

## LIVING WITH BUSINESS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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*Business English has become a very familiar phrase exactly because English has become a lingua franca, a very handy way of communicating between business persons. This fact has brought along the need for present students – the prospective business persons - to become aware of the importance of this language and especially of this specialised vocabulary so as to get the best deal possible.*

English is already Europe's lingua franca and it's time for politicians and educators to acknowledge this many argue. English is particularly suitable as a lingua franca because of its functional flexibility and spread across the world, and because English is already "de-nativised" to a large extent: the global number of non-native speakers is now substantially larger than its native speakers (about 4:1). English is no longer "owned" by its native speakers because acculturation and nativisation processes have produced a remarkable diversification of the English language into many non-native varieties. English as a lingua franca is nothing more than a useful tool: it is a "language for communication", a medium that is given substance with the different national, regional, local and individual cultural identities its speakers bring to it. And because of the variety of functional uses of global English, English has also a great potential for promoting international understanding.

The advance of English as the result of globalisation reflects American commercial, political and military might, and the impact of Hollywood, CNN and McDonald's. The British have always been keen to capitalise on English as a strategic and commercial asset. In reality English is no longer a foreign language in several states. It is widely used internally in many fields, and increasingly as the corporate language of big business. It is a fact of working and social life for many EU citizens.

Many who teach business communication observe gradual changes in Standard English. As any other language English changes through contact with other languages and through several other well-understood avenues of language evolution, such as compounding, adding affixes, functional shift, coinage, and so on. As the third millennium begins, new factors are converging to influence Standard English: work environments are becoming more richly intercultural, international business is using English increasingly as a global language of business.

But what is Standard English, and what is the place of Standard English in teaching business communication in contexts that are more and more international? How, as teachers, do we make our peace with the multiple, competing standards and values affecting what is "acceptable English"? These questions trouble us in part because business persons approve of others' use of English depending on their view of what English is and what it's supposed to be used for. Most business persons say that they expect people who work for them to be highly competent in Standard English. It seems a simple issue to these business persons. To teachers it is far from simple.

The field is huge, containing a multiplicity of perspectives from which English for business can be studied. Some include descriptive linguistics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, social psychology of language etc. Psycholinguistics, for example, is the study of how languages are learned, remembered, and used, and of how linguistic variables influence human behavior. Pragmatics is an important lens for studying English for business.

Business persons, like many others, tend to take a purist's attitude when they perceive language errors. They are usually not pleased to notice ways in which the English of their younger employees and new hires differs from their own. If variation occurs in domestic workplaces, even more variation occurs where English is used as a second or a common language.

For business and other international purposes, a core of English has to remain understandable to all English users. But England, the U.S., and Australia do not own English. No one nation or culture is in charge of English now.

English in its rich variety of uses and kinds is not a concern of many of our students, nor is it a concern of most business persons, even those who seek to do business internationally. If they have studied a foreign language, they might have an inkling of different worldviews and cultures, but they rarely become fully fluent in both language and culture of the second language. Instead, invited to use English abroad, they tend to feel complacent and therefore may be blind to linguistic and cultural interference.

The business public and many educators think of Standard English as "good English" and English that varies from it as "bad English." It's fairly easy to learn a little English. The grammar of English is simpler than that of many other languages. (But its vocabulary is enormous and its spelling, because of its voluminous borrowings from other languages, is irregular.) M. H. Heim of UCLA, professor of Slavic literatures and a professional translator with about ten languages, is quoted as saying "English is much easier to learn poorly and to communicate in poorly than any other language. I'm sure that if Hungary were the leader of the world, Hungarian would not be the world language. To communicate on a day-to-day basis – to order a meal, to book a room – there's no language as simple as English" (Wallraff, 2000). For optimal communication, two business communicators need strong mastery of linguistic parity in a common language. Internationally, optimal conditions are rare. A translator is helpful but not always available or affordable – and not all are equally qualified and impartial. A few business people become fluent in one or more additional languages deliberately for business purposes.

English as a world language, just through use, will probably employ a limited lexicon and fairly uncomplicated grammatical structures.

Ideally, international business requires "a particularly sophisticated mastery of the subtleties and nuances of the target language." (Vande Berg, 1997, p. 17). But many business people don't care. The everyday speech acts of business are complex. They include everything from informing to negotiating to evaluating performance. In daily business we persuade, solve problems, build relationships, give and solicit feedback, listen, create contracts, give instructions, motivate, manage conflict, and exchange routine information. Internationally, people routinely do many of these things by using a limited vocabulary and choosing uncomplicated structures.

### **Bringing business English into the classroom**

Try to imagine the scenes: a Finnish scientist coming to Vienna for a conference on human genetics; an Italian designer negotiating with prospective clients in Stockholm; a Polish tourist chatting with a local bus-driver in Crete: they all communicate successfully in "English", but which "English"? Well, chances are that it is not the language you hear in chat shows and soaps on British or American television, but rather a range of "Englishes", with enough of a common core so as to make it viable as a means of communication.

For business purposes, much depends on a core of language remaining intelligible to all speakers of English. But language does not grow by anyone's organized plans; it just grows.

How then do we respond to a need to teach in a world where the English of business is changing? Here are some suggestions will give us at least a start.

- For our own development as teachers, we should become increasingly aware of the reasons why L2 English learners experience the problems they do – of the sources of interference. We

can read published scholarship on TOEFL and ESL, and we can read more of the work of other nations' influential writers, either in the Englishes they use, or in translation if they do not write in English, or in the original languages where we are able. More awareness will allow us to intervene more intelligently.

Here are some features often regarded, and taught, as particularly "typical" of (native) English. Aiming at communicating as a business person, in a variety of interactions such as casual conversations and academic discussions, no major disruptions in communication happened when speakers (students) committed one or more of the following deadly "grammatical sins":

- using the same form for all present tense verbs, as in 'you look very sad' and 'he look very sad'
- not putting a definite or indefinite article in front of nouns, as in "our countries have signed agreement about this"
- treating "who" and "which" as interchangeable relative pronouns, as in "the picture who" or "a person which"
- using just the verb stem in constructions such as "I look forward to see you tomorrow"
- using "isn't it?" as a universal tag question (i.e. instead of "haven't they?" and "shouldn't he?"), as in "They've finished their dinner now, isn't it?".

These characteristics, it will be noted, are described in a neutral way here, ie we are not talking about "dropping the third person -s" or "leaving out the -ing ending of the gerund", but this is not the way these "mistakes" are usually treated in English classrooms around Europe. As many teachers of English as a foreign language will know, the time and effort spent on such features as the "third person -s", the use of articles and the "gerund" is often considerable, and nevertheless many learners still fail to use them "correctly" after years of instruction, especially in spontaneous speech.

- The point is that it is crucial for English language teaching to focus on contexts of use that are relevant to speakers of English. In particular, descriptions of spoken English offered to these learners should not be grounded in British or American uses of English only. In this respect it is disappointing that so-called "authentic" materials offered to learners continue to be based only on corpora of native speaker use.
- We should watch the changes in Standard English and refrain from making automatic judgments of those who do not use it exactly as we might.
- For people doing business abroad we should urge more understanding of linguistic and cultural differences. Language researchers say native speakers of English are already outnumbered by second-language and foreign-language speakers of English, and will be more heavily outnumbered as time goes on. If we want to be well prepared players in tomorrow's business, looking beyond the lens of the domestic world view will be essential.

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In this respect it is disappointing that so-called "authentic" materials offered to learners continue to be based only on corpora of native speaker use. Learners (along with all other learners of English as an International Language) need descriptions drawn from interactions between non-native speakers in the contexts in which they, too, will later participate. To some, our proposal may seem to be a recipe for "permissiveness" and decline in "standards". But what we are essentially seeking to do is to carry through the implications of the fact that English is an international language and as such no longer the preserve of its native speakers.

- As we learn more about what kinds of English are used between L2 English speakers in business, we should take a lesson from the extra efforts at active listening, encoding, and decoding that the speakers exhibit. Motivated by the same profit motive emphasized in all business curricula, they try very hard to adapt their own English to something familiar to the other. When we teach listening, some examples from international English could be used to illustrate problems and solutions.
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One source wrote, "You can't *use* a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you stretch beyond the circle of grammar and dictionary, out of the old world and into a new one' that is why it is very important to be aware of the act of learning not only a new language but also a new specialised language.

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