

TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES – AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

It has become a widely known fact that Business English belongs to the academic field and that it is particularly focused on teaching skills rather than pure grammar, being primarily concerned with fluency. This is mostly supported by the content that is taught during Business English Classes. Our analysis is limited to aspects of oral communication skills teaching, since we consider it of paramount importance for any business professional. Moreover, we discuss the fact that in teaching these skills, business communication instructors are faced with a set of challenges which are unknown to the General English teacher.

Keywords: *Business English, communication, education, skills.*

1. BUSINESS ENGLISH VS. GENERAL ENGLISH

Business English is generally defined in opposition to General English not only in terms of the *content* that is being taught, but also in terms of *the teacher's background and attitudes*, in terms of the public he addresses, that is, *who the students are* and what their expectations could be.

If we consider our first issue – *content* – we come to realize that Business English implies teaching specialized vocabulary, different skills such as: negotiation, presentations, telephoning or socializing, going as far as teaching certain cultural differences, awareness of which turns out to be crucial at certain moments in students' professional lives. By contrast, General English satisfies the need of a general vocabulary, having as a main purpose, most of the times, the close-to-perfect acquisition of grammar rules. It is undoubtedly the necessary basis for the acquisition of Business English rules.

As for the instructor's *background and attitudes*, we have found that it has already been agreed on the fact that the Business English instructor is

not only a specialist in English and general education; he is required to have some knowledge of the Business field since he would normally have to deal with issues strictly related to the context. Moreover, although a needs analysis is required to any English teacher, in the case of the Business English instructor this is an essential stage. Why? Let us focus on the students' status in order to answer this question. Although Romania struggles to adopt European laws and attitudes in order to become a successful member of the European Union, there are some performance items which guarantee our uniqueness – after all, the principle that governs the European Union is that all nations should be “united in diversity”. Despite different attitudes towards this issue, we do believe this is a positive point in favor of our nation: while European companies hire Business English instructors in order to educate their employees, Romanian companies consider knowledge of English compulsory when taking into consideration a potential employee. Young employees are supposed to have knowledge of at least General English if not of Business English. For this reason, we teach Business English at University. These are the issues which make the learners' attitudes towards Business English quite different from one context to another. The already employed students, the ones who already function in a working context might raise problems which are absent in the academic environment. In the first case, the instructor faces the requirements of a business relationship in which the student – client has certain demands which need to be satisfied for the former to get paid. Therefore, the quality of the teaching process is conditioned by the money issue, which is undoubtedly, at least theoretically, absent from the academic world.

However, most of those who teach at the University face other obstacles such as mere lack of interest, this object being regarded as an optional course whose usefulness can not be grasped by some of the students who find themselves overwhelmed by the multitude of new issues which, at least in the beginning, they can not make much sense of. Another aspect that the Business English instructor has to deal with in this context is the varied language levels that students have when graduating high school. It often happens that a group would gather students from the beginner up to the advanced level. The large number of students in a group is also an important issue: while a company instructor would normally teach groups of 5-15 people, the University Business English instructor would normally teach groups of 30-40 people whose level of English, as we have already mentioned, is extremely varied.

All these things considered, we should all bear in mind, irrespective of whether we teach in private companies or at the University, the fact that in order to make our work worthwhile, we need to focus first of all on the *utility* of our teaching. We live in a continuously changing world where, whenever asked to learn something, people ask: *why? what's the use of it?* As consumer – based as it may seem, the University has to move on and be able to answer the requirements of its students. Some academic voices might argue that the purpose of a University instructor is to *present* different issues (depending on the field of study), to raise questions, to stir interest, to point the way, rather than to clarify, explain and give solutions. For all these reasons, the Business English Teaching field can be easily considered an outcast in its relation with the academic world. We could also add that another strong reason which stands against its academic status is the fact that its fields of interest are rather limited, not including complex issues such as philosophy, literature or culture.

What we intend to do further on is to give a brief presentation of the Business English aspects which certify its belonging to the academic space, in its deepest meaning, with an emphasis on the oral communication skills which are taught during Business English classes. The university is an educational institution whose main

beneficiaries are the students; coming to university is undoubtedly an essential stage in their professional lives. Their expectations are to acquire the necessary information and skills to succeed in their future careers and these expectations can be fulfilled with the support of their instructors, that is, teachers.

Teaching Business English is by all means a challenge since we are supposed to teach things that people are likely to use in their future careers. The fact that the acquired knowledge will serve in a variety of contexts, the certainty that those contexts will influence, up to a certain extent, different people's lives, turns our profession into a useful activity – let us not forget the extreme importance of *utility* nowadays – and moreover, into a clearly academic one, since our students are likely to practice the skills that studying Business English involves at some of the highest professional levels.

2. TEACHING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

One of the most important aspects which certify that Business English Teaching differs from General English Teaching is *content*. Let us start by admitting the fact that quite a large number of people claim they can understand and speak English, at least at an elementary level. However, very few of them know what Business English involves, being unaware of what it actually takes to be a successful Business English speaker. That would be the first, simple argument in favor of our considering Business English a rather unknown field of knowledge to most of the general public.

The main aim of any Business English instructor is to use programs where *content*, *language* and *communication* are combined in order to develop the learner's language knowledge and communication skills. However, most of us are not content specialists; we are rather knowledgeable generalists able to tap into the learner's expertise and use it as a resource for his/her future progress in the field of Business English [1].

The content-related issues we are going to focus on in this paper are more precisely deal

with the communication skills we wish to develop with our students since the ultimate key to successful business is communication. Communication within business can be either written or oral. The main skills we are normally dealing with are *fluency* and *effectiveness*. *Fluency* is concerned with speed and effort of speaking, and *effectiveness* deals mostly with the impact of discourse on the audience. One of the major differences between General English and Business English stems from the different treatment of the following issues: while General English is mostly concerned with developing accuracy and fluency, Business English is rather focused on fluency and effectiveness. However, they are undoubtedly interconnected but not necessarily interdependent: there are students who have already acquired an impressive amount of specialized vocabulary and grammar rules but who have failed in building an effective speech; there is another category who, although being capable of effective communication for a limited period of time, thanks to some other abilities related to it – use of gestures, eye-contact, mastering of context-related structures – once outside their specialist area, are no longer capable to deal with a spontaneous communication situation [2]. We are going to discuss here only a limited number of situations which illustrate the need for oral communication skills acquisition: socializing in business contexts, presentations, meetings and negotiations, telephoning.

2.1. Socializing

Much of the spoken interaction occurring in a business context is concerned with building and maintaining positive relationships, which ultimately play an important role in achieving successful business results. Typically, this relationship-building phase takes place around the main purpose of the business meeting: before the meeting starts, in conversation over lunch or dinner. Although most of the times equated with “small talk”, the socializing stage could be essential for the final result of a business meeting. Mastering this skill could eventually lead to advantages for the business partners: “small talk” is used with the aim to ease communication when people first meet, to build and maintain rapport between people who do business, or

create positive relationships for successful business outcomes. Mark Ellis and Christine Johnson see socializing in terms of: *routines, social rituals, conversational English*. As far as *routines* are concerned they exemplify with ordering drinks or a meal – these being fairly predictable, students normally operate quite efficiently; as for *social rituals*, they refer to fixed phrases for greeting people or saying goodbye; *conversational English* appeals to a wider area of knowledge since it is normally used for establishing contact and getting to know people better.¹

The cultural issue almost automatically intervenes since socializing normally occurs between people who do not know each other and who very often come from different cultural backgrounds. The Business English teacher should be aware of the essential factors which form the basis of a culture: climate, social customs and traditions, historical events, ideas and beliefs, religion, geography and, at the same time, he should offer an insight of all these aspects to his/her students. When dealing with socializing, Business English courses familiarize the students with the structural patterns of building “small talk” (travel, accommodation, weather), of welcoming visitors, of introducing oneself and responding to introductions. As far as cultural awareness is concerned, this is a rather controversial issue. While some scientists argue that knowledge of cultural difference is compulsory in order to avoid any tensions between partners and thus achieve success in business communication, others believe that attention given to details which are rather irrelevant for the business context could only enable the occurrence of stereotypes: e.g. *British do not speak foreign languages; Brazilian males kiss when they meet*.²

2.2. Presentations

Part of our speaking proficiency depends upon our ability to speak differentially, depending upon our audience, and upon the way we absorb their reaction and respond to it in some way or another [3]. It is probably the best starting point for a successful presentation in business. Presentations relate mostly with effectiveness but effectiveness can not be achieved without fluency and accuracy.

The key to building an effective presentation is to agree upon the points which constitute it: content, structure, delivery, language. Content refers to the information the speaker has chosen to convey. Structure refers to the organization of the chosen information [1]. At this stage the instructor familiarizes students with the typical pattern:

- a) *Self*: e.g. First of all, I'd like to introduce myself and my Company
My name is... and I work for...
- b) *Topic*: e.g. Today I am going to talk about...
- c) *Sequencing*: e.g. First of all,...
Secondly,...
- d) *Changing subject*: e.g. To return to the issue of...
- e) *Clarifying*: e.g. For example...
- f) *Summarising*: e.g. To conclude...
- g) *Questions and interruptions*: e.g. Thank you for your question...
What does this mean in terms of
- h) *Concluding*: e.g. Well, that's about all I have to say...

Delivery refers to the techniques used by the speaker to have an impact on the audience: voice – he/she has to speak loud enough to be heard: a weak voice might suggest uncertainty; body language, eye contact; *language* refers to the traditional categories, more precisely to the accurate use of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation.³ These are important aspects of presentations since they trigger the coherence or absence of coherence in a message.

2.3. Meetings and Negotiations

Meetings differ in terms of level of formality, number of people attending, of whether they are in-company or with suppliers, customers. They can also be extremely varied as far as their purpose is concerned: exchange of information, reporting, making decisions, negotiating, planning.

Before teaching any aspects related to meetings, and implicitly, to negotiations, we must be aware not only of the type of meeting which may be relevant to our students but also the role they might have to play during the meeting.

People need a wide variety of social and linguistic skills in order to perform well in

meetings, and here we refer to both *social* – appearing to understand, chairing, responding to others, resisting interruption, interrupting, demonstrating (in)comprehension – and *linguistic* ones: functional exponents for arguing, reporting, explaining, grammatical features, vocabulary.⁴

Probably one of the most effective ways of teaching meetings is *simulation* since it is, at least most of the times, perceived by the students as a challenging and exciting activity. However, before getting involved in such a simulation, they need to be familiarized with the roles that participants in meetings normally play: the chairperson/ the participants/ the secretary; the boss/ the subordinate; the expert/the non-expert. Therefore, the chairperson is responsible for overall control: opening the meeting, stating the purpose of the meeting, involving the participants, clarifying, closing the meeting; the participants are responsible for making relevant contributions; the secretary is responsible for keeping a record of participants, points discussed, conclusions reached [1].

Simulations, as we have already stated, are extremely useful since by using them students practice specific language, they are motivating, they involve active use of communicative skills, they help build and maintain group cohesion. As Ken Jones defines it, “a simulation is an event, not taught, but shaped by the students”.⁵

2.4. Telephoning

Telephoning may appear as a rather simple issue in the business area. However, teaching telephoning may be more complicated than it appears. Nick Brieger states that a business phone call can be defined according to its purpose: giving information, requesting information, confirming information, making arrangements, persuading (telephone selling), negotiating, complaining [1].

An important issue we all agree upon is that students are rather anxious about using the telephone in English. The situation is immediate and they are deprived of context clues that might enable them to get by otherwise – eye contact, mimics, gestures. The needs to be covered when dealing with telephoning are: politeness, language control, spelling and linguistic numeracy.⁶

Telephoning could turn not only into a challenging but also into a difficult activity for students since the interlocutors do not see each other. Therefore, such “allies” in delivering the message as body language are no longer available. As Nick Brieger argues, *manner* is extremely important since it encompasses some aspects which ultimately enable the clear delivery of the message: in order to achieve effectiveness, the speakers must first of all use clear and comprehensible speech. They should avoid mumbling, jargon, complicated sentence structure. Moreover, they should use the appropriate vocal tone for the purpose of the call: polite, helpful, and persuasive. These are only some of the aspects that turn telephoning into a rather difficult to achieve skill for students: not only that they need to have acquired some knowledge related to the telephoning vocabulary and structure but they also need to be aware of the different registers they are supposed to use on different occasions: formal/ informal.

CONCLUSIONS

We have tried to demonstrate that the field of teaching Business English is by no means restrictive or limited. We chose to discuss *content* since it is the most representative and relevant aspect in teaching Business English. However, we limited ourselves to dealing with the importance of oral communication, by stressing

the importance of socializing, presentations, meetings and negotiations, telephoning. We chose these to be the focus of our paper because not only do such activities motivate students but they also turn out to be extremely useful in their future professional lives.

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