PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF 
BUSINESS ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The term Business English is used to cover the English taught to a wide range of professional people, and students in full-time education preparing for a business career. This paper reviews the practices in the teaching of Business English to the undergraduates who have little or no experience of the business world. Generally, these pre-experienced learners gain their knowledge of business largely from books; as a result, such knowledge is incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. They are also less aware of their language needs in terms of communicating in real life business situations. This paper presents the effective strategies and practical approaches that can be incorporated in business English classrooms. The approaches are organized around a tripartite structure to create authentic business contexts. The three parts are (a) combining authentic, framework and tailor-made materials, (b) integrating business skills with simulations, and (c) implementing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as teaching and learning tools. Sample activities will be provided in order to show the practicality of the approaches. Teaching Business English is far more than teaching Business or Language; it is about teaching communication in the authentic business contexts.

KEYWORDS

Authentic business context, Practical approach, Teaching business English, Simulation, Tailor-made materials, Authentic materials, Framework materials, ICT

INTRODUCTION

The term business English is used to cover the English taught to a wide range of professional people, and students in full-time education preparing for a business career. Language practitioners divide business English learners into two categories: (a) Job-experienced language learners who work in companies or other business instructions such as managers, office staff and other professionals, and (b) pre-experienced (low-experienced) language learners from universities, colleges or trade and commerce schools who study business courses (Ellis, 2000). This paper reviews the practices in the teaching of Business English to the second group – the non-native undergraduates who have little or no experience of the business world. The methods, approaches and activities that will be discussed in this paper are the results of our observation and experience of teaching business English to students who are pursuing their studies in business fields such as Marketing, Accountancy, Finance and Business Administration. Generally, these pre-experienced learners gain their knowledge of business largely from books; as a result, such knowledge is incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. They are also less aware of their language needs in terms of communicating in real life business situations. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, business English was distinguished from general English by developing specialist vocabulary and business related
words and terminology (Ellis, 2000). This was one of the early attempts to come up with some approaches for teaching business English. Since that time business English teaching has drawn on many aspects and approaches which place much emphasis on the need to develop the skills for using the language learned. This paper presents the effective strategies and practical approaches that can be incorporated in business English classrooms. The main focus of these approaches is to show how to create authentic business contexts for pre-experienced learners who have not yet encountered the real life business situations. The approaches are organized around a tripartite structure to create authentic business contexts. The three parts are (a) combining the authentic, framework and tailor-made materials, (b) integrating business skills with simulations, and (c) implementing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as teaching and learning tools. Sample activities will be provided in order to show the practicality of the approaches.

TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIALS

One important part in teaching business English is to use the type of materials which will best help the learners to get ready with the real life situations in workplace. A key issue when considering any teaching is authenticity. It must be admitted that students hardly learn business English in the classrooms. It is not also probable for the pre-experienced learners to practice and learn English in the real corporate world. Therefore, the feasible approach is to attempt to employ methods and strategies that help to create authentic business contexts in classrooms where the learners can understand business concepts and situations and practice their skills.

When faced with a number of course book packages on the market, the online teaching and learning materials in the internet, all purporting to target business English learners, it is essential to be able to recognize what materials can create authentic contexts in classroom. Business English course books are popular all over the world and they look useful and professional particularly for pre-experienced groups. They may also provide a window on the business world (Frendo, 2005), with the caveats that they may not be able to create authentic contexts in classrooms. There are various types of teaching and learning materials for business English such as job-specific materials, self-access materials, reference books, video materials, business simulation games, etc. Generally, there are three types of business English materials for teaching and learning: framework materials, authentic materials and tailor-made materials (Frendo, 2005). Framework materials are “diagrammatic representations which can be used to generate language”, for example the frameworks to describe 4P’s, and SWOT analysis. “Authentic material is any kind of material taken from the real world and not specifically created for the purpose of language teaching” (Ellis, 2000). There are various sources of authentic materials such as newspapers, magazines, the broad source of company specific materials, etc. The tailor-made materials refer to materials that are designed or produced by the teachers to meet specific needs of their students.

The aim here is not to discuss the criteria that we must consider in selecting and evaluating these materials. Nor do we want to categorize the characteristics of business materials for pre-experienced learners based on their language needs. In this section, the attempt is to present the materials that can be combined in order to create authentic business contexts in classrooms. The emphasis must be less on the authenticity of available teaching and learning
materials and more on how they can create authentic business contexts for the pre-experienced learners. Generally, the materials must have a high credibility; they must also be up-to-date and attractive. This paper would suggest combining tailor-made materials with authentic materials. The framework materials can also be incorporated as problem solving tools.

The ideal activity is probably to interact with authentic materials in the same way that the learners might have in real life. Authentic materials must be altered and exploited by selecting, transferring, cutting and adapting but without changing the medium of communication. The following is a list of materials that can create authentic business contexts.

**Authentic Materials**

In the context of business English, there are various types of authentic materials. The main source of authentic materials and activities is internet that will be discussed in ICT section in this paper. Here are examples of authentic items which can be used in classrooms:

1. For pre-experienced learners, course books and materials are designed which often use authentic materials in their content.

2. Articles or excerpts from newspapers, magazines and business English journals chosen for their relevance or interest are most likely useful.

3. Advertisements, illustrations, commercial documents or diagrams to demonstrate business concepts can also be selected.

4. The BBC World Service provides various kinds of information that can be usefully incorporated in teaching and learning materials.

5. Specific Company information is a very vast category that covers a variety of business teaching and learning materials, such as annual reports, letters, faxes, emails, memos, minutes of meetings, contracts, written instructions, product information, company’s advertising brochure, company’s websites, etc.

6. Case studies or teaching cases are defined as “narratives designed to serve as the basis for classroom discussion” (Lynn, 1999). Using case studies to facilitate learning is often recommended by educators as it enhances various skills such as critical and analytical skills of the learner. Lynn (1999) states that teaching case is a story, describing or based on actual events or circumstances, that is told with a definite teaching purpose in mind and that rewards careful study and analysis. Gideonse (1999) believes that almost anything can be a case as long as it presents a predicament from practice demanding some kind of action. In the context of business English, it is a written description of a problem or situation that is taken from the business world. The purpose of a case study is to place the participants in the role of decision-makers, to identify central alternatives among several issues, competing for attention and to formulate strategies and policy recommendations. Cases are not presented with their own analysis, but the learners are to apply the theory they learnt to a “real situation” (Husock, 2000). Thus, it is evident that the case method provides more authentic contexts for the business English learners as they present real situations in the business world. Barnes et al. (1994) discuss that the case method enables students to discover and develop their own unique framework for approaching,
understanding and dealing with (business) problems. In other words, the learners are to understand the case, identify the possible problems, analyze and provide recommendations using a problem solving tool or a framework.

**Framework Materials**

A framework is essentially a tool to be used in a particular context to guide learners in expressing ideas, giving short explanations or describing situations. Frameworks are clearly structured contexts that are designed to help learners to use the specific language and content (Frendo, 2005). In the context of business English, frameworks are mainly used as problem solving tools, for instance, in 4 P’s students use Product, Price, Place and Promotion to analyze a case study. Most of these problem solving tools are available in World Wide Web together with examples. The following are some of the frameworks that you can find in the internet which provide step by step guidelines to solve case studies in business English.

**Framework 1:** Easton (*Learning from the Case studies*)

- Step 1 Understanding the situation
- Step 2 Diagnosing problem areas
- Step 3 Generating alternative solutions
- Step 4 Predicting outcomes
- Step 5 Evaluating alternatives
- Step 6 Communicating the results

**Framework 2:** Edge and Coleman (*The Guide to Case Analysis and Reporting*)

- Step 1 Comprehend case situation
- Step 2 Diagnosing problem areas
- Step 3 State problem/ Problem statement
- Step 4 Generate alternatives
- Step 5 Evaluate and select
- Step 6 Defend implementation

**Framework 3:** Wallace J.S. (*Group Problem Solving*)

- Step 1 Identifying the problem
- Step 2 Reasons for the problem
- Step 3 Proposed solutions
- Step 4 Evaluation of each proposed solution
- Step 5 Recommendations and rationale for each recommendation
- Step 6 Action plan (step by step)
Tailor-made Materials

It is necessary to prepare tailor-made materials which can be integrated with authentic and framework materials to create authentic business contexts in classrooms. This can be easily done to suit the pre-experienced learners of business English. The best method is to select any authentic materials and adapt and tailor them in order to make various teaching materials. For example, reading comprehension texts can be adapted from popular business magazines like *Times*, *Business Today*, *The Economist*, etc. and comprehension questions and vocabulary exercises can be set based on the language proficiency of the learners.

Another way to generate tailor-made materials is to make use of real company details. Teachers can take information on sales volume of the year 2008 of two or three companies which belong to the same industry (i.e., Nokia, Samsung and Motorola), for instance, and put the statistics into charts, tables or graphs. The students are to interpret or analyze the data shown in the charts and graphs as part of their business skills.

Combining tailor-made materials with authentic materials is an effective method in teaching business English. A good example of this technique is how teachers can prepare a simplified case study for pre-experienced learners from extensive cases which can be found in the Internet. To do this, the teacher needs to understand the case and omit the unnecessary details without disturbing the real context of the case. Then, the task and background information must be properly stated according to the students’ language proficiency level. The following are the tailor-made case and the screenshot of the extensive case from the Internet:
BUSINESS SKILLS AND SIMULATIONS

Simulations can be used for variety of business skills. It is similar to role play; however, in simulations, students can express their own ideas and opinions as if they themselves were in the imagined situations. This paper suggests using the power of simulations to transpose the normal classroom into an authentic setting where language skills can be developed under more realistic conditions. The most common view of simulations is that they provide a way of creating a rich communicative environment (a representation of reality) where students actively become a part of some real-world system and function according to predetermined roles as members of that group. Like a real business, simulation should involve people, resources and processes. The aim is to give learners an experience comparable to one in “real-life”. In fact, it is worth thinking that a simulation becomes reality (Black, 1995) and students become able to relate to real life situations and think beyond the “classroom’s box-like walls” (McArthur, 1983).

Simulations can effectively be utilized in developing students’ presentation skills. Learners are given a task such as doing a case study or designing/innovating a product. Then the learners have to present information, discuss and justify their opinions just as they have to do in real working situations. In addition, learners may be asked to present their research projects in the classroom as if they are presenting the similar projects in a business meeting. Learners receive feedback at the end of their presentations as it helps them to be able to improve their presentation and oral communication skills.

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**Case Study**

**Background**

Carrefour, one of the largest retails in the world, decided on expanding into Asia in 2005 due to the high growth potential in the region. After considering several markets, it decided to start its Asian foray from Taiwan.

Initially Carrefour had planned to use the strategies it followed in France and other European countries in Taiwan as well, but it soon realized that there was a significant difference between the behaviour of Taiwanese shoppers and that of shoppers in Europe; the Taiwanese shopped more frequently and in small quantities, and were extremely price conscious. In addition, the consumers were not satisfied with some of Carrefour’s practices like high profit margins of imported goods, parking fees, and long queues at cash counters even when the supermarket was crowded.

Though Carrefour was extremely successful in establishing itself in Taiwan, its revenues began to decline after 2007. Carrefour was no longer attractive and modern for the Taiwanese. Therefore, it has decided to adopt different marketing strategies and approaches to revive their business and increase its sales. As the head of the marketing department identify the main problems and prepare an action plan in not more than 300 words which would help Carrefour to uplift its profits.
Simulations can also be used to develop business writing skills. There are various methods to teach business writing. The best is to put the student in an authentic context where he has to write real business documents, memo, emails, reports, business letters, and so on. The learners may be given a situation in a company and then based on the information given they have to prepare an analytical report such as a market research report or a feasibility report. The information and situation given to students are from the real company’s documents and resources. The report has all the characteristics of a report that they might have to prepare in the workplace. The report includes introduction, findings, conclusion or evaluations, and recommendations. By engaging students in the real situations through simulations, they are provided with a platform to enhance their business skills.

THE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) TOOLS

Information technology (IT) has had a significant impact on teaching and learning of business English. Computer based materials for language teaching, often referred to as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) appeared in 1980’s. The use of CALL software such as Windows messenger, emails, the internet, and other specific and non-specific softwares can be incorporated using effective pedagogy to create a powerful language learning program. Not only it assists but also stimulates the learners in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and also critical thinking (Cobb & Stevens, 1996). As Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become more accessible, CALL has moved beyond the use of computer programs to embrace the use of the internet and web-based tools (Dudeney, 2007). The internet is a useful resource for teachers and learners of business English. The internet can enrich the lessons and provide the learners with authentic and up-to-date materials.

Implementing ICT in business English classrooms is a way to bring the outside world into the classroom, thus, creating an authentic context for the learners to acquire the skills they need in future in real business world. The following sections demonstrate how ICT can be used in teaching and learning of business English.

Teaching and Learning References

There are a number of different types of e-learning resources specially designed for Business English teachers and learners. For a list of useful links for the business English teacher, www.besig.org can be used, and once the word ‘business’ is entered into the search engine business.com, almost all the topics that are related to business are available for further exploitation. Another website, www.bized.ac.uk, provides interactive activities based on a wide variety of up-to-date business issues and many other features that are suitable for any business English learner. www.bbc.co.uk is another extensive website that offers a lot of features such as a glossary, which many learners find particularly useful, and a link which allows the learners to open a short video clip and understand the context of the language that is used.
Additional web-based language learning resources comprise electronic dictionaries, thesaurus and pronunciation guides that are geared towards the general English learners, while some publishers offer specifically designed online resources for Business English learners. For instance, Longman Business English offers an article on one particular company every month, together with comprehension questions. Other than the articles, a convenient feature is the availability of online dictionaries that can be used instantly by the learners. (i.e., Oxford Online Dictionary and Longman Web Dictionary).
Specific Company Information

Learners of business English are often attracted to company websites that are popular and established. These websites not only provide authentic materials, but also furnish the learners with up-to-date statistics as most corporate websites publish their company details and annual reports on the World Wide Web. In particular, company websites give details about company history, marketing strategies, product information, and advertising methods and so on. In order to create an authentic learning context, the teachers can bring real companies into the classroom. For instance the learners could be asked to compare and contrast two organizations (KFC and Mc Donald’s) that belong to the same industry. The books, that provide specific information about particular companies, are hard to come by or none. Therefore, internet is a great source of information for the learners of business English.

Up-to-date Formats/Structures and Layouts

Writing plays a key part in the business English syllabus and is used in a vast range of different situations. It is an invaluable mode of communication across time and space. Among the important writing skills, the learners are likely to learn how to write business emails, letters and reports. As such, writing requires planning and organizational skills, as well as correct formats, structures, layouts and so on. When books may be out of date or hard to come by, the internet offers a host of free information that is current and relevant. In particular, there are websites that give lots of useful guidelines for writing business letters, emails and reports.

For example, http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_emailett.html
In addition, the internet also offers lots of authentic writing practice for the learners in any level within a business context. In a genre or text approach, writing is taught to the learners by giving sample texts. For instance, the learners are given a chance to study sample letters and later they will be asked to compose their own versions.
SAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES FOR PRE-EXPERIENCED LEARNERS

The following two samples have been designed to show how the tripartite structure discussed in this paper can practically be used to teach business English skills to pre-experienced learners.

In sample 1, students are required to compare and contrast two companies based on the tailor-made outline given by the teacher. Students research on the real companies using various ICT tools and resources. They have to produce a write-up/project paper in pairs. They are guided throughout their project and they will be given continuous feedback.

In sample 2, based on a problem-solving framework, students are required to do a case study analysis. The framework has been generated from a few problem solving tools. The salient features given in the case study are the results of tailoring the available details and statistics of real companies.

Sample 1: Compare and contrast two organizations

Students to work in pairs and they have to choose two organizations from the same industry, e.g., KFC and McDonald, Microsoft and Apple.

Students have to write an extended essay based on the following headings / sub-headings according to the format given below. They are required to provide at least five references from three different sources.

1.0 Introduction
Introduce the industry and give a brief description of the two organizations.

1.1 History of Establishment
1.2 Company’s objectives / mission statements
1.3. Board of directors of the two companies
2.0 The organizations
   2.1 The brands/ Types of products
   2.2 Slogan and Logo
   2.3 Current business development (E.g. locations, branches, employees, etc.)

3.0 Marketing strategies
   3.1. How do they market their products? (Marketing Mix – 4 P’s)
   3.2. Advertising methods (evaluate the effectiveness of methods)

4.0 Future plans of the two organizations
E.g. merging plans, take-over, exporting products to other countries, expanding the business etc.

5.0 Conclusion: Finalize and comment on the new findings

6.0 References

* Students are required to do their outline in class and come up with a second draft for the essay report based on the outline.
* The lecturers will discuss their outlines and drafts in class and recommend the changes that need to be made.
* Students are required to present this project in class. They are given 5-7 minutes to present their topic. They may use the OHP or Power Point to present the points for the presentation.

Sample 2: Doing a case study

Based on the following problem-solving framework, students have to do a case study analysis.

**Step 1** Introduction: Summarise the case study in about 150 words (background information and current situation, industry, organization, products, history, competition, financial information, and anything else of significance)

**Step 2** Study and analyze the salient features given in charts/graphs/numbers provided in the case study (One paragraph of about 200 words)

**Step 3** Problem Identification: Brainstorm and diagnose problem areas

**Step 4** Root-cause Analysis: Problem statement (in one sentence)

**Step 5** Alternative Generation: Brainstorm to generate alternative solutions

**Step 6** Evaluation of Alternatives: Evaluating each proposed solution (Students brainstorm and discuss the advantages/ disadvantages/constraints/ limitations/ internal and external factors, etc.)
Examples:

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**Step 7  Recommendations and rationale for each recommendation (Individual)**

**Procedure**

Each class will be given a specific case study selected by their lecturer (This case study must be supported with graphs/charts/numbers, etc). Students in groups of three/four, write a 1500 word analysis using the problem-solving framework given above. The lecturer guides the students throughout the writing process. Students are to present a step by step process of their work. The final step where students give at least 3 recommendations and rationale for each recommendation will be done individually in class on a specified date. Writing the final step, students have to incorporate at least three references from two different sources using the Harvard System of referencing. The students’ final step must not be more than 400 words. Students are given two hours to complete the task. They are allowed to bring their paraphrased notes and sources to class.

* Students are required to attach all notes, the outline and source materials with the final copy.
CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show the practical methods and strategies of creating authentic contexts for pre-experienced learners of business English. As emphasized earlier, the key is to put the three parts of (a) combining authentic, framework and tailor-made materials, (b) integrating business skills with simulations, and (c) implementing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as teaching and learning tools, together in preparing teaching materials and strategies and learning activities. The integration of the three parts can enrich the classroom experience for both teachers and students of business English. The benefits of this structure support students-centred learning and situation-centred learning which have for long been acknowledged and promoted as elements of business communication teaching.

Pre-experienced learners may not have hands-on experience of business procedures as the job-experienced learners have, but they have a developing knowledge of business and interest in business topics that are valuable in language learning classrooms. Creating real life situation is a great way to prepare our students for the business world. Every teacher enjoys trying out different approaches, adding variety to lessons, and discovering the most effective methods of instruction. As you bring a new perspective to your classes – the challenges of everyday business life – you will be adding both variety and meaningful communication to the study of business English. It is a challenge, though, that carries with it significant benefits in making teaching and learning methods, strategies and approaches of business English more practical. Teaching Business English is far more than teaching Business or Language; it is about teaching communication in the authentic business contexts.

REFERENCES


