

Kovalchuk Olha Serhiivna

National University of Food Technologies (Kiev, Ukraine)

TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH: AN OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIES

In the last two decades, Business English has attracted increasing interest and awareness. Business English courses are offered by many language schools worldwide (by over 100 schools in the UK alone); examining boards offer Business English examinations; the Business English Special Interest Group (part of IATEFL, the International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) has over 1500 members from around the world. Yet despite this enormous interest, Business English is an area often neglected by linguistic researchers, who prefer to work on other – more easily defined – areas of special English.

Business English must be seen in the overall context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as it shares the important elements of needs analysis, syllabus design, course design, and materials selection and development which are common to all fields of work in ESP. As with other varieties of ESP, Business English implies the definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on particular kinds of communication in a specific context.

However, Business English differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations).

There have been many developments in the ways in which teachers and course designers look at Business English. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, specialist vocabulary was seen to be what distinguished Business English from General English, and there was a preoccupation with business-related words and terminology. Earlier textbooks—such as *British Banking* by J. Firth in the Peter Stevens series, published by Cassell in 1971—reflect this approach. The principle underlying these earliest Business English coursebooks was to present target specialist vocabulary in the context of a written text or dialogue which, dealt with a particular topic (for example, in *British Banking*, exchange and exchange control, companies and their bank accounts). Exercises consisted mainly of comprehension questions on the text, vocabulary exercises, and the drilling of randomly selected structures. It was assumed that the learner had already studied the language to at least intermediate level. On the other hand, any existing knowledge of the subject was not taken into account: in fact, the expository nature of the texts assumed that the learner had little knowledge. There was no consideration of how the learner might apply the language in real life, and no development of skills such as interacting in meetings or writing letters.

A second approach, heralded by the BBC/OUP video and coursebook *English for Business* (also known as *The Bellcrest File*), published in 1972, placed a greater emphasis on training «the skills of communication in English speaking, writing, listening and reading within a business context» (quoted from the Introduction to the Teacher's Book). The course included development of listening skills (based on working with the video), structural drills, gambit drills, dialogue practice, and role simulations. Again, it assumed that the learners had already covered the fundamental grammar of English, but that they needed to continue to develop their knowledge in order to handle practical situations effectively.

In the mid-1970s and 1980s, following the trends in General English, Business English teaching began to focus more and more on functional areas – formulaic language for recommending, giving opinions, showing agreement, and so on. This kind of teaching was supported by lists of «gambits» derived from the Kellor corpus from Canada. An example of a functionally-orientated coursebook for Business English is *Functioning in Business* by Knowles and Bailey (Longman, 1987). In the original edition, this course presented listening practice at a pre-intermediate level on cassette, exemplifying key language for making appointments, confirming plans, introductions, business lunches, and so on. The conversations on cassette were followed up by functional language practice (for example, requesting, agreeing, and clarifying) and role play.

Since the late 1980s, Business English teaching has drawn on aspects of all the previous approaches, but also places much more emphasis on the need to develop the skills for using the language learned. The development of company training programmes during the 1980s began to provide employees with opportunities to attend courses in presentation techniques, negotiating, and effective meetings skills, among other things. This led to the publication of books and materials on business skills, and these were also available to Business English teachers, course designers, and materials developers. The recognition of the need for businesspeople to be proficient in business communication skills has had a major impact on Business English teaching. Although it is not the designated brief of the Business English teacher to train businesspeople in behavioural techniques (for example, presentation or negotiation), it is hard to ignore the influence that good behavioural skills have on successful communication. Many job-experienced learners now come to the language course to learn to perform in English, tasks that they can already perform in their mother tongue. In other cases, however, pre-experience language learners may need training in behavioural skills, and in colleges and business schools there is now a wide acceptance of the need to start training learners in, for example, basic presentation techniques.

This approach to Business English teaching is reflected in coursebooks such as Vicki Hollett's *Business Objectives* (Oxford University Press, 1991), which bases language practice activities

around the key communication skills areas. Today there are many varieties of Business English. The most important distinction to be made is that between pre-experience (or low-experience) learners and job-experienced learners. Students in colleges or universities will have gained their knowledge of business largely from books and, as a result, such knowledge will be incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. They will be less aware of their language needs in terms of communicating in real-life business situations, and their expectations of language learning will be moulded by their experiences from school, and thus by the educational policies of the country in which they grew up.

Job-experienced learners will also be influenced by their educational backgrounds, but they will, in most cases, have gained some practical experience of having to communicate on the job. This experience has the effect of focusing their attention on what they perceive as their own shortcomings in terms of fluency, getting the message across, and being able to understand the people from other countries that they have to deal with.

Pre-experience learners will have two kinds of needs. (1) Their present situation may require them to read textbooks in English or follow lectures in English in order to gain the qualifications they are seeking. A major component of their English training may therefore be the development of reading and listening skills, with a strong emphasis on the vocabulary of the subject. In addition (depending on where they are studying), they may have to attend seminars or write papers in English. These will then constitute important skills objectives for any language training programme they follow. (2) They will need to prepare for their future working life in business. In this regard, their teachers may include in their language course such skills as commercial correspondence, participating in meetings, or presenting information or social interactions, depending on the kind of jobs they are preparing for.

There is a third important distinction between courses for pre-experience and job-experienced learners. Pre-experience learners are in many cases preparing for examinations. If these are to be taken in English, the examination curriculum will provide the basis for the syllabus and will set out very specific objectives for the course; it will not be left to the teacher or the learners to decide themselves what they will do. In the case of job-experienced learners, the objectives for the course and its content will be the product of a negotiating process between the learner (or sponsoring organization) and the trainer (or training organization). The learning parameters are flexible and perhaps even vague, and it is more difficult to assess in precise terms the success of training.

Within the two main areas of pre-experience and job-experienced Business English teaching, there are also many varieties. The kinds of English courses offered by colleges and universities will vary widely depending on the level of qualification the students are aiming at and the types

of work they will later be engaged in. The needs of students following vocational courses in, say, commercial practice (import-export) or secretarial training will be vastly different from those following a university degree course in Business Administration. The differences will be evident in the level of language and the kinds of language knowledge and language skills required.

The characteristics of the language of business

As mentioned earlier, Business English is an area of ESP that is relatively poorly researched. Rigorous linguistic analysis is fragmented and is more frequently based on the written forms of language such as correspondence, annual reports, and articles in business journals. Some kinds of analysis have been carried out with respect to the language of meetings and discussions, but there is still little to support course developers beyond their own first-hand experience gained in the field. What follows is our own understanding of what Business English is, based on many years of working with a wide range of pre-experience and especially job-experienced learners.

The most important characteristic of exchanges in the context of business meetings, telephone calls, and discussions is a sense of purpose. Language is used to achieve an end, and its successful use is seen in terms of a successful outcome to the business transaction or event. Users of Business English need to speak English primarily so that they can achieve more in their jobs. Business is competitive: competition exists between companies and also within companies, between employees striving to better their careers. It follows that performance objectives take priority over educational objectives or language learning for its own sake.

Much of the language needed by businesspeople (apart from social language) will be transactional: getting what you want and persuading others to agree with the course of action you propose. The language will frequently be objective rather than subjective and personal. For example, in discussions and meetings, it will be more appropriate to evaluate facts from an objective standpoint («This is a positive point», «On the other hand the disadvantage is...») rather than expressing personal feelings and opinions.

Information has to be conveyed with minimum risk of misunderstanding, and the time for processing (both by the speaker and by the listener) needs to be short. Therefore there is a preference for clear, logical, thought emphasized by the kinds of words that indicate the logical process (for example, «as a result», «for this reason», «in order to»). There is often a need to be concise – particularly when communicating by fax or telephone – and certain familiar concepts may be expressed in word clusters to avoid circumlocution (for example, «cash with order», «just in time delivery»). Certain terms have evolved to save time in referring to concepts which people in business are familiar with (for example, «primary industry», «parent company»). Many of these are acronyms.

The Business English syllabus

People around the world conduct business meetings in English even though English may be a foreign language to all those present. The language that they use will be neither as rich in vocabulary and expression, nor as culture-bound, as that used by native speakers, but will be based on a core of the most useful and basic structures and vocabulary. Businesspeople do not always need to know the full complexities of English grammar and idiom. Fine distinctions in meaning (as are conveyed by some of the compound tenses, for example) may not be important in a business context. On the other hand, in a Business English course some structural areas may require more attention than in a conventional course: for example, conditionals in negotiating, or modality for expressing possibility or politeness. There is consequently a need for syllabus designers to be selective when addressing the needs of Business English learners.

The Business English syllabus is likely to be defined primarily in relation to business performance skills such as meetings, presentations, socializing, or report-writing. Within these skills areas, certain concepts are typically discussed and expressed: for example, describing changes and trends, quality, product, process and procedures, strategy.

These concepts can be broken down into the more linguistically powerful functional areas such as comparing and contrasting, expressing cause and effect, recommending, and agreeing. The language defined in the syllabus may include grammatical or lexical items, and elements of spoken or written discourse, including, for instance, cohesive devices and stress and intonation patterns, as well as organizational features such as signalling a new topic or turn-taking in interactive sequences.

The selection of materials can be made at two levels. First, at the start of a course, the trainer or training organization will probably want to make some decisions about the coursebooks and supplementary materials that will provide the core of material to be used (unless the organization has developed its own materials). Exceptions would be highly specific courses which would need materials to be developed specially, or one-to-one courses for which a more flexible approach is needed. Second, the trainer will need to make decisions about items of material to use for a particular lesson. In both cases, the same factors will affect the trainer's decision; but in the first case, the criteria for selection must somehow apply to a whole book, whereas in the second case, they need only apply to a particular exercise or activity.

There is no single description of what a Business English syllabus might consist of, although many coursebooks do present a generally-accepted common core of functions, structures, and vocabulary.

As already stated, one of the main characteristics of Business English is the emphasis on performance – training learners to become operationally effective. For people in business, the

priority is to be able to understand and get their message across, and for the majority of Business English learners many of the refinements of language are quite simply not relevant. For people in full-time jobs, time is often severely constrained, and acquiring knowledge for its own sake (though it may be pleasurable for some) is out of the question.

What the majority of business learners need to acquire could be broadly summarized as follows:

- ~ confidence and fluency in speaking
- ~ skills for organizing and structuring information
- ~ sufficient language accuracy to be able to communicate ideas without ambiguity and without stress for the listener
- ~ strategies for following the main points of fast and complex speech
- ~ strategies for clarifying and checking unclear information
- ~ speed of reaction to the utterances of others
- ~ clear pronunciation and delivery
- ~ awareness of appropriate language and behaviour for the cultures and situations in which they will operate.

Some learners may also need to develop practical reading and writing skills.

As Business English teaching develops in terms of diversity, richness, and depth, the demands placed on the teacher are ever increasing. Some trainers may find a particular niche in which to specialize, while others may prefer to meet the challenges of teaching a wide variety of learners from different jobs, cultures, and educational backgrounds.

As we hope to have stressed in this article, the first requirement for any Business English trainer is to be an expert in language teaching; the second requirement is to develop awareness of the needs and concerns of businesspeople and to become flexible enough to respond to those needs. This professional development is ongoing throughout a trainer's career and there is no room for complacency at any stage.

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