Novelties in Academic English Testing

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Abstract

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With growing geo-economic globalization, there is constant rise in the volume of international business contacts, and English for specific purposes, namely for business engineering, must be able to deal with these new challenges. Theories and practical methods of teaching and learning 'foreign languages for career purposes' have focused on business English as the lingua franca of international affairs. Business linguistics centres on idiom functioning in economy, and on the linguistic component of business communication. The methodology involves both traditional and modern teaching-testing methods for the discourse and for the emerging text, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, empirical, descriptive, comparative techniques, cognitive, pragmatic, and genre-style analyses. All types of linguistic data are used as study materials – real or experimental, authentic or simulated, as well as their combinations. The current article reviews international English idiom testing strategies and their impact upon students' learning approaches and their subsequent proficiency levels.

Keywords: Academic English tests; students' study styles; entrepreneur levels; tradition and modernity in foreign language teaching.

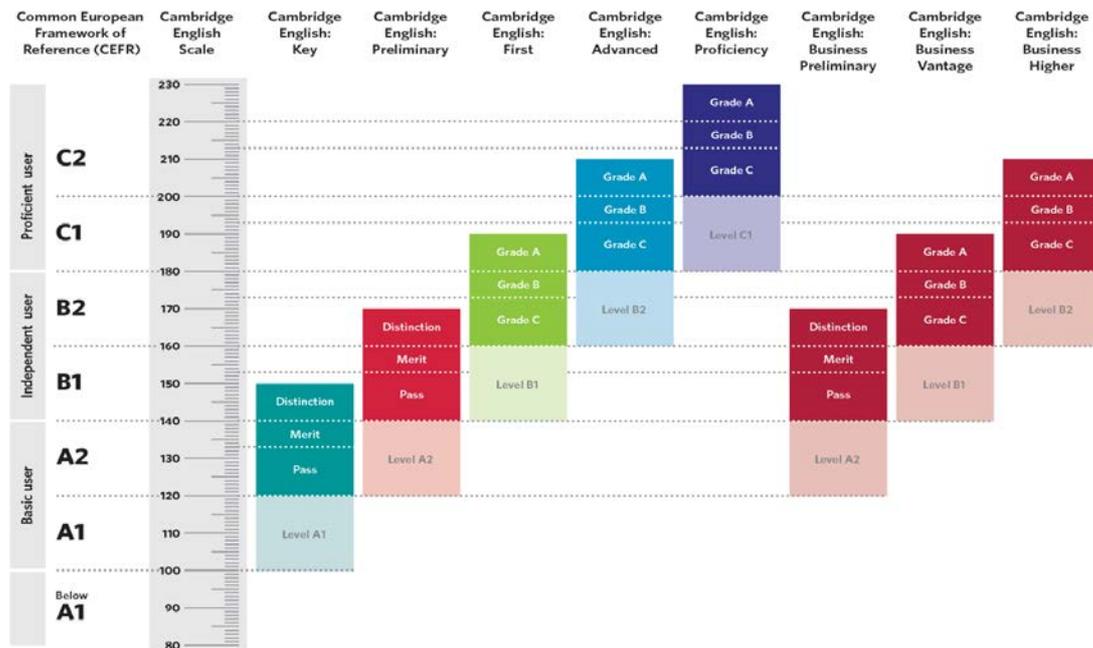## 1. EU CEFR levels and Cambridge English Scale scores

The Cambridge English Scale is a range of scores used to report results for Cambridge English exams. Such scores replace the candidate profile and the standardised scores. Grades and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – CEFR levels are retained. Scale scores make clear exams alignment with each other, and with the CEFR.

Cambridge English First, First for Schools, Advanced and Proficiency have reported on the scale since January 2015. Cambridge English Key, Key for Schools, Preliminary, Preliminary for Schools, and the Business Certificates were added in February 2016. Candidates receive a Statement of Results and a certificate containing the candidate's score on the Cambridge English Scale for each of the four skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) and Use of English where tested, together with the score on the Cambridge English Scale and the grade as well, in accordance with the CEFR level for the global exam.

In addition, the certificate contains the level for the UK National Qualifications Framework – NQF. The overall score is calculated by averaging the individual scores a candidate receives.

Table 1. Cambridge English: Advanced Reading and Use of English

Part	Task type	Testing focus	Length of text	Questions
1	4-option multiple-choice cloze	Vocabulary	150-170 words	8
2	Open cloze	Grammar (and vocabulary)	150-170 words	8
3	Word formation	Vocabulary	150-170 words	8
4	Keyword transformation	Grammar, vocabulary, collocation	25 words each	6
5	4-option multiple-choice text	Various	650-750 words	6
6	Cross-text multiple matching	Opinion, attitude	550-600 words	4
7	Gapped text	Cohesion, coherence, text structure, global meaning	650-800 words	6
8	Multiple matching	Detail, opinion, attitude, specific information	600-700 words	10

Fig. 1. Grades and CEFR levels correlated with skills and tasks in entrepreneur communication on global job markets

Many students appear to have problems communicating in English, especially the low ability ones. This may be caused by lack of basic grammar and vocabulary (Adler, 1983, p. 45) and by deficiency in using adequate communication strategies. Learners experience difficulty in selecting the most appropriate & effective strategies for business engineering communication tasks. The dialogic tactics they implement can form an inventory of elicited answers related to academic levels and job communication strategies in use.

Low-ability students resort to risk-avoidance means, especially time-gaining strategies, and need assistance in developing risk-taking techniques: social-affective, fluency-oriented, help-seeking, or circumlocution.

2. Relating scores between exams

The Cambridge English Scale represents performance across a wider range of language ability than any single exam. Each exam is mapped to a section of the scale; despite exams being targeted at specific levels, there is a degree of overlap between tests at adjacent levels, and the new Cambridge English Scale shows where the exams overlap and how performance on one exam relates to performance on another.

Candidates who achieve the same Cambridge English Scale score in different exams show comparable levels of ability. For instance, a test taker with 182 in *Cambridge English First* gets a similar score in *Cambridge English Advanced*. Exam alignment is an integral part of test construction procedures as well as of the rating scales used to assess performance.

The example below shows the link between CEFR levels, the Cambridge English Scale and the grades in *Cambridge English Advanced*: a candidate with 200-210 gets grade A and a *Cambridge English Advanced* Certificate stating Level C2. The maximum achievable score in *Cambridge English Advanced* is 210. The ones with 193-199 get grade B. Those with 180-192 obtain grade C. All these candidates get Level C1 *Cambridge English Advance* Certificate. The ones with 160-179 get Level B2 and those with 142-159 do not get certificates but are given a Cambridge English Scale score shown on the Statement of Results, as illustrated in Fig. 2 below.
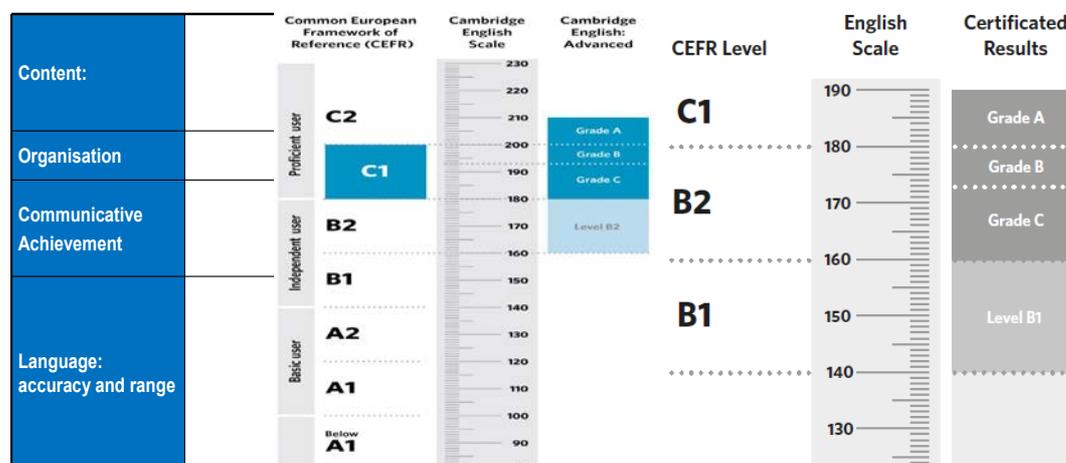

Fig. 2. Cambridge English Scale scores shown on the Statement of Results

The Business English Certificate Vantage (BEC Vantage) assesses the English used in business context at CEFR B2. Grade A candidates achieving 180-190 receive BEC Vantage stating their Level C1 skills.

Grade B or Grade C ones (160-179) get Level B2.

Table 2. Correlation of skills, scores, grades and CEFR levels

• grammar and vocabulary • discourse management • pronunciation • uninterrupted collaborative talk • having long turns • advanced preparation & organization • global achievement • negotiation • interactive communication	Pass Grade A 180 – 190 Pass Grade B 173 – 179 Pass Grade C 160 – 172 Level B1 140 – 159	82 to 150 Cambridge English Key 102 to 170 Cambridge English Preliminary 122 to 190 Cambridge English First 142 to 210 Cambridge English Advanced 162 to 230 Cambridge English Proficiency 102 to 170 Cambridge English Business Preliminary 122 to 190 Cambridge English Business Vantage 142 to 210 Cambridge English Business Higher

Those below Level B2, but within 140-159, get Level B1. BEC Vantage candidates with 122-139 do not get a result, CEFR level or certificate, as scores under 122 are not reported in BEC Vantage.

3. Speaking skills in tests and in daily business engineering communication

The interest in communication strategies has grown over the last decades. Initially, this subject was introduced as a new area of applied linguistics, and the papers published on inter-language first mentioned the concept of communication strategies in English. Such strategies are systematic communication-enhancing de-vices used to handle difficulties in message exchanges, thus preventing communication from breaking down or turning vague. The range of dialogue strategies focus on the interaction process, and on the problem-solving acts arising from the gaps in the speakers' linguistic assets.

Communication strategies in business engineering are, in fact, particular problem-solving skills (Argenti, 2008, p. 213). The act of merely uttering expressions in an attempt to communicate in English for professional purposes is not strategy. However, if students have problems in using a particular word in the target idiom, the notion of strategy emerges. Hence, they use description or circumlocution instead of the problematic word, or even resort to gestures so as to reach the communication goal.

In this way, a strategy is a possible means of problem-solving that the users select because it works effectively and they are comfortable with it. Such strategies envisage awareness and problem-orientedness. They target message achievement or compensation (used by good language learners) and reduction or avoidance (low ability ones). Apart from these, risk-taking or risk-avoidance strategies are adopted, taking into account tolerance of risk as one of the influences that makes individual students vary. Under certain circumstances, they are encouraged not to 'lose face' as a result of making mistakes, so they are likely to employ risk-avoidance strategies to maintain the conversation. In contrast, other students might have been raised in an environment where people communicate naturally without seriously worrying about correctness, and they are more likely to take risks for expanding their resources in order to solve communication breakdowns.

Considering the communication strategies implemented, business engineering university students most frequently use approximation (Cismas et al, 2015a, p. 78), paraphrasing and circumlocution. Taxonomies of communication strategies have generally been based on criteria such as whether the target group chooses to achieve or reduce the goal, or whether they consult sources of information in their native tongue or in the target idiom.

The risk-taking strategies expand linguistic resources and meet the dialogue goals. They include: social-affective strategies for dealing with emotions or attitudes; fluency-oriented strategies, for speech clarity and pronunciation; accuracy-oriented strategies, for paying attention to forms of speech; non-verbal strategies, such as giving hints by using gestures and facial expression; help-seeking strategies, such as asking for repetition, clarification or confirmation; and circumlocution strategies, for paraphrasing or describing objects properties.

The risk-avoidance strategies are what speakers use to adjust the message to their linguistic resources: message abandonment strategies, for leaving a message unfinished; message reduction or alteration strategies, to allow the substitution of familiar words; time-gaining strategies (gambits or fillers) to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse flow in difficult moments (Cismas et al, 2015b, p. 142).

In the relationship between the means and the ends of communication, the ideal context assumes that speakers' linguistic resources and the message are in balance, i.e. speakers have sufficient linguistic skills to express the message. However, some speakers wish to convey a message beyond their capabilities, so they have two options: either attempt to increase their resources to reach the communicative goals, although it is risky to do so (the risk-taking strategies), or to tailor the message to the available resources (the risk-avoidance strategies, defined as such because there is no risk to take, since the speakers may simply leave the message un-finished). Oral communication is more successful if the interlocutors are homogeneous in point of nationality, knowledge background, age and similar cultural and educational backgrounds (Cismas et al, 2015c).

There are few studies investigating mixed-ability idiom learners and their employment. The focus is on the link between communication strategies and adjacent variables, like interaction with native speakers or frequency of using the communication strategies. This basic feature of interacting and responding appropriately is often overlooked in teaching materials, and dialogue facilitators must be used in business engineering tasks.

Certain speakers of English as a foreign idiom communicate well by uttering few words while others have difficulty in getting the same results. The former may use communication strategies (gestures, imitating sounds/movements, paraphrasing, and deriving new words). Poor selection of strategies for accomplishing the language tasks will lead to unsuccessful communication, mainly in lower-ability students who lack basic lexis or grammar. They will expand short answers, continue stories, or show that they understood the idea so far.

In both international and national contexts, students with low language abilities employ communication strategies, but they still are not successful in conveying their message; hence analysing dialogue skills is worth-while. Thus, language professors potentially see how high-ability students differ from low-ability ones in using such approaches and in taking roles in conversation. Practically,

professors apply the strategies in the speaking tasks inventory to elicit students' responses. It might be effective if the didactic staff members realized which types of skills students tend to use before planning lessons, selecting materials, and opting for teaching methods.

4. Conclusions

High-ability students prefer risk-taking strategies, such as social-affective, fluency-oriented, help-seeking, and circumlocution, whereas the low-ability ones tend to employ more risk-avoidance strategies, like time-gaining. The reason may be that high-ability students implement most of the risk-taking strategies as a result of their proficiency in English. Additionally, with their higher degree of cognitive flexibility, they are likely to apply social-affective strategies to manage their feelings during communication.

In contrast, the low-ability students' limited English proficiency may lead them to use risk-avoidance strategies, and play for time. Less competent speakers rely more on their lexical acquisitions than on linguistic knowledge (Cismas et al, 2015d). The communication strategies employed by the high-ability students make them more successful in oral communication. Their risk-taking is more effective in conveying meaning or concepts since all information is provided in a clear and direct way (Cismas et al, 2015e).
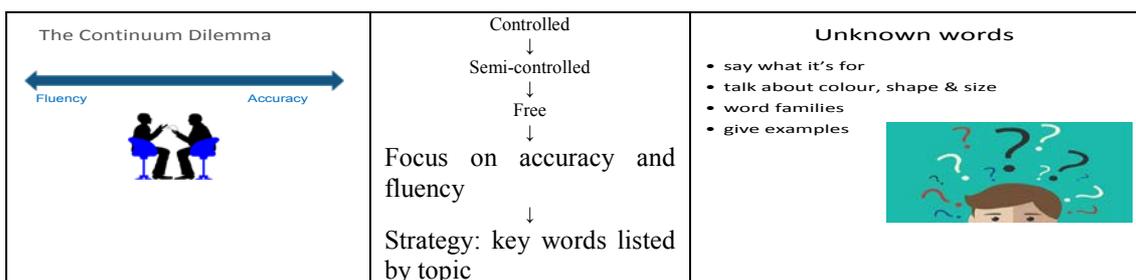

Fig. 3. The continuum dilemma: fluency vs. accuracy in entrepreneur and business engineering communication

Communication strategies should be taught for business engineering in academic environments because students benefit not only from the linguistic knowledge but also from the communication strategies which they will use to promote effective language learning (Gouveia, 2004, p. 68). Often poor learners cannot understand how the good ones obtain their solutions and feel unable to perform like the good ones. After revealing the process, the myth fades.

In addition, if students do not select strategies in the service of their intended tasks, skills, and goals, they might not easily find the most appropriate means and be successful. Hence, enhanced effectiveness is obtained if both process and product are integrated in the teaching methods. Consequently (Nelson, 2006), strategic competence and language-skills development will be supported by a learning system in which students can foster their ability to select appropriate strategies.

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