FURTHER RESEARCH ON PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING CODES OF ETHICS AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract – The present paper is a second step into the study of the integration of codes of ethics (CoEs) into the syllabus of a Business English course in an Italian public university. As highly specialized corporate documents, CoEs represent a specific genre, as intended by Swales (1990). They are commonly used to implement ethical principles into business practice (Krč 2015), however, studies on the pedagogical implication of using CoEs in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, especially in Italy, are scarce. On one hand, CoEs as a specific genre are expected to reveal their potentiality in providing students with the necessary tools to meet the needs of disciplinary communication (Bhatia 2002). On the other hand, they could be considered useful in raising content, communication, cognition and culture-related skills in EFL learning, thus exemplifying the integration of content and language in education at large. Previous findings (Giglioni & Patat 2020) suggested that CoEs are functional pedagogical tools for students in terms of lexicon enhancement and overall engagement in corporate communication and behaviors. Within the theoretical framework of genre analysis and its possible implications for language teaching, this paper addresses issues raised in the first phase of the study. More specifically, this second stage of the research, which provides data for comparison, focuses on students' perceptions and achievements in their EFL learning process with special attention to language awareness at a micro-textual level. Even if based on a small sample, it is believed that this qualitative and quantitative approach to CoEs allows for learners' improvement in language proficiency without neglecting corporate discourse.

Keywords: codes of ethics; ESP; genre-based instruction; corporate discourse.

1. Introduction

English, as the global language of business, has become a mandatory, common corporate communicative code that aims at facilitating communication and performances across diverse business endeavors and practices. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tackle the teaching of language in context in an attempt to

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provide students with the necessary linguistic tools and strategies to operate effectively in an international or multinational corporate environment. Therefore, in the interest of defining appropriate theoretical and pedagogical frameworks and insights, genre-based teaching emerged to address issues such as variations in discourse; thus, largely, genre theory has also been concerned with how a typified text can foster learning.

The term 'genre' could broadly indicate a "different type of spoken and written text" (Hyon 2018: 2) or, more specifically, a set of communicative purposes shared by a collection of communicative events (Swales 1990: 46). This broad umbrella term encompasses also corporate documents, such as codes of ethics (CoEs), which are conceived in response to specific and, often recurring, social and rhetorical needs.

In previous research on the implementation of CoEs as teaching tools in ESP courses (Giglioni & Patat 2020), on the one hand, it was suggested that CoEs could be functional in the enhancement of both students' linguistic and business-related communicative competences. On the other hand, the scarceness in literature, especially in Italy, of studies that delve into this genre and genre-based approach was highlighted. Moreover, as findings suggested a general ease in identifying macro-features in CoEs' analysis, it was decided to concentrate on micro-features only (see 2.1).

The present study aims at overcoming one of the limitations of the previous research, more precisely the lack of data for comparison. Hence, this paper is to be considered a second step into the exploration of CoEs into a Business English course in an Italian public university. The rationale is the belief that CoEs typical traits can be taught to students to enhance both language and content acquisition. Therefore, in this further stage into better understanding the didactic impact and potential use of CoEs, the two hypotheses remain unchanged:

Hp1: Generating awareness of CoEs' main features is functional in the enhancement of students' linguistic competence

Hp2: CoEs assist in developing business-related communicative competence.

However, two are now the main questions to be addressed:

RQ1: What is the impact of using CoEs written in English in a Business English course for L1 Italian speaking learners of English as a foreign language?

RQ2: When compared to previous research (Giglioni & Patat 2020, see 2.1.), are previous findings on the impact of using CoEs written in English in a Business English course for L1 Italian speaking learners of English as a foreign language validated in this second phase of the study?

2. Theoretical framework

ESP curricula are increasingly planned on the basis of genre pedagogy in view of building learners'generic competence including rhetorical, linguistic and sociocultural awareness of a particular situation (Yang 2012: 53). The effectiveness of genre-based approaches (GBAs) to teach ESP has been widely acknowledged, although examination of learners' perception and attitudes towards genre-based learning seems to be more limited.

Genre pedagogy, as highlighted by Hyland (2007a:160), elaborated an explicit model, represented by the teaching-learning cycle. The key stages – which have been considered also for this study – are: setting the context (*i.e.* revealing genre purposes and the settings in which it is commonly used), modelling (*i.e.* analizing representative samples of the genre), joint construction (guided, teacher-supported practice), and comparing (*i.e.* relating what has been learnt to other genres and contexts to understand how genres are designed to achieve particular social purposes). The cycle is flexible, so that students can join depending on their knowledge of the genre and instructors can go back to the first stages for revision. For this reason, the cycle is suitable for application to language teaching at various levels, and it was therefore deemed to fit this study.

Within the theoretical framework of genre analysis – and its possible pedagogical implications – if genres could be considered as communicative events based on conventions and embedded within professional practices (Bhatia 204: 23), then corporate discourse and the investigation of textual artefacts in their context is promoted to shed light on the interactions of the members of a discourse community (Bhatia 2002: 6). Corporate discourse and corporate practices are intertwined, thus, "analyzing discourses through which corporate practices are constituted can be a way into this hidden world of corporations" (Jaworska 2020: 667). As representative of corporate discourse, CoEs are specialized texts that broadly refer to the representation of a company's ethical principles on a global scale and they are addressed both to internal and external stakeholders. Written to guide behavior, CoEs are a specific corporate genre; as authentic material – which increases students' learning experiences (Tamo 2009: 75) – they could potentially help learners in their prospective professional environment since they can provide "opportunities for learning by allowing students to experience the same problem-solving challenges in the curriculum as they do in their daily endeavors" (Herrington et al. 2014: 402).

3. Methodology

Drawing from previous considerations on methodologies (Yin 1994; Hyland 2007b), a case study based on a small-scale sample, which is considered to be suitable for genre practices, and on multiple (*i.e.* qualitative and quantitative) methods is appropriate for investigating a phenomenon within its real-life context.

3.1. Study context

As corporate documents of varying length, CoEs set the guidelines designed to inform all the parties of a company's ethic stance; they became a firm's 'business card' that ensure professionalism.

Previous research on CoEs (Langlois & Schelegelmilch, 1990; Pierce & Henry, 1996; Farrell & Farrell, 1998; Wood, 2000; Farrell & Cobbin, 2000; Adams, Tashchian, & Shore 2001; Singh, 2011; Somers, 2001; Pollach, 2003; Wood & Rimmer, 2003; Singh et al., 2005; Fairfax, 2007; Long & Driscoll, 2008; Stevens, 2008; Kaptein, 2011; Holder-Webb & Cohen, 2012; Krippendorff, 2013; Chua, 2015; Andrade, Hamza, & Xara-Brasil, 2017) focused on aspects other than the pedagogical implications of using CoEs in ESP courses. In Italy, particular attention should be devoted to the works by Catenaccio & Garzone (2017) and by Giglioni (2019; 2020). The former focused on the distinction between legalistic and commitment-oriented codes (Catenaccio & Garzone, 2017), whereas the latter pointed to the main features at macro- and micro-textual level for each type (Giglioni 2019) and used those in comparative studies for both foreign and Italian codes (Giglioni 2019; 2020). Giglioni emphasized the connection between the prevalent adoption of legalistic CoEs and the national legislative framework which introduced the concept of the liability of institutions (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2001), therefore implying that (non)compliance with codes may have legal consequences.

In CoEs analysis, in order to differentiate between code types (*i.e.* legalistic vs. commitment-oriented) some features at a macro-textual level were identified for each type: legalistic codes tend to be much shorter, they often feature lists, definitions, and contract-style layouts. On the other hand, commitment-oriented codes are crammed with visuals and comprehension aids, they frequently have *ad-hoc* titles and a CEOs' message (Giglioni 2019). At a micro textual level, legalistic codes feature long sentences, formal words, phraseological units, extreme precision, overuse of 'shall', nominalization. All these features are extremely much rarer in commitment-oriented codes where impersonal style, simple lexicon, and figurative language were instead observed.

The previous study on the pedagogical implications of CoEs (Giglioni

& Patat 2020) pointed to the beneficial contribution of the implementation of the genre in ESP in terms of leaners' linguistic and professional education. At first, that is before students were instructed about codes' typical features, detecting micro-features was a challenging process, often illustrated by incorrect examples. The post-treatment results showed however an increased awareness towards the language structures at both lexical and syntactical levels, thus, confirming Hp1 (*i.e.* generating awareness of CoEs' main features is functional in the enhancement of students' linguistic competence). Likewise, a post-questionnaire validated Hp2, that is CoEs assist in developing business-related communicative competence, as all learners perceived CoEs as a useful instrument in approaching the corporate environment.

3.2. Research design

The present exploratory research has been conducted in an Italian-medium university in Milan (Italy). The sample group consists of 24 students (see 3.1.1) who attended an 80-hour Business English course as part of their first-level master program in Marketing Management during the academic year 2020-2021. In line with the previous study, both the same syllabus, which explored business-related topics and the four macro-skills in accordance with the B1-B2 level (CEFR), and the same quasi-experimental framework were followed. The five-week (from 19.01.21 to 16.02.21) study started by asking students to first answer a ten-question pre-questionnaire (see 3.1) and then complete a pre-test (see 3. 2) that concentrated on CoEs' micro features. It ended with a post-test (see 3.2) and an abridged questionnaire (see 3.3).

3.2.1. Participants

Participants were 24 students enrolled in a public university in Milan (Italy) who were attending a one-year master program in Marketing Management. They ranged in age from 22 to 31, with a mean age of 22.89. The majority of the participants were female, 78.3%, while 26.1 % were male. All students but one, who was a Spanish native speaker, were Italian mother tongue. All participants had previously studied a foreign language other than English: Spanish 70.83% (n.17) ranging from A1 to C1 (ECF) levels, French 50% (n.12) A2 to B2, Chinese, German, and Russian, respectively 8.33% (n.2) at generally A2 level, according to students' self-evaluation. As to English, all participants had studied English before; in particular, n.2 students had spent more than a year in an English-speaking country. After one-to-one interviews with one of the researchers, participants were divided into two groups: A) 13 students were considered at B1 level and B) 11 at B2 or higher level.

3.2.2. Instruments

Following the above illustrated quasi-experimental framework, data was collected through several instruments.

1. A pre-questionnaire that consisted of ten open-ended questions in Italian aimed at evaluating participants' knowledge of CoEs (maximum allocated time 20 minutes).

2. A pre-test to assess participants' critical thinking and linguistic competence. Based on previous research (Giglioni 2019), the pre-test concentrated on CoEs' micro-features (see 2.1.) by analyzing two codes, one legalistic and one commitment-oriented (maximum allocated time 40 minutes)

3. A post-test to evaluate post-treatment knowledge

4. An abridged post-questionnaire (maximum allocated time 15 minutes). The post-questionnaire focused on participants' evaluations and perceptions on the use of CoEs in the ESP course.

3.2.3. Data collection and analysis

To guarantee anonymity, pre-questionnaires and pre-tests were administered electronically (via email) in class on the same day. They were then collected in a folder on the researcher's drive. After a five-week period, post-tests and abridged questionnaires were submitted electronically and collected with the same modalities. To guarantee conformity, open-ended questions were formulated in Italian.

The data collected from the pre- and post-tests were processed quantitatively by using the proportion measurements and the compare mean due to the small sample size. As to questionnaires, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were implemented; response categories were identified and positive, individual multiple responses were analyzed quantitatively.

3.2.4. Treatment

The treatment consisted in a two-hour lesson on CoEs given by the instructor to the group as a whole. The lesson focused on an overview on codes presenting the macro and micro traits (see 2.1). Further in-class activities concentrated on pre-reading exercises, which involved skimming and scanning selected codes focusing on audience, authors, and content. Jigsaw reading of selected sections allowed students to work on lexical and grammatical features as well. During a two-hour, self-study session, students were asked to retrieve a code of their choice and analyze it on the basis of the

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exercises carried out in class. Discussion sessions were then designed to shared ideas, perceptions, and opinions on CoEs.

4. Findings

4.1. Questionnaires

Questionnaires included ten questions in Italian, to allow all participants to express themselves at their best, and were used to explore learners' previous knowledge and opinions on CoEs.

All students (95.8% n.23) offered a definition of a CoEs (Q1), insisting on some key words that see codes as collection of social (13% n.10) and/or ethical (9% n.7) norms (*insieme di norme*, 28% n.21), behavior (*comportamenti*, 17% n.13), or values (*valori*, 7% n.5) implemented at work (*lavoro*, 14% n.11) or other contexts (11% n.8). As to predicted topics in CoEs (Q2), participants thought in terms of ethical-moral (14% n.8) norms (13% n.7) and behaviors (30% n.17) for the display of respect between employees and toward employees' health (20% n.11); the reference to issues such as gender equality (4% n.2), discrimination (4% n.2), exploitation (2% n.1), and language (2% n.1) is noteworthy, albeit minor. When questioned about style (Q3), 39% (n.12) claimed that they expected a direct, communicative style and 13% (n.4) predicted for a more legalistic approach while 23% n.7 believed that CoEs should combine both styles. In addition, 23% (n.7) added the words "clear" and "understandable" next to "direct" and "communicative".

Questions 4 and 5 focused, respectively, on authorship and the moment of code writing. With reference to Q4, n.10 (33%) participants thought top management (*vertici o dirigenti*) is directly involved, while n.6 (20%) suggested it is a company's director (*il direttore o capo dell'azienda*) or more generic members of the company (n.4 13%). This last answer already indicated some vagueness, which is then reflected in n.3 (10%) who declined knowledge but then provided a tentative answer while only one did not offer a response. N. 3 (10%) believed that HR is responsible for writing CoEs whereas n.2 (3%) assigned the task to a lawyer or the chief executive. Regarding Q5, participants maintained that CoEs are generally written when a company is established (35% n.15) or in time of significant changes or needs (16% n.7).

Q6 tried to explore learners' ideas on the reasons behind code drafting which, according to their responses, were regulating (50% n.15) and communicating (13% n.4) principles of conduct or coordinating (15% n.5) and directing (7% n.2) the various parties, employees and external entities. Code retrieval was the subject of Q7: n.8 (30%) responded online, on the company's website, n.4 (15%) at the company (on a notice board), n.10

(37%) provided other locations (ex. in a company's statute or report, in a presentation or in a contract).

Q8 required students to name other types of text that could belong to corporate communication and it posed a challenge: n.11 (41%) claimed not knowing any other genre, n.6 (22%) mentioned the financial statement (*bilancio e bilancio consolidato*), and n.2 (7%) mentioned reports.

The last two questions aimed at assessing participants' perceptions on the usefulness of knowing CoEs (Q9) professionwise and their potential impact on English learning (Q10). As to Q9, 58% (n. 15) reckons that reading a CoEs allows potential employees to know how to behave and interact within a company and the corporate environment, while 31% (n.8) believed that CoEs are useful in understanding and evaluating a company's ethical stance. Regarding Q10, one answer in particular seems to summarize them all: "I think studying CoEs could be very useful, both to expand my vocabulary and improve my communication skills and command of the language; also to learn to deal with more complex issues in a language other than my native; and to eventually discover the cultural differences that are typical of this domain". As to percentages, 47% (n.17) detected a potential improvement in vocabulary, 22% (n.8) in understanding the cultural aspects, 14% in exploring new content, and 6% (n.2) in improving communication skills.

4.2. Pre and post tests

Table 1 and Table 2 show the distribution of the participants' analysis of the traits of legalistic (Code V) and commitment-oriented (Code B) codes at a micro-textual level. Table 1 reports Group A's compared results while Table 2 indicates Group B's compared answers.

		GROUP A Pre-Test						GROUP A Post-Test					
		CODE V			CODE B			CODE V			CODE B		
		+	-	NA	+	-	NA	+	-	NA	+	-	NA
LEGALISTIC	TRAIT												
	Formal words	45.5	45.5	9.1	82	9.1	9.1	30	50	20	100		
	Phraseological units		9.1	91	9.1		91	20	20	60	20	10	70
	Extreme precision	73	18	9.1	73	18	9.1	80	10	10	70	20	10
	Overuse of shall		100	1	91	9.1		10	90		90	10	
	Nominalization	9.1		91		9.1	91	70	10	20	60	20	20
	Prevalence of long Sentences	36	64		82	18		30	70		100		
COMMITMENT-ORIENTED													
	Prevalence of short sentences	73	27		36	64		80	20		10	90	

	+	-	NA	+	-	NA	+	-	NA	+	-	NA
No impersonal style	64	27	9.1	55	45		70	30		70	30	
Simple, clear lexicon	100			55	36	9.1	100			10	90	
Figurative language	27	18	55		45	55	50	10			50	50

Table 1
Pre & Post-test GROUP A: Participants' analysis of CoEs at a micro-textual level (+=presence, - = absence, NA= not answered in %) - Response rate 100% / Response rate 83.3%.

While in the post-test results a generic tendency to homogeneity is to be noted in the majority of the traits (formal words, overuse of shall, prevalence of short or long sentences, simple lexicon), some features still create doubts; this is the case of phraseological units, nominalization, and figurative language. On the whole, though, an improvement in terms of agreement is to be noted with a decrease in the number of NA answers.

		GROUP B Pre-Test						GROUP B Post-Test					
		CODE V			CODE B			CODE V			CODE B		
		+	-	NA	+	-	NA	+	-	NA	+	-	NA
LEGALISTIC	TRAIT												
	Formal words	25	58.3	16.7	75	16.7	8.33		100		100		
	Phraseological units	41.7	16.7	41.7	25	33.3	41.7	100			8.3	83	8.3
	Extreme precision	75	25		83.3	16.7		100			92	8.3	
	Overuse of shall		100		91.7	8.33			100		92	8.3	
	Nominalization	33.3	16.7	50	41.7	16.7	41.7	100			92	8.3	
	Prevalence of long sentences	16.7	83.3		75	25			100		100		
COMMITMENT -ORIENTED	Prevalence of short sentences	91.7	8.33		25	75		100				100	
	No impersonal style	25	75		75	25			100		92	8.3	
	Simple, clear lexicon	91.7		8.33	50	41.7	8.33	100			8.3	92	
	Figurative language	33.3	16.7	50	8.33	50	41.7	100				100	

Table 2
Pre & Post-test GROUP B: Participants' analysis of CoEs at a micro-textual level (+=presence, - = absence, NA= not answered in %) - Response rate 91.7% / Response rate 100%.

Group B, the relatively most proficient group, showed an unquestionable tendency to unanimity on the legalistic code and a clear pattern of homogeneity when it comes to the commitment-oriented code. NA questions were few in the pre-test and almost null in the post-analysis. Even for what concerns those features that were considered particularly difficult in the pre-

test (*i.e.* phraseological units, nominalization, and figurative language), Group B members showed great improvement and agreement.

4.3. Abridged final questionnaire

To conclude this study, two open-ended questions were asked to participants (response rate 58.3%): *Q1: Perché potrebbe essere utile conoscere un codice etico? Spiega.* (trans. Why could it be useful to know the content of CoEs? Explain.) *Q2: Secondo te, può lo studio dei codici etici in inglese contribuire al tuo apprendimento della lingua? Per quali aspetti?* (trans. In your opinion, could the studying of CoEs in English contribute to your language learning process? In which terms?).

The answers to Q1 showed that students think that studying CoEs is a useful tool to get to know the values and principles (n. 10), the mission (n. 7), the vision (n. 3), and the responsibilities (n. 4) of a company so that potential candidates behave accordingly or maybe better decide how to present themselves at a potential job interview.

The answers to Q2, which aimed at evaluating participants' perception of the impact of working on CoEs on linguistic competences, indicate that, even if some students found CoEs a challenging material language wise, they still consider CoEs functional in i. enhancing vocabulary (n. 4), ii. learning specific jargon (*i.e.* Business and Legal English) (n. 9) but also in iii. comparing formal *vs.* informal language (n. 4) and iv. understanding how foreign companies convey their ideologies and values when compared to Italian companies (n. 4).

5. Conclusions

This second step in the study of the implementation of CoEs in a Business English syllabus confirms that the analysis of micro-features, as reported in Table 1 and 2 in the previous study (Giglioni & Patat 2020), has posed some challenges for the participants enrolled. In particular, phraseological units and nominalization are constructions that students are unfamiliar with; nevertheless, the treatment seems to be effective, even though some differences between groups with different language levels are to be recorded. The validity of Hp1 (*i.e.* generating awareness of codes' main features is functional in the enhancement of students' linguistic competence) is confirmed by the post-treatment re-analysis of the two codes for both groups while Hp2 (*i.e.* codes assist in developing business-related communicative competence) was corroborated by the clear connection students made between CoEs and their potential future carrier.

Overall, post-treatment and post-test results show a clear tendency to a

greater awareness with regard to the micro-textual traits. Furthermore, the establishment of a link between the studying of CoEs and prospective job opportunities demonstrates that participants could clearly connect the possibility to work on authentic material to their real life, job-related needs.

As to linguistic competence, both collective activities and self-study sessions showed to foster vocabulary acquisition, particularly in the field of ESP. As to the professional aspects, both groups stated that CoEs are useful tools in terms of acquiring proper understanding of corporate values, principles and behaviors.

To conclude, the present study, a second step in a larger approach to studying the impacts of the integration of CoEs – which are authentic and contextually situated corporate documents, pivotal in business discourse – into the syllabus of a Business English class, substantiates the results of the first study (Giglioni & Patat 2020) and validates the idea that using CoEs bears positive effects on the ESP class.

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