Business Communication and Public Speaking in the ESP Domain: Some Considerations

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Abstract   The aim of this paper relates to the implications of introducing Public Speaking as a specific English for Purposes (ESP) domain in teaching and learning Business Communication (BC). Background literature on this topic provides a useful frame for understanding and justifying the origins of the subject and the arena in which studies on public speaking in business English then emerged. In addition to that, an overview of the business workplace skills required by corporate communities at present demonstrates that public speaking in the teaching and learning of English for Business Purposes cannot be ignored. The study underlines the strong need for a focused reflection on the impact of good oratorical skills in business communication in English. Due to the varied and complex nature of business communication, however, public speaking studies and programs should be targeted for the audience, and not standardized or copied from models which are suitable to a non-business context.

Keywords   Public Speaking, Business Communication, English for Special Purposes (ESP)

1. Introduction

Although professional public speaking has been a common topic for conversation in many blogs and websites in recent years, nothing scientifically relevant emerges in these sites, apart from general attention given to the description of emotions and fears in women's and men's approach to public contexts [1-2]. In spite of the fact that the subject of public speaking has been looked at extensively from a rhetorical point of view as well as from a political and law perspective [5-9], or from the conversation analysis angle [10-12], this issue has received limited attention in the ESP context (in business contexts, in Reference 13 and 14; in legal contexts, in Reference 15). The contiguous areas which have been explored in the last decades are related to the 'conference presentation' genre [16, 17] or the 'presidential debate' [18].

This contribution illustrates what existing literature suggests about public speaking, particularly with regard to the influence of language on international and global business communication in English. It concludes by raising concerns about the developing literature, confirming the significant role of public speaking effectiveness in the business workplace, with particular reference to entrepreneurs' concerns.

2. Methodological Background

Modern public speaking draws its origins from the British school of Elocutionists, among which the importance of Sheridan must be underlined [19]. By using two types of language (the 'language of ideas' and the 'language of emotions'), in Sheridan's view, the role of a public speaker is to instruct, to please and to move. The British school used those principles of elocution in investigative treaties, and in writing manuals for technical elocution (e.g., clerical elocution) and illustrative anthologies, often designed for lawyers and negotiators. The power of oratory and eloquence became central at the beginning of the twentieth century thanks to the efforts of the American Elocutionary Movement [20-28]. With the American tradition, the relevance of effective speech expanded to the fields of medicine, entertainment and commerce, or business. Desire for education and the wish to become good mediators contributed to the American elocutionists' success. Many people, often trained for professions such as medicine or law, became 'teachers of elocution' in response to a growing demand for training in this field.

2.1. Background Literature on Public Speaking in English for Business

Public speaking builds on the basic communication skills we originally develop as we acquire language and learn how to make conversation. As expanded conversation, it should preserve the natural directness and spontaneity of

good conversation. And like conversation, it should be tuned to the reactions of listeners. In a business context, speakers and listeners of this 'conversation' are usually highly motivated business people, looking for oral effectiveness and efficiency. Some basic references to the importance of public speaking in the training of a business expert have been made since English for Business started to have its own identity [30-32]. At the beginning of the twentieth century the newly-born Business English specialized domain shows its independent status in some manuals, which were conceived for people approaching 'practical business'.

The importance of exercises for the practice of public speaking in professional contexts was often highlighted in manuals of Business English of the first decades of the twentieth century [30]. While some authors of Business English books gave priority to practicing written skills [31], the great majority devoted pages to oral skills for the workplace, and considered public speaking as a special topic inside them. Effectiveness and efficiency in oral performances in business English were a priority for some authors at the beginning of the twentieth century [32], who often underlined one of the most commonplaces of contemporary public speaking courses, that is 'Building speaker confidence', or 'Fear of Public Speaking', which has been a common issue in the most recent studies in the field [2, 33, 34, 4]. Moreover, all these manuals were concerned with preparation for public speaking at different levels, on topics such as: adapting to the audience and the situation [35]; finding the right topic [32]; researching and studying the topic [32]; supporting one's ideas [36]; structuring the speech [35]; outlining the speech [37]. The new specialized identity of the business English speaker was analysed in these books, which often considered whether the learner was able to argument in the specific way which his/her profession required [36].

2.2. Public Speaking as a Workplace Basic Skill

The strategic importance of oral communication skills in today's workplace has been amply documented in literature on organizational leadership. In particular, it has been demonstrated that successful oral communication reflects the specific internal and external influences on a particular company [38]. In ESP teaching and learning contexts, business graduates should be equipped with an understanding of the real communicative needs of their future workplace. Van Horn [39], reporting on a survey of employees in New Jersey, claims that oral communication is seen as vital by employers but, interestingly, it is an area for which graduates lack preparation. Scollon, Wong Scollon & Jones [40] find that most business graduate employees' communication is more informal in nature, although this seems to be against the goal-oriented nature of corporate discourse.

Drawing on those considerations, the real challenge is how to define the needs of internal and external corporate oral communication in English. They are integral to the workplace, but they are shaped by factors such as a company's external and internal environments, which in turn influence management approaches and modes of work organization [38, 39, 42]. Within the workplace, oral communication is influenced by the status of the parties, the purpose of communication, and the medium [44]. Furthermore, successful communication depends on the parties sharing background knowledge and assumptions, and from their linguistic and cultural identities. In spite of all these complex issues, the urgent need of skills in the field of public speaking in business workplace contexts deserves strong consideration on behalf of the ESP researcher.

2.3. Business Workplace Requirements and ESP Practice

Disciplinary variation in English for Business teaching has received considerable attention in the theory as well as in the practice of designing and teaching programs in English for specific groups of learners [41]. Nevertheless, it is claimed that, in the context of English as a global language of international business, multinational corporations find ways of matching the authentic workplace requirements with non-English background preparation [42]. Moreover, according to Bhatia and Bremner [41], dissatisfaction from the side of the student is strong, as most learners need support both in English for Academic purposes and in English for the workplace: the perception of business teachers generally reinforce and complement this statement.

At a more pedagogical level, the corresponding challenge is to handle the tension between workplace requirements and ESP practice. A survey conducted by Crosling and Ward [13] identified public presentations as one of the most common forms of oral communication expected by business graduates: the two authors underline that this should be a priority in university education and complain about the lack of attention made to this issue at the academic level. These premises included formal presentation practice as a requirement for workplace assessment in some university curricula [43], with excellent results in both natives' and non-natives' oral communication performances during their career as University students beforehand and during their professional experience afterwards [44]. Experience in using English for Business in public speaking contexts would undoubtedly be very beneficial for any student of business and for any business expert.

2.4. Public Speaking Areas of Application in English for Business

As Lucas [8] points out, public speaking was the bedrock of a variety of undergraduate curricula in the US in the past decades, and for a good reason: according to a survey of nearly 500 companies and public organizations, public

speaking was ranked as one of the most important personal qualities sought after by employers. Luckily enough, as far as public speaking is concerned, nowadays the employee should be effective only in: delivering persuasive speeches in sales presentations, making proposals and promoting motivational sessions [45]. In fact, Beebe and Beebe [46] also highlighted the importance of informative speaking in business communication, which is speeches where a new product is presented, or the manufacturing process is described, or people or ideas are introduced to an audience. Both persuasive and informative speeches seem to be part of the daily routine of some categories of business people, namely entrepreneurs, which have been chosen in a recent study on public speaking in ESP as an interesting context for analyzing the relevance of oral effectiveness in business communication by non-native speakers of English [47, 48].

3. Methodological Issues

The research on entrepreneurs' public speaking in English offers a limited range of specific contributions. Studies in the field tend to highlight either the technical skills required for successful public speaking in business, or the symbolic aspects that entrepreneurs evoke for their speeches to be persuasive. Studies that reflect the former trend focus on the nature of oratorical skills and on the possibility of transferring those skills from political oratory to the management community, to which entrepreneurs are loosely associated with in this tradition.

3.1. The Entrepreneurs' Point of View

Notwithstanding the attention paid to the role of public speech when looking at entrepreneurs, extant research does not clarify how entrepreneurs interpret the actual speaking in public and whether, by using this form of communication, they only aim to achieve support and legitimacy or to portray other aspects of their profession. With this in mind, in 2010 we conducted a study [47-49], aimed to address the following research question: what meaning do entrepreneurs attribute to speaking in public within the context of their role, and with what implications? Our interdisciplinary reflections on the data demonstrated that the uniqueness of individuals' social context was an influential factor in the creation and development of entrepreneurs. We refer to reference 48 for a detailed summary of our study, whereas we underline here only some key aspects revealed in the interviews, which suggested that for our sample of participants public speaking was about getting a point across, sharing a rhythm, showing a path to others, creating a feeling, persuading, welcoming, and transferring passion for one's profession. Although these points could be seen as consistent with the general canons associated to the role of a public speaker, they were looked at from a different perspective arguing that, if linked to the entrepreneur, each of those key aspects

reflected the passion and the emotional component embedded in this role. Rather than exclusively considering entrepreneurs' use of oratorical skills [50-52] and the importance they attribute to the normative component of a text, we suggested reflecting on how actually just the fact of being an entrepreneur gave a specific pathos to public speaking: the emotion that may drive the entrepreneur as a risk-taker and as a person in control at the same time reflected on his/her interpretation of public speaking, as a medium for sharing a path, a rhythm and ultimately a passion.

In addition to the components of public speech (e.g., argumentation, delivery), our study [48] highlighted a second set of elements entrepreneurs illustrated as important in their way of addressing an audience, namely: sense of welcoming, emotions and emotion transfer, emphasis on people, spontaneity, self-confidence, and the search for audience confirmation. This view can suggest that, for entrepreneurs, public speaking may not only be about transferring a message or legitimizing one's position, but also about sharing emotions with the audience. In other words, public speaking might not be a mere means to the end of winning the interlocutors' trust and understanding, but a way for sharing the entrepreneurial passion 'per se'.

4. Results

There are two implications that emerge from this reflection. The first one is that, within the wide arena of business, the speaker's professional role influences the pathos associated with the performance of public speaking. In turn, this sets the emotional antecedent of the process of construction of meaning between the speaker and his/her audience during a speech. This delicate but relevant aspect should be taken into consideration when the ESP academic or practitioner arranges a public speaking course [53]. Drawing from the professional role, we believe that this type of antecedent is different from both the actual emotion that the speaker feels right before starting a speech and that may influence the outcome of it (on this matter literature has widely explored the issue of public speaking as a fearful social situation, and of emotion regulation behaviours aimed at reducing anxiety and the occurrence of fearful thoughts experienced by the speaker while performing the actual speech [1-4, 54]) and the traditional rhetorical appeal to emotion that speakers use to win their audience over. Particularly we would argue that, whether it is deliberate or not on the part of the speaker, the emotional antecedent we are referring to relates to enduring together with the audience the interpretation of one's professional role.

The second implication that emerges from our reflection has a more pragmatic aspect and is addressed to public speaking trainers. Traditionally, the main aspects for training people in public speaking tend to focus on managing visual contact, managing the speaker's emotions, structuring the message effectively, developing personal

charisma, and using gestures and non-verbal behaviour coherently [8, 55-56]. Targeting those strategies in light of trainees' professional roles can increase the salience of the training outcomes making the benefits of the training activity fit for purpose [57].

5. Conclusions

Earlier studies on the field of public speaking have already supported in giving evidence of the strong importance of this domain in the field of business communication. In addition to that, an overview of the business workplace skills required by corporate communities at present demonstrates that public speaking in the teaching and learning of English for Business Purposes cannot be ignored. To sum up, a more focused reflection on the impact of good oratorical skills in business communication in English is needed, in the context of ESP research. Due to the varied and complex nature of business communication, however, public speaking studies and programs should be targeted for the audience, and not standardized or copied from models which are suitable to a non-business context, such as politics or law. The reflections that emerge from our paper may suggest investigating the way the pathos of public speaking varies according to other business roles (e.g. sales person, buyer, consultant, etc.). Moreover, future research needs to address how social factors such as gender, age, etc. may influence the outcomes of studies conducted on public speaking.

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