TBE

TEACHING

BUSINESS

ENGLISH

This module is an introduction to Business English and is intended to give you brief idea of what is expected of a Business English teacher. For the comprehensive TBE course which gives you the TBE qualification you will have to complete the 120hr Comprehensive In-class TESOL course at the institute first, as practical experience in an EFL context is a necessity.

INTRODUCTION
WHAT IS BUSINESS ENGLISH?

Business English is that branch of language teaching that specializes in business topics, concepts, vocabulary and jargon. Its popularity has increased phenomenally in recent years, fanned by the flames of globalisation. English is currently the lingua franca of the world, being the language of common communication in science and technology, medicine, international politics and commerce. In fact, it has been estimated that globally, more English is spoken by non-native speakers than by native speakers. In China, for example, business people daily conduct commerce with clients in Europe, South America and India, to name just a few countries, and the language used to conduct negotiations is English.

In non-English countries with a developing or developed economy, the growth rate of business English has ensured that trainers who specialize in this field of language teaching will not only be assured of finding a job, but will be paid quite handsomely as well. There tends to be more prestige attached to teaching Business English than there is to General English and given the demands on the corporate trainer, it is not difficult to understand why.

Not only do corporate trainers need to understand a broad range of complex business concepts, but they need to be able to express these in clear and simple terms to their students who may be specialists in their field, but beginners at speaking English. Although it is often said that trainers are teaching language rather than business skills which the students already possess in their own language, the reality is that the business student does expect the trainer to have enough knowledge of the business world to be able to set interesting and engaging tasks and role plays based on these. Language is more than just about words and grammar – it always needs to be set in a context and in business English this context is invariably business ,and if the client, for example, is a stockbroker, he/she would expect the case studies selected by the trainer to have some bearing on the world of stocks and shares.

Business clients also expect high degrees of professionalism from the corporate trainer and hold a trainer who has had experience in the business world in high regard. If the trainer is able to cite examples from his/her experience, this can be especially valuable as a point of discussion for a lesson. While the client may frequently be late for a lesson on account of business demands, it is unthinkable for the trainer to be late. The trainer needs to arrive for every lesson punctually and fully prepared. To "wing" a lesson in Business English is to expose yourself as unprofessional and it will not go by unnoticed by the client.

Intra-company training courses such as induction training, sales training, customer service training or anagement training , have moved a long way from the talk and chalk lectures of the old days, and professional trainers in the corporate world tend to offer dynamic, engaging and interactive training courses that are carefully structured and proficiently presented. Powerpoint presentations in the workplace are expected to be sophisticated, well thought out and highly polished. The business clients expect no less of their English teacher. Sitting behind a desk week after week, plodding through a standard coursebook is not going to impress the client. Expectations are high and corporate trainers should be prepared to step up to the mark.

If they are able to do this, the rewards are high, not only in terms of personal selffulfillment but also in terms of the material remuneration the trainer can expect. We hope that what you learn on this course will be the first step in a career of that will open new worlds to you. Starting something new is always difficult, and but if you stay the course, you will surprised at the opportunities that await you in the most unexpected places.

LIZ BIGGS

Course creator

What makes Business English different from General English?

A. Client profile

B. Location and facilities

C. Grouping

D. Trainer's role

E. Course syllabus

F. Course materials

G. Intercultural competence

A. Client profile

An adult General English class usually contains a variety of people from students and career professionals to housewives. They probably have a good idea of why they need to learn English but this is not always specifically addressed by the teacher, especially in a large class. The topics are usually general and based on situations that simulate everyday interaction with people in the home, in society and in the workplace. Unless trainers are called upon to teach general Business English classes, they will find that corporate clients know exactly why they need to learn English as it is has been shown by lack of proficiency in their English performance skills in the workplace. They also have a clear idea of when they use English, to whom, and what functions they need to perform in English. Business English is, in effect, more narrowly prescribed and more goal directed than General English.

Within the groups there can be people in high managerial positions, as well as low people right at the lower rung of the management ladder. At times when these are combined in the same classroom, there may be a problem with interaction and class dynamics as the lower status person tends to constantly defer to the higher one regardless of relative proficiency.

Many business English students work in a technologically sophisticated environment and they expect the trainer to be able to use multimedia to make the lessons more interesting. Hence it helps if trainers are able to enhance their lessons by using Powerpoint presentations, video clips or material downloaded from the Internet which is projected onto a large screen.

If the trainer is on contract to a corporate client, the spokesperson for the client is usually the Human Resource (HR) manager rather than the students themselves. This HR manager often determines the students' needs and decides on the course content. If there are any complaints about any aspect of the course from either side, they are usually directed through the HR manager. Often this manager's ideas on what the students need is quite different from that of the students themselves. The Corporate Trainer needs to tread a delicate path in balancing the needs of the students with the requirements of the HR department.

At times, a trainer may be asked to teach a general Business English class to students who have no specific workplace need, but would like to increase their proficiency in English with some focus on business concepts and terminology. This class will bear more resemblance to a General English class than to Business English as the topics are usual preselected from coursebooks with very little, if any, direct relevance to specific needs. The topics, however, are always business related even if in a general sense.

B LOCATION AND FACILITIES

General English is usually taught in the language school's location and the teacher knows exactly what facilities there are and is able to arrange the room in advance. In many language schools the classrooms are regular rectangles with the chairs in a squared horseshoe facing the teacher and the white board. There is plenty of room to move around the room and plenty of room to configure groups.

Usually business English takes place in-company and the trainer is required to travel to the client's place of business. The client determines the room in which the classes take place and frequently this is a conference room with a large central table and not much room for moving around. Often the trainer only gets access to the room minutes before the class is due to start, and moving furniture around is sometimes frowned upon by the company. The layout of the room, thus, tends to be static. The trainer needs to be flexible and adapt to this by using corridors, foyers and any public spaces available for group and pairwork and to keep the atmosphere dynamic.

If trainers wish to show a video clip or do a listening activity, they may need to arrange beforehand to have the equipment available. This is often done by liaising with the HR or with the class representative. If the class is one-on-one of comprises only 2 or 3 students, trainers can make use of their personal laptops or ask one of the students if they would be willing to allow their laptop to be used for the lesson.
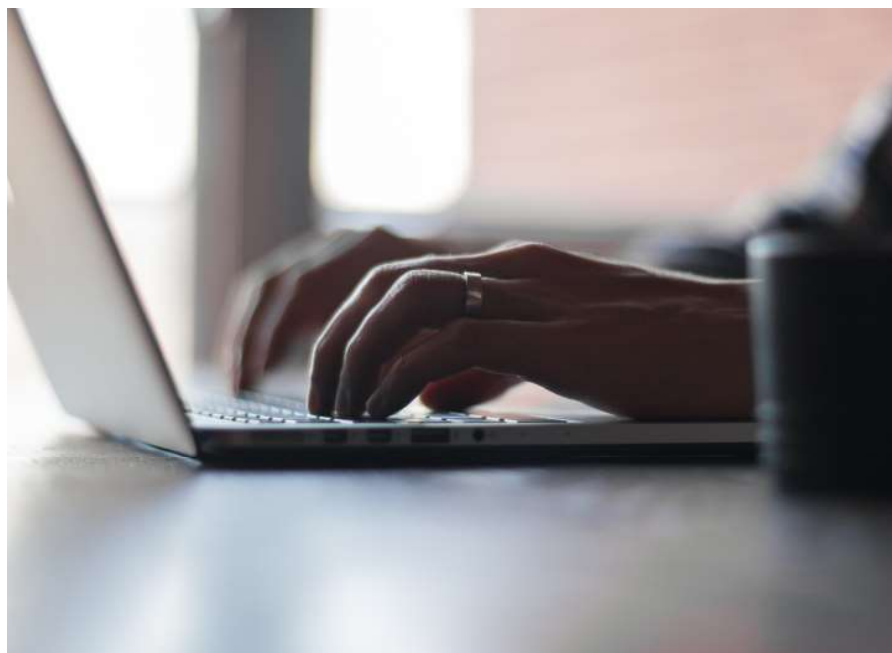
C. GROUPING

With General English, the levels tend to be homogeneous and the teacher does not have the problem of dealing with a wide range of different levels in one class. It is an exception, not a rule to get students that are all the same level in Business English. Unless the number of students is so large that splitting the class is feasible, companies are not usually prepared to pay for separate classes for different level students, and ask for the group to be taught together. This is very demanding for the trainer, who needs to use flexible grouping techniques in class to ensure that the lower levels aren't left behind and the upper levels aren't bored. Often this requires creating different tasks for the same activity. For example in a role play, the lower levels could be given role cards that are within their capabilities, whereas the upper levels could be verbally given a description of the roles they need to play.

A feature of corporate training is that the classes are often one-on-one and the course has been designed specifically for one student's needs. Although it is quite intensive working with one student – (the trainer has to be the partner in the role play, and then give the student feedback afterwards) it is easier to make the course relevant to the students' needs, as the trainer can focus the materials and the techniques on the students specific workplace requirements. The student can even bring in materials that he/she uses in the workplace to target the training even more narrowly.

While a class with more than 15 students is not ideal, it often does happen. Trainers who get large classes should make the most of the lively atmosphere that usually ensues when a group of people who know each other well are gathered together. Pair work and group discussions are even more effective when there is a wide range of opinions. It does mean that the trainer has to move faster round the room when monitoring though, and feedback is specific to only a few students as the trainer cannot possibly hope to cover corrections for all of them. They can, however, rotate the feedback so that each student gets at least three helpful comments on their performance per lesson.

D. Trainer's role

Language teacher

First and foremost, the trainer is a language teacher, with a solid understanding and awareness of their own language. Trainers are expected to notice specific errors their students make, understand why they make them, and the best ways to correct them. The trainer should understand which language items are important for the client's job and be able to input this language in a relevant and interesting context.

They should understand the importance of recycling the language often until it becomes a natural part of the students' speech.

Consultant

The Business English Trainer, unlike the General English Teacher, is expected to have some specialist knowledge of business matters and to have had some experience in the corporate world. They are expected to have a good business vocabulary and understand the general and somewhat more specialized concepts pertaining to marketing, finance, economics, retail etc. The students frequently treat the trainer as a consultant when faced with a business matter they are not sure of or don't understand.

Coach

Although the corporate trainer is primarily a language teacher, they often teache other communication skills such as giving a presentation, or writing a Powerpoint presentation. These go beyond the boundaries of pure language. As coach, the trainer's job is to make the students aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in these skills, and guide them in ways that will improve the latter. Often these are soft skills, such as taking control of a telephone caller who is dominating the conversation, or projecting confidence when giving a presentation.

The Professional

In places that have a formal corporate culture, trainers are expected by the clients to look and behave like the model of a successful businessperson. This means that they should always be dressed as if they have just come from the office. In many cultures the trainer is judged, fairly or unfairly, on the physical image they project. This is particularly so in Asia where sloppy dress will project a very poor image of the trainer's professionalism.

There are, however, companies in which the corporate culture is more relaxed and less formal attire is the norm. In cases such as this, the trainer should be guided by the dress of the client, but should always be well presented. While it might be acceptable to project a quirky, idiosyncratic style for General English, it is highly doubtful whether this will go down well in the corporate environment - especially if it is accompanied by unbrushed hair and clothes pulled straight from the dirty laundry basket.

The trainer is also expected to behave as a professional, which means an appropriate demeanour, as well as being politically correct at all times. Calling a client "Dude" and christening a latecomer "Late Guy" may seem like fun at the time, but could hardly be calculated to impress students with the trainer's abilities to communicate in English.

E. Course syllabus

Customised Courses

Unlike General English where the syllabus is derived from a course book, Business English has a specially devised syllabus that is created in response to the needs analysis given to the clients. So, for example, if the needs analysis shows that the students do a lot of presentations in English, a lesser amount of telephoning and some e-mails, the syllabus will be designed with a weighting towards presentations, followed by telephone English and some e-mailing English included.

The syllabus may be topic based or based on communication skills. Normally it follows the form taken in the needs analysis.

A typical example of a course syllabus will be designed on a combination of the following business communication skills:

- Presentations
- Negotiations
- Social English (small talk)
- Telephone English
- Meetings
- Teleconferences
- E Mail English
- Report Writing
- Writing and delivering Powerpoint presentations.

A topic based syllabus has themes such as:

- International Branding
- Crisis Management
- Sales and marketing
- Trade
- Advertising
- Product promotion
- Information Age
- Takeovers and mergers
- Teambuilding.
- Innovation

Within this syllabus are cross-over language skills which run through all the themes above. These are :

- Listening
- Pronunciation
- Specialised vocabulary banks
- Functional language
- Fluency
- Communicative competence

General Business Courses

The syllabus for these is generally topic based; i.e., marketing, finance, sales. There are many solid course-books for General Business Courses and if trainers are lucky enough, they can select a coursebook that matches the profile of their class.

In an established language school though, the coursebook has usually been chosen and comes with the course being offered. Popular series are Business Benchmark, Market Leader and In-Company, though new series are constantly appearing on the market so trainers should check out the latest publications before selecting from the older ones.

F. COURSE MATERIALS

Commercial materials
If the course is a General Business course for entry level (pre-experienced) business students, the course materials usually comprise a course book that is similar to that of General English, except that the topics and the functional language are focused on business themes. For example, a popular business English pre-Intermediate coursebook Market Leader contains topics such as Careers, Selling Online, Companies, Marketing, Managing People, Conflict and New Business. On the other hand, the General English course-book Cutting Edge contains, in its Pre-Intermediate level publication, topics such as Leisure and Lifestyle, Appearance and Building your Dreams. Both course books include similar grammar points such as Modals (must, need to have to etc), Present Simple and Present Continuous for future plans), but these are embedded in entirely different topics and situations.

Authentic materials
In General English, the teacher will often draw from the students' individual experiences and opinions to expand on tasks in the course book. Business English is no different, but takes the concept of personalization one step further by incorporating materials generated by the student him/herself as the basis for activities. The student can, for example, bring in texts such as e-mails, Powerpoint presentations or reports that they have written or are going to write, and the trainer can give guidance and feedback. The trainer will need to create appropriate tasks to make the most of these materials.

With speaking practice the trainer will have to simulate the situation in which the student has had to speak or will have to in future. For example, the student may have a videoconference, meeting or presentation coming up and the trainer can create simulation exercises to help the student gather the right language and register to perform effectively. This may well happen in General English, but it will usually be based on a social situation such as returning an unsatisfactory purchase to a store or ordering in a restaurant.

Custom written materials
Unlike general English where the teacher tends to work with course books supplemented by activities derived from their personal resource files, in Business English there is often a pressing need for a client to improve their English skills as quickly as possible. To do this, the client often asks for the materials to be more specifically targeted to their daily activities.

In such cases, the trainer needs to create appropriate input – a case study for example—and then create tasks based on this input that meet stipulated performance objectives. These custom written materials can be adapted from either the trainer's own resources, or else from material sourced in text books or on the Internet.

Supplementary to writing the input material – e-mails, reports, example Powerpoint presentations for example, it is important for the trainer to create appropriate tasks based on this material. The trainer needs to constantly keep the lesson objectives in mind when writing materials. It is tempting but not productive to include interesting material that may engage the students' attention, but does not achieve the purpose of the lesson.

G. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Although intercultural competence may be touched on in General English, it can form a significant part of Business English training in companies where the learners interact in English in a global marketplace. In this case, it is not just language that is important, but also understanding what type of language is used in specific situations by people in different cultures. It also involves understanding and knowing how to deal with different cultural customs.

For example, how does one handle a silence on the telephone? Does a silence following something you have said mean the person doesn't know what to say, agrees with what you are saying or disagrees with what you are saying? Different cultures have different conventions concerning silences, and western culture has conventions governing how a speaker deals with a silence in the conversation.

Areas of cultural difference

Power Distance

Different cultures tend to deal with the status gap between people in different ways, with some cultures giving more power to people of higher status. This has a strong impact on employee interaction in corporate organizations which tend to be hierarchically organised.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is important for a business person operating across cultures to have knowledge of local customs in handling power distances. In order to help identify which cultures have high and low power distances, a Dutch sociologist, Geert Hofstede created a measuring scale known as the PDI (Power Distance Index). When applied to different cultures, the Index showed that countries such as China, Malaysia, Russia and India had a high power distance while countries such as Australia, Denmark, New Zealand and Canada scored low on this scale.

The significance of these scores is in the way that power distances manifest themselves in the work place. In high power-distance countries, those in authority openly demonstrate their rank. Subordinates are expected to take orders from above without question. Sometimes they are even expected to take the blame for things going wrong even though the decision was one made by their superior. In low power-distance countries, superiors treat subordinates more as equals. Superiors entrust subordinates with important assignments, and, should something go wrong, blame is either shared or very often accepted by the superior as their managerial responsibility.

An example: Liz Biggs, a Teacher Trainer from South Africa, comes to China to work in the Corporate Division of a language school. Here she finds that meetings that are held with Chinese staff are very different from those held in her own country. Meetings here provide a platform for the department head to give instructions, reprimand poor performance and tell staff what he/she would like them to do. The staff listen passively and only respond when asked to do so. Liz is used to attending meetings in which the goal is to brainstorm ideas and find mutual solutions to problems. She expects people to participate vociferously in meetings.

Now she needs to chair a meeting with the Chinese sales staff to discuss the academic components of the courses that they sell for Corporate Training. Liz ponders how she should run this meeting in order to get valuable input from her staff, all of whom have a solid understanding of sales and the Chinese customer

High and Low Context Communication

Another area that may need to be covered is the difference between a high context and a low context culture. High-context and low-context communication refers to how much speakers rely on signals other than words to convey meaning.

For people from a high context culture - China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam for instance - information is implicitly embedded in the situation or context, and familiarity with these situations means that people understand the meaning without having to have it explained. Communicators in high context cultures tend to establish social trust before conducting business, value personal relationships and connections very highly and their negotiations tend to be slow and ritualistic. Everything that is said in high-context communication is interpreted in the context of the social relationships between the individuals.

In low context cultures, such as Germany, the United States and Switzerland, things need to be conveyed more explicitly and people tend to avoid ambiguity. The resulting directness in communication often strikes people from high-context cultures as rude, aggressive and insulting. Low context communicators like to establish the main point immediately, get down to business straight away. They value expertise and performance above relationships.

High context communication means that more knowledge is below the waterline and comprises implicit patterns that are not fully conscious and that are hard to explain even if you are a member of that culture. Low context communication, on the other hand, means that more knowledge is above the waterline, and is explicit and consciously organised. It is quite important for cross-cultural communicators to understand whether the culture they are dealing with is high or low context, and if it is not the same as their own culture, they will need to approach issues such as being direct/indirect; explicit/vague; goal-directed/ relationship directed with understanding and tolerance of the other.

An example: Francis Saunders, a marketing manager from the UK is transferred to the company's head office in Japan. He arrives in the office on the first day and although people greet him in a friendly manner, they don't give him much information about who they are, what their jobs are and how systems work in the office. He feels that there is a conspiracy to withhold information from him, but in actual fact, it just hasn't occurred to his new colleagues that the information he needs is not self-evident . Not only is therevno conspiracy, but they are delighted to welcome him on board.

To handle a situation like this, the Marketing Manager needs to be flexible and not expect all the answers straight away. He will have to be patient and accept that if things happen without him being informed it is not personal and he is not deliberately being kept in the dark.

Time: mono-chronic and poly-chronic cultures
Mono-chronic cultures tend to be linear and complete one task at a time. Poly-chronic cultures on the other hand do several things at the same time. So, for instance, the participants in a meeting in a poly-chronic culture will do many things simultaneously without being considered rude. For example, they might take and make calls on their mobile phones, they might have a side conversation with a colleague or even read something unrelated to the meeting. In mono-chronic cultures, this would be considered extremely rude as everyone is expected to focus on the task on hand.

Lateness is also a feature of a poly-chronic culture where it is viewed as being quite normal. This is often a bone of contention for mono-chronic business people who take lateness as a sign of lack of respect for other people.

Conclusion

These intercultural differences are very broad and may move the trainer a bit too far beyond the world of the students' specific needs, so the focus of intercultural training needs to be on the specific cultures and specific contexts that the students are actually working with.

Critical Incident Studies
One way to make students aware of cultural differences is to give them critical Incident case studies. Critical incidents are situations in which cultural differences are so vast that communication and understanding are in danger of breaking down. Trainers select (or write) a relevant scenario to illustrate their objectives, and students confer to consider the situation critically and to provide possible solutions.

CERTIFICATE ASSESSMENT TASK - 8

TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH

Novelist Amy Tan expresses the differences in cultural communication this way:

"An American business executive may say, 'Let's make a deal,' and the Chinese manager may reply, 'Is your son interested in learning about your widget business?'

What does this quote tell you about inter-cultural communication? Should we assume from the quote that the Chinese businessman is not interested in doing a deal?