

DEVELOPMENT OF BUSINESS ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS

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Abstract. The paper deals with Business English language learning techniques: role play, simulation, projects and case study. The paper analyses Task-Based Learning method which is associated with the communicative approach. The major concern of the paper is the use of the case study method in teaching Business English. The paper emphasizes the benefits and opportunities of the case study method as well as the role case studies play in practising and developing business communication skills: meeting, presentation and negotiation as well as management skills: team working, decision making, problem solving, critical thinking and organisational skills.

Keywords: business English, communicative skills, case study.

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1. Introduction

The paper discusses my experience in teaching Business English language course to first and second-year students at a Higher Business School. Before entering our school students studied a lot of grammar, language functions and vocabulary of the English language at a secondary school. Their levels of general English are intermediate and/or upper-intermediate. At our school they study Business English language in order to develop communication and professional competence.

Business English covers topic areas varying from Human Resource and Management to Marketing and Accounting. The focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world; instead, it is integrated into the school curriculum. Business English combines professional subject matter and English language teaching. Such a combination is highly motivating because students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study. Being able to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases their motivation.

The following are the aims of the Business English course:

- To develop students' reading, speaking, listening and writing skills in Business English in order for the students to understand a range of work- or business-related information and to respond appropriately when required.
- To develop students' Business communication skills: meeting, presentation, negotiation in

order for the students to be able to interact in a range of work- or business-related communications.

- To acquaint students with specialist terminology in order for the students to understand and produce a range of language which will be clearly understood in professional environment.
- To familiarise students with basic business concepts in order for the students to be able to communicate effectively in international working environment

To achieve these goals we could not use old-fashioned methods of teaching Business English focusing on teaching lexical and grammatical structures. The idea was that the students should use language in controlled exercises until they have mastered its structures to a high degree, and only then begin to talk freely.

These days it is generally accepted that language is more than a set of grammatical rules with attendant sets of vocabulary to be memorised. It is a dynamic resource for creating meaning.

Now most courses emphasize the importance of fostering students' ability to communicate in the foreign language rather than their skill in constructing correct sentences. Communication practice has become one of the most important components of the teaching process. And Business English course books focus on developing communicative skills engaging students in learner-centred activities, such as role play and simulation, projects and case study. Carrying out communicative tasks requires active involvement on the part

of the student, which in turn makes the lessons more motivating and more effective.

If students believe that in a language course they do tasks relevant for their future professional communication, they are more motivated to learn (Donna 2000).

2. Methodology for using communicative approach

A traditional method for the organization of language lessons has long been the PPP approach (presentation, practice, production). With this method individual language items are presented by the teacher, then practised in the form of spoken and written exercises, and then used by the students in less controlled speaking or writing activities.

An alternative to the PPP method is the Test-Teach-Test approach (TTT), in which the production stage comes first without any input from the teacher. This is followed by the teacher dealing with some of the grammatical or lexical problems that arose in the first stage and the students then being required either to perform the initial task again or to perform a similar task (Bowen 2002).

These are the basic stages of a TTT approach:

1. Setting task for students to use language with the aim to find out what students already know or do not yet know
2. Giving feedback on language use with the aim to show students where they are with the language
3. Introducing language needed or reformulating what students were trying to say with the aim to clarify and introduce the language students need to communicate more effectively
4. Giving further practice with the aim to provide an opportunity to experiment with the new language

Jane Willis (1996), in her book 'A Framework for Task-Based Learning', outlines a third method for organizing lessons - **Task-Based Learning (TBL)**, which is associated with the communicative approach and takes account of the need for authentic communication.

What is a task? A task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome (Willis 1996).

The focus in the task is on meaning not on form. This is where a task is different from a practice activity, where the focus is on language form rather than meaning, and students experiment with some lexis or grammar that the teacher has chosen.

TBL provides learners with natural exposure (input), chances to use language to express what

they want to mean (output), to focus on improving their own language and to analyse and practise forms. TBL is more likely to keep learners motivated since it builds on whatever language they know in a positive way. Learners are actively engaged throughout the task cycle, and get chances to think for themselves and express themselves in the security of their group. They are more autonomous and feel empowered, gaining satisfaction from successfully achieving things through language (Willis, Willis 2007).

Pedagogically, task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices:

- A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom (Nunan 2004).

The main advantages of TBL are that language is used for a genuine purpose meaning that real communication should take place, and that at the stage where the learners are preparing their report for the whole class, they are forced to consider language form in general rather than concentrating on a single form (as in the PPP model). Whereas the aim of the PPP model is to lead from accuracy to fluency, the aim of TBL is to integrate all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency. The range of tasks available (reading texts, listening texts, problem-solving, role-plays, questionnaires, etc) offers a great deal of flexibility in this model and should lead to more motivating activities for the learners (Bowen 2002).

These are the basic stages of a TBL approach:

1. Pre-task stage: Introduction to the topic and task.

The teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, helps students understand task instructions and prepare. Students may hear a recording of others doing a similar task.

2. Task cycle: Task.

Students do the task in pairs or small groups. The teacher monitors from a distance.

Planning.

Students prepare to report to the whole class (orally or in writing) how they did the task, what they decided or discovered.

Report.

Some groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports, and compare results.

3. Language focus: Analysis.

Students examine and discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording.

Practice.

The teacher conducts practice of new words, phrases and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the analysis.

Jane Willis identified seven types of speaking and writing tasks. The tasks are presented in order of complexity – low to high levels:

1. Listing (brainstorming, fact finding)
2. Ordering and Sorting (sequencing, rank-ordering, classifying)
3. Matching
4. Comparing and Contrasting (finding similarities or differences)
5. Problem solving
6. Sharing personal experiences
7. Projects and creative tasks

TBL approach, in general, and task types, in particular, has been developed for English as a Second Language classroom. Now a question arises: Can they be applied to the Business English classroom?

The answer is positive as Business English students are faced with real world tasks and given the authority to decide how to solve business problems using the target language they have already acquired at Business English classes and knowledge of subject areas gained in special courses.

Examples of task types for Business English lessons.

1. Listing, e.g. motivation factors, roles of management, good presentation
2. Ordering and Sorting, e.g. salaries, success factors
3. Comparing, e.g. companies, work and conditions, economies
4. Problem solving, e.g. business role-plays and simulations, case studies, negotiations, dealing with complaints
5. Sharing personal experiences, e.g. career paths
6. Projects and creative tasks, e.g. setting up a business, an educational institution, launching marketing campaigns, product design

The next five chapters (3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) focus on task-based learner-centered problem-solving communicative activities, such as role-play, simulation, projects and case study with particular emphasis on methodology for using case studies.

3. Role – play

Role- play can be a particularly effective way of providing communication practice for the students of a Business English course, and it is invariably popular.

Role-play is one of the whole gamut of communicative techniques which develops fluency in language students, which promotes interaction in the classroom, and which increases motivation (Ladousse 1994).

The students in role play will have a situation to work with and their role card will state who they are, what they want to do, and what their attitude is.

The advantages of including role- play in the Business English course:

- Role-play is a task-based learner-centered activity which is usually based on real-life situations.
- Role- play gives the students the opportunity to practise the new language that they have been working on in the course.
- It helps to make the teacher aware of gaps in their knowledge and the language that they need to practise and learn.
- Role-play provides useful practice in the kinds of language the students may eventually need to use in similar situations outside the classroom, in work- or business-related context.
- Role- play can help the teacher to assess the progress of students; as they are fully involved in their activity the teacher can observe their actions and also keep a check on their language. The role of a teacher is no more that of instructor-corrector-controller but becomes more of a facilitator allowing her/him to wander freely round the class, giving help where needed, assessing the performance of individual students, noting language mistakes. The teacher can address some of the points arising from these observations in the feedback session after the role play.
- In addition to providing fluency practice, role-play also involves the development of critical thinking: the ability to generalize from examples, to draw analogies, judge priorities, infer causes, on the one hand and debating skills: listening to what someone else has to say, not interrupting, speaking relevantly and clearly, being articulate, arguing the issue through, on the other hand.

What sort of role play activities would be appropriate in a business English class? Here are just a few possible examples:

1. A is the managing director of a small company; B is the advertising director and wants

to advertise the products on television. The MD is keen on advertising in newspapers and is unconvinced about the value of television advertising (in terms of costs and returns) so B has to try to persuade the MD.

2. One day staff find that prices have risen by over 50 % in the staff restaurant. This is because the company has stopped subsidising all drinks and meals. Their union representative meets the general manager to discuss the situation. A is the Union representative who wants to negotiate a solution to the problem. A's objectives are: to get subsidised meals back immediately or to postpone the cuts in subsidies until the staff has been properly consulted. B is the General Manager, whose objectives are: to listen carefully to what the union representative says and to explain why the cuts in subsidies are necessary (Cotton *et al.* 2010a).

3. A is the US owner of an up-market chain of restaurants. He phones the supplier and wants him to make regular deliveries of lobster and crab to his restaurants in New York. B is a Canadian supplier of shellfish and does not offer to supply the owner, as he has too many orders at present and is under-staffed. A has to try to persuade B to supply (Cotton *et al.* 2010b).

The role play task is to stick strictly to the instructions on role cards and use specific language functions, such as: giving opinions, asking for opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, making suggestions, persuading another student to change his/her opinion, etc.

Many students find this type of practice easier and more attractive than ordinary discussions as they find it easier to express themselves from behind the mask of being someone else; others find it simply more stimulating and exciting.

4. Simulation

Simulation is similar to role play except that in a simulation the participants are free to take their own decisions and are not directed in any way by constraints laid down on a role

In contrast to a role-play, in a simulation game there are likely to be more than two participants and each is given a role, for example:

The Polar Bear Ice Cream Company, LTD plans to introduce one of the following to the market next year:

- a) Teddy bars: chocolate ice-cream on a stick shaped like teddy bears.
- b) Multivitamin bars: a 10-fruit sherbet on a stick with vitamins.

- c) Champagne-truffle bars: champagne-flavoured ice-cream with a chocolate truffle coating

A is the Managing Director who favours option b) and are against option c); B is the Export Sales Manager who is very much for option c) and definitely against option b); C is the Marketing Manager who is very much for option a) and definitely against option b); D is the Production Manager who is very much for option b) and definitely against option a); E is the Domestic Sales Manager who is very much for option c) and definitely against option a); F is the Purchasing Manager who is very much for option a) and against option c). (Lloyd 1996).

In simulations the students use language they have learnt, and knowledge of business topics they have acquired before.

Although role-play tasks and simulations are very similar, there are also significant differences.

- Simulations involve more participants.
- They take longer than role-play activities.
- They are more suitable for more advanced learners as the language used is more advanced and complex.
- The focus is on general fluency rather than specific language functions.
- There are no constraints (i.e. on role cards) on how the participants behave. Each participant has a role but how they act out that role is completely up to them.
- Simulations take quite a lot of preparation but if they work well they can be reused in future classes.
- Because of the competitive nature of the simulation, simulations are invariably popular with the students and they get intensely involved in them as the activity progresses.

“Business Roles 1 and 2” (Crowther-Alwyn 1997, 2007) are very valuable resource books containing numerous simulations with prescribed roles for students of Business English. David Evans (Evans 2003) offers 14 business situations for analysis and discussion, Marjorie Rosenberg (Rosenberg 2005) created activities with the element of fun, Paul Emmerson (Emmerson 2007) suggests interesting topics for discussion and provides numerous activities for teaching business communication skills, Adrian Wallwork (Wallwork 1997a,b) wrote very valuable books for intermediate and advanced students containing many topic-based discussions.

All these teacher resource books have been successfully used in the Business English classroom.

5. Projects

This is the most ambitious activity and is suitable for mature, advanced students. Groups of students are set the task of planning in detail some sort of socio-economic enterprise: a community, an educational institution and/or a business with certain given resources, or they may be asked to launch an advertising campaign..

To successfully establish and run a business, students create a business plan in which they set the nature and objectives of the business, define the state of the market, target customers, competitors, product positioning, product marketing, personnel, premises, equipment required, funding, expenses and expected profits.

Students may be asked to set up a college or university. The new institution can be based on that which the students are at present attending. They usually have strong convictions about what needs change and reform; here is their chance to express their criticisms in a constructive and imaginative way: if they had the job of rebuilding and replanning the whole institution, how would they do it? Points to be considered should include: finance, size and scope, type of students, staffing, range of subjects offered, facilities, geographical position and layout, organization and administration, extra-curricular activities, rules (Ur 1997).

Students may be asked to prepare an advertising campaign for one of the products or services. They have to define the campaign's key message, the product USP, the target audience, choose advertising media and depending on their choice either to write the text, the script or to use a storyboard.

Projects provide an opportunity to practise and develop students' management skills, such as team working, problem solving, decision making, time management, need assessment, result forecasting as well as linguistic competence by consolidating business vocabulary.

6. Case study method

6.1. What is a case study?

A case study describes a problematic real-life situation that needs to be solved.

Business case studies begin with the description of a company profile followed by additional information presented in the form of charts, graphs and tables. At our classes only case studies written by language teachers are appropriate rather than case studies written by business lecturers. The former are short and adapted to the language classroom while the latter may be 10–50 pages long.

Such famous authors of „Market Leader” series of pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced coursebooks as David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent (Cotton *et.al* 2010a,b, 2011a,b) as well as Mark Powell with Ron Martinez and Rosi Jillet (Powell *et.al* 2004) and Tonya Trappe with Graham Tullis (Trappe *et.al* 2005,2006) integrated mini cases and/or dilemmas at the end of each chapter dealing with specific business topic, whereas John Allison with Mark Powell (Allison *et.al* 2005) collected 28 realistic Business English case studies in a separate book which is part of the “In Company” series.

6.2. Benefits of using case studies at business English language classes

Case study is a powerful learning tool for Business English students:

- It is a fluency-based activity allowing the spontaneous use of the English language.
- It simulates an authentic working experience requiring them to get involved in managerial communication.
- It provides a high motivation for English learners as they are thrown into real-life situations and given the authority to decide how to solve business problems.
- It is a useful task-based activity representing the student – centered approach.

Think about the traditional teacher – centered method, in which the instructor is the hub and all communication goes through him or her. Learning a language and communication skills requires active participation. If only one student can speak at a time, how much learning can be accomplished? With the case study method, on the other hand, students are allowed to communicate in their individual groups, thereby multiplying the opportunities to produce language and to be corrected, as well as to practice communication skills (Rodgers 2006).

It provides an opportunity:

- 1) to practice a variety of business topics relating to Human Resources, Management, Marketing, Finance;
- 2) to practice and develop language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing;
- 3) to practice and develop a variety of business communication skills relating to agreeing and disagreeing, checking and clarifying, discussing advantages and disadvantages, justifying proposals and reaching agreement, chairing and participating in meetings, negotiating a contract, giving a presentation, etc.;

- 4) to develop analytical, managerial skills such as team working, decision making, problem solving as well as critical thinking and reflective learning;
- 5) to develop linguistic competence by consolidating already acquired and being introduced to new lexis ;
- 6) to develop writing competence by taking the minutes , writing the agenda of the meeting and as a follow-up activity writing a letter, memorandum, a report, an e-mail, etc.;
- 7) to develop students' organizational skills and encourage collaborative learning .

6.3. The use of case studies to develop business communication skills

The teacher should pre-teach the language required to discuss the case study. It is important to select the skill you would like to focus on and teach the specific language.

If we take meetings as an example, we could do the following:

provide students with useful language input for both the chairperson and the participants, such as the language of agreeing and disagreeing, hedging, expressing opinions, checking understanding, interrupting, referring back, reaching agreement, finding a compromise, coming to a consensus, making your point, making recommendations, inviting people to speak, opening and closing the meeting, etc.

If we take negotiations as an example, we could pre-teach the language of putting forward a proposal, agreeing and disagreeing with a proposal, imposing conditions, making concessions, asking for clarification, summarising what has been said, postponing a decision or playing for time, concluding a deal, etc.

After finding a solution to the problem the students make presentations in groups. Students should be familiarised with presentation skills, such as introducing the talk, indicating the structure and sequences of your talk, moving from one section of your talk to another, highlighting, summarising, inviting questions, etc.

Business English materials which have structured and lexical approach to business skills (Emmerson 1999 a, b, c, Mascull 2002, Goodale 1997) have been successfully used in the Business English classroom for practicing and developing students' communication skills.

If students hold a press conference, the teacher should pre-teach the skills of asking and answering difficult questions, using various intonations ranging from neutral and/or polite to forceful and/or aggressive. (Cotton *et.al* 2011a).

6.4. Stages of the case study

The following are the main stages of the case study:

- Case study introduction.

Students may be given to read the case in advance. The questions and discussion points provide a means for the teacher to check that students have understood the key points.

- Defining the problem.

Students discuss the situation in the company, analyze and discuss quantitative data, make SWOT analysis and present company goals.

- Problem solving.

Students are divided into groups of four-five students to analyse the problems and find solution. Students participate in a meeting or negotiation to focus on finding a solution to the problem. In case of a meeting a chairperson is selected to lead the meeting and an agenda is drawn up. Students should take detailed notes during the meeting. They identify options open to the company, evaluate the options, select the best option and draw up an action plan

- Presenting the solution(s).

Students present their action plan in groups. To ensure active participation of all students we ask the students to share the presentation speaking time equally.

- Evaluating the solution(s).

Students discuss the different solutions. A consensus should be reached on the main points raised in the presentation.

- Follow-up (Optional)

Students may be asked as a follow-up activity to write an e-mail, memorandum, a letter, a report, etc.

Supplementary material giving suggestions and advice on how to develop students' written communication has been used at Business English classes (Taylor 1999, Comfort *et al.* 1998).

- Feedback

It's not fair to students to ask them to put a lot of effort into something and then to disregard the result.

The ideal Follow-up phase involves learners evaluating their performance themselves. The next best thing is for them to evaluate each other. Only if they do neither of these should you use your notes to make comments yourself (Crowther-Alwyn 2007).

What the groups have done must be assessed, criticized, admired, argued with, or even simply listened to with interest. This feedback session is an essential part of the activity as a whole.

Feedback can be organized in different ways: by giving the correct results, where there are any;

by comparing the solutions of different groups; by trying to collate the various solutions into a class version.

It is most important not to leave the problems set hanging in the air.

7. Correcting language mistakes

Some teachers think correcting language mistakes should never be done in fluency exercises on the grounds that it is discouraging, interferes with the flow of speech.

I personally disagree with this. If I do not correct glaring errors, other students will, probably more rudely and less efficiently. A student often knows he may be saying something wrong or may simply not know how to say it at all. And he will learn more from being given the appropriate form or item at a moment when he needs it to express himself. Withholding such help often hampers the discussion and discourages students more than giving it. But correcting and supplying language on the spot should be done without stopping the flow of the discussion; otherwise the fluency activity may become unsuccessful.

In general, when the students are engaged in fluency activity, it is better for the teacher to circulate unobtrusively, making language notes. At the end of the discussion the teacher feeds back the language by writing selected language points in context one by one on the board giving students a chance to supply words or correct mistakes first. When students give presentations the teacher may write individual feedback sheets for students, making it easier for them to review their mistakes out of class (Emmerson 2007).

Instead of leading the class, the teacher's role becomes that of a discussion facilitator who monitors discussions and provides the students with vocabulary, grammatical structures and content feedback.

8. Conclusions

Communicative activities: role-play, simulation, projects and case study have become the most important Business English task-based learning techniques nowadays as they develop communicative competence by putting students in real-life situations, where they can use language actively and practice and develop communication skills.

Case study is a powerful learning tool for Business English students as it simulates an authentic working experience requiring them to get involved in work-or business-related communications. It provides a high motivation for English learners as they are put into real-life situations and

find themselves in the position of authority to decide how to solve business problems. . Case study provides the framework for a task-based learning with the focus on the solution of the problem as the outcome of the task.

Case study method allows the students to practice and develop their communication and management skills, such as presentation, meeting, negotiation skills, as well as problem-solving, decision-making, teamworking, critical thinking, all of which are required in a modern business context.

The facilitator role of a teacher helps create a partnership in learning between the teacher and students, thus greatly enhancing the learning experience.

In the task-based approach to learning fostered by TBL method, the students will achieve communicative competence in Business English more efficiently.

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