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## REQUESTS AND APOLOGIES IN BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSEBOOKS – THE CASE OF BUSINESS RESULT

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**Abstract:** Pragmatic competences, as part of Applied Linguistics, appear to be one of the hardest types of competences to be taught to learners, especially in EFL, ESP respectively. This has already been discussed in quite a bit research, and there are still doubts whether these competences can be taught through ESP books at all. Especially, when we talk about Business English, which as branch of English for Specific Purposes, pays more attention to building vocabulary in order to help learners ease their communication skills. This paper focuses on two types of speech acts, requests and apologies, as part of pragmatic competences.

The book that is analyzed, is Business Result, Elementary and Pre-Intermediate. The paper gives a general overview whether these two speech acts are presented enough in these two books, and furthermore, whether they are taught explicitly or implicitly. Based on my experience of using this book in teaching, and, another thorough analysis made especially for this research, it can be said that these coursebooks do not contain enough explicit materials for teaching requests and apologies, to students of Economics in any University that these books are used. There are other implicit, not so clearly suggested or observed exercises which aim to teach these two speech acts, but, that is not enough.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, speech acts, requests, apologies, Business English

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Business English, as part of English for Specific Purposes, has become a very important course in higher education institutes. We all know that English is important in finding a job, even in non-native English-speaking countries. However, possessing knowledge of Business English, is a much-needed asset in getting involved in the business world, not only finding a job, but making connections for other important things too. In North Macedonia, Business English is taught at few universities, starting from University “Cyril Methodius” in Skopje, as the largest university in the country; then University of Tetovo, South East European University, and American College Skopje.

However, the accent on this paper is put on the development of pragmatic competences in Business English, because as such, these competences are less paid attention to due to different factors which will be discussed below.

Usually, when Business English is lectured as a course in universities, it is given more attention to communication skills in general, maybe enrichment of the vocabulary, less importance to pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences, respectively. There are researchers and linguists who think that pragmatic competences can not be taught through textbooks, as the latter are not seen as a reliable source of necessary pragmatic input. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) believe that the inclusion of pragmatic content in ELT coursebooks should be done really carefully, and here the role of the teacher is crucial. But there are quite a few others who have supported the opinion that pragmatic competence can indeed be improved through textbooks (Koike and Pearson, 2005; Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004; Bouton, 1994).

Quantifiably fewer studies are conducted on the pragmatic development in the ESL context, let alone in Business English specifically. Learners need to encounter well-given input and be explicitly guided. This can help them understand the gaps between their mother tongue and the L2. If we analyze a simple request such as “use your printer”, and “Could I use your printer”, they are both understandable by the hearer, but, when in communication with a native speaker, the second option would be more acceptable, due to the politeness in it. This is exactly why focusing on pragmatic competences is very important in teaching Business English.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English for Specific Purposes is part of Applied linguistics, which is oriented towards grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre (Dudley and Evans, 1998). What makes ESP different from general English, is that sometimes different methodology should be used in the process of teaching, it represents an area of unfamiliar domains (Belcher, 2006) and puts its focus on the learner (Skenderi & Ejupi, 2018). There are different types of ESP such as English for Academic purposes; English for Law; English for Business etc.

Business English, as a branch of ESP has become quite important the last two decades, when communication in the Business world has immensely increased. Communication is the key, and as such, Business English is seen as part of Communicative Language Teaching. But, even if we say that communication is the focus of BE, do we really analyze what do in fact Communicative competences mean?

According to CEFR, (2001), Communicative competences are divided into Linguistic competences, Pragmatic competences and Sociolinguistic competences. Pragmatic competences, as observed by CEFR, is the correct usage the language (137); or as Yule defines it “the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener; (1996; 3); “the ability to produce socially appropriate utterances in various contexts of language use” ( Daskalovska, 2016). Pragmatics is a branch of applied linguistics, initiated somewhere in the late sixties, and as such is concerned with the meaning attribution of utterances. (Al-Qahtani, 2020)

In pragmatics, actions that are performed with utterances are speech acts. This paper focuses on the speech act of requests and apologies. These two may be both speech acts, but they are different in the sense of when they are being acted. Olshtain (1984) claims that requests are pre-event acts, made trying to cause or change something; while apologies are post-event acts, which happen after a certain event has already happened.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper gives an overall evaluation of a coursebook, Business Result, both levels, Elementary and pre-intermediate, used in some institutions in North Macedonia, as part of Economic Faculty. ZOhrabi suggests that coursebooks are evaluated at every stage (2011), while Cunningsworth (1998) observes that the best way to show the strengths and weaknesses of a coursebook is when evaluation is done after its use. Therefore, this analysis is done based on my experience after using the book as a material for teaching Business English course, and it is based on tasks that are aimed to teach politeness, through the speech acts of requests and apologies, implicitly or explicitly.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pragmatic competences can be taught differently, according to what the expectations of the courses are. It is hard to say whether books have or not enough materials for certain type of competence however, I have tried to rely my experience of the last two years of using Business Result with my students.

In Business Result, each unit has a different topic which can be taught independently from the other units. Each unit has a part which is titled *Business Communication* and it is expected to help with communication. Another part which is present in each unit is *Practically speaking*, and here I have been able to find something from pragmatic competences. But, not including explicit teaching of pragmatics as we would like to.

### 5. REQUESTS

Requests are face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978), and by making a request, the speaker is freed from imposition (Olshtain, 1984). According to Leech & Svartvik ,the speech act of request occurs when speakers want or expect the hearer to commit to future action, directly or indirectly, (qtd. in Romina & Marazita, 2009), or as they observe requesting means “to ask your hearer whether he is willing or able to do something”.

Requesting examples without giving any explanation, or prior introduction to requests, the exercise only has a set of questions which all start with the modal “can” for e.g (page 16 Elementary)

- **Can I \_\_\_\_\_ a private room?**
- **Can you \_\_\_\_\_ me your name please?**
- **Can you \_\_\_\_\_ me the prices?**

The only hint that is given to students so they understand this is one way of making a request is the key expressions part on the left side of the page, where under requesting there is the first sentence of the sentences above.

In ESP, it is vital for a speaker to be polite when important transactions like “contracts, business correspondence, advertisements in the foreign language” (Triki, 2002) are being done, because it helps enormously in achieving where you want. So, mastering the maxims of politeness is not a luxury, is a competence that one must have if successful outcomes are expected from him.

In Business Result Pre-intermediate, in the very first unit, under the section of Practically speaking, we can find exercises which aim to teach students *How to make polite requests?* (page 9)

This section has three exercises, where the first one only gives student to choose between **I** or **you** to fill the gaps of some sentences such as in the examples:

1. *Could \_\_\_\_\_ speak to you for a moment?*
2. *Can \_\_\_\_\_ tell me your name?*
3. *Can \_\_\_\_\_ have another drink, please?*
4. *Could \_\_\_\_\_ call me again tomorrow?*

The second exercise is a pair work type of task, and students are asked to use the questions from the previous exercise, with their answers given in this exercise.

1. *Yes, of course.*
2. *I'm afraid I'm on Holiday.*

3. *Certainly, same again?*

The third exercise is also a pair work type of task, and has a list of requests, and students are expected to make and respond to these requests. Examples:

1. *I want your telephone number. (have)*
2. *I want your address. (give)*
3. *I need your pen to sign the visitor's pass (borrow)*

There are also examples in the coursebook where “could” is used such as below:

- **Could you** give me a hand? – hearer oriented  
(pg. 51 Elementary Business Result)
- If we agreed to work with you, **could you** reduce your price? – hearer oriented  
(pg. 128 Pre intermediate Business Result)
- Do you think **I could** ask him to come later? – speaker oriented  
(pg 13 Pre intermediate Business Result)
- **Could I** leave a message for her?  
(pg 23. Elementary Business Result)

### Apologies

Olshtein et al, observe that the speech act of apologizing is different from that of requesting, because apologies are post-event acts, while requests are always pre-event acts (206) requests attempt to cause an event or sometimes change one, while apologies are the ones that signal the “fact that a certain type of event has already taken place” (ibid). Bergman and Kasper (1993) maintained that the purpose of apology is to re-establish social relation harmony after the offense is committed.

Regarding the speech acts of apologies, there is only one exercise which is explicitly teaching learners about apologies, to some extent. It is found in Business Result Elementary, page 33. Under *Practically speaking* – How to apologize. There are two exercises. The first one is a listening activity. After listening students are expected to answer two questions;

*How does the speaker apologize??*

*What reason does the speaker give?*

In the second exercise, students are expected to be able to take turns to apologize for some given situations in the other exercise, such as the examples below:

*You're late for a job interview*

*You didn't remember your colleague's birthday.*

*A customer didn't receive a delivery.*

Implicitly, quite a lot exercises include at least one sentences where apologies could be taught without students being aware of it. The framework of Olshtain and Cohen (1983) observes five models of expressing an apology:

- “I am sorry”; explanation or account of the situation,

**That's strange. It isn't here. Sorry about that.** (121, 27)

- “the taxi came late”; an acknowledgment of responsibility,

**I was at the presentation on branding. (page 121 dialogue 28)**

**There were problems with my flight (page 121, dialogue 31)**

- “I'll pay for the broken vase”; an offer of repair,
- “it won't happen again” – promise

There were no examples of the last two models in neither of the books, respectively an offer of repair and promise.

However, there are few performative verbs used to express an apology, and they include formulaic expressions of regret such as: (Olshtain, 1984)

Sorry:

- **Sorry, I'm busy then. (BR, Elementary, page 52)**
- **Sorry, I.m a little late. (BR, Pre-Intermediate page 23)**

Apologize:

- **I do apologize for that. (BR, Pre-Intermediate, page 151)**

Excuse:

- **Excuse me, is this seat free? (Business Result Pre-Intermediate, page 10)**
- **Excuse me, I can't find the ticket office? (BR, Elementary, page 120)**

The second example is also an indirect request, such as “Could you help me find it” or similarly asked.

Olshtain lists **regret** as one of the routinized performative verbs which are used to perform an apology, but, this word is not used not even once in neither of the coursebooks used for analysis in this paper.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Pragmatic competences have always been seen as a hard to achieve competence through coursebooks. They still remain harder than other competences, and the debate whether they should be taught explicitly or implicitly will continue to be active and disputable in the future too.

Business Result Elementary and Pre-Intermediate versions, are both helpful in teaching and learning Business English, but still lack enough content regarding pragmatic competences, and the analysis above show this assumption better.

As per requests, they are usually presented in the form of hearer-oriented, rather than speaker-oriented. Regarding apologies, they are represented less than requests, which can be proven with the information that the word apologize is found only once in the whole pre-Intermediate coursebook, while regret, as a performative verb for apologies, is never used in neither of the books.

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