French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish may not be familiar with: "The primary accent in compounds is most commonly on the first element [...]" (Cruttenden, 2014, p. 249), whereas "[...] a two-word phrase is typically pronounced with late stress: that is to say, its second word has more stress than its first" (Wells, 1990, p. 150). Wells (1990) shows, for example, that the compounds *bank account*, *bank draft*, *bank loan*, *bank manager*, *bank rate*, and *bank statement* take primary stress, whereas the two-word phrases *national debt* and *national government* take late stress. Nonetheless, the adverbs *commonly* and *typically* in the two citations written above indicate that these do not define cast-iron rules: Compounds may take late stress, and conversely, a two-word phrase may take early stress. Carr (2013) and Wells (1990) discuss groups of compounds that belong, though not always, to the former group, e.g. "[...] those where the first element names the material or ingredient out of which a thing is made" (Wells, 1990, p. 151). Cruttenden (2014) provides an example of the latter group. In this example, the author brings up a concept that I would like to elaborate on: *contrastive accent*.

I have observed that English as a foreign language textbooks sometimes make use of *contrastive accent*, an item that will be illustrated in the next paragraph, to depict the interrelationship between sounds and meaning. Nonetheless, what I suggest is, first, that the target learners practise the pronunciation of difficult BE words (see *degree of divergence* in the next section, for example) in BE multi-word terms, and second, that they personalise the use of *contrastive accent*. As a result, a sequence of four activities will be put forward.

In the first activity, the learners brainstorm multi-word terms using a BE word they may find difficult to pronounce accurately, e.g. *national market*, *national companies*, *national income*, *national deficit*, etc. In the second activity, the learners make up isolated phrases in groups and with their teacher's guidance using two of the multi-word terms in question, e.g. *National companies want to control the national market*. In the third activity, the learners are asked to place primary stress on each multi-word term, or alternatively, their teacher may ask them to choose from different options. Two possible options in this case are *National ˈcompanies want to control the national ˈmarket*, and *ˈNational companies seek to control the ˈnational market*.[2] Following the rule of two-word phrases that was introduced above, the most suitable option should be the first one. In the last activity, the learners illustrate the possible positions of primary stress within the multi-word terms that they have brainstormed by making up dialogues that reflect *contrastive accent*. For instance, during a meeting, a speaker corrects an attendee saying: *I'm sorry, but I wasn't talking about the national ˈdeficit. I was talking about the national ˈsurplus*. In a different dialogue, another speaker might say: *I'm sorry, but I wasn't talking about our ˈnational market. I was talking about ˈregional ones.*

2   The symbol /ˈ/ is used to indicate primary stress.

I think that activities in which differences in the syntax and pronunciation of multi-word terms between BE and BF, BI, BP, and BS emerge and in which the target learners (particularly intermediate and advanced ones) provide and discuss their own examples of these differences could be highly productive in the process of enhancing these learners' pronunciation skills.

English loans and English sounds

English lends French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish terms that may be used in business contexts. In this paper, I shall call these terms *BE loans*. *Feedback*, *helpdesk*, and *layout* (Lazarev, 2017) are examples of these loans in French; *business*, *test*, and *stock* (Pulcini, 1999) are so in Italian; *franchising*, *subholding*, and *yield* (Amorim et al., 2017) in Portuguese, and *joint venture*, *subprime*, *insider trading* (Orts Llopis & Sánchez-Lafuente, 2012), *management*, and *reinvestment* (Alejo & McGinity, 1997) in Spanish. It could be argued that the pronunciation of BE loans should not go unnoticed in BE or GE lessons where BE pronunciation is taught. In this section, I shall explain why by referring to English sounds.

The reason why I think it is important to work on English sounds when learning BE loans in lessons in which pronunciation is taught stems from the possibility that the target learners may have encountered these loans in written text or that they may have used them exclusively or quasi-exclusively in combination with L1 words in L1 speaking environments. It may be presumed that this situation may cause the sounds of the learners' L1 to interfere or even to replace English sounds when saying the loans in question. While discussing English loanwords in Italian, for example, Pulcini (1999) argues that "phonetic adaptation to the pronunciation rules of the receiver language is always present […]" though the author asserts that in many cases this adaptation is minimal (p. 361). As for the pronunciation of Anglicisms in French, Lazarev (2017) illustrates this adaptation by explaining that *ch* in the word *challenge* may sound [ʃ], i.e. like *ch* in the French word *chimie* (*chemistry* in English). In regard to Spanish, Alejo and McGinity (1997), for example, speak of a "[…] tendency to produce a vowel sound before consonant clusters with *s*" (pp. 223-224).

In the discussion of the use of economic Anglicisms in the business classroom, Alejo and McGinity (1997) devote a subsection to pronunciation. The authors herein suggest taking into consideration the *assimilation index* of Anglicisms when teaching pronunciation to Spanish learners. This index is defined as "[…] the number of changes that an English word has to make to adapt its pronunciation to Spanish" (Alejo & McGinity, 1997, p. 224). However, I think that the *degree of divergence* of a given BE loan should also be borne in mind. By *degree of divergence*, I mean the amount of difference between the learners' pronunciation of a word and the target English pronunciation of this word. Indeed, I believe that, when lesson planning, taking the *assimilation index* of a BE loan into account is a good start, but that this should be contrasted with what actually happens in the classroom, i.e. with the *degree of divergence*. I shall illustrate this

concept with the following example. Alejo and McGinity (1997) suggest teaching the term *management* as its *assimilation index* is high in comparison to Spanish. Nevertheless, it could happen that, in a given class, this term presented few or no difficulties. Consequently, I think that, even in monolingual classes, i.e. those in which all the learners have the same L1, it would be interesting to focus first on those BE loans whose *degree of divergence* is high. If the *degree of divergence* could not be reduced, then it would perhaps be useful to address the *assimilation index*, i.e. to compare English with the learners' L1 (in this case, French, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish). However, if this were the case, the teacher would need to be familiar with the pronunciation of the learners' L1.

Conclusion

Because of the apparent lack of research that relates the language of BE systematically to teaching the pronunciation of this language in my survey into the free access abstracts or introductions of the journals mentioned in the introduction, I set out to examine this issue. In this paper, I have dealt with primary stress when teaching the pronunciation of BE multi-word terms and with English sounds when looking into the pronunciation of loans that may be used in business contexts. In the former case, I have compared the language of BE with that of BF, BI, BP, and BS and can conclude that there are syntactic and phonological differences between the first language and the other four, which need to be taken into account when teaching pronunciation in lessons that deal with BE. In the latter case, I have discussed the reasons why it may be important to teach the pronunciation of BE loans in the same lessons. In addition, I have referred to existing literature and to Alejo and McGinity's (1997) *assimilation index* in particular. I have also proposed combining this index with the *degree of divergence* when teaching the pronunciation of BE loans. Indeed, the ultimate goal of this article has been to reflect on issues that may come in useful when teaching pronunciation to adult L1 speakers of any of the four Romance languages in question in BE lessons or in GE lessons whose content is about business.

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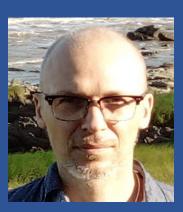https://www.wordreference.com/enpt/credit%20card

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