Toward an Integrated Model of Teaching Business English in Tertiary Education

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Abstract Effective use of English in the international business context requires not only knowledge of business domains, such as micro- and macro-economics, marketing, finance and fundamentals of business law, but also professional, intercultural and interpersonal skills. All these components should be taken into consideration while designing Business English (BE) syllabi. The article discusses some of the important issues connected with designing BE courses for the tertiary education level and analyzes Bhatia's (2002) tripartite model for teaching English for business purposes, which, drawing to the concept of professional expertise, aims to combine teaching subject knowledge and business practices with developing students' discursive competence. The framework cultivates facilitating their business expertise and skills, rather than merely teaching discrete knowledge of the subject and a special language register. On the practical front, the author recommends adopting the case study approach in BE classes, because cases allow for working on the three modules of the model discussed in the theoretical part of the paper.

1 Introduction

The purpose of a Business English (BE) course, like any other English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, is to fulfill students' profession-related needs and develop expertise in a given profession they represent. To achieve this, the syllabus and materials used in the classroom try to imitate students' communication needs in workplace settings, which were determined by prior needs analysis. However, in the case of BE courses taught at tertiary level, where the participants are pre-experienced learners; i.e., apprentices in business contexts, those needs are often difficult to identify since it is impossible to foresee in which business sectors or at what positions the students will be employed and, thus, for what purposes they

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will be using English in the would-be workplaces, if they use it at all. Traditionally, in such courses, referred to in the literature as English for General Business Purposes (EGBP), students usually use materials set in business contexts, formed on the basis of language rather than job criteria. They work on the traditional four skills and develop specific grammar and vocabulary (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 55).

This paper, which is of a descriptive and exploratory nature, analyzes BE, addresses some of the important issues associated with designing BE courses at the level of tertiary education and tries to answer the question regarding what contents such courses should include so that students can acquire both language proficiency and professional expertise enabling them to function successfully in the world of business. The author discusses Bhatia's (2002) tripartite, participant-focused and process-oriented model for teaching BE. It aims to integrate teaching subject knowledge and business practices with discursive competence,[1] hoping to prepare students to work in a multilingual and multicultural environment across a range of business sectors, and at diverse positions.

2 Business English, Business Communication and BE Course Design

BE register contains specialized language in terms of grammar and business terminology, and is used to relate language forms to the context in which they are used. Zhang (2007, p. 403) categorized BE lexis into three groups according to their functions, namely "participant, process and circumstance". He revealed that whereas in the business world the participants act in the capacity of customers, contractors, managers, sellers or buyers (i.e., are rather institutionalized and public), in everyday life they take roles of wife, mother or child (i.e., are personal and private). Along the same line, processes in the business world are more action-oriented (i.e., business people sell, manage, manufacture, deliver or confirm) than in ordinary life, where people see, feel, lie, love, marry or die. The circumstances of the two worlds also differ, which is illustrated, for example, by location (office, department, boardroom versus living room, kitchen, fitness club, forest, etc.).

[1]Discursive competence comprises: (a) textual competence—the ability to use language, i.e. sounds, words and grammar, appropriately to suit the context and use textual, contextual and pragmatic knowledge to construct and interpret texts; (b) generic competence—the ability to respond to recurrent and new communicative situations by producing, interpreting and using generic conventions to achieve professional goals; (c) professional competence—the capacity to use genres to become a competent member of a professional culture; and (d) social competence—the ability to use language more widely to participate effectively in a wide variety of social and institutional contexts to give expressions to their social identity (Bhatia, 2002).

Currently, thanks to advanced technology, an in-depth study of the language used in business communication is feasible, which has made determining the content of BE courses much easier: at the micro-level of grammar and lexis, BE is not any more as experience-, intuition- and materials-led as it used to be. For example, the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC), which contains one million spoken data from a range of purely spoken business contexts, allows for gaining access to frequency lists of the most important keywords and clusters used by business people at meetings and, thus, including them in a BE course (Handford, 2010). In a similar vein, access to more data has revealed practices showing that, in many situations, much shorter and more informal phrases than the ones taught in the past are used at business meetings, and that gambits employed on such occasions do not have to be verbal: topic closure can be signaled by shifting papers or taking out car keys, while topic introduction by opening a new file (Linde, 1991). Handford (2010, p. 251) reported that, in business meetings, the modal verb *must*, while formally possible, is highly unusual and potentially hazardous; *need to* and *have to* are more frequent. Similarly, expressions such as *I disagree with you* are not common even though they are still used in BE textbooks. Data bases such as CANBEC can contribute to offering students input more compatible with the language they will meet in their future workplaces.

However, BE is much more than a "the special nomenclature that reflects content knowledge" (Handford, 2010, p. 248) with specialized lexical, syntactic and discourse features. Language used in business is a complex phenomenon subject to a range of variables and has its own subject matter, interpersonal relations, channels of communication, and patterns of organizing messages. All those factors contribute to significant variations and dynamic patterns of business communication of which students have to be made aware.

Researchers argue that in business communication language is often used to create messages in conventionalized forms, appropriate to the communicative goals of interaction participants. Studies of business genres[2] reveal that business interactions are staged and goal-oriented. This is illustrated by meetings which have typical structural features repeated in different contexts and companies. Holmes and Stubbe (2003) identified three stages into which corporate meetings are structured: opening, discussion and closing. Each phase is made up of a number of linguistic conventions, exchanges and moves, and the boundaries between the consecutive stages are marked by transitional moves. The participants also automatically employ relatively well-ingrained professional and discursive practices to achieve their objectives.

Recent research indicates that genres are standardized communicative events, and in the literature, researchers identify seven core communicative events in the business world (Bhatia, 2002; Holden, 1993; Yin & Wong, 1990). Five of them, namely telephoning, socializing, delivering presentations, taking part in meetings

[2]Genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share the same set of communicative purposes (Swales, 1990, p. 58).

and negotiations, require oral language, while two are in written form: corresponding and reporting. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 64) noted how misleading the term "socializing" is by suggesting that the focus of interaction is social when, in fact, it remains business. The "social" aspect of interactions is primarily aimed at establishing a good relationship in order to enhance the conduct of business. All those communicative events have to be taken into consideration while designing a BE syllabus.

Currently, content offered in BE classes tries to incorporate the research findings discussed above and imitate how the language works and functions, and how people use it in business contexts. Consequently, this means that designing the course is preceded by a thorough analysis of discourse (exploring texts at a level beyond the sentence), genres and communicative events typical of a business community students hope to enter in the future (McCarthy & Carter, 2004, p. 3). Exposing students to various business genres stems from the premise that as novices they should be ushered into professions through engagement in its characteristic language and a set of practices mutually understandable within this community, along the way learning to replicate the values of the profession, if possible, by interacting with experts.

In addition, students should be exposed to and study the context in which communication takes place. As Bhatia (2008, p. 171) argues, contextualization is responsible for "the eventual success of professional activities usually undertaken by professionals to achieve their professional objectives". In practice, this means allowing students to go beyond textual studies (e.g., distinguishing features of promotional letters) and analyze text-external factors. If texts are to be sources of an in-depth analysis of a given professional community and their linguistic practices, they should not be treated as isolated artifacts, but, instead, their users and the uses to which the text is put and how the discourse is affected by the relationship between participants should be explored in detail. The knowledge about "who gets to say or write to whom with what effect using what channels and modes, how different genres are used, abused or subverted, and what the patterns of communication reveal about organizational structure, culture and decision-making processes" is necessary in understanding an organization's systems of communication (Hall, 2013, p. 5).

However, according to Bazerman and Russel (2003, p. 1), the study of texts and how they are produced and understood is meaningless, unless we can look at what the text actually causes to be done in the real world:

> It is in the context of their activities that people consider texts and give meaning to texts. And it is in the organization of activities that people find the needs, stances, interactions, and tasks that orient their attention toward texts they write and read. So to study text production, text reception, text meaning, and text value apart from their animating activities is to miss the core of text's being.

Thus, students' attention in BE class should be directed not only at the language and context, but also at what influences BE discourse significantly, namely the relationship between interlocutors (business partners), the issues of power between them, and their attitudes, identity and cultural values. All those variables shape and constrain the use of the language and have a significant impact on the utilized style in interaction, which can be either formal or informal, and direct and indirect. Research findings have revealed that the institutional relationship and status of the speakers, along with the goals of the encounter, seem to exert the foremost effect on business communication. For instance, status allows or restricts opportunities to take the floor or open or close topics in meetings, whereas both L1 and L2 clients and managers have more power and discursive opportunities than subcontractors or subordinates in business encounters (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 61).

Another example of this kind is provided by Charles (1996), who showed that a dichotomy of "new/old" in a business relationship has a differentiating power in sales negotiation discourse. If the relationship is new, the Buyers and Sellers are likely to take the roles imposed on them by the business community: they will follow established business patterns and, during the negotiation, they will use a range of politeness strategies to save the professional face of the negotiating partner. However, if the relationship is established, those roles may well be relaxed and the established patterns set aside so that the politeness strategies both sides use might serve to save the personal face of the other party. Another distinguishing factor is the situation of the buyer's market, which gives the Buyer more power over the Seller in interactions.

In the light of what has been said above, BE students have to be aware that networks of interpersonal relations in the world of business are intricate and need to be considered if the message is to be communicated clearly and the relationship dealt with appropriately, e.g., the issue of social distance between the participants shapes discussion. The participants within those circles (i.e., business-customer, business-business, and members of different departments within the same company) differ in many respects, namely in access to knowledge of professional practice, market position, status and frames of reference,[3] and, thus, communicate in a different way. Those differences exert a considerable role in interpersonal interactions as they help shape the structure of the interaction and induce a strategic use of the language (Zhang, 2007, p. 404).

Since enterprises have globalized, intercultural aspect of communication has been contributing a lot to the interpersonal dimension of doing business and thus, students have to become familiar with the cultural context of language use, that is, national or local cultures, industrial cultures and corporate cultures. The participants of cross-cultural interactions may face a dilemma over whose frame of reference and code of conduct to adopt. Traditionally, it was assumed that in international encounters where English is used, Anglo-American norms dominate. This, however, is not valid anymore, according to researchers reporting various deviances from such standards.

[3]Frames of reference are concepts, values, views, etc. by means of which an individual perceives or evaluates data.

For example, Marriott (1995) investigating business negotiations in English between an Australian and a Japanese, noted the Australian's considerable disagreement with the Japanese's refusal to respond to his proposals in the forms and manners he had expected. The Japanese deviated from the Anglo-American norms because of his status, that is, he was an overseas representative of his home company and wanted to emphasize the differences in cultural norms to pay attention to his diverse cultural identity. Bilbow (1997), in turn, revealed that at corporate meetings in Hong Kong, Western staff used more directive forms than local Chinese staff members, who were more circuitous. Bilbow attributed these differences to the cultural norms of the two groups—for the Chinese indirectness is a strategy used to save face, which is a social value highly recognized in their culture. Other studies, however, reported that the participants of international business interactions are not bound by their cultural norms and, driven by their business objectives, tend to accommodate to each other. For example, Marriott (1995) demonstrated that convergence is common in business negotiations between the Japanese and the Australian, and that both parties treat their cultural norms like interpretative resources rather than rules to be followed blindly. Zhu (2005) studied sales letters from a cross-cultural perspective (English vs. Chinese) and found that in order to achieve a persuasive effect, they share a range of communicative purposes, such as attracting the reader's attention, giving positive assessment of the product, persuading the reader to purchase the product and eliciting a positive response. Interestingly, the Chinese sales letters contained one communicative purpose, that is, the goal of setting a long-term agent-client relationship with the reader, which was absent in the English letters. Since, on graduation our students may find themselves working for international companies, a grounding in intercultural communication seems to be of paramount importance and should be present in BE class.

A lot of changes in business communication which have taken place at the turn of the 20th century regard the mode of doing business and BE courses have to adapt to them accordingly. For example, Firth (1995, p. 6) pointed out that a negotiation activity takes place in many contexts, such as "offices, committee rooms, marketplaces, consultancy rooms, shops, used car lots". The actual bargaining may be done by telephone, fax or e-mail after the meeting. The electronic revolution has also changed the media used in business to transmit messages. Powell (2005) portrayed the way business is conducted in the electronic age in the following way:

> These days the telephone is a more automatic choice for problem-solving and negotiation than the boardroom. A lot of meetings are as likely to take place in pavement cafes, office corridors, hotel foyers or in front of a webcam as they are seated around a table with a formal agenda and a flipchart. In fact, 21st century Business English might be better defined as a series of ongoing conversations – electronic, telephonic and face-to-face – whether they are the cut-and-paste conversations of e-mail, the interest-seeking conversations of negotiation or the public conversations of PowerPoint presentations (Powell in Zhang 2007, p. 405).

IT technology is changing the format of communication. For example, in the domain of written correspondence, it has accelerated the move away from formal and impersonal written communication to more informal and personal. However, BE students should be made aware that it still needs the hallmarks of good written communication, that is, a clear purpose and well organized ideas, which lead to a coherent and cohesive text.

Thus, if a BE classroom aims to equip students well with necessary competencies and skills to deal with real business people in the workplace environment, it has to go far beyond the purely semantic approach and the teaching of discipline-specific linguistic forms and features. Instead, it has to recognize the importance of discipline-based genres and introduce their analyses into class. If students are to be prepared to convey and receive messages for professional purposes appropriately, it is requisite to analyze with them a range of text types, both written and spoken, so that they become aware of how workplace genres are constructed, and allow them to identify which genres are most common and what their characteristics are. Such knowledge constituting discursive competence, that is, knowledge and skills that expert professionals use in specific discourse situations of their everyday professional activities (Bhatia, 2004), is one of the markers of professional expertise and will help students understand specific communicative purposes of business texts they will encounter in their professional lives. As important is examining the business relationships between interlocutors. Only once students learn all the intricacies and conventions of how the members of a BE discourse community they aspire to enter negotiate meaning in professional contexts, will they be able to exert a desired impact on their colleagues in the future work environments.

3 An Integrated Model of Teaching BE at the University

Traditionally, it was assumed that BE taught at the tertiary level should help students acquire helpful details of language that are in harmony with those used in business circles. However, recent research in genre analysis proved that language should not be perceived as a unified single literacy. It was revealed that students require, among a number of other inputs, the discipline specific knowledge of how professionals conceptualize various issues and talk about them in order to achieve their disciplinary and professional goals (Bhatia, 2004).

Currently, there is an increasing awareness that teaching BE is an interdisciplinary endeavor and should focus on a combination of three essential competencies: disciplinary knowledge (the development of deep conceptual understanding in a domain is a necessary condition for the development of expertise), discursive competence (language, business and study skills), and professional practice (Bhatia, 2002). Those components should be integrated since successful business communication requires knowledge of the discipline, language proficiency along with procedures, strategies and tactics for conveying messages, and a range of professional contexts in which linguistic choices can be made (frameworks of business activities). A tripartite model of teaching BE presented in Fig. 1 refers to the

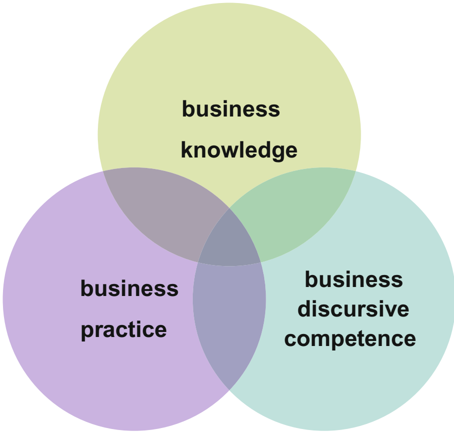


Fig. 1 Bhatia's tripartite model of teaching business english

aforementioned Bhatia's professional expertise framework. It incorporates three interdependent modules, namely business knowledge, business discursive competence and business practice.

The first area, business knowledge, comprises studies of various business topics and concepts from micro- and macro-economics, marketing, company finance, human resource management and fundamentals of business law. It can be transmitted to students in the form of small lectures, presentations or a range of texts (oral and written) (Zhang 2007, pp. 406–407). Those texts are simultaneously aimed at developing students' four language skills.

The business discursive competence module is designed to develop students' language proficiency, study skills and business skills. It plays a pivotal role, since language and business interact here—successful and appropriate discourse requires a combination of subject knowledge and insights into business practices. Students work on various sets of genres and activities, namely academic writing, discussion and presentations (study skills), meetings, negotiations, talking over the phone, socializing and correspondence (business skills). They also analyze a range of genres in terms of their accuracy and appropriateness to enhance their abilities to reflect on the use of language in business contexts.

Contents in the business practice component show students how business professionals perform business in a professionally appropriate manner. When communicating about professional goals, business people automatically employ relatively ingrained professional practices to achieve them. For example, a logistics manager, when setting up a supply chain process, deploys a range of professional practices, among which are: brainstorming, decision-making, bargaining, hypothesizing, transforming information, making a client feel valued or delegating responsibility (Handford, 2010, p. 32). All of those professional practices can be implemented by various discursive practices, such as, for example, starting the decision-making process, bringing the discussion back on track, clarifying one's position or checking shared knowledge. Thus, students have to become familiar with a set of tools which imply an intentional choice of how to proceed in a given situation, namely they acquire the procedures, conventions, strategies and tactics necessary for attaining various goals and objectives in a professional community. Drawing from Levinson's (1992, p. 100) understanding of strategies, this entails searching for "optimal or self-maximizing patterns of behavior available to participants in particular roles, under the specific constraints of the relevant activity". Business practice also involves introducing students to politeness systems used in the business world. Since doing business is marked by high potential for conflict and confrontation, access to a system of interpersonal strategies used to minimize threats seems to be indispensable. Students acquire procedural and declarative knowledge in such domains as professional etiquette and business ethics, fostering critical awareness of business practices. In addition, the business practice module comprises language use in intercultural communication, namely knowledge of effective collaboration and building relationships between people across cultures, with particular attention to each other's needs. This domain also covers a set of skills which will enable students to navigate successfully through communicative intercultural situations. Awareness and experience in intercultural issues and contexts are profoundly important for BE students since they can bring long-lasting professional, personal and relational benefits. On a practical front, it means that in a BE classroom students should be encouraged to engage in critical exploration of authentic professional and institutional intercultural contexts, roles and dilemmas which have a great impact on the unfolding discourse and the assumptions of the interaction participants. With lower-level students, their native language can be the medium of instruction, although English as a working language is preferred whenever possible.

The business knowledge and the business practice domains cover the semantic content of BE. They are supported by the module of business discursive competence, which allows for acquiring language and skills enabling experts "to identify, construct, interpret and use professional genres, and thus, participate in everyday professional activities" (Bhatia, 2004, p. 146). Business discursive competence, in turn, responsible for students' accommodating sets of genres, draws on the information obtained from the two other components, namely business knowledge and business practice.

The rationale behind integrating the three modules of business expertise within Bhatia's tripartite framework is that it will help students develop language awareness, that is, go beyond the lexical, syntactic and discursive features of BE, see how they are contextualized for communicative purposes, and simultaneously focus on the way these features relate to interpersonal relations. Students will become familiar with business practices and acquire prerequisite business knowledge enabling them to act as well-educated professionals. The model seems to comprise all the necessary elements students have to learn to be prepared to function appropriately in English in the world of business. As we know, language ability is not the most important issue in business, what often contributes to success is the experience and ability to maneuver dynamically within a particular context. Nevertheless, a working knowledge of specific clusters or key words may allow an individual who lacks either an extensive grammar or considerable experience to short-wire the system and be a more effective communicator. The discussed model takes all this into consideration.

4 Case Studies—A Practical Application of Bhatia's Model

The presented model can be applied in a BE classroom by using the case study approach, which, according to Handford (2010, p. 250), has considerable potential to offer students "an effective way of shortcutting the apprenticeship stage to become an accepted member of the business community". If students are to perform business by means of English, it is not enough for them to acquire knowledge about business—as important for them are the language and skills with which to conduct business. The best way to achieve this would be to design BE classes in such a way that students would be encouraged to simulate doing business in class themselves. Bhatia (2004, p. 49) argues that business cases are "used for the development of professional business skills in somewhat realistic, though largely simulated contexts". Although we realize that workplace discourses and practices can never be exactly replicable in a classroom situation because of a range of constraints, such as the inability to explicitly duplicate many of the pressures business people experience in the workplace environment, for instance, time and financial constraints in negotiating a contract, these practice cases do provide students with ample opportunities to mirror the activities and practices of real-life business situations.

The aim of case studies is to engage students in business problem-solving processes and prompt them to apply conceptual business categories to concrete situations. Students first analyze the available input and then recommend a course of action. In order to do this effectively, they must adopt the methods of argumentation and reasoning appropriate to business culture standards. Since success with a business case relies on creative and pragmatic application of various business theories, students turn to reflection using a synthesis of their prior background knowledge, drawing inferences from the provided texts and the ideas discussed in the class. Simultaneously they get immediate, formative feedback through follow-up discussion with classmates and/or the instructor.

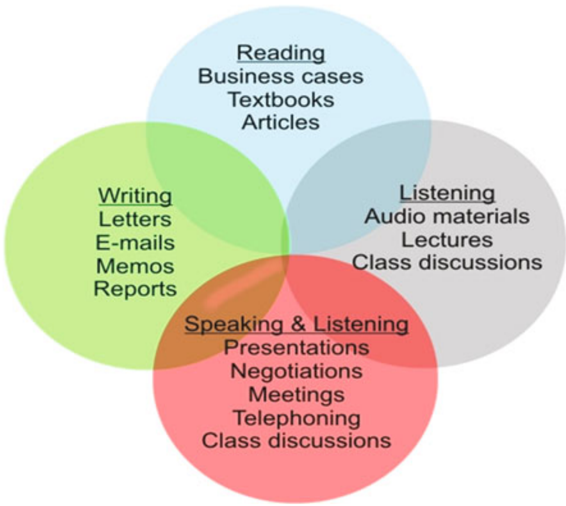
Business case responses generally can be classified into three categories: an assessment of a situation, an evaluation of an action, and a solution to a problem or situation, all of which are defined by the actions business students have to take, that is, assessing, evaluating and solving (Uhrig, 2012, p. 130). Multi-faceted problems which students are expected to analyze require them to integrate multiple business concepts to construct a solution. On the one hand, by analyzing various texts and documents, students can develop a feel for the types of business discourse through practice. On the other hand, acting out a range of simulations, they are provided with a stimulus to develop their abilities in handling business genres in English. If students want to complete the assigned task, they simultaneously have to resort to their professional knowledge of business, activate the business practice domain and deploy their business discursive competence.

The business case study technique demonstrates a range of genre networks typical of the business world. Doing business involves multimodality, as well as doing a case does, namely reading texts, listening to audio materials, writing responses, delivery of presentations and responding to follow-up questions, negotiating and participating in meetings, telephoning, engaging in classroom discussions and writing recommendations in forms of various letter types, e-mails, memos or reports (see Fig. 2). In this way, working on a particular case, students get a lot of stimuli to develop not only the four language skills, but also business and study skills. They also develop interpersonal and interactional skills that are of greatest concern in workplace settings, that is, they learn and practice how to take turns, clarify meanings, block interruptions, politely contain a troublesome interlocutor and direct the other company to follow the desired procedure (Handford, 2010, pp. 252–253).

Case studies have the potential to introduce students successfully into the intertextual nature of business communication by revealing how participants build on and draw from previous meetings, how they discuss and relate preceding communication to the ongoing encounter, and how BE often references written texts, such as e-mails, reports and agendas. Handford (2010, p. 252) argues that "making learners aware of this intertextuality is an important pedagogical aim" of a BE classroom.

Cases as examples of an integrative engagement approach are, by and large, a primary tool by which a BE course can socialize students into the business

Fig. 2 Genre networks in the case study approach (own source)



profession. They align with the values of the business profession; that is, interaction and persuasion are at the heart of the process. Progress of an individual student is measured by the extent to which his or her responses to a business case match an expert's opinion or solution. Thus, the use of case studies seems to be a well-established method of inducing future professionals into the job demands of business. All language, business and study skills are potentially involved and students' cognitive skills, such as reasoning, decision-making and problem-solving are activated. Finally, another advantage of cases is their compatibility with how adults learn foreign languages, that is, not sequentially in isolated parts, but in a nonlinear fashion.

It is significant to note that success of the case study approach depends to a large degree on students' willingness to co-operate with each other in maintaining the illusion of reality created in the classroom. Given some students' reluctance to get involved in learning the language by doing something actively in class, implementing the technique will demand a lot of skills and determination on the part of the teacher.

5 Concluding Remarks

Bhatia's (2002) model discussed in the paper approaches BE from a discursive perspective by recommending analyzing the contextual, organizational and cultural factors of texts. It demonstrates that BE teaching has to acquaint students not only with the knowledge of the discipline and the discourses they will encounter, thus raising their consciousness in this respect, but also has to become a springboard for sensitizing them to real-world business practices typical of the community they will be entering. Moving through the stages of apprenticeship to become an expert in any discipline and an accepted member of the business community requires learning appropriate ways of communicating. The recommended model, where the integrated three modules form the basis for the syllabus design, seems to provide students with the necessary knowledge, language and skills, and will navigate them through those stages and equip them with the English relevant to cater to their professional needs. Thus, on graduation, they will be able to use it effectively in the world of business. BE classes centering around cases which require students to interact in the way that might mirror professional practices seem to give students an opportunity to develop all the three modules of the model discussed. Characterized by authenticity of purpose and task, business cases introduce students to the business genres and prompt them to practice them, along with business knowledge and practice.

Some limitations of the proposed solutions should be addressed because they can set an agenda for future empirical inquiry. Firstly, more research is needed to bridge the gap between frameworks and models of BE teaching, the one discussed in the paper included, and the professional practices common for the corporate world. Since the world of business is changing rapidly, researching how and why business people communicate the way they do seems to be a never-ending endeavor. Secondly, the model should be tested in the classroom. Only then can a more reliable assessment be carried out.

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