

# ADVENTURES INTO THE UNKNOWN: A PILOT INTERVIEW STUDY ON BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHERS' SPECIALIZED COMPETENCIES AND ATTRIBUTES

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the specialized competencies and attributes that Business English (BE) teachers need in order to run successful BE courses and comply with the requirements of the business community. This small scale qualitative study explores the perceptions of Hungarian BE teachers with extensive BE teaching experience at multinational companies (MNCs) regarding the specialized knowledge, skills and personality traits they need in the field. The interviews conducted with BE teachers reveal that they are likely to be at an advantage if they gain some knowledge of essential business terminology, functions and processes, acquire the essentials of BE teaching methodology, and develop certain skills and personal characteristics which are highly appreciated by the MNC business community. The results imply that compliance with corporate requirements and fulfilment of the immediate needs of BE learners are likely to be the key factors of BE teacher professionalism. Therefore, acquiring BE teacher competencies is vital for the successful delivery of any BE course.

**Keywords:** Business English, ESP, teacher competencies, learner requirements, qualitative research

## 1 Introduction

The increasing importance of English language in professional contexts gave rise to specialized language training in the form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes and courses worldwide. As the use of English for Business Purposes (EBP) or Business English (BE) has become ever more frequent and significant in international business, mastering it to a high level has become indispensable for business professionals. In the past 25 years these trends have resulted in the increase of in-company BE training courses, which have created a demand on the ELT market for BE language teachers who are able to accommodate to multinational company culture, to meet the requirements of these organizations and the BE learners, and to deliver specific, tailor-made BE courses for business professionals.

BE, like any field of ESP is a “strange and uncharted land” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 158) for most language teachers, who often resist pursuing a BE teaching career mainly due to the lack of specialized teacher education or training and the challenging, ever-changing nature of ESP teaching (Belcher, 2006; Carreon, 1996; Chen, 2000; Wu & Badger, 2009). Although recent developments in the field of ESP have led to an increased interest in ESP teacher education and professional development (cf. Belcher, 2006; Carreon, 1996; Chen, 2000; F. Silye, 2004; Hüttner, Smit, & Mehlmauer, 2009; Jackson, 1998; Jármay, 2008; Kurtán, 2001, 2003; Sifakis, 2003; Wu

& Badger, 2009), little research has been devoted to the difficulties that teachers of BE face during their professional development in becoming a competent BE teacher and meeting the needs of the BE learner. While research findings suggest that BE teachers are required to develop specialized competencies (cf. Bereczky, 2009; Donna, 2000; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Frendo, 2005; F. Silye, 2004; Jármai, 2007, 2008; Kurtán, 2001, 2003; Midgley, 2003), no empirical research that I know of has been conducted with the aim of assessing the key BE teacher competencies expected specifically by the business community.

Similarly, in the Hungarian context, previous research studies have been limited to the language competence requirements of employers and the language skills of business professionals (cf. F. Silye, 2002; Major, 2002; Noble, 2002; Teemant, Varga, & Heltai, 1993), to the development of ESP teacher competencies (cf. Jármai, 2007, 2008; Kurtán, 2001, 2003), and to exploring the BE teacher identity (Bereczky, 2009); the BE teacher competencies as related to corporate requirements and based on the perceptions of Hungarian BE teachers have not been in focus. The present study is intended to contribute to the literature by filling this gap, in the hope that it may yield significant results for the education, training and professional development of BE teachers.

## **2 Specialized competencies of the Business English teacher**

Specialized competencies of BE teachers comprise knowledge, skills and personality traits, all of which seem to be equally significant. It is essential to summarize recent developments and research in the field of BE teacher competencies, as they provide the foundation for the current research.

### **2.1 Knowledge of the Business English teacher**

As part of their general language teaching background, BE teachers should have a high level of proficiency in English, and thorough knowledge of applied linguistics and ELT methodology. However, many practising ESP teachers and researchers have reported cases where the teachers could not answer students' content or topic-related questions due to their unfamiliarity with the subject matter, professional genre and discourse conventions (Belcher, 2006; Carreon, 1996; Chen, 2000; Hüttner et al., 2009; Wu & Badger, 2009). Consequently, a key question widely discussed by BE experts and teachers is whether BE teachers should know anything about the world of business or not. Assuming that some sort of business knowledge is required, the next question is: what depth of business knowledge is necessary and how can BE teachers acquire this expertise?

There seems to be a consensus among authors (Belcher, 2006; Donna, 2000; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Frendo, 2005; Jármai, 2008; Harding, 2007; Kurtán, 2001, 2003) that BE teachers are not business professionals and do not need to be. Most BE teachers have a general language teaching background and do not have hands-on experience in any field of business. It is unusual for teachers actually to have studied business disciplines or to have had a business career. Therefore, BE authors share the

view that BE teachers do not have to be experts in any particular area of business. Unlike in general English teaching scenarios, where the teacher knows much more about the subject he or she is teaching, in BE training “the teacher is not in the position of being the ‘primary knower’ of the carrier content of the material” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 13). Due to the fact that BE learners often know more about the business they are working in (for example, about business organizations, policies, functions, processes, products, markets, competitors, partners), BE teachers are required to work in partnership with the students. In fact, Frendo (2005) calls it a *symbiotic relationship* between the teacher and the learner, where the teacher has the knowledge about language and communication, while the learners know more about the subject area. This partnership between the BE teacher and learner assumes a completely different attitude towards BE teaching, which has to be accepted by both parties.

Conversely, BE experts concur that some insight into business can be an advantage for anyone attempting to teach BE. According to Dudley-Evans & St John (1998, p. 70) what BE teachers need is “to understand the interface between business principles and language”. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 163) argue, “the ESP teacher should not become a teacher of the subject matter, but rather an interested student of the subject matter”. They claim that meaningful communication is an integral part of BE training, which cannot be achieved without the teacher’s interest in, and some knowledge of, the subject itself. Ellis and Johnson (1994) also place emphasis on the importance of effective business communication in the BE classroom, which they believe is easier for the BE teacher if he or she has a good understanding of business. As a matter of fact, learners of ESP are bound to find learning more motivating if they have a teacher who is familiar with the basic concepts and principles of the given discipline (Carreon, 1996; Chen, 2000). Acquiring such knowledge, skills and understanding is a challenging task for many teachers. Chen (2000, p. 398) calls this process a *disciplinary acculturation*, which every teacher should go through in order to become a competent BE teacher.

Recommendations and learning tips on how to gain and broaden business expertise are provided by BE researchers (Bell, 2002; Donna, 2000; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Frendo, 2005) and include the following:

- Reading textbooks on Business Studies, popular ‘business made easy’ books;
- Reading magazines, journals, business pages of newspapers;
- Watching and listening to business and news programmes;
- Using the internet to find information, learning materials and teaching resources;
- Reading company publications and communications (e.g., brochures, annual reports, product information, websites and correspondence);
- Watching management training videos;
- Talking to business people, including BE learners;
- Learning from knowledgeable, job-experienced BE learners;
- Collaborating closely with business specialists;
- Attending courses and conferences;
- Learning from experience.

## 2.2 Skills of the Business English teacher

BE teachers should develop special skills, which may be as significant as business knowledge in BE teaching contexts. As discussed previously, BE teachers should share an interest in economics, management and business issues and should be willing to learn about the particular industry as well as the everyday professional activities of their BE learners (Bell, 2002; Donna, 2000; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Frendo, 2005; Kurtán, 2001, 2003). Not only should BE teachers be prepared to learn about business topics and other disciplines, but they need to be able to do so continuously, day by day, as they train business professionals from various companies in different industries, performing a wide range of activities. This requires important skills, namely “the ability to adapt to a particular teaching context” (Frendo, 2005, p. 5) and the ability to change from one context to another. Jackson (1998) and Jármai (2008) also emphasize the importance of adaptability, creativity and resourcefulness, which seem to be some of the key skills of the BE teacher.

Readiness to change is another key skill that BE teachers should possess (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Jackson, 1998). Any time during a lesson or a course changes may arise that can affect the training process, learning goals, teaching methods, topics, activities, materials or scheduling of the course. BE teachers need to be ready to respond to these changes quickly and effectively. This frequently involves on-the-spot decisions, which may require teachers to be flexible and take some risks in their teaching.

Relatively few research studies (cf. Hughes, 2005; Jackson, 1998; Jármai, 2007, 2008) seem to mention general business skills that teachers within the business world cannot avoid acquiring. The term ‘soft skills’ is frequently used in business for the abilities that people need in order to communicate and work well with other people (*Oxford Business English Dictionary*, 2005) and, in the case of managers, to manage people tactfully. Group facilitation, team-building, problem-solving, motivation, communication skills, meeting and negotiation skills, presentation and speaking skills, management and leadership skills, time and task management are some of the many soft skills applied in business contexts. As they work with business professionals who are often masters of the above listed skills and abilities, BE teachers are advised to study these soft skills thoroughly. Not only should BE teachers know about these soft skills, but it may also be useful for them to apply some of them in the BE classroom, (e.g., managing groups, activities, and time; building teams; motivating students), and eventually be able to perform some of these skills themselves (e.g., giving presentations, negotiating) (Hughes, 2005). As BE contexts are highly professional environments, having these skills is of much greater importance for BE learners than in general English contexts, and they are greatly appreciated by them. Furthermore, BE teachers need to train learners to cope with business situations in English. For this reason, BE teachers who acquire some knowledge of general business skills will be at an advantage.

## 2.3 Personality of the Business English teacher

Every teacher has their own personality and it is rather difficult to provide a definitive description of the attributes of the BE teacher. Although the individuality of different BE teachers cannot be overlooked, this section attempts to reveal that some significant personal qualities may be beneficial for any teacher who wishes to pursue a successful BE teaching career. Most authors

(Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) seem to agree that BE teachers need to be outgoing, open-minded, curious and genuinely interested in business issues. Furthermore, BE teachers should be tactful, sensitive to the learners' needs and be willing to listen to the learners (Belcher, 2006; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Jármai, 2008; Kurtán, 2001, 2003). As personal contact is of considerable importance in the case of a one-to-one situation and in small groups, BE teachers are expected to have excellent communication skills, be capable of building a good rapport with the learners and like working with people (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994). Ellis and Johnson (1998, p. 27) also point out that it is “invaluable (*for teachers*) to have a sense of humour, but it is also vital that the trainer should be seen to be taking the course seriously.”

Working in a professional environment, BE teachers have to demonstrate their professionalism themselves, for instance by being reliable and showing their accountability. Donna (2000, pp. 318–319) suggests that BE teachers should “provide a course outline or copies of syllabuses”, “inform all parties about changes”, “keep channels of communication open on a day-to-day basis”. The latter point is particularly relevant as learners appreciate it if BE teachers can easily be contacted and addressed with questions and problems at all times.

On the other hand, BE teachers tend to be shy and modest, and lack experience in using the marketing and sales techniques that are so familiar to their clients (Oliver, 2004). BE teachers need to feel more confident about themselves and their abilities: about their personal and professional experience, personal qualities, knowledge, attitudes and interests, and they must be able to promote and sell their services to their clients on a daily basis. Midgley (2003, p. 2) seems to be of the same view when he argues that BE teachers should “go out and sell ... (*their*) skills more actively”. He maintains that BE professionals should shift their focus from “learn English in order to do better business” to “learn to do better business, in English” (2003, p. 3). The author also admits that this would require a great amount of management training skills, sound business knowledge and experience, which is unlikely to be gained without management and business education and relevant work experience. This idea may sound a little far-fetched, but it is not beyond the bounds of possibility for specialized and dedicated teachers of BE.

### 3 Background and aims

This small scale, qualitative study is a follow-up to a questionnaire survey (Mészárosné Kóris, 2011b), which was conducted among Hungarian business professionals (i.e., BE learners and users) at multinational companies (MNCs) on their perceptions about what the necessary BE teacher competencies and the requirements are. The results obtained from the quantitative study indicated that business professionals had imposed well-defined requirements on BE teachers and that BE teachers need specialized competencies in order to meet the expectations of BE learners.

This pilot study aims to reveal the specialized competencies of BE teachers who are running BE courses at MNCs in Hungary. Therefore the study explores the perceptions of Hungarian BE teachers regarding the special competencies and attributes (qualifications, knowledge, skills and personal qualities) needed in their field, and aims to identify techniques and strategies used by BE teachers to obtain the necessary competencies and to cope with the

difficulties of professional development. A further aim of this study is to explore the requirements imposed on BE teachers by in-company BE learners (i.e., business professionals).

Based on the developments outlined in the previous sections and previous research, this study set out to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What specialized competencies and attributes (qualifications, knowledge, skills and personal qualities) do Business English teachers need to possess in order to run successful Business English courses?
- (2) How can specialized Business English teacher competencies be obtained?
- (3) What requirements do multinational companies operating in Hungary set for Business English teachers working for them?

## **4 Method**

### **4.1 Research approach and design**

Building on the results of previous research (Mészárosné Kóris, 2011a; Mészárosné Kóris, 2011b), this follow-up qualitative study is conducted with the aim of complementing these results and obtaining a deeper understanding of the BE teachers' perceptions. Furthermore, within the scope of this research, I hope to gain an insight into BE teachers' personal opinions and experience, which might help better illuminate interpret and explain the findings of my overall research.

### **4.2 Participants**

The study involved two female BE teachers with extensive BE teaching experience in both MNCs and tertiary education. The selection of participants followed a purposive, non-probability sampling procedure (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) in order to access knowledgeable teachers who have in-depth knowledge and first-hand experience in BE teaching. The participants in the study are referred to by pseudonyms.

Both participants graduated from Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest and both, being in their 60s, have more than 35 years of English teaching experience. The first participant, Tamara, has been teaching BE at leading universities of Hungary since 1986. She participated in various BE teacher training courses in Hungary, Great Britain and Ireland and, consequently, she holds several BE teacher qualifications. She also has hands-on experience in running BE courses at MNCs and has been involved in BE teacher training in Hungary. She is currently teaching BE and other ESP courses at a prestigious Hungarian university.

The second interviewee, Krisztina, has been teaching English since 1972. She first started teaching BE at a business college in 1976, where she worked for 15 years. Between 1990 and 2002 Krisztina was employed by a prestigious private language school, where she gained further

BE experience in teaching business professionals individually or in small groups at MNCs. Since 2002 she has been running BE courses at one of the leading Hungarian universities. She has also participated in various BE teacher training courses and she frequently attends BE teacher conferences.

### **4.3 The instrument**

To carry out an insightful analysis of BE teachers' personal opinions and experiences, I opted for "semi-structured life world" interviews (Kvale, 1996, p. 5). This type of interview serves is suitable for exploring BE teachers' detailed personal real-life experiences, difficulties in teaching situations, views on and attitudes towards BE teaching. Consequently, one-to-one, single session interviews (Dörnyei, 2007; McDonough & McDonough, 1997) were conducted. The interviews followed the interview guide approach (Cohen et al., 2007; Kvale, 1996), where topics and issues to be covered were specified in an interview schedule. The interview schedule was designed based on the findings of the preceding studies (Mészárosné Kóris, 2011a; Mészárosné Kóris, 2011b). As a result, the interviews were focused on the following themes:

- (1) Specialized competencies and attributes (qualification, knowledge, skills and personal qualities) of BE teachers
- (2) Recommendations for obtaining necessary competencies and attributes
- (3) The requirements of MNCs that BE teachers have to meet

The interview schedule did not contain a list of questions, but rather a sequence of guiding prompts under each heading. The interview schedule was not shown to the participants; it merely helped the researcher to keep the interviewees focused on the given topics and to make data collection systematic for each interviewee, while allowing enough space for free conversation. All the themes were discussed by the respondents, although they did not elaborate on every topic in the same detail owing either to their lack of experience in certain areas or to the irrelevance of particular issues to their teaching contexts. The English translation of the interview schedule can be found in the Appendix.

### **4.4 Procedures**

Prior to the beginning of the data collection, the participants were contacted and were briefly informed about the aims and procedures of the study, and their consent was obtained. Any information, facts and data presented in this article are published with the authorisation of the participants. As the interviewer and the participants' mother tongue is Hungarian, the interviews were conducted in Hungarian. They lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. At the interviews a friendly atmosphere and rapport were established and the participants could express their opinions and views openly and honestly.

The interviews were recorded digitally with the consent of the interviewees and after both interviews took place the recordings were transcribed following the transcription conventions proposed by Mackey and Gass (2005). The transcripts were analysed applying the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). First, the transcripts were prepared for data

analysis and units of meaning were identified by carefully reading through the transcripts. As a second step, the recurring concepts and themes were selected as the first provisional coding categories under which the units of meaning were carefully sorted. Initial categories and groupings were refined until the following established main categories were identified: content knowledge of the BE teacher, BE teaching methodology, personality of the BE teacher, BE teacher training, BE teachers' self-development, needs of BE learners. To increase the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis, and thus of the overall study, the concept of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) taxonomy of quality criteria was followed. In order to ensure greater credibility and dependability of the study, peer debriefing and member checking were carried out.

## 5 Findings

The main categories that were identified during data analysis were allocated to the corresponding research questions and the findings are presented accordingly. First, the interviewees' opinions on the specialized competencies of BE teachers are listed, and then the ways through which these competencies can be obtained are described. Finally, the requirements and needs of the BE learners are touched upon. In order to provide illustrations for this study, the quotes inserted here have been translated into English from the Hungarian text of the interviews.

### 5.1 What specialized competencies and attributes (qualifications, knowledge, skills and personal qualities) do BE teachers need to possess in order to run successful BE courses?

Both interviewees expressed their opinion that the most important competencies of the BE teacher are a high level of English proficiency, business knowledge, and BE teaching methodology. Tamara even elaborated on the priorities:

What is more important for a BE teacher: English language proficiency or business expertise? Both. Clearly, the best (*teacher*) would be someone who knows the business very well and is proficient in English, but obviously there are very few who can offer both. (Tamara)

As regards BE teachers' business content knowledge, both Tamara and Krisztina said that without having some insight into business matters it is rather difficult to satisfy the needs of the BE learner and to run a successful BE course. Tamara pointed out that she found it very difficult to teach something without actually understanding its content and if teachers try to do so, they can easily face problems as she did.

I sometimes got into trouble when I thought that I understood something and then it turned out that I did not...so it is worth making key concepts and definitions clear for yourself, even in Hungarian...to know what is what. (Tamara)

In the case of Krisztina, when she started to teach BE at the business college the novice teachers themselves asked for a business preparatory course in Hungarian in order to understand key business concepts and terminology.



We (*the teachers*) asked for this (*business*) course, because we felt awkward about teaching BE to the students while we did not have the business knowledge. (Krisztina)

Despite the high significance of having some business knowledge, both respondents added that English teachers cannot acquire the same business expertise as business professionals and they do not need to.

Actually, I've never had to teach business content...and...they (*BE learners*) already knew the business terminology related to their field in English. (Krisztina)

It is sufficient for teachers of BE to be interested in business issues, to try to be informed about the latest trends and news, and to understand some of the basic principles and concepts. When teachers feel that they have a gap in their knowledge or they do not understand a business term, they should openly admit it and ask for an explanation from the learners. As the interviewees stated:

It's no use acting as if you were an expert in business. (Tamara)

I don't think that the BE teacher should go into great depth to understand business itself. (Tamara)

It has to be accepted that you have limitations although there are things in which you are better (*than the business people*). (Tamara)

There were some cases when I had to admit that I was not familiar with the given topic, I did not know its terminology. In these cases I always said that it would be the topic of the next lesson. And it always was. (Krisztina)

Krisztina argued for the importance of mutual collaboration between the BE teacher and the BE learner as a key to success. Krisztina put forward the notion of partnership, which she considered essential for the teacher to understand:

At a BE lesson I am rather a partner...the partner of the learners than their teacher. And this is good. (Krisztina)

I have always felt this partnership. [...] In fact, business people are very understanding and they do not expect the teacher to know the business and its terminology. This is what they (*the businesspeople*) know, but they cannot use it correctly in English...and this is where you need this partnership. [...] This partnership is a mutual thing. (Krisztina)

Furthermore, Krisztina explained that the primary focus of BE courses is usually on improving the learners' business skills, e.g., telephoning, business writing, negotiation, presentation and socializing skills. It is vitally important for the business professionals to be able to cope with these situations in English perfectly well. Therefore, the BE teacher should be familiar with business skills in order to help the learners improve their language competence in these real-life situations.

As for the BE teaching methodology, the interviewees suggested that some orientation on teaching methods should be provided to novice teachers before they start their BE teaching career. Putting some tools, methods and materials into their hands can save time and effort, and it can also prevent potential failures and increase teachers' self-confidence. Knowing the very first steps to take when starting a BE course can be valuable. Both Tamara and Krisztina agreed that another important aspect of BE teaching is knowing where to look for resources and how to apply them to the specific BE context. Although a wide range of BE resources and materials are available for teachers to use, they are often not applicable to particular BE courses. In such cases BE teachers have to develop their own teaching materials, which can be a great challenge. A methodology course can assist future BE teachers in overcoming these difficulties by providing practical advice and usable methods for building up the course materials from scratch.

Regarding the personality of the BE teacher, Tamara referred to the teacher's self-confidence as a key issue in BE teaching. Tamara shared her past experiences when she, as a less experienced BE teacher at that time, had felt bad about her misperceived incompetence:

I was completely in despair that there are all these genius teachers and I will be a complete duffer. (Tamara)

I cried at first as I felt I would surely fail the exam (*to qualify as a BE examiner*). (Tamara)

Tamara's fears turned out to be unfounded, as she realized that she was no worse than her colleagues and she could certainly pass the BE examiner exam. Both Tamara and Krisztina suggested that participating in BE teacher training could result in an increase in teachers' self-confidence. Tamara mentioned the teachers' positive attitude to business and BE teaching as another key personality trait of the BE teacher:

You have to like it (*BE teaching*), only then can you do it well. (Tamara)

## 5.2 How can specialized BE teacher competencies be obtained?

Various ways of obtaining and improving BE teacher competencies were proposed by the respondents, among which BE teacher training, conferences on BE teaching and BE teachers' conscious self-development seemed to be the most important. Although most teachers are not given the opportunity to take BE teacher training courses, Tamara argued for its importance as she had found these courses highly beneficial, motivating and a help in boosting her self-confidence:

My colleagues were teasing me because I was attending training courses and preparing for exams, but I always benefited from them. (Tamara)

Krisztina also highlighted the usefulness of BE conferences and workshops, which she would highly recommend to everyone involved in BE teaching. Both Tamara and Krisztina explicitly

stated that some kind of specialization in BE teaching methodologies should be incorporated into teachers' formal university education, which could provide teachers with a "compass" (Tamara).

As most teachers cannot attend specialized courses, all they have to rely on is their own self-development and preparation. Both interviewees gave detailed accounts of their own struggles and hardships in preparing for the BE lessons when they first started teaching BE and how they were 'thrown in at the deep end'. Both of them expressed the need for self-learning:

If you start teaching BE, it becomes clear what it is that you do not know. (Tamara)

You cannot get on with it, unless you train yourself. (Tamara)

I was always busy preparing for these lessons as best I could. (Krisztina)

At the beginning of her BE teaching career, Tamara sat down and started to learn business concepts, definitions and processes, as well as acquiring key business terminology in order to feel "at home" (Tamara). Furthermore, she found that visiting BE classes held by experienced teachers was extremely useful.

### **5.3 What requirements do MNCs operating in Hungary set for BE teachers working for them?**

Needs analysis is one of the key tasks of the BE teacher when launching a BE course. Both Tamara and Krisztina emphasized the importance of tailoring these courses, lessons, activities and language tasks to the learners' individual or group needs. As Krisztina added, not only is initial needs analysis vital, but getting continuous feedback from the learners and adjusting the teaching procedures, activities and tasks to their needs throughout the entire course is also indispensable.

At the beginning of a BE course we always carried out a needs analysis, which I think is not that important in the case of a general English course. [...] But I have always done this (*needs analysis*) to ask the learners what they would like to practise. And based on their needs I put together the syllabus and the topics [...] which we can alter as we go along. (Krisztina)

The goal-oriented and results-oriented nature of the MNCs' requirements towards the BE training determines what teachers are expected to do during the course. As Krisztina said:

There is always a pre-set target. (Krisztina)

It is a great expectation that they (*the learners*) get from point A to point B and then from point B to point C. So, they have to achieve the goals set at the needs analysis by the end of the course and to step up to a higher level. (Krisztina)

Both Tamara and Krisztina stated that, in their experience, the majority of business people are usually unable to express themselves fluently in English, therefore the BE teacher needs to

improve their general language proficiency. In other cases, the BE teacher is required to develop the learners' business skills (e.g. presentation skills, negotiation skills, professional writing skills) in English. Both interviewees concluded that in the case of in-company BE courses, the greatest emphasis is placed on communication skills and not on grammar.

Another requirement of the BE learners was expressed by Tamara, and repeated by her several times during the interview. As she emphasized, the BE lesson must not be boring or uninspiring despite the dry and monotonous nature of some business-related topics. It is a challenging task for the BE teacher to make lessons interesting and motivating for the learners.

## 6 Discussion

The interviews with two BE teachers in this pilot study yielded rich data on necessary BE teacher competencies, the ways in which these competencies can be acquired and some thoughts on the needs and expectations of MNCs in Hungary. The findings of the interviews show that teaching BE is indeed a special field for teachers, different from other general English teaching contexts, for which they need specialized training, preparation and the use of different methodologies.

Regarding the special competencies of the BE teacher, the interviewees highlighted the vital importance of acquiring some level of business content knowledge, without which it is very difficult to cope with the challenge of teaching BE. This is in line with previous research conducted in the field (cf. Belcher, 2006; Bell, 2002; Carreon, 1996; Chen, 2000; Donna, 2000; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Frendo, 2005; Jármai, 2008; Kurtán, 2001, 2003; Harding, 2007). Both participants agreed on the importance of relying heavily on mutual collaboration or partnership between the BE teacher and the BE learners. Having concluded in the literature review that the BE teacher cannot be “the primary knower of the carrier content” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 13), i.e., the business content, it has to be accepted that teaching BE involves working in partnership with the BE learners. The teacher's role as a consultant, built on this mutual collaboration, ensures the success of the BE course and leads to optimal performance by both the BE teacher and the learners. Taking a consultant role assumes that the BE teacher has the ability to allow the BE learner to manage classroom situations and to be involved in the decision-making processes. This cooperation and increased autonomy of the learners may be unusual for a general English teacher working solely in the state educational system, however, it is vital for the BE teacher to employ this approach.

Further considerable significance is attached to BE teaching methodologies which provide teachers with practical tools, methods, ideas and resources they can apply and adapt to their own BE teaching contexts. Surprisingly, the necessity of holding an official BE teaching degree or qualification was not expressed at all by either the participants, or sources in the literature. The interviewees were only reflecting on the need to incorporate ESP or BE specialization courses into the university teacher education curriculum.

Special skills of the BE teacher were not particularly emphasized by the respondents when they were elaborating on BE teacher competencies; however, it was mentioned that

developing some soft business skills (e.g., presentation skills, negotiation skills, professional writing skills) can be beneficial for the teacher (cf. Hughes, 2005; Jackson, 1998; Jármai, 2007, 2008). Although earlier studies (Mészárosné Kóris, 2011a; Mészárosné Kóris, 2011b) have shown that a good BE teacher should possess excellent communication and interpersonal skills, these attributes were not mentioned by the interviewees of the present study. What was emphasized both by earlier studies (cf. Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994) and by the respondents, however, is the fact that the BE teacher should build a good rapport with the BE learners, which would lay the foundation for a successful course.

As for the personality traits of the BE teacher, the lack of self-confidence was raised by the participants in this pilot study as well as in earlier studies (cf. Bereczky, 2009; Oliver, 2004; Mészárosné Kóris, 2011a, Midgley, 2003) as one of the greatest problems for BE teachers to overcome. Lack of self-confidence might arise from the lack of BE teacher training, gaps in the teachers' knowledge of business, and lack of previous experience at MNCs. These adventures into the unknown may result in low self-confidence, shyness and modesty, which call for a change in teachers' attitudes and viewpoints.

Regarding the methods and ways of obtaining and improving special BE teacher competencies, the interviewees' recommendations correspond to those of the literature (Bell, 2002; Donna, 2000; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Frendo, 2005), underlining the need for training and self-preparation.

Finally, considering the needs and requirements of the business professionals and assessing their continuous feedback are essential for BE teachers. BE courses need to be tailor-made to each and every unique teaching context in order to achieve the pre-set goals and show the results and the return on the financial investment for the company. Goals can only be accomplished and the best results can only be obtained when the teacher is well-equipped with the specialized competencies proposed both by the interviewees and the literature consulted.

## **7 Conclusion and implications for future research**

The research attempted to list the specialized competencies of BE teachers from the point of view of the teachers themselves; therefore the aim of this paper was to examine the specialized knowledge, skills and personality traits, and identify the key attributes that good BE teachers should have in order to meet the requirements of the business community and deliver successful BE courses as well as retaining their customers, i.e. the BE learners. Another objective of this qualitative interview study was to pilot the selected research methods and their implementation, and draw conclusions for future larger-scale research to be carried out with more participants in order to gain a better understanding of the teachers' perspectives.

Results obtained from the study support the findings of earlier research in the field, and indicate that BE teachers are likely to be at an advantage if they gain some knowledge of essential business terminology, functions and processes, acquire the essentials of BE teaching methodology and develop certain skills and personal characteristics which are highly appreciated by the business community. The results imply that compliance with the MNCs' requirements and

fulfilment of the immediate needs of BE learners are likely to be the key factors of BE teacher professionalism. Therefore, acquiring BE teacher competencies is vital for the successful delivery of any BE course.

Based on the findings and the conclusions drawn from the present study, the instrument, after adjustment and updating, proved to be well-suited to the purpose of the research. This being a pilot investigation, the number of the participants was limited, therefore a larger-scale research project is planned for the near future involving a larger sample of Hungarian BE teachers. As regards the selection procedure of the participants, negative case sampling, as a variant of purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2007), should be considered for the larger-scale study to include novice BE teachers with little experience, as they might add a different viewpoint to the findings.

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## APPENDIX

### English translation of the interview schedule for BE teacher interviews

#### A. BE teacher background

##### A.1 Qualification, degree

##### A.2 Teaching experience:

- general English / Business English / other ESP
- tertiary education / private language school / in-company courses
- university students / business professionals / managers, executives
- one-to-one, groups

#### B. BE teacher competencies

[What are the most important BE teacher competencies?]

##### B.1 Qualification

- University degree in English language teaching
- University degree in any business discipline
- BE teacher qualification

##### B.2 Knowledge

- General English language proficiency
- ELT methodologies
- Content knowledge (business concepts, processes, functions, terminology etc.)
- BE teaching methodologies
- Multinational corporate culture

##### B.3 Skills

- Business soft skills (e.g. presentation, negotiation, business writing etc.)
- Adaptability, creativity, resourcefulness
- Readiness to change, decision-making, problem-solving
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills

##### B.4 Personal qualities

- Open-minded, interested in business issues
- Sensitive to the learners' needs and problems
- Good rapport
- Reliable, trustworthy
- Business-like attitude
- Business-like appearance
- Flexibility
- Self-confidence

#### C. Ways to obtain BE teacher competencies

##### C.1 Methods applied in their personal experience

##### C.2 Methods proved to be useful

#### D. Requirements set for BE teachers by MNCs

##### D.1 Qualification

##### D.2 Knowledge

##### D.3 Skills

##### D.4 Personal qualities