

## **Business English Courses: Towards Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic Competence**

**Elzbieta Jendrych**

Kozminski University, Poland

Head of the Language Centre and the Director of the Business English Postgraduate Program  
jendrych@alk.edu.pl

**Abstract:** Global business environment requires a new approach to needs analysis in business English courses for adult learners. With increasing demand for excellent business communicators from multinational corporations, language teachers, publishers and materials writers are expected to offer more effective language courses. To be good communicators learners need to acquire both linguistic and non-linguistic competence. The latter refers to sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence and includes four basic components: (1) practicing transferable business skills and managerial skills, (2) being aware of intercultural differences and business etiquette, (3) understanding the principles of business ethics and corporate social responsibility, and (4) applying the principles of effecting business writing. Time of the course permitting, these four components incorporated into a language course are likely to make it more attractive and useful to the learner. This approach to language teaching was assessed in a questionnaire – tertiary level students were asked to assess their competence, strengths and weaknesses. The results of the study suggest that students highly appreciate the non-linguistic course components. The respondents believe that these components are of key importance in effective business communication and contribute to increased employability and promotion opportunities.

**Key words:** ESP, business English, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence.

### **Introduction**

Teaching business English in a systematic way has over fifty year old history. In business English courses teaching priorities have changed in line with changing approaches and teaching methods. The relative importance of course components has also changed over time. The priority of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation was replaced by the priority of communication. Good language skills do not guarantee that a learner will be a good communicator in business situations. However, in the majority of cases they are fundamental to acquiring good communicative skills.

As a result of corpus studies we have witnessed attempts to describe language more accurately. Corpus studies have given “ample evidence of the existence of significant language patterns which have gone largely unrecorded in centuries of study” (Sinclair 1985: 251). Linguists started to create frequency lists of core vocabulary and collocations. Today, there are more and more linguists and teachers who believe that acquisition of vocabulary is central in second language acquisition (Zimmerman 1997; Nation 1990). Others think that not only single words but also larger phrasal units, so called ‘chunks’, are fundamental to improving fluency (McCarthy 1990). The concept of teaching language formulae rather than single words has many supporters.

Most teachers adapt new approaches to language teaching and try to improve their methodologies. Now, more than ever before, they should consider not only how to teach but also what to teach. According to the guidelines for language teaching and learning published in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) communicative competence includes three components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence.

In order to improve communicative competence teachers need to incorporate course components aimed at improving two non-linguistic competencies, i.e. sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Business English students need to achieve excellent communicative competence if they want to be high performers in their professional careers. If teachers and materials writers fail to recognize this need, they will not be able to offer effective language courses. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that inclusion of non-linguistic components is essential when designing business English courses of today.

## **Linguistic component**

The linguistic component of a business English course has always been central. Linguistic competence includes lexical, grammar, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competence. In courses of business English at tertiary level students usually need to improve their lexical competence in order to be able to communicate in typical business situations.

Without good lexical input courses cannot be effective. Nation and Newton (1997: 238) say that course designers need to “decide what vocabulary will be selected for teaching, how it will be sequenced, and how it will be presented”. They also explore one more important issue: incorporating vocabulary development into communicative activities. This element is crucial in business English courses at universities. Students can benefit most when they have a chance to develop their business vocabulary in communicative activities.

Proper selection of core business vocabulary, terminology, collocations, and phrases is very important in all business English courses. Without corpus studies the right selection of business terms and business lexis items is hardly possible. The same refers to selecting metaphors, acronyms and abbreviations and presenting them in the form of frequency lists excerpted from corpus texts. With this evidence language teachers and course-book writers know which items to include in their teaching materials and what to prioritize in the classroom practice. Students are more motivated if they know they learn the things that they will need most in real-life business situations.

Today, methodological constraints do not exist. Teachers usually use a mixture of approaches that best matches learners’ needs. The eclectic approach to teaching has resulted in a more flexible syllabus design and course design. Teachers are encouraged to develop tailor-made supplementary materials for specific group of learners. However, they should be encouraged to use corpus evidence. Lists of highest-frequency specialized business lexis in the form of single words, compounds and multi-word expressions as well as popular collocations and acronyms are highly recommended in all courses of business English for adults.

## **Sociolinguistic and pragmatic components**

The other two components of communicative competence, i.e. sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence, contribute greatly to effective business communication. Why are they particularly important in the language of business? Effective business communication helps in making new contacts, networking, winning new markets, getting more customers; in short - it helps in making money.

“Communication is an essential function of enterprise. Whether written or oral, it is the conduit through which an enterprise speaks to its customers. It is management’s mechanism for influencing employees and directing the work they do. And it is a means through which employees provide the information and feedback that management needs to make sound decisions” (Luecke 2003: ix). If an organization wants to create a favorable image and be perceived as a reputable enterprise, it needs good communicators. “An organization that is clear, consistent, and effective in its communications with customers, employees, shareholders, creditors, and the community is in a good position to establish trust and to elicit their collaboration” (Luecke 2003: ix).

With excellent communication skills businessmen can achieve more. People who are good communicators are much more successful at advancing in their careers than those who are poor communicators. Language students know that and they understand that better communication competence means higher employability, higher salary and better promotion opportunities. That is why they need business English courses that can improve their communicative competence. Linguistic competence, important as it is, will not make them good communicators.

In fact, experience shows that there are four areas that need to be incorporated into business English courses: (1) business skills and managerial skills, (2) business culture and etiquette, (3) business ethics and corporate social responsibility, and (4) business writing.

## **Business skills**

Speaking about Business English, Harmer says that “an enormous growth area in English language teaching has been in the area of Business English because many students perceive a need for the kind of language which will allow them to operate in the world of English-medium commerce. Once again there is specific vocabulary and language events (presenting to colleagues, the language of contracts, etc.) which are

unlikely to appear in a general English course, but which are vitally important for business students. And so teachers find themselves training classes in such procedures as the art of negotiating, the correct use of phones and e-mail, or the reading of business reports” (Harmer 2003 :10).

What does it mean in business English teaching practice? What students and language teachers need to do is first to learn/teach the core business terms, and then to go beyond language correctness, mastery of grammar, business lexis, and phraseology. In a course of business English at a higher level the traditional business skills of negotiations, presentations, meetings and telephoning need to be combined with managerial skills. Now, such new skills as conflict management, assigning roles in a team, setting tasks and goals and communicating them, and organizing teamwork also need to be incorporated into a business English course.

The importance of practicing business and management skills in a course of Business English is confirmed by many experts in ESP teaching (Harmer 2003); (McGrath 2002). McGrath is of the opinion that “knowledge and skill combine in efficient communication. However, teaching for knowledge is very different from teaching for skill. Knowledge can be ‘presented’ or ‘discovered’; it can also be forgotten. Skill, on the other hand, can only be acquired through practice, and once acquired is relatively easily maintained. The fact is that while we can ‘teach’ knowledge, we cannot teach skill. Skill has to be learned, and practice is a central element in that learning” (McGrath 2002: 98).

Many skills needed in the world of business are transferrable which means that they can be acquired. Learning new skills requires practice in performing various realistic business roles. It is usually done either in groups (e.g. negotiations, meetings) or individually (e.g. sales presentations, business writing). Students can practice new skills most effectively through task-based learning. This method requires students’ involvement in real-life business tasks such as e.g. preparing an offer for a client, applying for a job or interviewing job applicants, or discussing financial statements. Here, instead of doing language exercises students perform various realistic business tasks in typical business situations and practice transferrable skills.

The case study method is particularly effective in the process of acquiring new managerial skills because it is an active form of learning. The teacher is only a facilitator and it is students who analyze and solve a given business problem themselves. Generally, students like to solve business cases. The case study method gives them a sense of independence and competition and a feeling that they are decision-makers. Two factors are of key importance: (1) students have a sense of achievement and progression which motivates them to learn more and (2) they practice language skills in a very natural way.

## **Business culture and etiquette**

It is a challenging time for business people operating in a competitive environment. In addition to business skills, a successful business career also implies awareness of cultural differences, being tolerant to other cultures and using this knowledge to the benefit of the company. Organizations are becoming more multicultural; many companies operate internationally, use diverse labor and communicate with partners and customers from various regions who represent different cultures.

Business people need to know and understand their own cultural background, their attitudes and priorities. If they operate globally, they also need to know and respect other cultures. To avoid culture clashes with their business partners, they have to be flexible and tolerant and remember that cultural differences cannot be an obstacle to transacting business and attracting more customers. For teachers and learners of business English it means that a component of intercultural communication needs to be added either as a separate subject or as a component of a language course.

The cultural component can be helpful in identifying the characteristics of a given culture, it can teach students what to do and what to avoid, how to address people, how to greet them or how to use body language properly. Learners who know the dress code, business etiquette and who have good manners are likely to be more effective in their future business contacts. ‘Manners make man’ – this old proverb is true in the world of global business nowadays. Those who do not know the principles of business etiquette may find it difficult to establish and maintain good business relationships. Mistakes resulting from not knowing the etiquette may be costly to a company and an individual. Therefore, the basic rules of business etiquette such as exchanging business cards, extending invitations and accepting or declining them, etc. should also be taught.

With better understanding of globalization processes, a cultural component has been included in many business schools curricula. Students are taught courses in intercultural or cross-cultural communication and

business etiquette. Such courses can give learners the basic information on the main typologies of business culture (e.g. monochronic versus polychronic, pro-partner versus pro-transaction, multi-active versus linear-active or reactive, and collectivist versus individualist) and of cultural do's and taboos in various regions and countries.

### **Business ethics and corporate social responsibility**

Business people also need to understand generally accepted principles of business ethics and rules of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Rarely can one find a business organization that ignores these issues. A company which violates ethical or moral rules or does nothing for the community is no longer considered a reputable company. Students need to know which corporate practices as well as individual and collective behaviors are desirable and which are publicly condemned. They need to be exposed to such negative practices as tax evasion, using child labour, insider trading, cooking the books or mobbing. A business English course can be a good forum for discussing ethical issues of that kind.

Business organizations also have to know and respect the rules of environmental protection, 'going green' and sustainable growth. The general public expects companies to keep the environment free from contamination and pollution. Generating high profits at all costs and polluting the environment will quickly and inevitably devastate a good image of the company and, in extreme cases, lead to its bankruptcy. That is why, business people need to learn how to follow the standards and good practice guidelines and how to avoid bad publicity.

### **Business writing**

Business writing is of key importance for business professionals. It is a typical pragmatic competence – here students need to know the principles according to which messages are organized, structured and arranged, how messages are used to perform communicative functions and how messages should be sequenced (Council of Europe 2001). Without this pragmatic competence students with a very good command of English are not able to write a proper business letter or report. They need to learn what layout, style and tone to use as well as how to structure, organize and sequence information.

Typically business English courses at universities include the component of business writing. Students are first exposed to authentic examples showing models of commercial correspondence, memoranda, business reports, contracts, financial statements and advertising materials. Then they are given a scenario of a business situation which requires a response in writing. The basic principles of business writing include having a clear purpose, staying on the topic, economizing on words and using short sentences. General guidelines on the proper language use for each format are also useful.

The only method to learn effective business writing is the trial and error method. Long experience in teaching business English to university students shows that it is the only successful way to learn business writing. It may be painful and time-consuming for both students and teachers but it works.

### **Questionnaire study**

More than 120 upper-intermediate and advanced students of Kozminski University were asked to complete a questionnaire. It included questions on self assessment of their linguistic competence and on what they consider to be the weak and strong points in their linguistic competence. The respondents were in the middle of their business English course. They were divided into three groups: full-time undergraduate students, part-time undergraduate students, and students of business English postgraduate course. The results are presented below.

Table 1. Self assessment of linguistic competence in the three groups (%).

Score	Speaking	Writing	Speaking comprehension	Reading comprehension
Excellent	24	14	33	35
Good	44	59	50	55
Sufficient	20	24	13	9
Insufficient	10	3	4	1

Table 2. Self assessment of strengths (%\*).

Component	Full-time students	Part-time students	Postgraduate students	Total
Business vocabulary	37	50	66	49
Business writing	35	36	57	41
Business culture and etiquette	16	33	40	28
Business skills	12	5	29	14

Table 3. Self assessment of weaknesses (%\*).

Component	Full-time students	Part-time students	Postgraduate students	Total
Business vocabulary	35	40	29	35
Business writing	35	29	31	32
Business culture and etiquette	8	2	20	9
Business skills	33	52	34	40

\* In question 2 and 3 the respondents could give more than one answer.

The only finding which requires author's comment is a relatively low number of full-time and part-time students who considered poor understanding of business culture and etiquette to be the main weakness in their linguistic competence. It can be explained by the fact that they had taken a course on business culture and etiquette before the questionnaire was completed.

## Conclusions

Language learners have new needs resulting from the rapidly changing business environment of today. They expect that language courses will make them good communicators in the global world of business. Language teachers should try to understand students' new needs and be open to changes. It takes a lot of time and energy to learn how to teach the non-linguistic components. Yet, it seems to be inevitable if language teachers want to be successful in meeting the changing needs of their students.

The paper demonstrates how language teachers can best satisfy the new learners' needs in courses of business English for university students. By incorporating the four additional components into a business English course they provide their students with an opportunity to practice the language and to improve their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. It seems that quite frequently sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence cannot be developed properly at tertiary level due to a limited number of hours of instruction in a language course. As a result of such limitations, teachers tend to concentrate on linguistic competence rather than non-linguistic one. Consequently, learners' communicative competence cannot be improved.

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