

1 WHAT IS BUSINESS ENGLISH?

Background

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); there are more than 150 Business English titles on UK publishers' lists; 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. Whilst still very much a reflection of the structural/audio-lingual approach to language teaching, *English for Business* was a flagship course in the development of Business English teaching.

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, 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.

Job-experienced learners are more likely to have a single set of needs relating to their job. Sometimes learners may need English for a new job or a situation which they have not yet experienced (for example, an employee who is about to be posted abroad) and, in these cases, they will not know very precisely what needs they are going to have. However, one overriding characteristic of Business English for job-experienced learners will still apply: the need to be pragmatic. The practical *use* of the language will be more important than theoretical knowledge *about* the language. The employee who has been selected for a new job or a new project will have to be able to manage in spite of his or her incomplete knowledge or inadequate skills, and providing strategies for coping will be an essential feature of a language course for such a person.

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 for 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.

Similarly, courses for job-experienced learners will differ in objectives, course content, and methodology—depending on the type of business the learners are involved in, their jobs and job requirements, the length of the course, and the structure of the learner group. Individual tuition implies

more precisely defined objectives and a more flexible approach to methodology and use of materials compared to group tuition.

These varieties of Business English and their implications for course planning and implementation will be discussed in more depth throughout the book.

What characterizes 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.

Sense of purpose

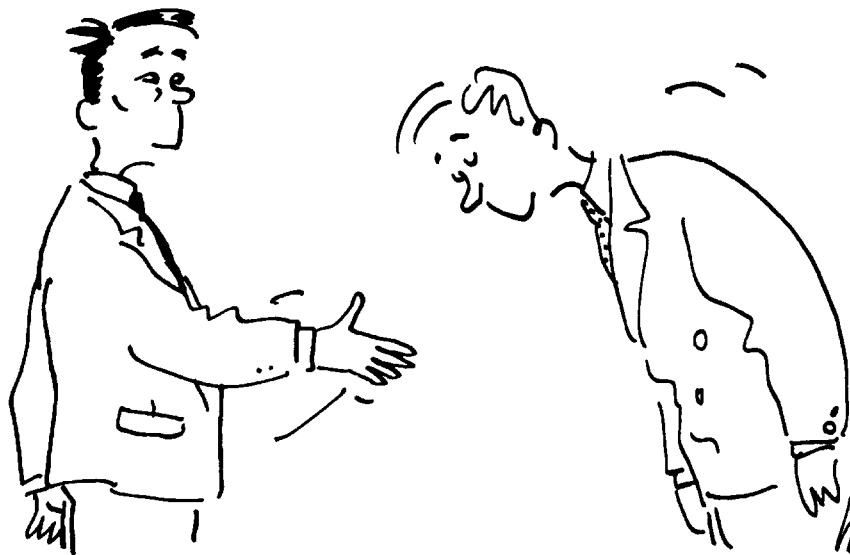
The most important characteristic of exchanges in the context of business meetings, telephone calls, and discussions is a sense of purpose. Language is used to achieve an end, and its successful use is seen in terms of a successful outcome to the business transaction or event. Users of Business English 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. For example, a German company in Seoul may have a long-term objective to establish good trading relations, and their representative's use of English is geared to that end. A French telecommunications project manager in India needs to know English to communicate with his technical teams on the site, who are all Indian. A Swedish pharmaceutical product manager needs to give clear presentations of recent product development to subsidiaries in Europe and the Far East. In each of these examples, the use of language has an implied element of risk: mistakes and misunderstandings could cost the company dearly.

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.

Social aspects

International businesspeople have a need to make contact with others whom they have never met before, or know only slightly. Meetings are often short because businesspeople are always pressed for time. There is a need for an internationally accepted way of doing things so that people from different cultures, and with different mother tongues, can quickly feel more comfortable with one another.



Social contacts are often highly ritualized. Formulaic language is used (in greetings and introductions, for example) in the context of a routine pattern of exchanges. A certain style is generally adopted which is polite but also short and direct (taking into consideration the need to be economical with time). Although some situations may require more than this (for example, keeping a conversation going over lunch), the style and content of social interactions will be typified by a desire to build a good relationship while avoiding over-familiarity.

Clear communication

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).

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.

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.

Business and General English courses

Not all courses run by a company or a business college necessarily merit the title of 'Business English'. Some companies and colleges provide language courses where needs have not been analysed and the course content is drawn from a General English coursebook. It may be that a choice has been made to improve the general command of English of the participants, and that this then constitutes the course objective. On the other hand, such a course may be the result of a lack of informed strategy on the part of the company or institution, or a lack of expertise on the part of available trainers.

As we showed in the first half of this chapter, Business English is not a neatly-defined category of special English. The term is used to cover a variety of Englishes, some of which are very specific, and some very general. The table below makes some general statements about key differences between Business and General English; however, we acknowledge that there are many situations where the distinctions are not so clear.

Table 1.1: Business English v. General English—a summary

Pre-course preparation	Business English	General English
<i>Needs analysis</i>	To assess the needs of the company, the job, and the individuals, and to define the language level required by the job. In-company training departments must make decisions about the type of training required: group v. individual, on-site v. language school, person-to-person tuition v. distance learning, etc.	To assess the language needs of the learners.
<i>Assessment of level</i>	Using formal tests or interviews.	Placement tests or interviews to allocate learners to courses or to form groups of a similar language level.

Pre-course preparation	Business English	General English
<i>Syllabus</i>	<p>Set courses will have fixed objectives and syllabus. Special courses will require a special syllabus.</p> <p>One-to-one courses may develop syllabus and content on an ongoing basis.</p>	<p>Often determined by choice of coursebook and (if applicable) an end-of-course examination. The syllabus is wide-ranging and may encompass the broad vocabulary and variety of styles found in literature and other general reading and in the world of entertainment and the media.</p>
<i>Course objectives</i>	<p>Defined precisely in relation to the needs analysis findings. May be worded in terms of the tasks/skills required in the job (job-experienced learners) or course of study (pre-experience learners), or in terms of required language improvement (e.g. command of structures or pronunciation).</p>	<p>Examination courses (e.g. Cambridge First Certificate) will have fixed pre-determined objectives. Individuals may have their own objectives: interest in the culture; desire to travel or live abroad; a feeling that language skills will be useful or will lead to better job prospects.</p>
<i>Time</i>	<p>In company language training, there are usually time constraints because of the need for training to be cost-effective. In colleges and universities, time for language study is also likely to be limited.</p>	<p>Outside the state education system, general language study will usually be open-ended. Even examinations can be repeated if necessary. An exception would be someone preparing for a holiday or residence abroad.</p>
<i>Learner expectations</i>	<p>Learners are likely to be more goal-orientated and to expect success. Business people normally have high expectations of efficiency, quality, and professionalism.</p>	<p>Learners also want to make progress but are less likely to set themselves specific targets within a rigid timescale.</p>

Table 1.1: Continued

Pre-course preparation	Business English	General English
<i>Materials</i>	<p>Print, audio, and video materials can be bought off the shelf for Business English—but they may not meet the specific needs of an individual or group. It may be necessary to develop materials for a specific course.</p>	<p>In most parts of the world, there is now a wide choice of off-the-shelf materials for General English teaching at all levels. Materials development by the teacher is not usually required or expected.</p>
<i>Methodology</i>	<p>Many learning tasks and activities will be the same as on a General English course, especially for teaching structures, vocabulary, and social English. Role-plays are common to both although the situations and language will differ. Business English also borrows ideas from management training—e.g. problem-solving, decision-making, and team-building tasks. Job-experienced learners will be given many opportunities to present and discuss aspects of their work.</p>	<p>There may be a broader range of techniques in use in the General English classroom. Many activities are designed to make learning more ‘fun’, and variety for its own sake is important to maintain interest and motivation in the absence of specific needs.</p>

Pre-course preparation Business English

Evaluation of progress

In colleges and universities there may be set (written and oral) examinations. In company language training there is usually no examination, but the training organization may use an off-the-shelf Business English test. In informal assessment, the emphasis is usually on evaluating the success of communication—i.e. did the speaker/writer express the idea precisely enough and appropriately enough for the target situation?

General English

Formal examinations include a written paper in which marks are awarded for grammatical accuracy as well as range of vocabulary and appropriacy. Oral examinations also take into account fluency, pronunciation and general communicative ability. Informal assessment (e.g. of class performance) is likely to focus mainly on grammatical accuracy, appropriacy of vocabulary and expression and pronunciation.