

Team-Based Learning in Business English

Jelena Stepanova Mg. sc. soc.
University of Latvia, Management College, Latvia
helen_stepanova@inbox.lv

Abstract: Business English is a main language of communication in the international business environment. The implementation of appropriate teaching-learning approach, such as team-based learning, allows students to engage into educational process and demonstrate higher achievements in language acquisition. The aim of the article is to analyze the theory-grounded investigation to trace if the team-based learning is good for Business English teaching and therefore serves as approbation of this stage of the research to continue it, as well as what the priorities are and if the learners accept them. The paper is an example of an interdisciplinary research and lies at the border of such areas as linguistics, educational sciences, sociology and psychology. The article reflects the results of empirical research on team-based learning implementation in Business English course in Latvian Business College where participated 40 first-year students, who mastered their language skills and communicative competences reaching an academic success through this approach. Mixed methods were used as the approach to research design, analysis of scientific literature, questionnaires and observations. Analyzing the results of the research it can be told that team-based learning in teaching Business English proved to be successful tool as it assisted to academic success in linguistics, communication and understanding of the business English discipline through teamwork and critical thinking and majority of students (82-100 %) gave a positive feedback. The research demonstrated that team-based learning gives more freedom and authorizes the students to be more responsible for their own studies and knowledge as the process involves both individual work and teamwork and the contribution to the team is significantly important there. Such self-determination leads to success as in academic studies as in life-long competences and proves team-based learning approach to be a useful and transformative tool for teaching Business English.

Keywords: team-based learning, Business English, university education.

Introduction

Education has changed its essence, now it is not a pure theory that students passively acquire on the lectures, it is rather an active practice, which students do in the classroom. The more students are involved in a hands-on training, the higher the result is, the better their achievements are at the end of the course and the deeper their motivation is in respect of further studies, life, work and career.

Among the different types of profession-oriented education nowadays, business education becomes more popular. It includes a wide range of skills, which affect not only professional knowledge, but also personal characteristics such as personality development, communication skills, proactivity, ability to solve conflicts, meet challenges and develop creative approach to entrepreneurship (Fillis, Rentschler, 2010). In regard to this, tougher requirements to the quality of business education appear. Business colleges and universities should arrange such an educational process that includes the development of all mentioned above skills. These requirements are put forward as by the Ministry of Education, by the business environment- employers, as well as by the students and their parents.

One of the most important discipline in business education is Business English. Since English is one of the two foreign languages which modern European citizens are expected to know according to Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001, 4), in addition, all communication in the modern business world in Europe is carried out in English. Thus, understanding the importance of business education for the modern society and the place of business English in it- it is important not to stand still in the teaching methods, but constantly improve it adapting new approaches for the implementation of the most active practical training.

For many years in post-secondary education problem-base learning (PBL), case-based learning and concept-base learning have been used with varying degrees of success. However, there is a growing body of evidence that team-based learning (TBL) is a successful method to incorporate peer teaching in teams with effect for learning outcome (Haidet, Kubitz, 2014). Team-based learning (TBL) is a unique concept to the 21st century pedagogy. It incorporates various theories of adult learning, such as cooperative theory (May, Doob, 1937), theory of margin (McClusky, 1970), three dimensions of

learning model (Illeris, 2009), model of learning process (Jarvis, 1987), lifelong and self-directed learning (Tough, 1967), transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991) and pedagogies of engagement (Edgerton, 2001) (Nagaswami, Defouw, 2011).

Team-based learning concept includes grouping students into diverse teams of 5-7 students that work together throughout the class (Michaelsen, Bauman-Knight, 2004). There is a three-phase process which includes the pre-class preparation where the teacher has to organize the learning materials to enable students to take responsibility on their own and their peers' learning process with following in-class team discussion. If students take individual accountability it will provoke the better team interaction. This accomplishes both competences-what individuals know or are able to do in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude and productivity - extent to which individuals can adapt to generate new knowledge and continue to improve performance. The second phase of the process includes regular testing at the beginning of a new theme. First, the students complete the individual Readiness Assurance Test (iRAT) and then they complete the same test with their team- members -the group Readiness Assurance Test (gRAT). The students get two marks- for individual test and for group test. Usually, the tests are multiple choice; however, open questions also might take place. Having completed the individual and group tests, the students discuss the answers with teacher and other teams. This discussion provokes students to appeal questions that they got incorrect. Appealing the questions and discussing it, the students review the material, evaluate their understanding and defend the choice they made. To conclude the Readiness Assurance Process, the teacher gives a lecture that focuses on concepts with which students struggled the most (Sweet, Michaelsen, 2012). Afterwards the teacher introduces the additional practice exercises- the third phase of the teaching-learning process.

The terms *team*, *work team*, *group*, *work group*, *cross-functional team*, and *self-directed team* are often used interchangeably. Whatever the title, a team is a small number of people with complementary skills who work together for a common purpose. A key element in team success is the key concept of synergy, defined by a situation where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Team provides a depth of expertise that is unavailable at the individual level. Teams open lines of communication (Lehman, DuFrene, 2011). The differences between the team, pseudo-team and group are summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1

Team vs. Pseudo-Teams vs. Group Criteria

Team	Pseudo-Team	Group
Synergy	Anti- synergy	Individualism
Win-win	Win-lose	Lose-lose
First to understand then to be understood	No understanding	First to be understood then to understand
Active listening	Passive listening	Lack of listening
Common goals	Partial common goals	Lack of common goals
Positive roles	Negative roles	Lack of roles
Transformation	Partial transformation	Lack of transformation

Simple grouping students into a team structure does not signify that they automatically start functioning as a team. Such group should go through the process of development to begin to function as a team. Members of the team have to be trained to behave as team members in the following areas- problem solving, goal setting and conflict resolution to develop the synergy and make the process of collaboration transformative for all participants (Lehman, DuFrene, 2011).

Successful team work increases productivity, involvement, engagement and creativity, besides such successful teams increase information and knowledge exchange, there is an increased diversity of views and acceptance of solutions and as a result- higher performance level (Thill, Bovee, 2014).

The main risk is to create a pseudo-team where no one is interested into results and higher achievements. This is a task for the teacher to assist in creating such a team where every member is willing to commit, cooperate, communicate and contribute to the teamwork and to establish 'the three R's'- roles, rules and relationships (Lehman, DuFrene, 2011).

The great theoretical basis of team-based learning was provided by P. Hrynychak and H. Batty (2012). According to them, the main emphasis in team-based learning is on the constructivist learning, in which the “focus is on the mental representation of information by the learner” (Svinicki, 2004, 242; Brame, 2013).

In team-based learning, the teacher carefully plans the lesson’s objectives, prepares the Readiness Assurance Tests and then acts only as a guide who assists in the learning process. The teacher’s choice of the tasks allows students to re-evaluate their experience, as Readiness Assurance Tests observe students’ experiences, comparing their understanding with the understanding of the questions with peers-team members and, as a consequence, construct new understanding (Brame, 2013).

The scientist R. Hake (1998) from Indiana University investigated team-based learning for many years and concluded that team-based learning and flipped classrooms have a lot in common. R. Hake researched the teaching of 2084 students in 14 physics courses in passive, teacher-centered way of teaching versus interactive engagement methods. At the end of the research he found out that students involved into interactive methods demonstrated twice higher gains than in the traditionally taught way (Hake, 1998). Later team-based method was broadly introduced in the USA in the healthcare education, proving its effectiveness.

Replacing half of the lectures with TBL activities, such as Readiness Assurance Tests, discussions and case studies teachers could see much higher performance on the exams. Additionally, the attitude toward the lectures and engagements have changed dramatically, what proves it is more effective learning strategy (Koles, Stolfi, 2010).

This article is a part and the first stage of empirical research of the author’s PhD dissertation. The author would like to research how team-based learning in teaching business English allows students to engage into educational process and demonstrate higher achievements in academic studies. The aim is to investigate teaching business English via team-based learning on the example of four groups at Latvian Business College (LBK) and to define the dynamic links of the educational process between the team-based learning and the learners’ success in this subject. The object of the research is learners’ achievements in acquiring business English through team-based learning. The team-based learning is appropriate for creating dynamic links of the educational process leading to an effective way of incorporating peer-group teaching with enthusiasm for learning of business English:

- it provides optimal educational settings to trust, mutual respect, interdependence and positive attitude towards learning;
- it challenges lecturers to be more creative and flexible with curriculum design.

The results can serve as approbation of this stage of the research to continue it, as well as it provides the information what the priorities are and if the learners accept them. The present paper is an example of an interdisciplinary research and lies at the border of such areas as linguistics, educational sciences, sociology and psychology.

Methodology

The paper focuses on illustration of team-based learning implementation in Business English course on the faculty of Business Administration at Latvian Business College.

The research had been conducted from February 2016 until June 2016. In the research participated 40 first-year students, age from 18 till 45 years old. The English language proficiency levels according to the results of the placement tests are A2 (Pre-Intermediate) in two groups and B2 (Upper-Intermediate) in other two groups.

Humanist, constructivists, as well as social learning and language learning theories were applied within the frame of this research.

The methods of the research included 1) study, analysis and evaluation of scientific literature; 2) pre-course, mid-course and after-course questionnaires and observations were used as a research method to evaluate the expectations of the students towards TBL in business English teaching/learning and then the success of TBL in business English Classes.

Providing the hypothesis of the research is - TBL is appropriate for creating dynamic links of the educational process leading to an effective way of incorporating peer-group teaching with enthusiasm for learning of Business English:

- it arranges optimal educational settings to trust, mutual respect, interdependence and positive attitude towards learning;
- it challenges lecturers to be more creative and flexible with curriculum design.

The following criteria were formulated to measure the students' achievements: four language skills: speaking, writing, reading and listening, critical thinking, team-work skills and perspective transformation.

Results and Discussions

To investigate the outcome of TBL application in teaching business English according to the settled criteria, the analysis of the pre-course questionnaires, mid-course questionnaire and post-course questionnaires was made.

In order to analyze the previous English learning experience of the students, the students were asked if they faced any of these approaches: teacher-centered, student-centered, team-based learning, case-study learning, project-based learning, game-based learning, problem-based learning. The analysis showed that majority faced teacher-centered (24 responses) and student-centered (17 responses). However, team-based learning (12 responses) has been faced only by minority of the students and most of them had no idea about this method.

Then, the students provided the information on the achievements, which they expect to get from the course: life-long competences, 4 language skills: speaking, reading, writing, listening skills, critical thinking skills, skills to work in teams. Analyzing their expectations and replies, it is obvious that the main skill the students desire to obtain is 'speaking skill', and then follow 'skills to work in teams', which completely fits the purposes of TBL approach. The other most often mentioned skills the students hope to obtain are 'listening skills', 'business vocabulary', 'writing skills' and 'skills to conduct the negotiations'. These skills are also parts of TBL teaching approach, as working in teams the students not only speak and work in teams, but also listen carefully to their team members, write the individual and group Readiness Assurance Tests, extend the business vocabulary and negotiate with each other. One more criteria and the question was if the students would like to work only in teams; the opinions shared 45 % of students answered that they would like to work only in teams, and 55 % replied that would like to work not only in teams. However, the TBL approach satisfies both needs as it includes iRAT as an individual work and gRAT as group work. Besides according to the pre-course questionnaires, the students even if they had never faced TBL before hoped that it could be useful and transformative for them.

The analysis of the outcome of the TBL approach in business English measuring the students' achievements according to the established criteria is presented in the following graph (Figure 1).

Analyzing the results of the survey, it is possible to conclude that:

- 100 % of students agree that the lessons, where TBL approach was used, were clear and interesting;
- 92 % of students believe that the lessons increased their understanding of the subject;
- 87 % confirm that the lessons improved their analytical and critical skills;
- 95 % of students agree that the lessons improved their skills to learn in teams.

Summarizing the main language skills and students' evaluation of contribution of TBL into teaching-learning of these four skills- speaking, listening, reading and writing, it is possible to make a conclusion that:

- 92,5 % of students think that lessons improved their READING English skills;
- 85 % assume that lessons improved their LISTENING English skills;
- 85 % confirms that the lessons improved their SPEAKING English skills;
- 82,5 % of students believe that the lessons improved their WRITING English skills.

To sum up the survey it should be told that 90 % agree that they liked working in teams during the course and 87,5 % acknowledge that team-based learning was useful and transformative as they expected at the beginning of the course.

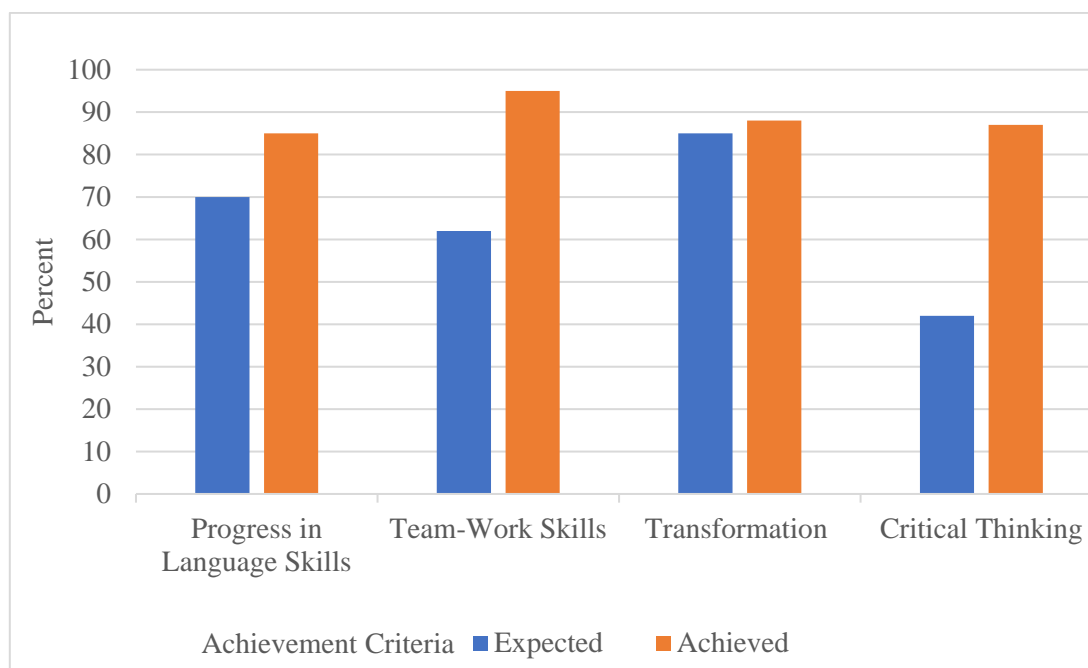


Figure 1. Analysis of TBL outcomes in business English.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the main expectations of the students were justified and even over justified- 70 % of students expected to acquire the speaking skills in pre-course survey and in the post-course survey 82,5 % confirmed that they had improved their speaking skills. Besides 62 % planned to acquire skills to work in teams and 95 % agreed that they had acquired these skills. Also, 85 % supposed that the TBL approach might be useful and transformative for Business English acquisition and the reality was even better and 87,5 % found it on completion of the course.

Thus, summarizing the questionnaires analysis it can be told that team-based learning in teaching business English proved to be successful tool as it assisted to academic success in linguistics, communication and understanding of the business discipline through teamwork and critical thinking.

Conclusions

Team-based learning approach is a useful and transformative tool for teaching Business English. The process involves individual work and teamwork, the contribution to the team is important too, as according to this approach, the peer evaluation is done at the end of the course and it influences the final mark of the students. The students whose names are the most often mentioned by the peers in the peer evaluation form get extra points to the final mark.

However, in spite of the very positive feedback from majority of students (82-100 %), it is important to notice the minority of students (5-15 %) who gave the neutral or negative feedback. It is crucial to understand the reasons why TBL was not so successful tool for their academic achievements. According to the observations, the reasons could be as follows:

- Poor language knowledge, as it was impossible to form completely homogeneous groups with absolutely equal language level;
- Poor attendance, in some groups the attendance was so low because of different personal reasons and the students skipped the first part of the lectures with TBL Readiness Assurance Tests.
- Personal characteristics- shyness, lack of self-assurance, probably caused by circumstances, as homesickness, as most students arrived to study from abroad and went through the process of adaptation and integration.
- Attitude to studies, as not everyone prepared for RAT at home properly.

Besides, according to the constant observations on the lessons, it might be concluded that the number of tests during one-term course should not exceed half of the lectures' number; otherwise, the students are overwhelmed with constant testing and feel suppressed. Writing the tests, the teacher should be creative

and formulate the questions corresponding to the language level and studied materials. The materials for studies should be well arranged with appropriate tasks for preparation. However, the tests should not include only such kind of questions, which demand the pre-class preparation; there should be questions, which involve the general experience and knowledge, thus the students start thinking critically and analytically. Then, the further discussion of the answers in teams might shift the students' paradigm and increase the understanding of the subject.

Finally, the main observation is that team-based learning gives more freedom and authorizes the students to be more responsible for their own studies and knowledge. Such self-determination might lead only to success as in academic studies as in life-long competences.

The teacher to contribute more to the success of TBL should:

- Pay more attention to team-formation, in order to create teams as productive and successful as possible. The special tests determining the roles in the teams should be done at the beginning of the course. However, it must be told that even if the teams should be formed once for the whole term, for the teams in this empirical research it was impossible because of poor attendance in some groups;
- Prepare creative RATs and well-arranged materials, as well as the list of tasks to prepare for the next test, providing home reading and quizzes for it;
- Support the students who face personal difficulties on the lessons explaining more if necessary and involving everyone in the team in general discussions;
- Develop better grading system for those who do not contribute to the teamwork.

Bibliography

1. Brame C. (2013). *Team-Based Learning*. USA: Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/team-based-learning/>
2. Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*. Strasbourg: Language Policy Unit. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf
3. Edgerton R. (2001). *Education White Paper*. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at http://www.faculty.umb.edu/john_saltmarsh/resources/Edgerton%20Higher%20Education%20White%20Paper.rtf
4. Fillis I., Rentschler R. (2010). The Role of Creativity in the Entrepreneurship. *Journal of Enterprising Culture*, Vol. 18. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a249/25292643de97035bf40b380ec3575b535c01.pdf>
5. Haidet P., Kubitz K., McCormack W.T (2014). Analysis of the Team-Based Learning Literature: TBL Comes of Age. *J Excell Coll Teach*, Vol. 25(3-4), pp. 303 – 333. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4643940/#R39>
6. Hake R. (1998). Interactive-Engagement Versus Traditional Methods: A Six-Thousand-Student Survey of Mechanics Test Data for Introductory Physics Courses. *American Journal of Physics*, Vol. 66(1), [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at http://www.montana.edu/msse/Data_analysis/Hake_1998_Normalized_gain.pdf
7. Hrynchak P., Batty H. (2012). The Educational Theory Basis of Team-Based Learning. *Medical Teacher*, Vol. 34, pp. 796 – 801.
8. Illeris K. (Ed.) (2009). *Contemporary Theories of Learning. Learning Theorists...in their Own Words*. UK: Routledge.
9. Jarvis P. (1987). *Adult Learning in the Social Context*. London: Croom Helm.
10. May M.A., Doob L.W. (1937). *Competition and Cooperation*. NY: Social science research council. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015008023809;view=1up;seq=1>
11. Koles P., Stolfi A., Borges N.J., Nelson S., Paremelee D.X. (2010). The impact of team-based learning on medical students' academic performance. *Academic Medicine*, Vol. 85 (11), pp. 1739 – 1745.
12. Lehman C.M., DuFrene D.D. (2011). *Business Communication*. (16th ed.). USA: South-Western Western Cengage Learning.

13. McClusky H.Y. (1970). An Approach to a Differential Psychology of the Adult Potential. In Grabowski S. M. (Ed.) *Adult learning and instruction*. Syracuse, N.Y.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education.
14. Mezirow J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Sanfrancisko, USA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
15. Michaelsen L.K., Bauman-Knight A., Fink L.D. (2004). *Team-based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups in College Teaching*. USA: Stylus Publishing.
16. Nagaswami S., Defouw D., Compton S. (2011). Team-Based Learning in Anatomy: An Efficient, Effective, and Economical Strategy. *Anatomical Sciences Education*. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/51715967_Team-Based_Learning_in_Anatomy_An_Efficient_Effective_and_Economical_Strategy
17. Sweet M., Michaelsen L.K. (Eds.). (2012). *Team-Based Learning in the Social Sciences and Humanities: Group Work that Works to Generate Critical Thinking and Engagement*. Virginia, USA: Stylus Sterling.
18. Thill J.V., Bovee C.L. (2014). *Excellence in Business Communication*. (10th ed.). UK: Pearson. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at <https://yfresources.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/excellence-in-business-communication-bovee-thill-10th-ed-2013.pdf>
19. Tough A.M. (1967). *Learning without a Teacher: A Study of Tasks and Assistance During Adult Self-Teaching Projects*. Toronto, Canada: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. [online] [14.11.2016]. Available at <http://allentough.com/books/lwt/intro.pdf>