

‘Supporting Business English Students in Developing Good Research Habits’

Professional Development Workshop, 29th September, 2022
with Dr. Stephanie Ashford and Nathan Keeves

Report by Dr. Tom Smith, 4th October 2022

1. Introduction

This workshop was conducted online and attended by Business English professionals from a number of German higher education institutions as well as colleagues from other countries, so a wide range of experiences, expertise and diversity was brought to the event. The first part consisted of a presentation by Dr. Stephanie Ashford of the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) in Villingen-Schwenningen, in which she set out in detail the research process and showed ways in which the research skills that students need for their academic studies could be developed as part of the Business English curriculum. In the second part of the workshop, her colleague Nathan Keeves organized participants into groups using Zoom breakout rooms, and set them the challenge of designing a research task on a curriculum topic in 30 minutes using a simple template. Finally, everyone came back together to share their ideas for activities, and then there was an opportunity at the end of the session to discuss thoughts on how to support students in developing academic research skills.

2. Presentation – supporting students in developing academic research skills

At the start of the presentation Stephanie asked participants what types of academic research their students do, both in Business English and other subjects, how their students are prepared for this, and what their own role is. As expected, there were differing responses to this question. Some teachers took the view that there was not enough research, others said that students only start doing research in the run-up to writing their bachelor’s or master’s thesis. Some institutions run introductory courses on academic reading and writing in the first semester, and students are likely to carry out small research tasks using the internet. It was generally agreed that students should be directed away from citing Wikipedia as a source, but that it can also be a useful gateway into finding other research material on the internet.

The next stage of the presentation showed ways in which students can be introduced to the process of research, and a conventional five-stage cycle was described – finding a focus, research design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. However, Stephanie pointed out that the reality is a messier and more iterative process, and it is important that students get support along the way. A chart showing topics from a Business English curriculum that lend themselves to research led on to the demonstration of a number of sample activities developed from coursebook materials and other sources. These included, for example, text development based on desk research, designing and conducting an online survey, searching for specific information in a treasure-hunt style web search, holding an interactive presentation based on research findings, and highlighting significant information about an airline’s financial situation based on analysis of the financial statements. The final activity, the “research rocket”, is a fast-flowing activity that can be launched with a minimum of preparation and materials. Students choose from a list of topics that might spark their interest (the Internet of Things, Brexit, Work-Life Balance and Non-Fungible Tokens, ...), gather as much information as they can in a short time by interviewing their classmates, using only each other as a resource, and then use their notes to write an introductory paragraph for an academic

paper. Stephanie ended her presentation by suggesting alternative ways of reporting findings other than an academic paper, and by inviting questions.

The first question came from someone who wanted to know what level of English the students would need to have. The presenters pointed out that DHBW students are expected to have an entry level of at least B2 on the scale of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), but in practice many start at a lower level. So, these activities can be challenging with mixed-level groups. One of the participants also observed that on courses where students are not working towards a test or examination, those most in need of the skills may be the ones most likely to give up.

3. Group work – creating a research task

After time out for a coffee break, the second part of the afternoon was a hands-on activity with everyone getting a chance to work on creating a research task. Nathan referred back to the topics on the Business English curriculum that offer springboards for research-related activities. He then split the participants into groups, and gave them an empty template in which they would have 30 minutes to create a research task plan on a given curriculum topic. In addition to the empty template there was a second version with tips added to facilitate the process. The only other instruction to the groups was: “The chosen topic is Legislation. Think about it, share ideas and design an activity for students researching it”. While the groups were working Nathan and Stephanie were able to visit them in their breakout rooms to give help and advice on filling in the template and answer any questions arising.

The 30 minutes was soon up and the templates uploaded to a Moodle Lightbox Gallery so that the results could be compared and discussed. One group focused on the theme of ‘contracts between landlords and tenants’ and designed a task that involved data collection and analysis and writing a follow-up report. This was a topic that most students would probably have had some experience of in their own lives, and it was agreed that a key element of the report writing would be how to explain complex legal terms and jargon (‘legalese’) in plain English. The other group went for ‘white-collar crime’ a focus for research, as there are many examples to choose from that would fit the remit. Several well-known business scandals came immediately to mind including Enron, Wirecard, and Dieselgate. It was felt that in this latter case the reporting phase could become an extension activity in the form of mini-presentations and debates from the perspectives of the company, the stakeholders, environmentalists, and the government.

4. Questions and discussion

Starting off the final part of the workshop, now that everyone had had the chance to try out the research task template, Nathan began by asking what people thought about the process: “Does this type of research activity differ from your usual teaching style? If so, how?” There was general agreement that this approach was a very different one, and that it could generate a many new ideas for teachers and students. In particular, the reporting stage at the end of the task was seen as having a more professional ‘feel’ to it, and that it would put more pressure on students to complete the research. Stephanie then asked: “How can we develop our research ideas and share them with colleagues?” One response was that as Business English teachers we don’t always have specialist knowledge, and so maybe this research approach could be something to share with colleagues who are the subject-specialists. Also, input from

outside experts could be an additional source of interest for students doing research projects. It was further noted that such an approach might need support from the institution.

One participant also asked: “How do your students react to the idea of doing research?” In answer to this question Nathan said that in his experience the coronavirus pandemic had had an impact on students’ ways of working, for example online via Zoom, and therefore having to rely more on the internet to find information. Teaching and learning styles had to adapt, and students were asked to do more research online. Now, post-corona, they have reacted well to being asked to do research. Stephanie added that with online teaching you can get much closer to students as they are working. Also, it is important to be very specific about what they are being asked to do and to explain why they are doing it. Finally, she went back to the question about sharing ideas with colleagues, pointing out that research plans like those created using the templates could be passed on to other teachers as very useable ready-made lesson ideas.