

# USING BUSINESS ENGLISH IN UNIVERSITY COURSES

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*We find ourselves confronted with many questions in connection with students studying Economy. How many students in the world study English as a foreign language while pursuing business studies at university? How do institutions weight the relative demands of English for study and academic purposes and English for (future) occupational purposes? These are some of the potential unknowns which business teachers might benefit from having answers to.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. What is a Communication Strategy?

It is a key strand of the export plan which shows how your company intends to cope with all the language and cultural problems as they arise. It demonstrates ways in which a company will operate in international markets - whether it will hire local people who speak the language or use a local agent to meet all its language needs; it is about working out whether to use local translation agencies, or develop language skills in the local staff; it is about finding the most cost-effective solution.

The ultimate goal is that a company is able - thanks to a well thought through strategy - to compete against local competition with equal ease and effectiveness however far or near it is trading. Whether it's Birmingham, Berlin, Barcelona or even Bombay and Bratislava - the company still has to make sure its products or services can match or better the local competition.

### 1.2. What is NOT

A communication strategy is not just about hiring a language teacher and running a few classes prior to leaving to attend a trade exhibition. It is not just about setting up language training, but making a language compulsory in the company and making a long term commitment to a market by running classes for a number of years. It is also about making sure you have good translations but only ones which have been culturally adapted and checked in the country itself; it is about carrying out many more systematic approaches such as auditing and evaluating hidden linguistic resources, or local cultural knowledge, and making sure you put the personnel with the right language skills or cultural background in the job; it is about making sure the wording on the packaging conforms to local standards and environmental rules and regulations; it is about ensuring the size and colour of the packaging meets with local preferences and buying habits; it's about using whatever resource you have to hand that can deliver a high quality service, which means hiring agents for their linguistic skills, if you have agents; making sure you add a line on the desirability of language skills in every advert you put out for a new job; it is about sending people to the market who speak the local language well enough to carry out market research by reading newspapers and checking out the local competition by speaking directly to potential customers in their language.

### 1.3. How can we help?

There is now a significant set of business English (BE) students or learners for whom *Let's Be in Business* can be of great value: we are referring to the growing numbers of business administration and general business studies students, particularly in Europe, but also elsewhere. I myself am responsible together with other colleagues for BE at the University of Oradea, Faculty of Economics

and business administration where 90% of the students enrolled in BE courses are pre-experience students (students with no previous experience of working in a business environment).

We find ourselves confronted with many questions in connection with this category of students. How many students in the world study English as a foreign language while pursuing business studies at university or college? How many such students have work-experience before they learn English? How do the different institutions weight the relative demands of English for study and academic purposes and English for (future) occupational purposes? These are just some of the potential unknowns which syllabus and curriculum planners, materials producers, advisers and business teachers might benefit from having answers to. For instance, what business English skills and knowledge will be needed to cater for all the potential students on such courses? What types of students are we dealing with?

## **2. What are they going to do after their university course?**

When they begin their course the vast majority of BE students have no clear idea how they will eventually need to employ their BE skills. To be sure, we have all seen 'needs analyses' from industry and commerce. These may serve as an overall index of some of the BE needs, but teachers in institutions will know how unpredictable professional and even learning activities are becoming nowadays. If I had been told 4 years ago that my students would today be employing the Internet as a resource for their seminar papers on business matters (with all the accompanying pitfalls entailed), I would not have believed it. Similarly, many predictions being made today are unlikely to become realistic practices in the future. When tomorrow becomes today, or even yesterday, we are all much wiser.

How can curriculum planners and BE teachers cope with this degree of uncertainty? We would argue that there are a number of *basics* which BE students/learners cannot do without. Given the high numbers of lower to upper intermediate level students on university courses, the importance of a structured approach to business English becomes self-evident. Some of the principles that may be considered guides in the selection and arrangement of the material in *New International Business English* are described below.

## **3. Need for a structured approach to Business English**

The rationale, which underlies *Let's Be n Business*, fits in very well with the needs and requirements of those BE syllabuses which aim to prepare pre-experience business students to use English in their future professional settings. Such courses need to try to achieve two things: to strengthen and enhance the somewhat shaky core English skills and knowledge of our learners, as well as to simultaneously build up students' BE skills. These courses should not be too demanding in terms of prior business-related knowledge and experience - otherwise they will go over the heads of many, if not most, of our students.

Business English language *instruction* in this setting is tightly constrained: both in terms of available time and of the prior knowledge of our students. Principled selection of material is therefore a must. This has to factor in two major elements: our students' limited business experience, and teachers' own assessments of the relative utility of differing language skills needed for business. Either way, the outcome teachers provide has to be within a framework of systematically structured learning and teaching.

We will mention some of the fairly essential basic English skills such students tend to lack and hence need practice in. These include the following: knowing how to pronounce English (words, phrases, whole utterances), knowing how to read (aloud) a whole passage in English, how to spell words in English, how numbers are spoken in English, how to count in English, how to master business-relevant words and phrases, and control business-necessary intermediate level grammar; as well as knowing the English names of letters, punctuation marks and symbols.

#### **4. Let's Be in Business provides a principled rationale for Business English students**

*Let's Be in Business* provides a number of natural business environments in which to situate and practise these basics. In the following summary we will indicate how this principle is put into operation in *Let's Be in Business*.

##### **4.1. Spelling**

Knowing how to spell words (names) out loud in English (spelling aloud) is essential. Practice is given in getting names and addresses right in commercial correspondence. In business people need to be able to use the alphabet fluently and also to understand other people when they spell words or names out loud.

##### **4.2. Vocabulary**

In BE classes we will also clearly need to encourage vocabulary learning - but how? In order to deliver 'high-priority vocabulary' for students it is necessary to select and present relevant lexis for Business English in a principled fashion. It is important to stress how vocabulary learning can benefit from contextualization and activization. *Let's Be in Business* aims to do precisely this. The texts, instructions, exercises and recordings contain much of the 'business' vocabulary that students will require. The majority of this vocabulary is assimilated as students carry out a task-related activity and should not be taught 'separately' out of context. The Textbook contains exercises on the vocabulary related to the particular theme of the unit. These exercises are designed to introduce business-related vocabulary and terms which have not occurred elsewhere in exercises or tests. Unfamiliar terms and vocabulary for the pre-service students are contextualized by the *Let's Be in Business* Textbook, which provides sets of helpful background information at the beginning of each unit for pre-experience students.

An intermediate level individual lexicon can usefully include items such as the ICC Incoterms which are used to facilitate the terms of a deal. (Incoterms are an internationally agreed set of rules published by the International Chamber of Commerce to facilitate the cross-border interpretation of trade terms.) These are dealt with in Unit 10 of the *Let's Be in Business* Textbook. These and other sections provide the structured input of relevant words and phrases which need to be mastered.

#### **5. Spoken English in core business situations**

Pre-service students can benefit from being confronted with models for behaviour in core business situations. *Let's Be in Business* allows this to be done in a series of integrated activities, where the real business world can be presented, anticipated and simulated. Relationships and behaviour at meetings are discussed and practised in Unit 1 as well as elsewhere. Units 2 and 3 contain various aspects of sales including the preliminary demonstration and the stages of commercial negotiations respectively. The principle behind integrated activities consists in allowing a mix of the four language skills to be practised in as realistic a fashion as the pedagogical situation allows.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Faced with large groups of young, pre-experience students enrolled in the early stages of business administration courses, it is impossible for us to know which specific business area they are likely to end up in. Yet, the learning discipline of BE and the accompanying academic and study skills may well contribute to the broader transferable skills demanded by today's more flexible job market.

We hope the structured approach to business English which underlies the design of *Let's Be in Business* can provide you with a satisfactory answer to the dilemmas that you face as a BE teacher as you deal with intermediate level business English students in college, university and related pedagogical settings.

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