

BUSINESS ENGLISH ARTICLE SUMMARIES AS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

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Abstract

The present article tries to present the pros as well as the cons of the use of business English article summaries as assessment tools. The great plus of such a tool is the fact that it offers the opportunity of involving both written and spoken English skills. It is also a way of boosting students' confidence, but it may be challenging too (in terms of spoken English production, grammar or summarizing business information).

What is the most encouraging part about our resorting to such a tool during business English seminars is our positive students' feedback who see it as a quite effective method of improving their English skills and a way of updating their economic knowledge 'in real time' as articles are generally 'fresh' information providers.

Keywords: business English article summaries, written and spoken English skills

1. The use of English article summaries in business English seminars. Pros and cons

Our study encourages the use of authentic materials being in accordance with the language teaching literature² which is in favour of this practice whose great merit is that they offer real English language contact: "They give the learner the feeling that he or she is learning the 'real' language; that they are in touch with a living entity, the target language as it is used by the community which speaks it." (Guariento & Morley 2001: 347).

Our experience with 1st year economic students has revealed the fact that (both oral and written) authentic materials are assigned some sort of certainty on the side of the EFL learner that they represent a valuable connection to real English language and (economic) realities. All these are on the background of students' awareness of the fact that very good English knowledge is crucial for their future personal income: "on an individual level, recruiters and HR managers around the world report that job seekers with exceptional English compared to their country's level earned 30-50% percent higher salaries" (Bonkowski 2013). It is

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² Beare (2017) focuses on the use of newspapers and provides a very useful and detailed list of various ways of using them during classes "from simple reading exercises to more complex writing and response assignments".

this sensitivity that may be essential for their motivation to become better and better at mastering English, *business* English.

The importance of using the business English article summaries as assessment tools derives actually from the close connection between the summarizing skill and business, as one can say that summarizing is essential in any type of business, and we believe that especially economic students have to be made aware of this fact, in case they are not already. Thus, a very good command of such a skill is a must as you “need to write executive summaries, whether you are in banking, real estate, insurance, manufacturing, law, education, or another type of organization” (Gaertner-Johnston 2013)³, if we were to think on a medium/long term regarding our economic students’ future careers in business, and we should.

Another gain is the fact that students can familiarize with certain business realities (e.g. ways of funding a start-up: borrowing or fundraising; the connection between creativity and business success and the list of the issues debated in business English articles is actually endless) as well as the language describing them, but also get some in-depth knowledge about the ones that they already know.

The summarizing task proves to be an effective barometer of students’ finesse and potential to deal with all kinds of language situations and “tricks”. Here is a list of several examples containing various mistakes that have been extracted from our students’ business English article summaries:

- “to develop different programs or strategies in order to prevent the security being broken” instead of “to develop different programs or strategies in order to prevent ~~the~~ security from being broken”;
- “regardless of which department the employee belongs” instead of “[...] the employee belongs to”;
- “an income over \$208,500” instead of “an income of over \$ 208,500”;
- “cognitive computing makes barriers between them and us to disappear” instead of “[...] between them and us ~~to~~ disappear”;
- “the percent of job separation” instead of “the percentage of job separation”;
- “customers spend more money with your brand” instead of “[...] more money on your brand”;
- “always exclusive trying to sell them something” instead of “always exclusively trying”).

This kind of assignment “forces” students in a way to process the information in the article and try to summarize it by using the information available in the article and their own English knowledge instead of giving in to the temptation of getting it all done with the help of the Internet as it may happen in the case other types of assignment like translation or finding some information on a business topic.

Of course, one may find the use of such an assessment tool rather time consuming, but we believe that the gains outnumber eventual drawbacks and inspired business English language trainers can find ways to prevent such disadvantages by means of good time management, clear summary writing instructions, effective correction of grammar, pronunciation and spelling mistakes.

2. Business English article summaries and the English skills involved

Fulfilling the task of writing a business English article summary may seem quite simple at first sight, but its challenges are the result of the complexity of such an assignment. The very first thing before writing a summary is having knowledge of a minimum set of guidelines teachers should remind students of or familiarize them with before the actual writing the summary. But the simple knowledge of the rules is not sufficient: our experience is the proof that even if they have been provided with guidelines they still have not respected (all) summary-writing tasks. To a certain extent, the ability to perform this summary-writing task measures ESP students’ performance independence (Shore et al. 2017: 238), as the knowledge of the

³ The same author (2013) lists the questions that the executive summary of a report or an article might answer:

“Briefly, what is this about?

Why is it important? [or] Why was it undertaken?

What are the major findings or results?

What more is to be done? [or] How will these findings be applied?”

rules can actually be expressed only by means of good business English with all the skills that this process involves.

Moreover, writing a summary of an economic article in English is even more challenging as Business English has its specific characteristics. The major distinction would be the fact that each economic field is defined by its own language to which we should add the dimension of the respective business culture.

The target students are 1st year economic students (within The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the Faculty of Cybernetics) whose average English language level is mostly B2 to C1. They have been given a minimum set of guidelines as the following:

- to choose⁴ an online⁵ article belonging to the economic field that should not exceed 800 words and which should be as recent as possible;
- to include the main ideas of the online economic article (which we have called the “golden rule” of a successful summary, in other words: when somebody reads the summary they should find out the essentials of the article);
- to avoid expressing personal opinions on the topic of the article;
- style: formal/ academic;
- word limit: approx. 200.

Some of our students’ common challenge has been the difficulty of compressing the information in the article which most of the times is motivated by the student’s feeling that everything seems so important that it has to be mentioned in the summary as well. There have been cases where summaries do not stick to a summary logic line, only a bunch of ideas listed without even being followed by a naturally expected conclusion of the respective article. Some summaries lack an introduction and/ or a conclusion.

In order to involve as many language skills as possible, our students have been asked to read their summaries in a loud voice during the business English seminar, this way their pronunciation is checked. But the gains are not only in terms of checking and improving pronunciation skills, but also regarding the business knowledge spread, as their colleagues can also find out information about various economic topics present in the respective articles.

Of course, depending on the time available, a very effective technique is ask students to check in pairs if his/her colleague has respected the guidelines, this way they can “digest” the summary-article rules by feeling responsible for the feedback that they give for their colleague⁶. Condruz-Băcescu (2014:423) has also touched upon the issue of this new collaborative dimension of the learning process: “the act of learning is no longer considered to be the effect of the teachers’ work, but the result of interaction between students, teacher interaction with students and society to which they belong, as well as the information provided by it”.

Besides our students’ knowledge and ability to summarize English economic articles, by means of this assessment tool we have been able to check their language level (grammar, spelling, pronunciation).

In terms of *grammar* we are listing some of their common errors:

- “the thing that could stimulates the developers” (i.o. could stimulate developers);
- “few years ago the games_dominated the app market”, “the universe of the mobile application is in great expansion”, “the automation is a controversial subject”, “the bank accounts or the stock exchanges are in the frontline” (i.o. games; mobile application; automation, bank accounts, stock exchanges);
- “Odgers Berndtson run this program for seven years” (i.o. has been running);

⁴ In order to increase their feeling of freedom as well as responsibility they have been required to choose the article themselves.

⁵ The reason why we have asked our students to choose an online business English article is a practical one: there are lots of such articles on the Internet which nowadays is the handiest information source.

⁶ See also Shore et al. (2017: 238) who recommend “simulated peer interactions”.

- “it seems that the app publisher come from every industry” (i.o. comes);
- “This article speak about people which got hired [...]” (i.o. This article speaks);
- “these doesn’t show that “gig economy” is truly a phenomenon” (i.o. these don’t show);
- “money have as great power” (i.o. money has);
- “finacial market performance exists, but it can’t be predicted because is different from subject to subject” (i.o. it is different from subject to subject);
- “women population can be very important in economic progress” (i.o. in the economic progress);
- “if women in UK would work at the same level as Swedish women GDP will increase by 9%” ([...] worked [...] GDP would increase);
- “employees from mining sector” (i.o. from the mining sector);
- “it was announced two quarters of negative growth for the economy” (i.o. two quarters of negative growth for the economy were announced);
- “20% of US exports sells in Canada” (i.o. sell);
- “one reason why Canada’s economy is so important it’s because...” (i.o. one reason [...] is because);
- “one of their biggest problem it’s based on their national currency instability” (i.o. one of their biggest problem is based on [...]);
- “Trump said that he will tax Ford” (i.o. he would tax);
- “if a bug comes along it is the possibility we messed up the entire company” (i.o. if a bug comes along there is the possibility);
- “by helping businesses to discover” (i.o. helping businesses discover).

To the grammar mistakes above we are adding several instances of:

- *wrong word order formulations:*

- “an important role has the government” (i.o. the government has an important role);
- “also are excluded the people” (i.o. people are also excluded), “the hotel chain Marriott” (i.o. the Marriott hotel chain);
- “it speaks about what is Mark Field’s opinion on it” (i.o. it speaks about what Mark Field’s opinion on it is);
- “the fact that will be created new jobs” (i.o. the fact that new jobs will be created);
- “it will be created a new division of labor ” (i.o. a new division of labor will be created);
- “by adding to pictures details like emotions” (i.o. by adding details like emotions to pictures);
- “for students are very important these experiences” (i.o. these experiences are very important for students);
- “America wanted to show everybody who’s the boss” (i.o. America wanted to show everybody who the boss was)

- *misused terms:*

- “oil companies are trying to pass this problem” (i.o. overcome/ solve);
- “app developers will enrich more and more” (i.o. will become richer and richer/will enrich themselves more and more).

Regarding *spelling* the following mistakes are unfortunately common: *whitch, even thogh, extencion, founds, dangerous threads, financial aria* i.o. which, even though, extension, funds, dangerous threats, financial area.

Here are some examples of incorrect *pronunciation*:

- inflation /ɪnˈfleɪʃən/, c.p. & s. /ɪnˈfleɪ.ʃən⁷/;
- cost /ˈkɒst/, c.p. & s. /kɒst/;
- significant /saɪˈgnɪfɪkənt/ c.p. & s. /sɪɡˈnɪf.ɪ.kənt/;
- innovative /ɪnəˈveɪtɪv/ or /aɪˈnɒvətɪv/ c.p. & s. /ˈɪn.ə.və.tɪv/;
- financial /fɪˈnænʃəl/ c.p. & s. /ˈfaɪ.nænʃəl/;
- expertise /ˈɛxpɜːtɪz/ c.p. & s. /ˌɛk.spɜːˈtiːz/;

⁷ The first phonetic transcriptions are the incorrect ones and belong to some of our economic students. All correct phonetic transcriptions are from the online edition of the Cambridge Dictionary: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>.

- status /'status/ c.p. & s. /'steɪ.təs/;
- identify /ɪ'dentɪfaɪ/ c.p. & s. /aɪ'den.tɪ.fai/
- supply /sə'plɪ/ c.p. & s. /sə'plaɪ/;
- develop /de'vel'ɒp/ c.p. & s. /dɪ'vel.əp/;
- purpose /pər'pəʊz/ c.p. & s. /'pɜː.pəs/;
- success /'saksəs/ c.p. & s. /sək'ses/.

We, as business English language trainers, are convinced of the usefulness of such a tool, but what about our targeted students? Fortunately, their feedback encourages us to keep on proposing it, as, they could see for themselves that by means of business English article summaries they have been able to check and improve their English language level, to read a recent business English article of their choice and update their knowledge of a certain economic issue and, on a (quite) long term, to prepare for better paid future jobs.

4. Conclusions

Although summarizing a business English article may seem quite easy at first sight, such a task requires the knowledge of certain writing rules as well as a good command of English language knowledge. The usefulness of mastering this skill has a very practical reason: they are very likely to have to perform such task no matter the business they will be in. But business English article summaries are valuable not only to this medium/ long term objective, but also in terms of the range of the English language skills and different types of economic English it involves.

The fact that our students' feedback is more than favourable encourages us more to believe that the business English article summarizing task should be used more often so as much it exposes the ESP learner to various business language situations that have to be clearly processed and understood in order to be compressed in much fewer words without missing the essential information present in the extended form of the original article.

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<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>

Abbreviations

- c.p. & s. - correct pronunciation and stress
i.o. - instead of

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