

## TESTING BUSINESS ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Alexander HOLLINGER\*

The measurement of language proficiency has been the concern of several remarkable specialists in the field of assessment of language learning and teaching. In their works, Robert Lado [4] and J.B. Carroll [1] proposed models that distinguish *skills* (listening, speaking, reading and writing) from *components of knowledge* (vocabulary, grammar, phonology, graphology). To use their terms, this paper will deal with one of the *components of knowledge*, i.e. the vocabulary of the language.

My aim is mainly to outline a typology of business English vocabulary tests, pointing out some of their peculiarities as well as some of the techniques used. These will be based on my own experience in the field of language testing and on two already published materials, *Test Your Business English Vocabulary* [2], and *A Lexicological Approach to Business English* [3] as well as some work in progress concerning the vocabulary of Business and Financial English. The essential advantages and disadvantages of such types of tests will also be discussed in the paper.

### 1. Characteristics of vocabulary tests

Vocabulary tests are mostly objective, that is to say they can be scored rather mechanically without the need to evaluate complex performance. They can be marked on a right/wrong basis, therefore the task could also be performed by a computer with the proper input. From the point of view of practicality, therefore, such tests are generally easy to devise, to administer and score. We could also say that they are highly reliable, in contrast to subjective types of tests, where the marking depends on the examiner, which makes them less reliable. On the other hand, a vocabulary test does not normally test productive language skills, which can be regarded as a shortcoming.

Vocabulary tests are discrete-point tests, i.e. they test only one element of language in contrast to

global/integrative tests which require a wider language performance from the test taker.

It is worth mentioning that business English vocabulary tests are usually based on the students' previous subject knowledge obtained either at specialised business courses or, when the case, at previous language classes. Therefore, they are as a rule achievement/ attainment tests administered at the end of a semester, of a year of study, or as components of end of course tests. They could, however, also be used as progress tests at the end of a unit or chapter devoted to one single aspect of the field of business.

For example, after having studied a unit on insurance based on relevant input material, reading and listening practice and possibly some writing practice, the students might be required to revise the materials and then will be asked to take a progress test in the vocabulary of insurance. From the teacher's perspective, the test could have a diagnostic function, as well. Thus, if need be, remedial work can be suggested.

### 2. Techniques used in vocabulary tests, applied to Business English

I shall now enlarge upon the main techniques I have used in vocabulary tests, many of which are included in the books mentioned above.

#### (i) Blank completion

This is a favourite method of testing, with the choice of the right word to be made from a list usually given at the end of the exercise or placed in a box at the beginning of the test. I have tried two ways of drawing up the list: one in which the number of words on the list equals the number of gaps to be filled in and another where the number of listed words exceeds the number of blanks (sometimes by as much as twice the number of gaps). I have found that the latter type of

\* Professor, Ph.D., Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication, ASE Bucharest

test discriminates much better than the former. In the former case weaker students could guess the right solution as no word has been left out, whereas the latter type eliminates guessing to a great extent.

### (ii) Blank completion with a cue

Here besides the list given at the end or beginning of the test, as mentioned in the previous type, the formulation of the sentence is conceived in such a way as to provide the test taker with a cue. Some cues may be based on the semantic relations between words, others on various aspects of word formation. I shall supply some examples and try to classify the cues according to their function and form.

#### a. reference to a synonym

Example: “A *bill of exchange*, also called ..., is defined as an unconditional order etc”. The gap should be filled in by **draft** (a synonym of **bill of exchange**).

#### b. paraphrase used as a cue

Example: “the *bill of exchange* is a ... instrument, that is the holder may pass it to someone else by signing it on its back, an operation called....”

The two gaps should be filled by **negotiable** (first gap) and **endorsement** (second gap).

#### c. reference to homonymy

Example: “The sales have witnessed a ... fall in the last two weeks.

“We have ... the onions into vinegar”

The expected solution to the gap filling is **steep/steeped**.

#### d. reference to homophones

Example: “The man did not pay his ... when travelling by bus to the trade ...”

The solution to the gap filling is **fare/fair** in that order.

#### e. reference to collocations

Example: “Two months ago we ... a contract with Messrs. Smith & Co.”

The expected solution is **concluded**.

#### f. reference to derivation by means of semi-suffixes

Example: “The ship must be completely ... at the beginning of the voyage”

The expected solution to the gap filling is **seaworthy**.

#### g. reference to derivation by suffixes

Example: “There was a ... of grain on the home market owing to the severe drought of the last two years.”

The solution is **scarcity**.

#### h. reference to derivation by prefixes

Example: “The bills are ...”

The solution is **overdue**.

We have also practised *crossword puzzle solving* where gaps are to be filled in, and where the cue is suggested by letters from already solved lines.

### (iii) Matching words with definitions or synonyms

Some of the matching exercises I included in the tests are based on a certain subject or area of business, testing especially the specialised vocabulary knowledge in a particular field such as the **bill of exchange**, **central banks** or **documentary credits**, a.s.o. At other times the tests are based not on a common topic area, but on common lexical elements. In the latter case, the matching refers to words in the realm of business from quite different areas which have in common the way they have been derived, compounded, or abbreviated. Let us supply some examples:

The words to be matched with definitions in one test belonged to different business branches: **hyperinflation**, **insolvency**, **uncrossed** could be said to belong to the branch of finance, whereas **discharge** belongs to the transportation field, and **decentralisation** refers to the field of company management. The link between them is that they are all derived by means of a prefix.

Another example is the matching of definitions with words composed according to a certain pattern. In the examples we are going to supply definitions were taken from different business fields.

Examples: *a person who has taken out an insurance policy* (**policy-holder**); *someone who has an*

*employment ( job-holder); a person who has bought part of a limited company (share-holder) etc.* The linking element is obviously that all expected solutions are compound nouns with **-holder**, while the economic subjects range from insurance to recruitment, and company law.

It is therefore adequate to say that whereas tests based on a particular business field or subject could be administered as a progress test at the end of a chapter or unit, vocabulary tests based on common lexicological elements are particularly useful at the end of a 4-year course in business English, i.e. as a type of achievement test. I have obtained quite remarkable results with the latter type of test with students of the faculty of Economic Studies in Foreign Languages who studied English as their second language.

#### (iv) Pairing of synonyms

This type of test could be seen as a variant of the previous one, as it implies matching. However, as it could be used in more complex forms, I refer to it separately as a category of its own.

The test may consist in a simple activity of pairing synonyms, preferably in a given context, to avoid ambiguity or obscurity.

Examples: *Fasten your belts* is to be paired with **buckle**. The latter word is given in a list of words that the test taker is expected to pair.

*We have made a reservation* is to be paired with **we have booked**.

A more complex and advanced variant of this type of test to be used with students in the upper years of language study consists of asking them, once they have paired the synonyms, to place them in a table according to the field of business where they are used. Here is a list of fields I referred to in such a type of test: *market economy, recruitment, transportation, insurance, stock exchange, banking*.

#### (v) Multiple choice tests

This type of test can be said to be characterised by high practicality as it is easy to administer and mark and could be used as one component of a test for students requiring certificates of business English language proficiency at the end of their language course.

I have devised tests of this type for different economic specialisations. The degree of difficulty could vary from very obvious definitions to much subtler shades of meaning.

For example, to discriminate between **appreciation** and **revaluation** on the one hand, and **depreciation** and **devaluation on the other**, in the field of currency rates of exchange requires a thorough knowledge of financial English and will usually create problems to weaker students.

Whereas **appreciation** and **depreciation** refer to a free currency market with a floating rate of exchange established on the inter-bank market by the interaction of supply and demand, **revaluation** and **devaluation** refer to countries with fixed exchange rates where any change is due to the decision of the competent financial authorities.

#### (vi) Dual choice

I used dual choice tests especially as lexicological tests for business English vocabulary and found them quite useful when testing the correct use of synonyms. To supply a few examples, the students were requested to choose between **room** and **chamber** when referring to an international body such as **The International Chamber of Commerce**, or to discriminate between such terms as **withdraw** and **retire**.

The same type of test has been used for the discrimination of homophones such as **fair/fare, weight/wait, way/weigh, tare/tear** etc.

Dual choices could also refer to the lexical chapter of collocations. Here I should like to mention the dual choice **do/make** which can be successfully used in tests of business English.

Examples: *to do business; to do one's shopping; to make a complaint; to make a loss; to make a profit; to make a fortune; to make an apology*.

However, compared to the multiple choice test, the dual choice test seems less reliable, as there is a higher chance of guessing the right solution.

#### (vii) Reformulation tests

The types of vocabulary tests discussed so far are based on choice of alternatives, pairing, matching, gap filling, which all involve a rather passive attitude on the part of the language test-taker, who is only expected to find a correct solution out of two or several alternatives given. On the other hand, vocabulary testing can be achieved through a number of more creative test types which require the test-taker to be creative, at least to some extent. Such test types are described below.

In one of the tests I devised, the students are required to reformulate so as to obtain a word based on affixation. The test-takers are provided with a

definition referring to a certain vocabulary item which they have to find out by themselves, no list being given. But the final requirement is to give the opposite of the defined word.

Examples :

*a documentary credit that cannot be withdrawn by one party without the consent of the other party (= a credit that is **not revocable** → **irrevocable**)*

*liability for all the debts of one's company (=liability which is **not limited** → **unlimited**)*

*goods that have arrived in a good condition (=goods that have **not been damaged** → **undamaged**)*

*information stored in a computer, which cannot be found (= information that is **not retrievable** → **irretrievable**)*

I have also included supplying antonyms or words with a reversative or pejorative meaning by means of prefixes in this category of tests.

Examples:

*to centralize (decentralize); warehoused*

*(unwarehoused); solvency (insolvency) etc.*

### (viii) Replacement tests

Such tests refer the test taker to a certain type of word formation. In our example it refers to compound adjectives.

Examples: artificial silk (**man-made**); garments (**ready-made** clothes); 20 pieces short (**short-shipped**)

### Conclusion

To conclude this overview of a typology of the tests I have designed and used in my activity of business English teaching, I should like to stress that a whole range of tests can be designed and administered in this area, which lend themselves to various testing purposes, from diagnostic and progress, i.e. **formative assessment**, to end-of-year/end-of-course tests, i.e. **summative assessment**.

## REFERENCES

1. CAROLL, J.B. - 'Fundamental Considerations in Testing English Language Proficiency of Foreign Students', in ALLEN, H.B. (ed.) - *Teaching English as a Second Language*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1965
2. HOLLINGER, A. - *Test Your Business English Vocabulary*, Bucharest, Teora, 2000
3. HOLLINGER, A. - *A Lexicological Approach to Business English*, Bucharest, Cavallioti, 2000
4. LADO, R. - *Language Testing*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1961