CATEGORIZATION OF BUSINESS ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS: A PROPOSAL

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Abstract

While developing a matrix to map Audiovisual content, according to the needs of Business English (BE) teachers and learners, a problem presented itself while attempting to identify and organize the most relevant BE communicative skills (CS) into macro and meso categories (MMC).

Once the literature did not provide any solid categorization proposal for these CS, the plan was then to use the table of contents of BE course manuals for identification purposes. However, these manuals also showed many distinct approaches and that made finding a categorization proposal very difficult.

To achieve a conciliatory categorization proposal, 7 BE manuals were selected according to year of publishing and publisher; then, the CS included in their tables of content were collected as raw data and gathered in a database. From the methodological viewpoint, all data was treated resorting to content analysis technique to establish the MMC. This data was treated and analyzed qualitatively according to the methodology theorized by Miles and Huberman (1994), which is directed specifically towards the identification of categories in qualitative data analysis.

The exploratory analysis of the results led to the proposal of 8 macro categories with a reliability index of 88.4%. In order to have a more thorough analysis, the qualitative analysis process was repeated and, thereof, the meso categories inside each macro category were identified, i.e. 4 to 7 meso categories were identified in each macro category. Moreover, all of these categorizations passed a reliability index of 80%.

The study concludes with a proposal of MMC of CS for BE context that can be included in the mapping matrix of AVC to be developed.

Keywords: Business English, communicative skills, manual, qualitative analysis, mapping matrix

1 INTRODUCTION

For economic, political and social reasons, English is the “lingua franca of the modern globalized world” [1]. According to Crystal quoted on Pennycook [2], when it comes to writing, it is the main language in books, newspapers, scientific production, Internet content and standard mail; it is also the main language used in pop music, sports, international competitions, advertising, medicine, diplomacy or air-traffic control, to name a few.

Connected to this global presence there is also a great pressure in the business world for internationalization [3]. Companies are looking to expand their businesses to reach a global market and English is the most commonly used language in this economic conjuncture. Accompanying this internationalization is a type of learner that sought to acquire linguistic knowledge of English, which connected the business world with the English learning needs: a Business English (BE) learner.

Considering the specificity of this branch of English language learning, one can focus on how to learn BE. For this purpose, syllabi were created and training programs put into practice in order to provide learners with opportunity to train communicative skills (CS) associated with BE. Moreover, aids like BE manuals and audio-tapes were designed to provide a more complete scope to the training.

Manuals may be useful for learning; however, a learner can also rely on Audio-visual Content (AVC) [4] repositories like YouTube or Vimeo [5] to find video examples and tutorials that might help to train these CS outside the classroom, providing learners with a more informal and autonomous context for learning. Examples of AVC range from edited cuts of TV shows like “The Office”, films like “The Wolf of Wall Street” and User Generated Content that registered users post in the repositories.

Deciding which AVC to consume to train the CS related to BE depends on factors like the language level of the learner, the skill to be trained or the genre appreciated by the learner. The AVC
repositories provide information about the content to a general public but not to such a specific target audience like learners of BE in the B2 level [6].

Taking this into account, a project is being developed with the goal of developing a matrix that will enable AVC mapping, grounded on the specific needs of BE teachers and learners. This matrix will translate into a set of inquiries about the AVC, thus inviting users to identify markers, for example, as to “genre”, “duration” or “type”; markers more connected to language like for instance “accent”, “level” or “subtitles”; and even markers that define the context where communication is happening such as “occupation”, “location” or “events”. These markers were identified based on the literature review.

Another inquiry developed for the mapping matrix regarded the CS and this is where a gap of knowledge was identified: the literature did not provide any solid categorization proposal to organize CS in an inquiry (an initial approach was made by using a table of contents of a single random BE manual; however, that choice would be too arbitrary).

This paper intends to cover this gap, by sharing the results of a study that collects CS from published BE manuals, treats these CS as qualitative data according to the qualitative analysis methodology theorized by Miles and Huberman (1994) [7] (which is directed specifically towards the identification and organization of Macro and Meso Categories (MMC) of qualitative data), thus providing a general categorization proposal that would sustain the matrix’s CS inquiry.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to British Council numbers, 11.4 million people are learning English face-to-face [8]. However, not all of them are learning for the same reasons, hence the BE learner’s very specific needs. It was accepted that BE is “an umbrella term to refer to any interaction, written or spoken, that takes place in English, where the purpose of that interaction is to conduct business” [9]; the BE learner is an adult learner that wishes to master specific CS, vocabulary and types of interaction with people, who are connected to the learner via the business world.

More definitions of BE can be found in, for instance, Bhatia & Bremner (2012) [11], who dedicate a whole chapter of their work to list several definitions of Business English. This evolution of definitions is a consequence of the growth of demand for syllabi that satisfy the need for people to be able to communicate in English in very specific business settings.

Alongside this evolution of the syllabi came a necessity to publish BE manuals that could be valuable aids to the learning requirements of these learners. For this reason, publishers of manuals on a global scale, like Cambridge University Press [12], MacMillan [13] or Oxford University Press [14], decided to invest in the conceptualization and publishing of manuals directed towards learners of BE English.

Given this specific learning context, one should also understand that BE is a branch of English language learning that targets both native and non-native speakers of English. Neely (2012) [15] recommends that even native speakers should get used to communicating in their native language in a way that accommodates and integrates their colleagues – by speaking slower, using different vocabulary, learning to rephrase or help their coworkers to communicate better. Moreover, native speakers might reap many benefits from formal training with BE syllabi. CS like negotiating, closing a sale or talking on the phone should also be taught to native speakers, as many of them do not get the chance to learn them in their normal academic path.

Another important aspect of this research is AVC. Recent data has evidenced the measure in which consuming AVC is a highly-favored form of entertainment. Nielsen’s (2014) report indicates a growth of hours dedicated to AVC consumption in all demographics. Consumer statistics published by Ericsson (2015) address the growth of consumption activities associated with the video-on-demand content. Google (2016) adds statistics about the different ways of consumption of AVC, namely using computers or mobile devices as well as pairing the mobile devices with AVC consumption. Hence, all data points to the fact that AVC, as an entertainment form, is consumed massively, using several platforms, on a global scale.

Furthermore, there is research that binds AVC benefits with English language didactics. McNulty & Lazarevic (2012) list some advantages of using AVC in English didactics: synchronous communication exposure, non-verbal communication, paralinguistic cues and a more efficient understanding of meaning. Bahra et al (2014) identify some of the constraints relating to the same issue: culturally biased content, unsuitability of genre or exposure to irrelevant/difficult
vocabulary. Considering the benefits and the constraints of AVC for English didactics will contribute to conceptualize a more complete mapping matrix.

In view of the topics of this framework, namely, the role of English as lingua franca, the specific branch of BE, the necessity to publish manuals, the massive consumption of AVC for entertainment and the association of AVC with English didactics, it was possible to outline a methodology that would address and propose a solution to the identified gap in the literature review.

3 METHODOLOGY

To achieve the set goal, this study is centered around the qualitative analysis proposal outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) [7]. This section will cover the criteria for choosing the sample, how the data is to be collected and treated as well as how the researchers plan to identify the MMC.

Table 1. Research design

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3.1 Phase 1 – Definition of criteria for manual selection

The collected data were extracted from BE manuals. The criteria used in the selection was as follows:

1. ECFR level: The sample of BE manuals had to be directed to learners of the B2 level [6].
2. Publisher: Oxford University Press, Cambridge University press, MacMillan and Longman/ Pearson, once they are well-known for their manuals in the specific area of BE.
4. The quantity of manuals per publisher: No more than two manuals per publisher.

3.2 Phase 2 – Data collection and standardization

The corpus consisted textual artifacts and it implicated inductive and qualitative analysis, thus appropriate methodology for this phase was content analysis.

With such an amount of textual data, it was necessary to adopt a qualitative analysis that promoted data reduction. The view of qualitative analysis promoted by Miles and Huberman (1994) [7] was consistent with the final goals of this study, as it promotes a research flow model which considers constant data reduction up to the establishment of categories. Furthermore, this view also conceives that qualitative data can be reduced and transformed by paraphrasing and elimination.

Paraphrasing and elimination of redundancies were, in fact, the next steps of the standardization process. Here are the standardization steps that were followed in this phase, along with examples of the paraphrasing and elimination processes to which the raw data was subjected to:
1. When a CS is stated in a verbal form other than the -ing form, such CS will be rephrased into an -ing form. Ex.: “Report success” -> “Reporting success”.

2. When a CS was stated as a noun, the rephrasing process would occur by finding similar CS in the data, attributing the verb that was utilized the most, and, if necessary, setting the verb in the -ing form. Ex.: “Voicemail messages” -> “Leaving voicemail messages”.

3. When two CS were coupled, the edited data should detach them and consider them as separate CS. Ex.: “Making and responding to offers” -> “Making offers” / “Responding to offers”.

4. Repeated CS were considered redundant to the corpus and thus deleted. For example, the CS “Making decisions” appeared 8 times after the standardization process. This number was reduced to 1 appearance in the edited data.

3.3 Phase 3 – Identification of the MMC

This process also falls in what Miles and Huberman (1994) [7] refer to a data reduction process. In this phase, the objective is to organize information into categories. It begins with an exploratory approach:

1. Identifying clusters of CS;
   a. Examples of categories: “Networking”, “Presenting” and “Traveling on business”.

2. Elaborating operational definitions for the categories;
   a. Example of a definition: “Networking – This category will include all references related to the necessary skills to conduct a business negotiation, closing deals and post deal situations.”

3. Preforming an exploratory open coding;

4. Revising of the category definitions.

The exploratory approach to the corpus led to the identification of macro-categories, as well as to pinpointing redundant or missing categories, and even some CS that seemed poorly categorized.

After this exploratory approach, a new analysis of the data was held to identify the macro-categories:

1. A code was attributed to the macro-categories;
   a. Example of a code: “Presenting – SPK”

2. An open coding was preformed

3. After a standby period, the CS were coded one second time for a coding refinement, ignoring the first coding.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) [7], it is normal for a second coding task to have different results from the first coding task, i.e. there will be CS with codes that match on both coding procedures and CS with codes that do not match. This is due to the subjective nature of qualitative data analysis. Therefore, a reliability formula to validate the coding process was applied, i.e. “Reliability = matches / (matches + miss-matches) * 100” [21]. The formula produced a percentage and, according to the authors Huberman and Miles (1991), for a coding process to be considered reliable, the matching percentage must be close to or higher than 80% [21].

4. Both coding processes were compared, mismatches were marked and a reliability was calculated by applying a formula (Reliability = (matches + (matches + mismatches)))*100.

In the likely scenario that the reliability percentage falls lower than 80%, the theoretical approach to this qualitative analysis process states that a new categorization will be necessary. This implies new operational definitions for each category, the attribution of a new code and a repetition of the coding and validation processes. Again, the goal is to achieve a higher percentage than 80%.

At the end of this validation process, the macro-categories were defined, allowing for a further qualitative analysis of the data included in each of these categories.
In fact, the coding procedure also revealed that some CS can be included in two macro-categories (the previously referred as “miss-matches”). The miss-matches identified in the validation procedure were included in both macro-categories they were coded in.

The CS of each macro-category was thereupon considered as independent clusters of edited data and each cluster was categorized individually using the same assumptions of qualitative analysis theorized by Miles and Huberman (1994) [7] – as it had been done previously for the macro-categories.

4 RESULTS

The results section will cover the choice of the manuals, statistic information about the corpus removed from the collection process, statistic information about the standardized data, tables with organized information of the CS in the MMC and a chart reporting on the reliability index percentages for all the MMC.

4.1 Phase 1

According to the established criteria, the manuals that were selected for this study were:

2. English for Business Studies, 2010, CUP;
4. Business One-One Intermediate +, 2015, OUP;

4.2 Phase 2

The data collection provided 522 CS in the raw data corpus. The standardization processes of the raw data corpus originated a total of 458 CS. This was the corpus to be analyzed in view of the categorization process that would lead to the determination of the macro-categories.

4.3 Phase 3

For the definition of the macro-categories, the qualitative study was performed according to the referenced methodology. Table 2 shows the amount of CS attributed to each macro-category. The reliability index percentage for the macro-categorization was 88.4% hence assuring a sustained proposal for macro-categories of CS.

Table 2. Outline of macro-categorization of the CS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MACRO-CATEGORIES</th>
<th>ATTRIBUTED CS</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presenting</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>Deciding and solving problems</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Travelling on business</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a job</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Participating in a meeting</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Talking on the phone</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual skills</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the clusters grouped by the macro-categorization process, Fig. 1 presents the meso-categorization process results and the amount of CS attributed to each meso-category.
Concerning the reliability index formula, Fig. 2 provides a summary of the attained results. Both in the macro-categorization process and in the meso-categorization processes, the reliability index percentage was equal or higher than 80%.

Figure 1. Rundown of the CS into MMC.

Figure 2. Calculation of the reliability indexes for all MMC according to stated formula

The validation process resulted in the sustained identification of the meso-categories to be included in the mapping matrix, and thereof, the goal of identifying MMC was achieved.
5 CONCLUSIONS

This study was outlined to cover a gap in the literature, which was brought to light when performing a literature review for a doctoral project. This project considered the learning potential of AVC, its massive role as a means of entertainment in today’s society, and intended to unite these features with the specific teaching/learning needs of BE teachers and learners.

The theoretical embodiment of this union stemmed the conception of a mapping matrix to categorize and organize AVC according to its relevance to the BE community, more specifically directed to adult learners of the B2 level. This mapping matrix intends to serve as an aid for teachers and learners of BE, who consider AVC as an autonomous learning auxiliary to complement their practice.

One of the focuses of the matrix had to be a consolidated categorization inquiry of CS related to the teaching of BE, which was not found in the literature. When facing the lack of such an item, this study was conceptualized with the main goal was to achieve a sustained MMC proposal of CS related to BE teaching/learning.

To achieve this goal, the methodological tasks were a content analysis of tables of contents of 7 BE manuals; data collection focused on the CS in the respective tables of contents; standardization of the corpus; followed by a qualitative analysis that consisted of categorization tasks to define MMC according to statistical data; finalized by a verification of the reliability index for both the macro-categories and each of the meso-categories, according to the parameters defined by the adopted methodology.

Considering the final results relating to the categorization processes, together with high reliability index percentages achieved in the validation processes, it was possible to develop a validated inquiry of CS to include in the mapping matrix of AVC.

5.1 Future research

This study is qualitative and its reliability index is quite high. However, a future replication of this study should bear in mind the subjectivity of the subject. It is possible that other researchers look at the CS in a different way, which will immediately affect the corpus. Furthermore, some might address the CS of this study differently, by placing them in different MMC.

Concerning future research projects, it would be interesting to address the way CS are outlined in the tables of contents of BE manuals. This research found some degree of inconsistency in the way that CS were named. The question is whether a more thorough research study could propose a standardized nomenclature of the CS. Publishers could take this proposal into account for future publications.

To achieve this higher thoroughness, it is recommended that researchers use wider criteria to collect more CS from more BE manuals; and also that researchers consider a higher reliability percentage than 80%. It would be interesting to see an in-depth qualitative study which would put together a bigger and more global sample of CS present in BE manuals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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