COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Abstract: *Business English, as we know it today, is a part of the field of English for Specific Purposes, having two distinct areas: English for General Business Purposes and English for Specific Business Purposes. Both these areas are facing a rapid growth, with an increasing demand for teaching materials and improvement. Nowadays teachers face the challenge of developing not only general speech habits for their students but also rhetoric skills in order for the negotiations to be effective. The complex economic and political scene worldwide requires specific abilities for sophisticated communication. Thus, the teaching of the speaking skill has become increasingly important. Two decades ago, the accuracy of the students' language would most likely tend to be the major criterion whereas nowadays educators and researchers alike have come to the conclusion that communicative competence entails not only grammatical accuracy but also some other factors such as: sociocultural rules of appropriateness, discourse norms, and strategies for a rhetoric approach of the skills. Some applied linguists consider that the communicative competence comprises the following elements: grammatical or linguistic competence, socio-cultural competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. The present paper tries to express some of our ideas regarding the question: How can teachers of Business English improve their students' communication skills?*

Keywords: *teaching Business English; communication; innovation; on-line technologies.*

JEL classification: Z19

1. Preliminary considerations

1.1. From linguistic to communicative competences
A very well documented discussion with respect to communicative competences and its interrelations with the linguistic and the interactional competences was put forward some years ago by two researchers from the British University in Dubai, analyzing and referring to no less than 87 bibliographical titles. Pertinent exploration on the matter can be found in this work that provides not only an extensive historical account on the three notions but also a complex combined review of the literature on them. As the authors remarked from the beginning, and set as a goal for their endeavor, "Although a substantial number of studies have been conducted on these three competences, they have not been conflated for discussion in a single study." (Abdulrahman, Abu-Ayyash, 2019, p.1600).

1.2. Communicative competences in Business English

For the sole objective of what our current study aims at, we deliberately choose to neglect, for this instance, the complex structures and the multitude of purposes that Business English classes encompass and entangle, and to artificially, but not ignorantly, restrict its vast scope, by adopting the following remark of a colleague academic: "The goal of any Business English Course is to allow its users to effectively communicate with others in a business environment, whether that communication is in correspondence, face to face meetings, or other methods. Therefore, a Business English Language may include topics such as business English reading, letters, and resumes, business phrases, or terms of sale, advertising, and marketing" (*Batool*, p.1)

Literature of speciality identifies several strategies and consequently provides some hints on how to approach the teaching of communicational elements in the fields of Business English. Thus, we can enumerate several tips for improving the outcomes of the didactic process, as accurately put together by Margaret O'Keeffe, an experienced author, teacher and course designer specialising in Business English and ESP (O'Keeffe, 2020):

- Focus on high frequency vocabulary for work
- Help students with vocabulary learning
- Maximize student speaking time
- Provide support for speaking tasks
- Practice work skills your students need
- Teach functional language phrases

2. Particularities of business negotiations

2.1. Complex interrelations

Negotiations and the related business meetings are the activities that require the most complex interactions, both from a communicational view point and in what the business English vocabulary is concerned or, as a matter of fact, the human interrelation in itself, from psychological or social levels to intercultural understanding, if the case. Answers cannot not be ready made, questions are not always clear and straight forward, matters are sometimes disguised, information is not completely disclosed. To this strategies of persuasion are added, and sometimes attempts to trick or at least to win over. Disadvantages such as not knowing the specific terminology or even the standard language as a native does, add up to fill the list of difficulties, hence, the complexity of such activities, and the need for a more focused attention on the communicational skills, in this area.

2.2. Good communication skills - a vital asset

Developing and improving Business English learners' communication skills so that they will later be able to participate in a business negotiation is an undoubtedly

intrinsic purpose of the language classes with students in economics, future economists that shall most certainly at a point in their career have to deal with this situation.

Several researchers have looked into the matter and came up with advice and tips on how to improve the communicational skills to cope with bargaining sessions and be able to achieve most of what is desired from the negotiation, especially when it comes to non-native users of a language for this purpose. Guidelines on how to become a good negotiator and strategies to adopt can be found in many articles on the topic and at simple search on the internet as well, provided by several associations or schools of languages.

Several strategies can be identified even from the stage of preparing a negotiation, among which: having a clear objective, understanding your leverage and the other side's expectations, preparing research & data, identifying areas for compromise (*Kalatharan, 2020*), or, similarly, knowing your objectives, separating the people from the issue, asking questions and listening, finding shared interests, looking at creative options (*Britishcouncil). With these already not quite easy to accomplish, the hard part is forth to come, once the economist - learner of business communication in English as a second language - find himself / herself in a face-to-face, formal, sophisticated and lively interaction. Along that focus will have to be kept, reactions controlled, vocabulary mastered, rhetoric accurate, as dozens of conditions and terms have to be established, point are to be clearly and persuasively made, claims to be argued and defended, satisfactory solutions to be spotted and recognised, opportunities *identified and grabbed,* dangers avoided, conflicts settled, agreements reached a.s.o.

3. Improving business negotiation communication skills

3.1. Appropriate design of material

As previously mentioned, internet and published books on the subject are abundant in guidelines and examples. The teacher's mastery intervenes when, after the nevertheless extremely important step of selection of the material, he/she prepares it for introducing it to the class so as the results - acquisition of language, and elements of communication, and ability to make good use of them - are optimal.

What would be a good method? From our experience, maximum involvement of the students in the activity is the key to successful acquisition of lexical elements and development of abilities. Thus, it is of utmost importance to introduce the material through appealing activities, in a highly interactive way, if not through games, at least in some attractive exercises, resorting to the natural human propensity towards, for instance finding logic, restoring order, solving mysteries, arranging things appropriately. This means involving psychological aspects in the creation of the drills for the class, so as to direct and gently 'manipulate' students into even passively learning while actively, at the consciousness level, preoccupying with some activity they enjoy. Learning is then realised through methods such as: own discovery,

repetition, involvement/ struggle to accomplish required tasks, adrenalin rush that enhances senses, perception and cognitive processes. All these together and other mnemotechnical devices employed in the exercises created on the authentic material - templates of standard phrases, useful communication elements for diverse situations etc. - are to assure implementation of information in the students' memory and further ability to make use of it.

3.2. Vocabulary meeting various needs

We shall further exemplify with a few exercises created on some authentic materials containing lexical elements useful is certain situations. The material in the examples of this subtitle - 3.2. - was extracted from a reference title (*Kalatharan, 2020*) and two sites of language learning (*Englishclub, respectively *Englishlesson), was processed by us into a sequence of drills, bound to be perceived as playing, and thus to be seen by the students as interesting and appealing.

For the first mentioned material, the original text - and, consequently, the solution to the following exercises - is as in the paragraph below (*Kalatharan, 2020*):

    Establishing terms
     "I am excited by the opportunity to work together."
     "I'd like to outline our aims and objectives."
     "Based on my research…"
    Negotiating terms
     "Is that number flexible at all?"
     "I am basing my suggestion on these three ideas…"
     "If you can do that, I'm on board."
    Making suggestions
     "I just want to be sure I've got this straight. Do you mean…?"
     "I think the best way is to do this…
     "I'd like to suggest a solution."
    Making a proposal
     "Let's do the following…"
     "I propose viewing all scenarios in this context…"
     "How do you feel about…?"
    Rejecting a proposal
     "Prior to rejecting this proposal we need to establish industry consensus and trends, such as…"
     "Please bear in mind that one size does not necessarily fit all."
     "Let's consider some alternatives…"
    Closing the deal
     "Have we covered everything?"
     "Let's summarize our discussion to see if we're on the same page…"
     "Let's see how far we've come…"

Now let's consider some possibilities of activities on this material.

An option is to create some types of online exercises, if working on a Moodle platform available to students (with their distinct accounts) during the classes, i.e. either

1) a drag and drop exercise type with the 6 categories given as headings and each containing the three boxes for the right fragments to be dragged from the list and dropped in the right position, or

2) some yes/no or true/false questions in which sentences are given and claimed to pertain to one or another of the categories and, or, maybe,

3) a matching exercise type with categories on one column and exemplifying structures on the other.

We are not going to insist on the production and layout these Moodle format exercises as it made the object of a vast previous article of ours, but we are insisting on one aspect: the effectiveness and attractiveness of these types of online drills.

Another option, in onsite classes this time, is to distribute handouts with the separate lines (eighteen students getting a slip of paper each), post or stick on a wall or a board, a big cardboard with separate sections identified by the names of the six categories of activities and invite students to go to the cardboard in turn and position / stick each of the eighteen lines in the corresponding section. Discuss the wrongly positioned slips, if the case.

Two examples of the layout of the cardboard can be seen in Figure 1 and 2 below:

TERMS		A PROPOSAL	
Establishing	Negotiating	Making	Rejecting
1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3
Making suggestions		Closing the deal	
1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3

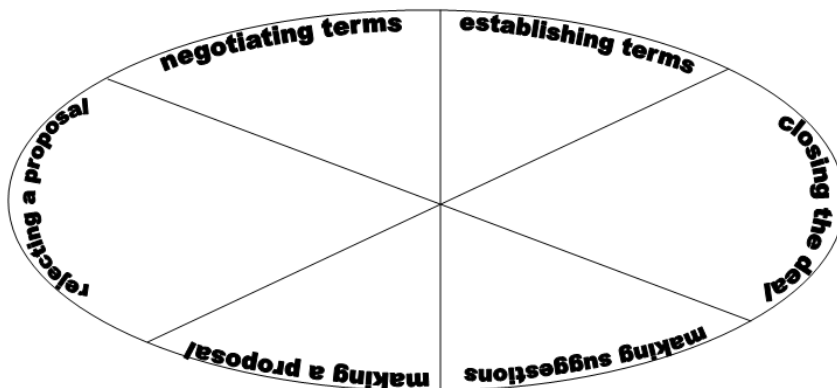**Figure 1** Example 1 of negotiation phrases cardboard layout - own design

Figure 2 Example 2 of negotiation phrases cardboard layout - own design

The material 'Useful Phrases For Business Negotiations in English' designed by English teacher Harry, on the English learning podcast ***Speak Better English*** can be

used even in its original design (*Englishlesson) to produce arrangements on columns, lines or other layouts, with directing arrows for instance - differently coloured for identifying various scenarios -, that can then - once the structures are finally arranged and the exercise is solved - represent visual aids for reinforcement o material, such as in the following figure, Figure 3:
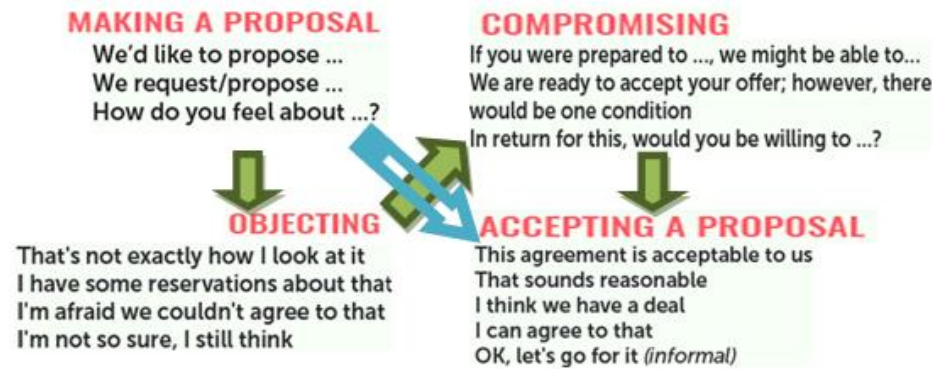
Figure 3 Example of final layout of a drill - a further visual aid
Own design - Source of material *Englishlesson

The third material aforementioned, or various fragments of it, can be tackled in several types of matching exercises, as it consists of examples of negotiation sentences with highlighted relevant lexical elements, for which meaning is also provided, in forms of explanations, examples, descriptions or synonyms. Under these categories - or others, at teacher's choice and imagination - can thus several exercises be created on this material (*Englishclub), seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Explained relevant vocabulary in negotiation phrases

Negotiation sentences with highlighted lexical elements	Meanings of relevant vocabulary
We can't offer you the raise you requested, but let's discuss some other **alternatives**.	other options
Could you **amplify** on your proposal please.	expand; give more information
We're better to settle this between us, because a formal **arbitration** will cost both of us money.	conflict that is addressed by using a neutral third party
We **bargained** on the last issue for over an hour before we agreed to take a break.	try to change a person's mind by using various tactics
I'll accept a raise of one dollar per hour, but that's my **bottom-line**.	the lowest one is willing to go
This is a **collective** concern, and it isn't fair to discuss it without Marie present.	together
If you are willing to work ten extra hours a week we will **compensate** you by paying you overtime.	make up for a loss

Negotiation sentences with highlighted lexical elements	Meanings of relevant vocabulary
I'd be willing to **comply** if you can offer me my own private office.	agree
We are willing to **compromise** on this issue because it means so much to you.	changing one's mind/terms slightly in order to find a resolution
I think we can offer all of these **concessions,** but not all at once.	a thing that is granted or accepted
It is impossible to engage in **conflict resolution** when one of the parties refuses to listen.	general term for negotiations
I **confronted** my boss about being undervalued, and we're going to talk about things on Monday.	present an issue to someone directly
It would be great if we could come to a **consensus** by 5:00 P.M.	agreement by all
I have appreciated your **cooperation** throughout these negotiations.	the working together
In their **counter proposal** they suggested that we keep their company name rather than creating a new one.	the offer/request which is presented second in response to the first proposal
Before we could start our **counterattack** they suggested we sign a contract.	present other side of an issue
I tried to close the discussions at noon, but my **counterpart** would not stop talking.	person on the other side of the negotiations
In the past I have had little respect for that client, but today she spoke **cordially** and listened to my point of view.	politely
They had some last minute **demands** that were entirely unrealistic.	needs/expectations that one side believes it deserves
When the discussions came to a **deadlock** we wrote up a letter of intent to continue the negotiations next week.	point where neither party will give in
I was hoping to avoid discussing last year's **dispute**, but Monica is still holding a grudge.	argument/conflict
Max has such a loud voice, he tends to **dominate** the conversations.	have the most control/stronger presence
My contract says that I am **entitled** to full benefits after six months of employment.	be deserving of
We have always been **flexible** in terms of your working hours.	open/willing to change
We've been **haggling** over this issue for too long now.	arguing back and forth (often about prices)
I want you to know that we don't have any **hostility** towards your company despite last year's mixup.	long-term anger towards another

Negotiation sentences with highlighted lexical elements	Meanings of relevant vocabulary
I'm planning to **high-ball** my expectations when I open the discussion.	make a request that is much higher than you expect to receive
I acted on **impulse** when I signed that six-month contract.	quick decision without thought or time
They were so **indecisive** we finally asked them to take a break and come back next week.	has difficulty choosing/making a decision
We have a little bit of **leverage** because we are the only stationary company in town.	(bargaining power) something that gives one party a greater chance at succeeding over another
After a bit of **log-rolling** we came to an agreement that pleased both of us.	trading one favour for another
I was expecting my boss to **low-ball** in the initial offer, but he proposed a fair salary increase.	offer something much lower than you think the opponent will ask for
They **misled** us into thinking that everything could be resolved today.	convince by altering or not telling the whole truth about something
The decision to call off the merger was **mutual**.	agreed by both or all
My prime **objective** is to have my family members added to my benefits plan.	goal for the outcome
From my **point of view** it makes more sense to wait another six months.	person's ideas/ thoughts
He **pressured** me to accept the terms by using intimidation tactics.	work hard to convince another of an idea
While I listened to their **proposal** I noted each of their objectives.	argument to present
His positive body language demonstrated that he was **receptive** to our suggestions.	open to/interested in an idea
Mary's **resentment** stems from our not choosing her to head the project.	anger held onto from a previous conflict
We didn't expect so much **resistance** on the final issue.	a display of opposition
Before you can **resolve** your differences you'll both need to calm down.	end conflict, come to an agreement
There are certain **tactics** that all skillful negotiators employ.	strategies used to get one's goals met
There was a lot of **tension** in the room when George threatened to quit.	feeling of stress/anxiety caused by heavy conflict

Negotiation sentences with highlighted lexical elements	Meanings of relevant vocabulary
Lower payments over a longer period of time sounded like a fair **trade-off** until we asked about interest charges.	terms that are offered in return for something else
His **ultimatum** was that if I didn't agree to give him the raise he asked for, he'd quit today without two week's notice.	a final term that has serious consequences if not met
It's **unrealistic** to think that we will have all of our demands met.	very unlikely to happen
We considered it a **victory** because they agreed to four of our five terms.	a win
The client will only **yield** to our conditions, if we agree to work over the holiday weekend.	to give in to another's requests

Source: *Englishclub

3.3. Standard phrases for specific phases

The phases that together form the process of negotiation require, each, specific vocabulary, distinct structures. For each of the main stages of the negotiation we can identify certain expressions that can be useful in producing our communication. [Sweeney, pp.100-117]

The following paragraphs, the template phrases, offer the authentic text [Horea, pp.65-66], and the exercises the students are invited to work on can range from the examples below, the suggestions of activities, and many others created by the language instructor according to the level of the learners:

Suggestions of activities:

- Handouts with separate fragments - standard phrases - cut and given to groups of students to arranges appropriately under the right category represented by the cards naming negotiation stages (e.g. relationship building, preparation for the meeting, bidding a.s.o.)
- Instruction and guidance to forming, out of each line that contains slashes (i.e. several variants), as many separate standard phrases as possible, maybe even followed by imagined examples of situations likely to occur in real life circumstances
- Extracting key/ collocating words/ phrases from the text and asking students to fill in the gaps with the right words/ phrases, given or not

Template phrases for each negotiation step:
First, in the stage of relationship building we may make use of structures such as:
- *Welcome to…*
- *Make yourself comfortable / Please, have a seat / …*
- *Would you like (a cup of coffee /)… ?*

- *I'm convinced / sure we will have a useful / productive meeting.*

In the phase of the preparation for the meeting, when we turn to business, the following can be found useful:
- *We would like to reach agreement on …*
- *We have reached an important stage…*
- *Previously we have agreed on…*
- *Today we have to think about…*

Stating the objectives, preparing for exposing your proposals and bidding, would require linguistic elements such as:
- *I'd like to begin with a few words about …*
- *We want to / May I clarify / outline our positions / aims / objectives…*
- *There are … specific areas we would like to discuss.*
- *We have to decide…*
- *It is important for both of us that we agree on…*

Then, when bargaining, in the phase of negotiation proper, there are more structures that can be used:
- *That's not acceptable unless / without…*
- *We can (only) agree to that on condition that / if ….*
- *Would you be interested in… ?*
- *We could offer… provided …*
- *If you could / on condition that we agree on / so long as …. we could agree / consider / accept / offer …*

Next, there are the acceptations or the refusals that have to be expressed and dealt with.
The positive answers are really unproblematic
- *That's probably all right.*
- *It seems acceptable. We agree.*
and the positive approaches are tactful and considerate
- *We should focus on the positive aspects / look at the benefits / at the points we agree on...;*
- *Could you tell us why you feel like that?/ What do you think is a fair way to resolve that?,*
while the negative ones might go from simple rejection
- *Unfortunately, I don't think it would be sensible / possible for us to …/ I'm afraid we are unlikely to / can't…*
 to adjourning or breaking the negotiation
- *It's a pity / I'm sorry / I believe / Unluckily… we couldn't / I don't think we are going / we appear unable to… agree/ reach agreement/ settle….*

Finally, when the negotiation is successful, the stage of confirming and summarising the discussions and the resolutions will come concluding the deal. In this phase, negotiators will probably use phrases like:

- *I'd like to / Can we / Let's summarise / go / run through the main / important points / proposals we've talked about / we've agreed / of our offer…*
- *I think this is a good moment / I'd like to check / summarise the progress we've made / the main points / what we've agreed /said…*
- *It's been a very productive / useful meeting, we look forward to a successful partnership.*

Conclusion

Interactive classes, active involvement of students in various drills and exercises that captivate them are essential to a successful acquisition of vocabulary and conversational structures and to the development of communication abilities.

Be it in virtual or physical classes, with online or, respectively, onsite types of activities, what counts is for them to be really appealing. Whether it is about individual, pair or team/group 'work' it should be preferably such designed as to be felt and seen as a game, to make learners wish to be involved instead of performing the activity just because it was required. From various ways of 'playing' with words, to matching structures or arranging fragments, on handouts or other means, in gaps or in the right positions, on boards or other specially designed materials, the path to most successful performances in language acquisition, even in this field of business communication for negotiation purposes, is active participation of subjects. Being active in an activity one likes can ensure a sort of 'passive learning' of the material contained in that activity. Playing with serious stuff can develop knowledge of the stuff most easily and pleasantly. Eventually, it all most often boils down to the way of introducing the students to the object of their learning, the way of presenting the material to the learners, the attractiveness of the activity, i.e. the ability of the teacher to design and provide the learners with appealing material in any circumstance.

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