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A Corpus-Informed Study of Corporate Jargon Trends (2016–2024) and Pedagogical Implications for Teaching Corporate English in ESP Contexts

ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether corporate English became more buzzword-heavy between 2016 and 2024 and how the findings can inform university ESP courses, especially Business English. Using a fully public corpus of annual report shareholder letters and regulatory filings from the time frame of 2016–2024, the study applies corpus-assisted close reading to track recurring buzzword packages, lexical bundles, collocational patterns, and shifts in abstraction and agency. The results show that investor-facing narrative sections increasingly rely on era-framing labels and layered noun phrases that compress meaning and promote strategic alignment, while regulatory disclosures remain more operationally concrete but still admit selective buzzword insertion. Pedagogically, the patterns support teaching corporate phraseology (terminology) through concordance-style noticing, collocation mapping, genre-sensitive rewriting, and unbundling tasks that convert abstract bundles into accountable, reader-oriented plain language.

Keywords: corporate discourse, buzzwords, plain language, Business English

Na korpusu temelječa študija trendov v poslovnem žargonu (2016–2024) in pedagoške implikacije za poučevanje poslovne angleščine v okviru ESP

IZVLEČEK

Ta prispevek preučuje, ali je korporativna angleščina med letoma 2016 in 2024 postala bolj nasičena z modnimi poslovnimi krilaticami (ang. *buzzwords*) in kako lahko ugotovitve podprejo univerzitetno poučevanje poslovne angleščine kot jezika stroke. Na podlagi manjšega, javno dostopnega korpusa delov letnih poročil (pisma delničarjem) in regulatornih razkritij iz obdobja 2016–2024 raziskava uporablja korpusno podprto natančno branje za sledenje ponavljajočim se naborom krilatic, leksikalnim snopom, kolokacijskim vzorcem ter premikom v stopnji abstraktnosti in izražanju vršilca. Rezultati kažejo, da se besedila, namenjena vlagateljem, vse bolj opirajo na oznake, ki določajo neko obdobje in na samostalniške zveze, ki stiskajo pomen in ustvarjajo strateško usklajenost, medtem ko so regulatorna besedila praviloma bolj operativno konkretna, vendar vseeno vključujejo izbrane krilatice. S pedagoškega vidika se izsledki lahko uporabljajo pri poučevanju frazeologije s konkordančnim opazovanjem, mapiranjem kolokacij, zvrstno občutljivim preoblikovanjem besedil in nalogami preoblikovanja abstraktnih zvez v jasen, braclu prijazen jezik.

Ključne besede: korporativni diskurz, krilatice, jasen jezik, poslovna angleščina



1 Introduction

Teachers of Business English in university ESP contexts increasingly work with corporate texts as key models of professional written communication. Annual reports, shareholder letters, and regulatory disclosures are highly visible, widely circulated texts that shape how corporate activity, strategy, and responsibility are discursively constructed. At the same time, such texts are often characterized by a relatively stable repertoire of abstract lexical items and phraseological bundles (terms such as *platform*, *ecosystem*, *transformation*, and *outcomes*) that recur across years and documents while allowing considerable interpretive flexibility. For Business English pedagogy, the challenge is not to define business English in general, but to help learners understand how corporate English operates as a specific professional register in which meaning, persuasion, and legitimacy are jointly negotiated. This study therefore examines diachronic change in corporate English between 2016 and 2024, with particular attention to how recurring buzzword packages function in investor-facing discourse and how these patterns can be addressed pedagogically within university ESP settings.

From an ESP perspective, language is shaped by recurring professional purposes and the genres that realize those purposes (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Swales 1990). Annual reports, shareholder letters, and regulatory filings are not neutral sources of vocabulary but rhetorical instruments designed for multiple audiences under different constraints. Since professional writing also positions writers and readers interpersonally, shifts toward buzzword-heavy discourse matter as they alter how stance is built, how evidence is presented, and what readers are invited to accept (Hyland 2005).

In this paper, corporate jargon is treated not as a list of words but as a functional pattern, often realized through high-abstraction lexical bundles that imply coherence, inevitability, virtue, and measurable success while leaving mechanisms and agency under-specified. Plain-language perspectives emphasize that clarity is not anti-professional but reader-oriented, especially when stakes are high (Cutts 2013), although strategic ambiguity can also serve legitimacy goals in corporate contexts. The study uses corpus-assisted analysis to show patterned evidence and to connect those patterns to teachable skills, combining quantitative tendencies with qualitative interpretation in a way that is especially useful for ELT applications (Baker 2006). This paper therefore pursues three objectives: (a) to identify how buzzword packages function and whether they intensify across 2016–2024 in key corporate texts, (b) to account for why such shifts may be more pronounced in certain genres than others, and (c) to translate findings into concrete ELT implications for university Business English courses, particularly through collocation-focused instruction, concordance work, and genre-based writing tasks (Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998; McEnery and Hardie 2012; Stubbs 2001).

The contribution of this study lies in three areas. First, it offers a longitudinal ESP-oriented analysis of corporate buzzword discourse across an extended period (2016–2024) rather than a synchronic snapshot. Second, it foregrounds phraseological consolidation (lexical bundles and collocational packaging) rather than isolated keywords as the primary carrier of corporate abstraction. Third, it explicitly translates corpus-assisted findings into classroom-operationalizable pedagogical practices, bridging corporate discourse analysis and Business English teaching more directly than most existing studies.

2 Conceptual Framework and Literature Grounding for ELT

The term “buzzword” is often used loosely in popular discourse, where it may refer to any fashionable term that appears overused. In linguistic terms, however, buzzwords are more productively treated as lexical items whose value is partly symbolic, as they index participation in a professional community, align a speaker with a perceived modernity, and compress complex programmes of action into small, repeatable tokens. Their meanings are not absent, but they are deliberately elastic, which thus enables broad uptake across sectors and sub-domains, and which is why words such as *transformation* can plausibly refer to IT infrastructure changes, organizational restructuring, or cultural change without being semantically false.

Corpus linguistics helps us see that buzzword force is rarely carried by single words in isolation. Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998) argue that patterned co-occurrence and recurrent sequences are fundamental to register and discourse style. Stubbs (2001) goes further by emphasizing that meaning is distributed across collocational environments and phraseological patterns, not simply located in dictionary entries. From this perspective, corporate buzzword discourse is not merely a vocabulary problem, but it is a phraseology problem. The repeated phrase “digital transformation”, for example, does not simply denote a process, as it frequently participates in a rhetorical logic where transformation is inevitable, technology is the agent, and the company is the enabler or platform. Plain language, by contrast, is not defined as simplistic vocabulary, but as communicative design that minimizes unnecessary processing effort for the reader. Cutts (2013) argues that plain English aims at clarity and usability, not at the avoidance of specialized language when specialization is genuinely required. For ELT purposes, this distinction is crucial. Students learning Business English must acquire specialized terms where needed, but they must also learn to distinguish necessary technical terminology from prestige-driven abstraction. That distinction is not purely lexical, but rather it is rhetorical and pragmatic, e.g. a phrase such as “deliver outcomes at scale” may appear professional, but it often says less than a plain alternative such as “help customers complete tasks faster across all locations”, depending on context.

Genre theory provides a third pillar of the framework. Swales (1990) defines genres as communicative events with shared purposes recognized by a discourse community, realized through recurring rhetorical moves. Annual report shareholder letters are hybrid since they combine narrative, evaluation, future projection, and brand positioning. Regulatory filings, although they can contain corporate self-presentation, are constrained by legal disclosure expectations, which tends to anchor language in definitional and operational description. Dudley-Evans and St John’s (1998) ESP model reminds us that teaching must account for these professional communicative purposes and the settings in which texts are produced and used. In practical terms, this means that an ELT course that treats Business English as a homogeneous register will misprepare students. Instead, students must learn to navigate intra-business variation, such as promotional investor discourse, compliance discourse, managerial internal discourse, and transactional discourse. Hyland’s (2005) stance-and-engagement model provides an interpretive lens for why buzzword packages are attractive. Corporate writers often seek to present claims as confident but not reckless, visionary but not

unverifiable. Stance markers and engagement strategies help achieve this balance. Buzzwords can function as stance devices in themselves because they signal modern competence and implicit alignment with assumed reader values, such as innovation, responsibility, and growth. From an ELT perspective, this creates a teaching opportunity, i.e. learners can be trained to see buzzword bundles as pragmatic stance choices rather than as neutral terms.

Although this paper's dataset is small, its interpretive commitments are grounded in established scholarship that is directly relevant to ELT professionals. Corpus-assisted discourse analysis has a strong tradition of linking patterns to pedagogy, particularly where learners must acquire a register's recurring phraseology (Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998; McEnery and Hardie 2012). Baker's (2006) work highlights how corpus findings can inform critical language awareness by revealing what is normal, what is unusual, and what is ideologically loaded in repeated textual patterns. Stubbs's (2001) emphasis on collocation similarly supports pedagogy because it reframes vocabulary learning as pattern learning, which aligns well with Business English needs for formulaic competence. ESP-specific theory adds an additional layer. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) frame ESP as a response to target-situation needs, where the authenticity of texts and tasks is central. Swales (1990) provides tools to teach genre moves and communicative purpose, enabling learners to see that a shareholder letter's vision section and a filing's business overview section have different rhetorical obligations. Hyland's (2005) work helps teachers show how professional writers strategically balance authority and reader alignment through linguistic choices, which is especially useful when examining how buzzwords function as engagement cues that presume shared values. Finally, plain language scholarship provides a counter-norm for evaluating corporate jargon. Cutts's (2013) account of plain English stresses clarity, reader orientation, and avoidance of unnecessary abstraction. Importantly, plain language does not oppose professionalism, but it opposes preventable opacity. For ELT teachers, this becomes a way to discuss effective business communication without reducing it to politeness formulas or email etiquette. Instead, it becomes a matter of designing language for reader needs, which can be operationalized through re-writing tasks, audience adaptation, and genre-appropriate style shifting.

3 Research Questions and Working Hypotheses

This study addresses three research questions (RQ). RQ1 asks whether corporate texts produced between 2016 and 2024 show intensified reliance on buzzword packages, especially in shareholder-facing narratives. RQ2 asks how that reliance differs between genre types, comparing investor-narrative annual report writing with legally anchored filing language. RQ3 asks what ELT-relevant conclusions can be drawn, particularly for Business English as ESP, in relation to collocation teaching, concordance work, genre move awareness, and pragmatic re-writing.

The working hypothesis is that corporate investor discourse becomes more buzzword-dense over time, especially after 2020, because technology narratives and legitimacy demands increase. A second hypothesis is that filings will remain more concrete overall but will still show selective buzzword insertion, functioning as a legitimating layer rather than the main informational substrate. The pedagogical hypothesis is that these patterns can be used

productively in ELT: rather than banning buzzwords, teachers can train learners to recognize their rhetorical functions, evaluate their informational load, and practise controlled style shifting between buzzword-heavy and plain-language variants, consistent with ESP needs and genre constraints (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Swales 1990).

4 Data, Corpus Construction, and Methodology

4.1 Data Sources, Corpus Design, and Analytical Approach

The dataset was constructed entirely from freely accessible online corporate documents produced between 2016 and 2024. The corpus includes Microsoft annual report texts from 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2024 (Microsoft 2016; Microsoft 2018; Microsoft 2020; Microsoft 2024), selected because they provide a consistent corporate voice across the full time window and contain extensive narrative shareholder-directed language. To contrast this voice with legally constrained discourse, the corpus also includes an Amazon Form 10-K text for fiscal year 2016 and a Tesla Form 10-K text for fiscal year 2024 (Amazon.com, Inc. 2016; Tesla, Inc. 2024). These filings were selected because they represent disclosure writing under regulatory obligations and because they are openly available in HTML form via United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) hosting, making them accessible for classroom replication if desired. The corpus is thus deliberately small but pedagogically realistic, mirroring the kind of text collection that an ELT instructor or a student group can assemble for project-based learning.

From an ESP perspective, the corpus design is justified as a sample of a target discourse domain rather than as a representative sample of business English globally. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) emphasize that ESP typically works with situated needs and contextually bounded corpora rather than attempting to model language in the abstract. The present corpus also reflects Swales's (1990) emphasis on genre as a defining unit of professional communication, treating Microsoft's shareholder letters as a longitudinal case study through which broader tendencies in investor-facing corporate English can be examined without claiming representativeness of corporate discourse as a whole.

The analysis combines corpus principles with discourse-analytic interpretation. Following Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998), the study treats recurring patterns – lexical bundles, collocations, preferred semantic fields – as evidence of register-style tendencies. Following McEnery and Hardie (2012), it treats concordance-based examination as an interpretive bridge between pattern and meaning, enabling qualitative discussion grounded in repeated textual evidence. Stubbs's (2001) collocational view of meaning informs the focus on pattern rather than isolated words; buzzword force is operationalized as phraseological packaging, especially where nouns of abstraction cluster with verbs of enabling, scaling, and transforming. Baker's (2006) approach to corpus-assisted critical analysis informs the attention to how repeated patterns support ideological work, such as naturalizing technological inevitability or presenting corporate agency as a service to the reader.

Concretely, analysis proceeded through iterative concordance logic. Candidate buzzword items and bundles were identified through repeated reading of each text, then checked across documents by searching for occurrences and examining the surrounding co-text. Items were

treated as analytically salient if they recurred across multiple documents (e.g. Microsoft 2018, 2020, and 2024) or showed repeated use within a single text in rhetorically prominent sections such as mission statements, future-oriented passages, or strategic summaries. While the study does not compute full frequency lists, approximate recurrence thresholds (e.g. several occurrences per document or presence across years) were used to distinguish stable phraseological patterns from isolated rhetorical flourishes.

This qualitative, pattern-based approach is deliberately aligned with corpus-assisted discourse analysis and with ESP pedagogy: the aim is not to rank items statistically, but to identify bundles that are recurrent enough to be teachable and interpretable as genre signals. Even minimal dispersion across texts is therefore treated as methodologically meaningful, because pedagogical applicability depends on recognizable recurrence rather than numerical dominance.

This ensured that claims about typical use were supported by multiple instantiations. Since the corpus is small and purpose-built, the study does not claim statistically generalizable frequency trends, but instead provides robust qualitative pattern descriptions and repeated exemplification, which is aligned with pedagogy, hence teachers do not need p-values to design a lesson, but they do need recurrent, teachable patterns (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; McEnergy and Hardie 2012).

4.2 Operational Definition of “Jargon” and “Buzzword Packages”

For this study, “jargon” is operationalized as recurrent lexical and phraseological choices that increase abstraction and evaluative stance while reducing explicit specification of mechanism, agency, or measurable referent. A “buzzword package” is a recurring cluster that typically includes an abstraction noun (such as *platform*, *ecosystem*, *capability*), a futurity or inevitability marker (such as *shift*, *wave*, *era*), and an outcome-oriented evaluative noun (such as *value*, *outcomes*, *impact*). The package is considered “jargony” when it functions primarily as legitimating framing rather than as technical description. This operationalization allows ELT-relevant distinctions: a technical term in engineering discourse may be specialized but not jargony, while “leveraging synergies to unlock value” is jargony because it claims competence without specifying action.

To avoid cherry-picking single striking sentences, each pattern discussed in the next section (findings and analysis) is supported by multiple occurrences across documents or by clear recurrence within a document, and each primary-data source is referenced repeatedly in the analysis. This aligns with Baker’s (2006) insistence that pattern interpretation should be grounded in repeated evidence rather than in isolated quotations. For ELT replication, the paper cites exact textual examples that teachers can locate in the source documents and use in class activities.

5 Findings and Analysis: 2016–2024

The analysis draws on six publicly accessible corporate disclosure genres that, taken together, function as a compact and authentic business English corpus spanning from 2016 to

2024. Four texts are Microsoft shareholder letters embedded in annual report webpages (2016, 2018, 2020, 2024), which serve as a particularly revealing register because they are simultaneously promotional, strategic, and reputational. Two texts supply a counterpoint in a more compliance-saturated register: Amazon's 2016 Form 10-K and Tesla's 2024 Form 10-K filed with the United States SEC. These documents are not plain language in the everyday sense, but they often contain stretches of notably concrete lexis (especially when describing business operations) alongside obligatory forward-looking disclaimers and risk language. Within this corpus, jargonization is treated as an observable shift from concrete, directly interpretable wording towards abstract, branded, and metaphor-heavy terminology that relies on insider knowledge or corporate framing for full interpretation. Such language frequently aggregates processes into nominalizations (e.g. *transformation* rather than *change*), compresses meaning into noun strings (e.g. *digital transformation platform*), and prefers evaluative intensifiers that are difficult to falsify (e.g. *best-in-class*, *trusted*, *breakthrough*). The key analytical move here is not to claim that all buzzwords are empty, but rather to show how across time certain lexical choices increasingly perform strategic positioning, future-casting, and legitimacy work, sometimes at the expense of immediate semantic transparency. The analysis emphasizes teachable pattern categories: lexical bundles, collocational environments, stance and engagement functions, and genre-specific rhetorical obligations.

5.1 Early-Stage Strategic Abstraction (2016)

In the 2016 Microsoft annual report language, buzzword bundles are present but often tethered to comparatively concrete program descriptions. The shareholder letter opens with a mission-framed stance that positions the company as an enabler, using a globally scalable empowerment formula: “empower every person and every organization on the planet”. The phrase is rhetorically expansive, yet in 2016 it is frequently followed by technology-domain details, product references, or named initiatives, which partially counterbalance abstraction. In the same textual environment, “digital transformation” appears as a key label for societal change, framed as something the company leads.

A notable feature of 2016 is the way the discourse oscillates between grand narrative and mechanism-adjacent descriptions. When the text describes “growing the Windows ecosystem” and “creating new computing categories”, the language remains promotional but includes product-anchored referents such as “Surface”, “Surface Hub”, and “Microsoft HoloLens”. This matters for jargon analysis because the buzzword *ecosystem* functions here as a bridge between abstract community value and concrete product interoperability. For ELT purposes, it provides an early example of how buzzwords can be semi-technical, and therefore learners can be guided to ask what “ecosystem” concretely refers to in a given context, whether it is a developer network, device compatibility, or partner distribution.

The 2016 text also contains lists of future investment areas, framed in broad nouns such as “productivity”, “cloud-based services”, “developer opportunity”, and “machine learning”. Even when presented as future ambitions, these items are frequently linked to plausible action domains. This does not make the language non-jargony, but it suggests a baseline: buzzwords are already present, yet they do not fully dominate explanatory logic.

From a corpus-pedagogy perspective, 2016 offers especially teachable collocational structures. The enabling pattern “help + noun phrase + verb” appears alongside “invest in”, “build”, and “develop”, allowing an instructor to show students that corporate discourse often uses verbs of facilitation rather than verbs of direct action. This observation aligns with Hyland’s (2005) stance and engagement model because “help” and “enable” position the company as supportive rather than controlling, a relational strategy that invites reader alignment. In class, this pattern can become a concordance exercise in which learners identify how agency is framed and who is granted the role of actor.

5.2 Intensification and Futurity (2018)

By 2018, the corpus shows a clearer thickening of futurity language and a stronger reliance on metaphorical era framing. Microsoft (2018) explicitly constructs an imagined future world “powered by an intelligent cloud and edge”, positioning this as “unprecedented” and inviting readers to “imagine a future” where technology anticipates needs. The bundle “intelligent cloud and edge” is significant, because it packages multiple technical realities into a single ideological emblem, i.e. intelligence implies responsiveness and progress, while “cloud and edge” implies comprehensive coverage from centralized to distributed computing. In a jargon analysis, the issue is not that the terms are meaningless, but instead that their rhetorical force exceeds their referential precision in shareholder-facing narratives.

The 2018 text also repeatedly uses the pattern “accelerate digital transformations” and constructs the company as a “strategic [...] platform and partner of choice”. The phrase “partner of choice” is pedagogically valuable because it is a phraseological unit with a specific pragmatic function: it asserts superiority without explicit comparison metrics. Learners can be trained to recognize it as a claim type rather than as information. Stubbs’s (2001) framework supports treating such units as meaning-bearing in their pattern contexts because their evaluative meaning emerges from repeated institutional use rather than from literal semantics. Baker’s (2006) approach adds that such repetition can naturalize a worldview: being a “partner of choice” becomes an assumed corporate goal that frames later claims as rational and legitimate.

From an ELT angle, 2018 is where buzzword packages begin to appear as organizing logic rather than as decorative labels. “Cloud”, “edge”, “platform”, and “opportunity” form a coherent rhetorical ecology: opportunity is constructed as external, inevitable, and vast; the company’s role is to provide the platform through which others must navigate that opportunity. Hyland’s (2005) stance theory helps explain why this is effective: it allows a confident future-projection stance while keeping claims flexible enough to avoid falsifiability. For teaching, this becomes a “stance vs evidence” workshop: students can locate where evaluation is strong and where empirical specification is light.

5.3 Crisis-Era Legitimization and the Rise of Branded Abstraction (2020)

The 2020 Microsoft annual report, shaped by the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, shows a shift toward heightened moral urgency and strategic abstraction, as crisis discourse legitimizes future-oriented framing while reducing demands for immediate evidential

specificity. In 2020, Microsoft frames itself as composed of “digital first responders”, a metaphor that imports urgency and public-service legitimacy into corporate identity. The metaphor is rhetorically powerful since it aligns corporate technology work with frontline heroism, implicitly upgrading the moral status of digital services.

The same text claims that the world has “witnessed years of digital transformation in mere months”, and it introduces a coined abstraction: “dynamic tech intensity”, defined as “adopting best-in-class digital tools and platforms” to build proprietary products. This is a pivotal point for the “jargon” question because “tech intensity” is not a common technical term; it is a branded conceptual category. It functions as an explanatory device that legitimizes corporate strategy as a necessary response to an external “era”, while simultaneously positioning Microsoft as both definitional authority and solution provider. Swales’s (1990) genre theory helps interpret this move: the shareholder letter has rhetorical permission to coin and circulate new categories precisely because it functions partly as corporate narrative and identity performance.

The Microsoft 2020 text also intensifies “end-to-end” and “integrated” packaging, especially in security-related passages. It claims “integrated, end-to-end capabilities” and situates identity and compliance as underlying “our entire tech stack”, while describing tools that “automatically remediate threats”. These bundles blend technical description and promotional stance. The phrase “end-to-end” is a classic corporate collocational unit since it promises completeness and reduces perceived risk, which is particularly salient during crisis discourse. For ELT classrooms, this provides a rich case for teaching pragmatic meaning: “end-to-end” does not simply mean “from start to finish”; it often functions as a warranty-like signal of comprehensiveness and control.

In 2020, the blend of abstraction and concreteness is especially complex. On the one hand, the pandemic prompts concrete examples of healthcare simulations and fast website deployments, while on the other hand, these examples are framed as evidence of “tech intensity” and of the “intelligent cloud and intelligent edge era”. This demonstrates a key rhetorical mechanism: concrete anecdotes are used to anchor the legitimacy of abstract categories.

5.4 The “Agentic Era”: Jargon as Worldview-Building (2024)

The shareholder letter frames the period as “the second year of the AI platform shift”, explicitly constructing a large-scale historical narrative of paradigm change. This framing does two things simultaneously: it claims inevitability because a “platform shift” is cast as an objective external wave, and it claims organizational virtue because the company presents itself as repeatedly capable of reinvention when “tech paradigms have shifted”.

Most strikingly, the 2024 text introduces an overtly time-periodizing label: an “agentic era”, alongside the claim that the company has built “three leading platforms” and that “Copilot” is “the new UI for AI”. Here the buzzword package becomes a full conceptual scaffold. The discourse does not merely use fashionable nouns, but it constructs a worldview in which AI is the defining environment, the company’s products are the interface layer of that environment, and the reader’s future success depends on adopting this stack. The phrase “Copilot stack”

exemplifies a layered packaging strategy: “stack” suggests technical completeness and modularity, while “Copilot” carries brand identity and user-friendly metaphor. Crucially, unlike earlier stages where abstraction framed strategy, in 2024 these abstract categories function as the primary explanatory mechanism: the “agentic era” and “AI platform shift” do not decorate the argument but organize how technological change itself is to be understood.

The pedagogical consequence is that learners will encounter corporate English where abstraction is not optional but foundational. If in 2016 buzzwords often accompany product referents, by 2024 the conceptual labels often function as the explanatory engine, with product examples operating as illustrations rather than as the primary meaning carriers.

Viewing it from Hyland’s perspective, 2024 discourse also demonstrates intensified stance management. The text claims remarkable progress “across every industry”, frames AI as transformative “for every individual, organization, and industry”, and presents a coherent technology-moral narrative of opportunity and responsibility. Such claims are expansive but not easily falsifiable, precisely because their temporal horizon is long and their evaluative terms are broad. For ELT learners, this is a prime site for critical language awareness as students can be taught to identify which parts of the clause carry measurable claims and which carry evaluative framing, thereby strengthening both comprehension and writing precision.

5.5 Genre Contrast: Operational Concreteness in SEC Filings

Against Microsoft’s increasingly world-building rhetoric, Amazon’s 2016 10-K repeatedly returns to simple, operational clarity when describing its retail model. It identifies “selection, price, and convenience” as “principal competitive factors”, adding the concrete operational qualifier “fast and reliable fulfillment”. In another section it states: “We strive to offer our customers the lowest prices possible through low everyday product pricing and shipping offers”, and it adds equally concrete service descriptors: “easy-to-use functionality”, “timely customer service”. Even when the document becomes dense, the key business propositions remain straightforward and paraphrasable. The description of fulfillment logistics is also refreshingly specific, listing “fulfillment and delivery networks that we operate”, “co-sourced and outsourced arrangements”, and “digital delivery”. These lines exemplify plain language not because the syntax is simple, but because the semantic content is anchored in observable processes. At the same time, Amazon’s filing illustrates how legal risk language creates its own kind of formulaic jargon. The report announces that it “contain[s] forward-looking statements”, and that “actual results may differ materially.” It later offers a definitional cue: “We use words such as anticipates, believes, expects, future, intends [...] to identify forward-looking statements”, and notes that such statements are “inherently uncertain”. From an ESP standpoint, this is valuable evidence that jargon does not only arise from trend vocabulary, but it also arises from compliance routines that generate highly standardized phraseology.

Tesla’s 2024 10-K similarly alternates between concrete operational description and legalistic formulae. Its business overview begins with a highly concrete verb series: “We design, develop, manufacture, sell and lease high-performance fully electric vehicles and energy generation and storage systems.” It adds a clear distribution statement: “We generally sell our products directly to customers”, and it enumerates infrastructure – “vehicle showrooms and service

centers”, “Mobile Service”, and “Supercharger stations”. These are exemplary for Business English teaching because they model a common corporate pattern in a relatively transparent form: activity verbs in coordination, followed by scope and channel details. Yet Tesla also displays the jargon of aspiration, especially when discussing future value claims. The filing notes investment “to accelerate our AI, software, and fleet-based profits”. The phrase is highly compressed: *fleet-based profits* is not self-evident to non-specialists, and *accelerate* frames profitability as a process that can be engineered. The document further references “Full Self-Driving (‘FSD’) (Supervised)” and a “purpose-built Robotaxi product”. These productized labels and acronyms echo Microsoft’s branding strategy, though Tesla’s operational sections remain more concrete overall. Tesla’s forward-looking disclaimer is also linguistically rich for ESP analysis. It states that forward-looking statements are “not guarantees”, and then lists stance markers: “anticipates”, “believes”, “could”, “estimates”, “expects”, “intends”, “may”, “plans”, “projects”, “will”, “would”, and “predicts”. This is effectively a built-in modality syllabus as it provides, in one place, the lexical items learners must master to interpret corporate probability, commitment, and hedging.

5.6 Discussion of Comparative Patterning

Across the Microsoft (2016; 2018; 2020; 2024) shareholder letters examined here, the trajectory from 2016 to 2024 is not a simple increase in incomprehensibility, but instead it represents a shift in the dominant rhetorical function of language within this longitudinal corporate case. In 2016, the abstraction tends to operate as framing around tangible product narratives, and it often coexists with memorable plain clauses such as “make things happen”. In 2018, abstraction becomes more strategic and positional, visible in phrases like “strategic digital transformation platform and partner of choice”. In 2020, abstraction becomes legitimizing under the crisis conditions of the pandemic, evident in “digital first responders”, “response, recovery, and reimagine phases”, and the coinage “dynamic tech intensity”. By 2024, abstraction becomes worldview-building: the “agentic era”, the “new UI for AI”, and a “rich tapestry of AI agents” are not merely descriptors but organizing metaphors that encourage readers to adopt a particular interpretation of technological change.

Amazon.com, Inc. (2016) and Tesla, Inc. (2024) show that plainness is not a stable property of a company but a local stylistic choice conditioned by communicative purpose. When describing operations, both rely on concrete verbs and enumerations – “offer [...] the lowest prices possible”, “fast and reliable fulfillment”, or “design, develop, manufacture, sell and lease”. When managing liability, both revert to formulaic legal language: “actual results may differ materially” and “not guarantees”. In this sense, corporate English contains multiple micro-registers within a single document, and jargonization is often most evident in visionary or strategic sections where persuasion and positioning dominate. Taken together, the evidence supports a nuanced answer to the underlying question of this paper – “Are companies getting more jargon?” – at the level of micro-analysis: within the Microsoft shareholder letters, the density of branded abstractions, epochal labels, and metaphorically organized frames appears to increase from 2016 to 2024, while Amazon 2016 and Tesla 2024 demonstrate that the same corporate ecosystem still routinely produces plain, process-anchored language when describing operations. The crucial analytic implication for ELT is that buzzwords vs plain language is best taught not as a binary, but as a repertoire of choices that shift with audience, purpose, and genre.

The findings support an interpretation that corporate investor-facing English became more buzzword-dense between 2016 and 2024, with the sharpest intensification visible in the 2020 and 2024 Microsoft texts. However, the pedagogically responsible conclusion is not that companies write badly, but that corporate language is adapting to changed communicative pressures. One pressure is technological complexity paired with marketing necessity. As technology products become layered ecosystems, firms have incentives to describe them as coherent wholes, so terms such as “stack”, “platform”, and “ecosystem” are not random because they offer a macro-model that investors and customers can grasp without technical depth. In this sense, jargon is partly a compression strategy, and ELT learners should not be taught merely to reject it, but they must be taught to unpack it. A second pressure is legitimacy and responsibility discourse. The 2020 “digital first responders” metaphor illustrates how crisis discourse invites moral positioning. In 2024, era framing intensifies, suggesting that corporate identity is increasingly built around the claim to navigate “platform shifts” responsibly. This aligns with Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal view: corporate discourse is relational, designed to manage trust and alignment. Buzzword packages can function as trust tokens because they signal alignment with accepted narratives of innovation and responsibility. A third pressure is genre divergence and audience segmentation. Shareholder letters can afford visionary abstraction, but filings cannot. Amazon’s (2016) filing language exemplifies a more definitional and principle-listing style that, while branded, remains relatively direct. Tesla’s (2024) filing language, though operationally concrete, still incorporates strategic labels like AI as a legitimating layer. This suggests that ELT pedagogy should treat corporate discourse as a system of genres rather than as a single register (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Swales 1990).

Finally, from a corpus-assisted viewpoint, the shift is best described as phraseological consolidation: a relatively small repertoire of bundles becomes increasingly central, making texts feel more repetitive and more buzzwordy even if they are not longer or syntactically more complex (Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998; McEnery and Hardie 2012). This consolidation is teachable because it yields stable collocational targets for instruction (Stubbs 2001) and critical discussion (Baker 2006).

6 Pedagogical Translation for University Business English

ESP teaching aims at enabling learners to participate effectively in target discourse communities, which includes both production and critical comprehension (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998). In corporate English, learners must be able to read buzzword-dense prose, infer plausible meanings, and decide when to reproduce such language and when to replace it with plain specificity. They also must learn to adapt language across genres, because a shareholder letter and a compliance disclosure do not require the same style choices (Swales 1990). A useful teaching strategy is to treat buzzword packages as “compressions” that students learn to decompress into operational paraphrases. For instance, the Microsoft 2020 term “tech intensity” can be unpacked by extracting the definitional co-text in which it is introduced because the text itself defines it as adopting tools and platforms for building new proprietary products. Similarly, the Microsoft 2024 “AI platform shift” can be unpacked by asking students to identify what counts as evidence of the shift in the surrounding paragraphs, and what remains implied rather than stated. This approach aligns with Hyland’s (2005)

emphasis on engagement: students learn how texts guide readers towards acceptance through shared assumptions.

Collocation teaching is central here, because corporate buzzwords rarely occur alone. Stubbs (2001) argues that collocation is not a decorative feature of language but a key mechanism by which meaning is stabilized. In the corpus, *platform* tends to co-occur with *shift*, *tools*, *stack*, and *partner*, while *transformation* co-occurs with *digital*, *accelerate*, *empower*, *navigate*, and *opportunity* (Microsoft 2018; Microsoft 2020; Microsoft 2024). This provides an ELT-ready set of collocation targets that can be practised through concordance-based noticing tasks. McEnery and Hardie’s (2012) corpus pedagogy logic is particularly relevant here: learners can observe repeated patterns, form hypotheses about function, and then test those hypotheses by examining further concordance lines. Baker’s (2006) work supports adding a critical dimension: learners can discuss what the pattern does socially and ideologically, not only what it means.

Genre pedagogy adds a second essential layer. Swales’s (1990) move analysis encourages teachers to ask students to map the rhetorical moves in a shareholder letter, such as mission declaration, world-situation framing, strategic positioning, exemplification, and future projection. In Microsoft 2024, for example, the “AI platform shift” framing appears early, functioning as a world-situation move that legitimizes later product framing. In Microsoft 2018, “imagine a future” functions similarly, but with a different technological emblem (“intelligent cloud and edge”). Teaching students to recognize these moves supports ESP aims because it links language choice to communicative purpose (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998).

Table 1 offers a condensed but specific pedagogical map linking chosen corpus-observed bundles to classroom applications. It is intentionally written in a way that allows direct classroom adoption without requiring specialized software.

TABLE 1. Pedagogical map linking buzzword packages to a Business English teaching context.

Corpus-observed buzzword package (2016–2024)	Typical co-text function in the corpus	Plain-language decompression strategy for learners	ELT application in Business English (university)
“digital transformation” (Microsoft 2016; Microsoft 2020)	Frames external change as inevitable and urgent; positions company as enabler	Require students to specify what changes, who changes it, and how success is measured	Concordance noticing task followed by re-writing into operational steps; peer review for specificity (McEnery and Hardie 2012; Cutts 2013)
“strategic ... platform and partner of choice” (Microsoft 2018)	Claims superiority through evaluative phraseology rather than evidence	Ask students to replace the phrase with an evidence-bearing claim or with conditional language	Genre move activity: identify “positioning claims” vs “evidence claims”, then practise rewriting with hedging (Hyland 2005; Swales 1990)

“dynamic tech intensity” (Microsoft 2020)	Coins a branded category to explain strategy and align readers with it	Use the text’s own definition as a paraphrase seed; then demand concrete examples	ESP project task: student teams build mini-glossaries of coined corporate categories, including definitions, collocates, and critiques (Baker 2006; Dudley-Evans and St John 1998)
“AI platform shift” and “agentic era” (Microsoft 2024)	Provides historical inevitability framing; legitimizes product ecosystem and claims of leadership	Ask students to separate descriptive content from evaluative worldview statements	Critical reading seminar: annotation of stance and evidence, then production task in two styles, one buzzword-dense and one plain (Cutts 2013; Hyland 2005)
“customer-centric” + principles list (Amazon.com, Inc. 2016)	Establishes identity and values in definitional corporate voice; relatively direct	Have students classify value claims and write supporting operational indicators	Business writing task: convert values into measurable KPIs in plain English; discussion of persuasion vs information (Baker 2006; Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998)
“operational efficiencies” with “accelerate our AI” overlay (Tesla, Inc. 2024)	Anchors language in operational action while inserting strategic modernity labels	Ask students to rewrite the clause with explicit cause-effect links	Contrastive genre task: rewrite filing-style prose into shareholder-letter prose and then the reverse; reflect on audience constraints (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Swales 1990)

This pedagogical map is grounded in the principle that students should not simply be told that buzzwords are bad, but instead they should learn how buzzword packages work as professional resources. In some genres, such language signals membership and strategic fluency, while in others, it can damage clarity and credibility. Cutts’s (2013) plain English approach provides the evaluative anchor: if a phrase increases processing cost without adding necessary precision, it becomes a teaching target for revision. At the same time, Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal view warns against treating corporate language as a mere information channel because stance and alignment are legitimate professional goals. The ELT task is therefore dual: to help learners interpret and critique buzzword rhetoric, and to help them deploy it responsibly when genre expectations require it.

6.1 Conclusions from the Research Analysis

The corpus evidence supports four conclusions that matter for ELT professionals.

First, investor-facing corporate discourse within the corpus becomes more reliant on buzzword packages across 2016–2024, with a clear intensification in the 2020 and especially

the 2024 Microsoft texts. This shift is not merely lexical fashion, but reflects a deeper rhetorical restructuring in which era-framing categories increasingly organize the text's explanatory logic.

Second, the jargon shift is genre-sensitive. Shareholder letters and narrative opportunity sections allow, and perhaps reward, abstraction, conceptual branding, and expansive futurity framing, as seen in “intelligent cloud and edge”, “tech intensity”, and “AI platform shift” (Microsoft 2018; Microsoft 2020; Microsoft 2024). Legally framed filing discourse remains more anchored in definitional and operational language, yet buzzwords appear selectively as legitimating overlays, as in Tesla's operational clause that introduces “accelerate our AI” amid efficiency and deployment language (Tesla, Inc. 2024).

Third, the most pedagogically relevant feature of corporate jargon is phraseology. Buzzword meaning is stabilized by collocation and recurrent bundles, consistent with corpus register theory (Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998), concordance-based analysis practice (McEnery and Hardie 2012), and collocation-as-meaning perspectives (Stubbs 2001). This is good news for ELT because phraseology is teachable through pattern noticing, guided concordance work, and controlled production practice. It is also critical news because learners who only memorize “business vocabulary” lists will miss how meaning is packaged across sequences and how stance is embedded in those sequences (Hyland 2005).

Fourth, plain language competence must be reframed in Business English teaching. Plainness is not the opposite of professionalism, but rather is a strategic register choice that can increase credibility and reduce risk. Cutts's (2013) principles can be operationalized as classroom evaluation criteria, enabling students to justify re-writing decisions in terms of reader needs and communicative purpose rather than in terms of personal taste. At the same time, ESP pedagogy reminds us that the goal is not to enforce one style but to develop adaptive competence across genres and audiences (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998; Swales 1990).

6.2 Future Implications in ELT

The findings have several implications for university ELT professionals teaching Business English, especially in ESP contexts where students must read and write for specific professional situations.

One implication is that collocation teaching should be treated as central rather than supplementary. In many Business English courses, collocations are addressed through limited short lists or textbook exercises. Yet corporate buzzword packages demonstrate that collocation is the mechanism by which professional discourse achieves its distinctive business tone. Teaching students to recognize and produce collocations such as *platform shift*, *partner of choice*, *end-to-end capabilities*, and *digital transformation* is not about imitating corporate marketing, but about giving learners access to the phraseological currency of their target discourse community (Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998; Stubbs 2001). At the same time, learners should be taught to interrogate what these collocations do rhetorically. Baker's (2006) approach supports embedding critical awareness into corpus work by asking students not only what patterns are frequent, but what perspectives those patterns privilege.

A second implication concerns concordance work and data-driven learning. The corpus in this study is deliberately small, precisely because ELT classrooms can replicate its construction. A productive future classroom practice is to assign students to compile mini-corpora of corporate texts from specified years, then to use basic search and concordance techniques to identify recurring bundles and their co-texts. McEnery and Hardie (2012) emphasize that corpus methods are not merely research tools, but are also learning tools because they train students to observe patterns and revise hypotheses. In the present corpus, for example, students can trace how “digital transformation” is framed in 2016, how “intelligent cloud and edge” frames opportunity in 2018, how “tech intensity” is coined and defined in 2020, and how “AI platform shift” structures the 2024 narrative (Microsoft 2016; Microsoft 2018; Microsoft 2020; Microsoft 2024). Such diachronic classroom inquiry naturally integrates reading, vocabulary, discourse analysis, and critical discussion.

A third implication is that genre-adaptive writing should become a core outcome of Business English as ESP. Students often practise one business style, usually email style, but professional life requires rapid switching between genres and audience expectations. Swales’s (1990) genre framework offers a path: students can be taught to identify rhetorical moves and then to write versions of the same content in different genre frames. In a shareholder-letter simulation, the student might legitimately deploy era-framing and visionary abstraction, imitating “platform shift” language. In a filing-style simulation, the student must be more operational and risk-aware, resembling Tesla’s action-dense clause sequences (Tesla, Inc. 2024). Dudley-Evans and St John’s (1998) ESP orientation supports designing such tasks around authentic target situations, ensuring that students are not practising style for its own sake but for communicative purposes.

A fourth implication is that plain language should be treated as a professional competence that can coexist with strategic corporate framing. Many learners assume that formal English means longer, more abstract English. Corporate buzzword discourse reinforces this assumption, which is why ELT teachers must explicitly teach style shifting. Cutts’s (2013) work offers a practical standard: clarity should be judged by whether a reader can quickly understand what is being claimed, by whom, and on what basis. In a classroom, this can be operationalized through revision workshops where students identify hidden verbs and empty nouns in corporate bundles and propose plain alternatives. Importantly, these tasks should not be framed as moral critique but as audience adaptation. Hyland’s (2005) stance theory helps teachers show why both styles are legitimate: each constructs a different relationship with the reader and a different balance of authority and accessibility.

Finally, the broader implication is that Business English teaching should integrate critical corporate literacy as a standard skill. Students will enter workplaces where corporate texts do not simply convey information but also shape internal decisions, external reputation, and even policy. Corpus-assisted pedagogy can help learners see how power and persuasion operate through repeated language patterns, which aligns well with the educational mission of university-level ELT (Baker 2006; McEnery and Hardie 2012). The goal is a graduate who can read “AI platform shift” prose without being seduced or confused by it, who can write it when genre demands it, and who can also replace it with plain specificity when clarity and accountability are required.

7 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation is corpus size and representativeness. The corpus is intentionally small and purpose-built, designed to be pedagogically replicable rather than statistically representative of all existing corporate discourse. While it spans 2016–2024 and includes both shareholder narrative and filing discourse, it is dominated by one corporate voice. Consequently, conclusions about companies in general must be interpreted cautiously. This limitation is consistent with ESP realities: ELT practitioners often work with focused corpora that mirror target discourse situations rather than with massive general corpora (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998). Nonetheless, future research would benefit from expanding to additional sectors, including non-technology industries where buzzword packages may differ.

A second limitation concerns genre coverage. This study compares shareholder-letter-style annual report narrative with filing discourse, but corporate communication includes many other genres, such as earnings call transcripts, press releases, internal strategy decks, and executive LinkedIn posts. Swales's (1990) genre model suggests that different communicative events will show different patterns because they serve different purposes and audiences. A more comprehensive map of jargon growth would require multi-genre corpora.

A third limitation involves measurement precision. The analysis is corpus-assisted and concordance-driven rather than fully frequency-statistical. The study therefore emphasizes robust pattern description supported by multiple examples rather than claiming fine-grained numeric trends. This choice is pedagogically defensible because ELT teaching typically benefits from stable recurring patterns more than from exact frequency counts (McEnery and Hardie 2012). Taking this into consideration, future work could apply larger-scale frequency and dispersion analysis across broader corpora, operationalizing buzzword density via defined lexicons and phraseological bundle extraction, in line with register analysis approaches (Biber, Conrad, and Reppen 1998).

A fourth limitation is interpretive. Buzzwords are not inherently meaningless, but in fact many are compressed labels for genuinely complex phenomena. The boundary between necessary technical abstraction and strategic opacity is sometimes contestable, which is precisely why ELT teaching should frame buzzword analysis as a pragmatic and genre-sensitive skill rather than as a hunt for bad words. Hyland's (2005) stance framework reminds us that professional writing legitimately balances persuasion, alignment, and information. The goal is therefore to teach interpretation and adaptation, not merely condemnation.

8 Conclusion

This study asked whether corporate English became more buzzword-heavy from 2016 to 2024, whether any increase differs by genre, and what ELT-relevant conclusions follow for university Business English as ESP. The findings allow each research question – and the working hypotheses – to be answered explicitly.

Regarding RQ1, the evidence supports a clear “yes” for the investor-facing shareholder-letter genre in the corpus. Across the Microsoft annual report texts, there is a visible diachronic

shift from earlier, relatively tethered transformation language towards denser conceptual packaging by 2024, where era-framing labels and layered noun phrases carry more of the explanatory and persuasive load. In short, within the shareholder-letter data, buzzword bundles not only recur but become increasingly structural. Regarding RQ2, the results show that jargonization is strongly genre-conditioned rather than uniform across corporate writing. The regulatory filings in the dataset remain comparatively more operationally concrete and constraint-driven, with more definitional and action-oriented phrasing overall. However, they are not free of buzzwords, and instead tend to admit them selectively as legitimating labels embedded within otherwise concrete clauses, hence confirming that buzzword growth is most pronounced where narrative positioning and future projection are expected, and more limited where disclosure norms impose specificity. Regarding RQ3, the ELT implications follow directly from the observed patterning. Since buzzwords function as phraseological units (lexical bundles and collocational frames) they are teachable through concordance-style noticing and collocation mapping. Their informational load depends on genre and audience, so teaching should emphasize genre-aware style shifting rather than blanket avoidance. Finally, because many bundles compress meaning through abstraction and reduced agency, they provide strong material for unbundling tasks that train students to rewrite corporate phrasing into reader-oriented plain language while maintaining professional tone.

The working hypotheses are therefore largely confirmed. The hypothesis that investor discourse becomes more buzzword-dense over time, especially after 2020, is supported by the shareholder-letter patterns. The hypothesis that filings remain more concrete overall while allowing selective buzzword insertion is also supported. The pedagogical hypothesis is likewise supported: the analysis yields stable phraseological targets and clear genre contrasts that can be converted into practical ELT tasks. Overall, the most accurate answer to “Are companies getting more jargony?” is “yes, especially in investor-facing narrative genres, and only partially in disclosure genres” – a distinction that is pedagogically valuable for Business English as ESP. By integrating longitudinal case analysis, phraseological focus, and explicit pedagogical operationalization, the study extends existing research on corporate discourse and buzzwords by showing not only how jargon evolves, but how that evolution can be made teachable within ESP-oriented Business English curricula.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset supporting the findings of this study (Naumoska and Naumoska-Sarakinska 2026) is openly accessible via Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20099535>.

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