

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS

Business English is an area of ESP that is relatively poorly researched. 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).

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. 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.

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 (for example, CIF and FOB).

Authentic Materials. Definition and use

Authentic material is any kind of material taken from the real world and not specifically created for the purpose of language (caching, it can be text, visuals, or audio material; it can be realia such as tickets, menus, maps, and timetables; or it can be objects such as products, equipment, components, or models. Some people say that as soon as a piece of authentic material has been altered in any way (for example, by cutting, selecting, simplifying, or transferring from one medium of communication to another), it immediately ceases to be authentic. However, any of these strategies may be applied if it can be justified in relation to the needs of learners.

For Business English training purposes, the authentic material that is most useful will be produced by companies for use by their employees, for client information, or for general publicity.

There are several reasons why a trainer might use authentic material. First, authentic texts (audio or written) will have a number of features that are often lacking in texts and dialogues created for learning English. They will exemplify the particular register to which they belong (academic, legal, or journalistic, etc.) and will often contain specific terminology and jargon and sometimes typical organizational features and sentence patterns. The language used will reflect the genuine purpose for which the material was created and will also target the expert reader or listener for whom it was intended. It will not be simplified or distorted by attempts to include structures or expressions aimed at the language learner may need to be exposed to, to develop skills for understanding, and possibly even to produce.

Second, the material may provide information about real-life situations or events. In this case, it is the content of the material rather than the language which is useful for the trainer or for the learner. The information conveyed is likely to be more accurate and to have high credibility, and

will probably be more up-to-date than most Business English training materials. It may also be very relevant to the learner's special interests and can thus be used to fill gaps in materials published for learners of English.

Authentic material may provide the core of a very specialized course if the course objective is, for example, to develop skills for reading manuals, instructions, contracts, or financial reports, or to develop letter-writing or report-writing skills. At the other extreme, authentic material may be used only occasionally on a course – to supplement Business English material by adding interest and variety.

There are many more ways of using authentic materials rather than as reading or listening comprehension exercises. For example, they can: provide a realistic context for a role-play, letter, or report; stimulate debate; provide information for a project or presentation; or practice the skills of describing, explaining, instructing, and exchanging information.

Below is a list of the different types and sources of authentic material that are appropriate for Business English teaching, together with suggestions for obtaining them. Books. Business books may have been written for study purposes at colleges and universities, or may be aimed at people in work who want to brush up on their business knowledge or skills. Some may be very academic, some more practical, and some humorous. It may be possible to find them in a good general bookshop or (in the case of academic textbooks) in a university bookshop. Some can be found in libraries (for example, British Council, or university libraries). Clearly, the trainer would not want to use the whole book, but may find certain chapters, paragraphs, or diagrams in them that could be relevant to the learners.

The media. Newspapers, magazines, and specialist journals. Single items or articles, chosen for their relevance and interest, are most likely to be useful, but advertisements (for products or jobs), or illustrations and diagrams, may also be selected. English-language newspapers and magazines are available in major cities throughout the world, or can be ordered on subscription. Specialist journals are usually only available on subscription or from libraries.

Radio and TV. The BBC World Service has for many years provided an opportunity for listeners around the world to tune into authentic English. News broadcasts are particularly useful, but other kinds of information programmes can be exploited as well. Information about wavelengths and programmes can be obtained from local British Council offices and from the magazine BBC Worldwide.

With the advent of cable and satellite TV, it is now possible for viewers to tune into English-language news and documentary programmes in many countries. BBC World Service Television is broadcast by satellite (and by cable in Europe), and aims to provide a worldwide service.

Details of how to receive it, and information on programme schedules, can be obtained from the BBC. CBS news provides access to American English.

Company-specific materials. The Annual Report. This contains company accounts, details of directors and company structure, changes made in the previous year, and a report on the financial standing of the company.

Product information. Most companies produce glossy brochures for their clients about their products and services. Some of these will have a general content aimed at non-specialists; others may contain specific technical information for people in the trade.

Newsletters and magazines or other PR material. We can distinguish between glossy magazines produced by companies for public consumption and more basic newsletters aimed at staff. Both contain news and general information about the company, its staff, and its products or services.

Company videos. Many large companies now produce videos for PR purposes, and these can provide useful classroom material. Some give general information about the company and its products, some describe the company's history, focus on its concerns for the environment, or show manufacturing processes. There will probably be an English-language version even if the company is registered in a non-English-speaking country. Some videos have no speech, only music as a background to the images portrayed.

All of the above material can be obtained direct from a company. They do not contain confidential material and can therefore be used without causing concern. Correspondence. Letters may be routine, non-routine, formal, or informal, and can have a range of different functions. Faxes are not very different from letters, although they are usually shorter and less formal. Letters, faxes, etc. may be obtainable if the trainer has contacts within a company. Course participants who are at work can be asked to bring samples if relevant to the course.

Reports and memos. These may simply be short notes – not even expressed in sentences; routine reports may be written by completing a form; some reports are sent by electronic mail and are never committed to paper. On the other hand, a report may be a long and carefully considered document containing a lot of detailed information about, for example, finance, marketing, or technical developments. Some reports are for internal consumption only, while others are prepared for clients or for other companies co-operating in joint ventures, for example.

Both internal and external reports are likely to be confidential and the trainer will only get access to them if a learner has a specific need and brings them along to the course. Minutes of Meetings. Sometimes these are composed in very formal language and make use of a number of conventions. In other situations, the minutes are brief and possibly even in note form. They

usually report the topics discussed and the action taken. Depending on the nature of the meeting, they will probably be confidential.

Contracts. These may be standard or non-standard and can have varying degrees of complexity and obscurity. American contracts are the most lengthy and detailed, whilst the British ones may use more difficult legal jargon. Contracts produced in English by other legal systems are usually relatively easy to read.

Manuals and written instructions. These are grouped together because they have a common purpose and similar use of instructional language, although they may refer to either technical or administrative procedures. Manuals are typically rather long and are commonly produced in print for a wide range of users. An example would be computer software manuals, produced by the software house for its users worldwide.

Instructions for using and maintaining equipment or machines could also be included in this category. Other kinds of instructions, however, are more temporary and usually shorter. They may be issued by the parent company to its subsidiaries, detailing procedures for carrying out routine tasks – for example, accounting and book-keeping. They may be issued in the form of an internal memo. It is not difficult to get access to manuals if learners need to work with them.

Usually they can be provided by the learners, the company or training institution, or by the supplier. Company instructions for internal use more likely to be confidential, but it should be possible to obtain examples if an employee has a special need.

Public information material

This category comprises all types of documents, brochures, leaflets and video materials which are supplied by governments or national institutions for general public. It is clearly a wide-ranging category, but examples which are relevant for Business English are as follows:

- ~ Tourist information (lists of restaurants and hotels, maps, information about tourist sights, history and geography of a region, tourist videos and timetables, etc.)
- ~ Information produced about the London Stock Exchange and Lloyds of London Information about postal and telecommunications services
- ~ Information produced by banks about accounts, loans, financial services, etc.
- ~ Customs and VAT forms and regulations
- ~ Information produced by electricity companies and water boards (for example, about environment, energy saving)

These can be useful sources of material for people who work in the United Kingdom or sometimes travel to the United Kingdom or other English-speaking countries. Some kinds of information may be available in English in other countries – especially tourist information.

Selection and evaluation

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.

As already discussed, a major factor in selecting a book is whether the book can fulfil the role required of it as coursebook, supplementary material, etc. 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 back-grounds. 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.

References:

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