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**Navigating a Global Pandemic with Business Excellence
in Mind: The Whys and the Hows**

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Abstract

This paper explores how teaching ESP to Business students might contribute to their becoming better prospective leaders and entrepreneurs. Making a case for competency-based education, it aims to demonstrate that enhancing students' critical thinking skills is vital. The SARS-CoV-2 crisis has been a catalyst for sudden and forcible change in the field of teaching, fostering a shift in how Business Education should be tackled. The most burning questions on which this study focuses are not only which teaching strategies might guarantee the shaping up of the true leaders of tomorrow's business world, but also what lessons the current Covid-19 pandemic has forced the academic community to learn, in light of the already-existing gaps in education approaches. By examining the most common hurdles and setbacks that a Business Communication in English professor might come across, the paper attempts to provide valid solutions for a fruitful teaching-learning process, mindful of curriculum design and the pitfalls of the e-learning environment. It also argues in favor of all-inclusive learning as best meeting the needs of today's digital natives, in a collaborative and choice-based environment that should ensure a productive online learning experience. Business Communication in English skills are shown to be key factors of economic competitiveness and growth in the global economy. Education in entrepreneurship is not (or should not be) limited to learning about company ownership or job creation, but also about social responsibility and civil leadership, therefore education in entrepreneurial skills as a lifelong learning goal must officially become part of regulated education.

Keywords: Business excellence, distance education, holistic learning, critical thinking, Business Communication in English, entrepreneurial leadership, pandemic.

JEL Classification: A12, I20, I21, I23, Z13

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Teaching in the time of pandemic: A grassroots experience*

The global crisis generated by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has clearly shaken our whole world to the core. One of the lesser expected consequences of this predicament has been a renewed interest in distance learning, since educators all over the world were forced – virtually overnight – to vacate the physical classroom and embrace online teaching. That is why, without much previous notice, we were all put in the strange and somewhat uncomfortable position of having to instantly master something new, without any sort of training. And nothing trains one better than necessity.

Virtual teaching starts from the principle that students and teachers (be they tutors, instructors, or professors, regardless of their academic rank) do not need to find themselves in the same physical space at the same time in order for the learning process to actually take place. In the case of distance learning, the two parties stay in contact with one another through an online system, also known as an e-learning platform.

Online teaching is a new learning model that is currently very successful due to its various benefits and advantages, such as flexibility of time and space, economy, scalability, not to mention that it is a dynamic, innovative, and interactive way of consuming new content.

Technology is altering the way in which students relate to institutions and their teachers, causing an evolution in education itself. Nowadays, in our increasingly virtual world, an unprecedented number of activities can be solved digitally², and the success of virtual teaching proves this theory in practice, as its demand tends to increase every year.

1.2. *A classification of the new challenges facing distance education*

A) The new digital divide

As stated in the Introduction to Mark Warschauer's book *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*, "a digital divide is marked not only by physical access to computers and connectivity but also by access to the additional resources that allow people to use technology well." (Warschauer, 2010, p. 6).

There are several types of students:

- those who have access to the Internet and know how to use it,

² According to the UN's 2019 *Digital Economy Report*, "The digital revolution has transformed our lives and societies with unprecedented speed and scale." (iv)

- those who have access to the Internet and do not know how to use it properly or whose gadgets are subpar and cause tech-related trouble,
- those without Internet access.

As shown in the UN's most recent *Digital Economy Report* (2019), the digital divide continues to be a challenge for education and, more specifically, for virtual teaching environments. In education, the digital divide stems from the students' lack of access to technology. The financial and logistical path to accessing technology is the main step towards students' being able to use these resources correctly and achieve first-rate learning outcomes.

B) Student motivation

Although it is vital that student motivation be intrinsic, creating the right online environment in which students are most inclined to learn and where they also feel motivated extrinsically should be the primary responsibility of those in charge of designing the curriculum. Professors need to constantly interact with students in order to put the latter's mind at ease and provide support whenever necessary, even though the two parties cannot meet in person and are forced to look at each other from behind a screen. The online instructional environment must be adequately planned and explicitly established, although this is not sufficient to preserve the student's curiosity or support intrinsic motivation (Bain, 2012).

When it comes to stimulating student enthusiasm, the primary role falls to the teacher, who must predict and prevent the distinctive motivational challenges that online education presents. One method towards achieving this goal is increasing interactions through a variety of e-learning methods. Students previously used to in-person teaching often feel anxious about online learning and need to feel connected, relaxed, and safe in order to be able to contribute in this unique educational setting. To help relieve their students' stress, professors must provide varied and surprising ways of interaction and communication, via videos, chats, forums, and even social media platforms.

C) Designing the curriculum

According to the OECD's *PISA 2012 Technical Report* (2014), insufficient time spent on curriculum development and design can be a contributing factor to a poorly developed virtual teaching experience, as well as a significant challenge for professors in the context of e-learning. Thus, it is imperative that all educators dedicate the necessary amount of time required to design and implement a lesson.

One way to surmount the pressing issue of time is for professors to collaborate frequently within their specialized e-learning communities. Collaborating with their peers allows professors to share, develop, and create a high-quality syllabus. This collaboration is meant to help minimize the time spent on lesson planning and pedagogic strategizing. One way to overcome the challenges of insufficient lesson planning can be addressed by focusing more on the students' individual needs and should include the following characteristics:

- opportunities for students to collaborate,
- a well-established protocol for communicating,
- clear performance expectations,
- opportunities for students to choose how assignments are created and presented.

For professors and students to succeed, these features are essential to the overall design of the course and the e-learning environment. If properly applied, they can transform virtual teaching into an innovative approach to learning – a holistic one, meant to meet the needs of today’s digital natives³ in an environment comprised of collaboration, choice, and a variety of electronic resources that support a successful online learning experience. However, in order for students to be successful in this novel learning environment, the challenges of e-learning must be overcome with constant support from instructors, customized solutions to frequently encountered difficulties, and teacher training.

2. Problem statement

Although Prensky’s description of the digital native applies to many a student nowadays, the use of technology for teaching can prove overwhelming and even present students with motivational challenges. The burden of helping students overcome these difficulties falls on the faculty’s shoulders, in the sense that instruction must sometimes be complemented by a steady dose of reassurance and psychological support from professors⁴.

Adapting one’s subject matter and teaching style to the rigors of online teaching can prove a daunting task for educators, who must make steady efforts to also incorporate those elements of the curriculum that are indeed applicable to the e-learning environment – which can be time-consuming, while the margin for error is very slim indeed.

Boasting its own e-learning platform and faculty’s previous engagement with blended learning, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies is capable of providing its students with the experience of a virtual campus which can be accessed from any device, such as a PC, Mac, tablet or smartphone, without space-time barriers. Today one can learn from virtually anywhere, since the learning spaces are now different from anything we had ever dared to imagine.

In an increasingly connected world, the use of technology in teaching is essential. It is crucial that educators everywhere use this global pandemic as both a lesson and a teaching moment, thus grasping the importance of meeting students’

³ “Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.” (Prensky, 2012, p. 203).

⁴ Many US universities provide information on their websites for students on how to deal with trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://www.northwestern.edu/counseling/outreach-education/covid-19-resources/index.html>), citing concerns regarding the students’ emotional wellbeing and overall mental health.

current and future needs by creating a new approach that is increasingly student-centric, while still remaining true to the values of high-quality education.

3. Aims of the research: Conceptualizing critical thinking as a key element to successful education in the post-truth era

Nowadays, assessing critical thinking skills in the classroom may take many different shapes and forms. The growing interest in measuring students' academic prowess comes from the need to verify the effectiveness of the teaching methods applied to this very end. It is vital to ascertain whether the various academic programs do indeed manage to improve the students' thinking skills. But the evaluation of critical thinking faces a preceding difficulty, namely describing what the latter truly means (Davies & Barnett, 2017). There are various ways to define critical thinking⁵, and the way we assess intellectual skills very much depends on how we understand them. The various assessment initiatives developed have faced serious issues regarding their legitimacy, which have, in turn, put their very feasibility into question.

When it comes to developing students' critical thinking skills⁶, education plays an important part. Moreover, a key aspect of teaching is appraising one's own results. Regarding the development of thinking skills, it is also necessary to determine whether certain teaching approaches really work or not. The most immediate benefit would be examining whether the students' performance has genuinely improved in the wake of taking a course for that specific purpose, compared to the time before receiving it (Sobkowiak, 2008).

It seems reasonable to believe that citizens with future responsibilities in society should put sufficient emphasis on developing their argumentation or decision-making skills – in short, that they should master those skills which define critical thinking. Social concern regarding leaders' ability to make sound decisions or solve complex problems seems perfectly reasonable. As such, we might construe that the effort to measure the capacity for critical reflection does not solely regard students in classrooms but is also a serious social concern.

People – from children to adults – are inclined to believe whatever they are told (without questioning the source any further) when informed by a figure of authority, especially when that authority is academic. Education is the basis of a country's social and economic development. The great powers of the First World base a large part of their development on the steady rise of professionals trained to get involved in the political and social issues of their country. Hence, the current university environment seeks to teach through a combination of work and study,

⁵ According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Critical thinking is a widely accepted educational goal. *Its definition is contested* [emphasis added], but the competing definitions can be understood as differing conceptions of the same basic concept: careful thinking directed to a goal." (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-thinking/>).

⁶ The most logical antidote to the avalanche of conspiracy theories flooding the internet via social media, especially in the COVID-19 era, seems to be teaching one's students about the importance of critical thinking.

that is, through both experience and knowledge. Therefore, encouraging critical thinking plays a crucial role in the formation of any future professional. An individual who thinks critically tends to lead an existence that is rational as much as it is empathic.

When preconscious mental processes have an appropriately complex architecture, informed decisions can be made taking into account internal needs, objectives, and external contingencies, including the unconscious and preconscious part, as well as the conscious experience. To generate such a solid and well-grounded structure, the continuous construction of knowledge is necessary, which is generated through experience, interaction, analysis, and reflection, as postulated by the constructivist theory.

To make this knowledge continuous, the pedagogical field proposes various teaching methods meant to reinforce and encourage critical thinking in a more productive way. From preschool to university, various techniques and innovative forms of teaching are being proposed. In this context, it might be interesting to ascertain whether strategies focusing on problem-based learning allow for the development of sub-competencies in the direction of interpreting and analyzing information, assessing a specific situation by making use of both objective and subjective data, and inferring the consequences of individual decisions based on self-regulated reasoning.

Returning to the importance of including competency-based education in the training of individuals capable of facing the demands of society and identifying critical thinking as a reflexive and constructive form of knowledge (Ogle et al., 2007), it might be worth considering problem-solving techniques as a valid strategy to foster generic and individual competencies in higher-education students.

Working in the classroom using innovative teaching-learning techniques allows for the whole class to stay involved, favoring active participation. In addition, it becomes possible to observe how vital learning skills are developed just as the problem at hand is getting solved. Therefore, it becomes clear that problem-solving exercises favor the competencies related to assessing a specific situation, using objective and subjective data. As such, analysis, reflection, synthesis, interpretation, and inference are applicable when the aforementioned technique is used. To generate critical thinking, active learning is required. Students must learn a concept in order to internalize, apply, and observe the value of what has been learned – thus, self-evaluation and the evaluation of one's peers prove to be an integral part of knowledge acquisition.

Work in the classroom is a continuous challenge in which we must innovate every day, to favor the learning processes. The role of the teacher is to be active in this process, seeking the necessary tools to consolidate an upward learning trend that should have a substantial impact on the personal and academic development of young people. As an educator, one must constantly bear in mind that teaching by competencies favors the formation of complex and capable people in a society that requires entrepreneurs who are also hungry for knowledge and possess the ability

to face the challenges of today's world without falling prey to false information, 'fake news,' and unsubstantiated claims.

For these purposes, the ability to argue in a logical and well-informed manner consists in the relevant and useful management of data, of the flow of information, and the wealth of knowledge at one's disposal, with the aim of being persuasive by providing compelling arguments. The milieus of dialogue, discussion, and debate require the strategic use of this skill. It is not always necessary to argue, but any argument should be conducted according to a well-established set of rules. Avoiding pseudo-arguments, fallacies, subterfuges, and bad reasoning are all aspects with which a person boasting good critical thinking skills should be familiar.

As such, the teacher must ask their students to justify (give reasons) or explain (give causal guidelines) a statement that they believe is sound. The teacher must require the students to construct an argument, which will then be rigorously evaluated. The skills of inference and argumentation come into play: the student must consider the premises and how they lead fallibly or infallibly to the conclusion. If the conclusion one wishes to reach (or support) has terms that commit one to a particular type of inference and unique sort of logic, then one must exhibit greater skill and knowledge still. In order to make sure that they tolerate analysis and withstand possible criticism, many arguments should be carefully scrutinized. Students must be able to draw their own informed/educated conclusions, at which point they are also expected to 'pay the price' of their initial assumptions and the respective consequences. Students must be led to understand that they are expected to construct a system using their own reasoning, as well as explain and convince others of what they think, of what they observe, and of what they consider relevant epistemically, logically, and axiologically.

As previously explained, critical thinking is a multicomponent-type process. Any proper method of evaluating the students' critical thinking skills must ensure that those thought components are adequately quantified. The factors that make up any test aiming to measure critical thinking capabilities show that the components are never independent from one another (Wisdom & Leavitt, 2015). We can activate some and not others, but in a broad context, such as our daily activities, all processes interact with each other. Thus, in the field of practical reasoning, we can find any possible form of inference. The procedures that we must follow in order to make the right decisions also require our reasoning processes, which allow us to achieve the desired results more effectively. When we solve a problem, we make use of both our reasoning processes and our ability to decide well. In short, there is no perfect 'recipe' that absolutely guarantees always finding the adequate solution to a problem, but critical thinking is the failsafe that protects us from looking at the world from behind a smokescreen of half-truths and distorted realities.

4. Research methods: Teaching approaches in Business Education

Business Education ensures that students have access to real-life situations involving companies and clients, as it provides the students with their first professional-type experiences, meant to prepare them for a future career in the world of business. Unlike traditional teaching methods that solely rely on providing theoretical information, which many times results in tedious and useless classes (Kohn, 2003), Business Communication in English captures the students' attention, because it allows them to partake in fun exercises – for instance, they can pretend to be company executives and make their own decisions as part of a business scenario, even if those decisions turn out to be wrong.

First and foremost, Business students need to understand that an excellent command of the English language is increasingly necessary for successful international communication, as it is linked to prospects of economic competitiveness and growth in the global economy.

The creation of new companies is undoubtedly one of the primary sources of sustained development throughout the world, both economically and socially. On the one hand, there is a positive and strong correlation between entrepreneurship and economic results in terms of growth, the survival of companies, innovation, job creation, technological change, increased productivity, and exports. Business initiatives – either in the context of the start-up of a new business or the reorientation of an existing one – are the engine of the market economy in the generation of wealth. On the other hand, entrepreneurship is also a means in the service of other social objectives, such as the generation of employment, the labor insertion of disadvantaged groups, the diversification of options for consumers and, ultimately, an increase in the quality of life of the community in which it is developed.

In recent years, various attempts have been made to come up with an operational definition of entrepreneurship. Oftentimes, a limited view of the construct is maintained, which is incorrectly defined exclusively in relation to the creation of companies and self-employment. However, it should mean much more than that, since it is linked to a broad concept of essential skills for life. Entrepreneurship includes creativity, innovation, and the ability to take calculated risks, as well as the capacity to plan and manage projects aimed at achieving different objectives. All these competencies are transferable and multifunctional and, therefore, important to meet the individual needs of personal development, social inclusion, and employment.

From this point of view, entrepreneurship is, above all, a question of attitude, which reflects the motivation and ability of a person to identify and take advantage of new opportunities to produce value or business success. Thus, business competencies can be useful to any person and type of business. That is, they can be present in both entrepreneurs and employees, as well as in companies of any sector and size, in the different stages of their life cycle, from before their creation to the phase of growth, transfer or closure, and new start-up.

In short, the benefit of an education in entrepreneurship is not (or should not be) limited to learning how to own more companies, be more innovative, and create more jobs. It is a key factor in becoming more creative, acquiring more confidence in what one does, and acting in a socially responsible manner. There is broad consensus regarding the need to include the education in entrepreneurial skills through lifelong learning, integrating it into the systems of regulated education, from kindergarten all the way to university and beyond.

Based on a broad concept of entrepreneurship, business skills education can be defined based on two elements:

1. education in competencies and business skills directed to the development of specific personal qualities and not directly focused on the creation of new companies,
2. specialized training aimed at the establishment of a company.

As such, Business Education in a Foreign Language should operate on the following levels:

- a) promote the development of personal qualities related to entrepreneurship, such as creativity, initiative, risk-taking, and responsibility,
- b) provide students with early knowledge of the business world and a credible interaction with it, by helping them understand the role of entrepreneurs in the community,
- c) raise awareness among students about self-employment as a possible professional option (the message would be that, in addition to being employed, one can also become an entrepreneur, simultaneously or in the long run),
- d) organize activities based on learning through practice (learning by doing) – for instance, by directing mini-companies or virtual companies as part of a classroom role-playing exercise or end-of-the-semester project,
- e) provide students with specific training on how to start a business and manage its growth.

5. Findings: a few strategies and guidelines for educational success

The use of effective methodologies and activities for the teaching of entrepreneurship has long constituted a point of critical reflection on European and national policies and curricula. In general terms, it is assumed that the learning of basic skills and specific knowledge for the creation of new companies requires different teaching strategies complementing each other.

The following are a few useful strategies for the selection of entrepreneurship education methodologies when it comes to university-level classes of Business Communication in English:

- i. *Theory-based methods should not be used excessively.* There is consensus regarding the importance of not limiting Business Education to the teaching of purely theoretical information, although much of the knowledge that the students acquire on the creation and operation of companies must be grounded in theory. Lectures as a primary teaching tool must be complemented with a wide range of more effective methodologies.
- ii. *Autonomous forms of learning should be developed.* It is crucial to encourage an active attitude in the student, through educational methods that allow greater control over their own learning process. In this context, the adoption of a secondary role by the teacher, as a moderator of learning rather than a content provider, is crucial.
- iii. *Learning based on direct action and practice by the student should be promoted more.* In relation to the previous point, the best way to learn about entrepreneurship is to practice it in a concrete way. Innovation and efficiency are mainly the result of action-oriented teaching methods based on student participation, which encourage students to understand the most theoretical aspects and encourage an active attitude in the learning process. Thus, in the teaching of business skills, there must be a balance between theoretical studies and the vital component of learning through practice.
- iv. *Learning opportunities based on experience should be provided.* The involvement of the outside world in education is a strategy highly valued by students. That is why it is widely recommended that companies and employers participate more, while a more widespread application of methods based on case studies and specific projects is also encouraged. In this way, business skills are presented as a logical continuation of theoretical studies, rather than a mere extension that runs parallel to them.
- v. *Cooperative learning and interaction should be enabled.* The overcoming delimitations between disciplines and multidisciplinary collaboration are essential elements for the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills. This method entails allowing students from different schools and fields of study to cooperate towards the development of joint activities and projects. Thus, greater use can be made of the individual skills of students with different academic backgrounds, in a context of continuous learning and mutual collaboration for the identification and fulfillment of new opportunities.
- vi. *The role of reinforcement should not be underestimated.* Finally, it is important to recognize and encourage those students who are really interested in undertaking their own business projects, especially by reinforcing the values of accountability and innovation in the company (Sutton, 2002). In this sense, organizing competitions and awarding prizes to the students' most innovative projects can be a positive reinforcement strategy.

Based on these six basic methodological guidelines, the activities most useful in the teaching of business culture and entrepreneurial initiative are the following:

- A. group activities and teamwork for the conception of new commercial ideas,
- B. workshops involving business plans that allow for the maximum development of the students' innovative ideas,
- C. case studies, which present students with models of behavior with which they can easily identify,
- D. outside lecturers, especially businesspeople and business professionals (both entrepreneurs and corporate types),
- E. company-centric simulations, for a better understanding of various enterprises' internal dynamics and ways of operating.

6. Conclusions

When planning a course or preparing for a specific class, Business English professors must be aware of all the options and limitations that derive from the institution's – and the students' – expectations of said course/class. The trick is managing to strike a balance between all the factors involved in each course. Thus, faculty must consider the variety of situations and tasks that the students of English for Specific Purposes should or might wish to carry out, together with their rhetorical/verbal needs, linguistic insights (grammar, vocabulary, etc.), and communication skills.

Ultimately, teaching Business Communication in English should be about adequately balancing all the factors that play a pertinent role in the design of the course and then taking two key steps, as follows: on the one hand, a relevant selection must be made considering the time available, the importance of the communicative needs detected, and the frequency of specific structures in the variety of the course; on the other hand, it might be convenient to establish a progression consistent with the subject matter's degree of difficulty and commensurate with the communicative importance of each aspect tackled. Regarding the linguistic aspects of Business English, grammar has long been an essential part of most language teaching programs, with grammatical errors or difficulties threatening to interfere with the students' productivity and communication effectiveness (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). However, in light of all the issues explored in the present paper, it can be judiciously inferred that the teaching of Business English has less to do with grammar and a lot more to do with critical thinking, entrepreneurial education, and a certain understanding of global issues that, for lack of a better word, can be defined as cultural awareness.

In the process of adapting university-level teaching of Business Communication in English to the requirements of the global market today, it is essential to reconsider whether the transformations undertaken will allow an appropriate response to the social responsibilities frequently assigned to the public university.

In a saturated labor market, marked by instability and the burden of unrealistic demands regarding professional experience, it seems unlikely that the traditional role of the university as a trainer of paid professionals can meet the needs of students in terms of access to the business world and the labor market in general. And even if it were, the fast-changing and ever-growing requirements of the business environment pose important challenges to the manner in which we choose to teach prospective entrepreneurs in the context of higher education – which means an innovation of teaching methodologies is long overdue.

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