An overview of approaches to teaching English to Business Persons

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Pedagogical approaches used in the Business English textbooks were initially, a reflection of the EFL teaching approaches adapted for business English teaching (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). For example, *British Banking* (by J. Firth in the Peter Strevens series, published by Cassell in 1971) contemplated the *structural approach* to language teaching, consisting of activities such as comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises and structural drills. Later in 1972, *The Bellcrest File* was published, which emphasized training of the skills of communication in English within a business context. This course was taken to be a reflection of the *structural/audio-lingual approach* to language teaching. During the mid-70s and 80s, business English teaching focused more and more on the *functional approach*, presenting language for making appointments, confirming plans, introducing people, as in, for instance, *Functioning in Business* (by Knowles & Bailey, published by Longman in 1987).

During the 80s and 90s, textbooks drawing on all the previous approaches were developed, but with an emphasis on *business communication skills*, such as presentation techniques, negotiating, effective meeting skills, as for example, Vicki Hollett's *Business Objectives* (Oxford University Press, 1991). In the past few years however, there is a growing recognition that language teaching needs to consider the business contexts in which communication takes place, especially in today's technological era, in which people must meet the demands of a more closely linked business world (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Business English is rather difficult to define and limit in linguistic terms. Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), for instance, suggest a two fold division for business English: 'English for General Business Purposes' (EGBP) and 'English for Specific Business Purposes'(ESBP). According to these authors, the courses for EGBP are directed towards pre-experienced learners or those who are just

starting their career. These courses are usually given at language schools and are formed on the basis of students' language level and not on the basis of their jobs. Teachers have a wide choice of published materials to choose from when selecting materials for classes. ESBP, on the other hand, refers to the courses run for job-experienced learners who bring their business knowledge and skills to the language-learning situation. Depending upon the needs of the learners, these courses focus on one or two language skills and specific business communicative events. Both in EGBP and ESBP courses, EFL teachers must be able to select materials appropriately from what is available; be creative with what is available; modify activities to suit the learner's needs; and supplement materials by providing extra activities. The materials, on the other hand, should above all be significant as a source of language, as a learning support, for classroom motivation and stimulation and for reference (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

Nowadays Business English has become a new multi-disciplinary area of research within ESP studies. As suggested by Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), there is a need to investigate more about the language, skills and genres used in occupational and academic contexts. Likewise, the various roles of the ESP practitioner as teacher, course designer and materials provider, researcher, collaborator, and evaluator should also constitute a focus of investigation (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). The test questions draw on insights from critical discourse analysis. The procedures and written questions are meant to reflect on the appropriate profile of an ESP teacher, i.e., they not only account for the linguistic and pedagogical knowledge of the candidates, but also filter important aspects such as the candidates' feelings, their critical reflection of what goes on in the classroom and their ways of looking at the students.

Major approaches to Business English materials have been summarised in Robinson (1991), Dudley-Evans & St John (1996), St John (1996), Johnson (1993), Brieger (1997) and Flinders (1998) - and Nelson (1994) has created a large computer database of these materials for online reference.   Categorisations of Business English materials, although differing in terminology and

approach, have tended to make the same distinctions between the materials on the market. Four separate categorisations of materials will be considered here, Johnson (1993), St John (1996), Brieger (1997) and Flinders (1998).

St John (1996:9-14) gives perhaps the fullest account of Business English materials and puts forward the following description:

 1. *Materials for business communication skills*: These are materials that 'focus on the core skills of business activity' (1996:9). This area covers that aspect of communication that is not concerned with specialised knowledge, but the general communication skills that we all need to function in different walks of life. Non-language skills are also included here, for example non-verbal communication and organisational skills. In this section she includes books such as those in the *Longman Business English Skills Series*, for example, *Negotiating* (O'Connor et al. 1992), *Socializing* (Ellis & O' Driscoll 1992), and *Telephoning* (Bruce 1992).

 2. *Materials for business contexts*: These are the 'hard-core' ESP materials where the nature of the business forms the interaction. Examples of this are the *Business Management English Series* by Brieger & Comfort, which include books with a relatively high 'business' content such as *Personnel* (Brieger & Comfort 1992a) and *Finance* (Brieger & Comfort 1992b).

 3. *Materials for business studies*: Business studies materials have borrowed a lot from actual business courses: Uber-Grosse, (1988) in her article *The Case Study Approach to Teaching Business English* stated that the Harvard Business School first used case studies over seventy years ago and St John notes that this has led to the widespread use of case studies and simulations for training purposes. In terms of teaching Business English, Uber-Grosse says that case studies 'teach language through content, rather than through grammatical or lexical exercises' (1988:131). She says that they typically use authentic materials where the students are presented with a problem to solve. In Business English

they have been used quite widely and examples include *Portfolio* (Howe 1987) and *Case Studies in International Management* (Sawyer-Lauçanno 1987).

4. *English materials in a business setting*: Most of the Business English materials available today fall under this category. This category includes 'course books and supplementary materials'. Examples of these in wide use are *Business Opportunities* (Hollett 1994), *Business Objectives* (Hollett 1991) and *Insights into Business* (Lannon et al. 1993). Examples of supplementary materials given by St John include *In at the Deep End* (Hollet et al. 1989).

Johnson (1993) takes a slightly different approach to categorising teaching materials. She follows what is basically a chronological approach, starting with the early approach of looking at specialist lexis and ending up with the latest books concerning business skills. In her survey these kinds of materials, she has identified the following four kinds of orientations:

(a) Focus on specialist lexis

Early course books in specialised business fields, such as the Collier-Macmillan Special English Series (ed. Strevens) were concerned to present specialist vocabulary through the medium of written texts, usually of an expository nature, which took no account of learners' previous knowledge or experience. Exercises focused on randomly selected structures and vocabulary and there was no consideration of how the learner might apply the language in real life. More recently, some text books have focused on teaching vocabulary, either for business generally (Flower, 1990) or for specific industry or job areas (Radice 1993).

(b) Focus on gambits

Next came those books with focus on gambits. The BBC/OUP course book, English for Business (1972) (The Bellcrest File) focuses on the presentation and practice of 'gambits' - fixed expressions that can be used in meetings, for example, to put one's point of view, agree or disagree. The focus on gambits-in conjunction with the teaching of language functions - continues to be popular with course

book writers even today (Goodale 1987). The teaching of gambits has, however, been strongly criti-cised, for example by Williams (1988), who pointed out that many of expressions taught in the Business English course books are in reality rarely used. In her analysis of a corpus of business meetings conducted by native speakers of English, she noted that overt expressions (e.g. of disagreement) were commonly avoided. Julian (1989) also notes that gambit approach may distract inexperienced trainees from the way language moulds the human interaction. She emphasises the need for language learners to understand the psychological and behavioural aspects of negotiation, and lists the principal language features and skills which are needed by practitioners to enhance their performance.

(c) The case study approach

Other writers like Piotrowsky (1986) emphasize the importance of case study approach in Business English. Piotrowsky (1986) explains that the value of the case study method is that it allows executives to use the managerial skills and styles they have developed. The approach suits most adults because it gives them the opportunity to discuss what interests them most. Similarly, Uber Grosse (1988) gives the rationale for case studies as enabling the teacher to teach language through content rather than through grammar and lexical exercises. The content must, however, be business-oriented and authentic and must involve an integrated skills approach. The activity is learner- centred and develops reasoning faculties and problem-solving skills. A negative factor, however, is that authentic case study material is ungraded and may sometimes be too difficult.

(d) Focus on business skills

Language training for business has increasingly focused on improving the communication skills necessary for dealing effectively with common business activities, including: presentation, participating in meetings and negotiations, telephoning, writing letters and writing reports. A further skill given much attention in business English is socialising, (greeting and introductions in the context of business meetings, making small talk and entertaining clients at a restaurant). There has

been great interest among trainers (generally fuelled by the demands of learners) to apply management training techniques in Business English training. This trend has led to some discussion and argument as to whether communication skills training is the proper concern of the language trainer or would not best be left to the experts.

Flinders (2001) also attempts to categorise Business English materials. He suggests that there has been a shift from 1980 to the present day in that there has been a move from using authentic materials to using ready-made published materials. He continues by saying that the 1990s saw the rise of what he calls the *media mix* - so that in the classroom today, students get a mixture of books, photocopies, audio and video, PC disks, CD ROMs and use of the Internet. He presents definitions of Business English materials by suggesting five main course components:

1. Language knowledge

2. Communication skill

3. Professional context

4. Cross-cultural area

5. Management skill

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of the major approaches to various types of Business English materials shows that the recent publications have attempted to integrate management teaching and language teaching and that these have incorporated insights of discourse analysis and pragmatics in their design. It should however, be noted that the published materials have focused on the general language functions performed across a wide range of business situations. The key problems found in Business English materials presented above can be summarised as follows:

1.   Materials present an oversimplified and unreal picture of the business world.

2.   The language found in the textbooks differs from that used in actual business.

3.   There is a concentration on politeness and pleasantness that is not matched by   real-world experience.

4.   There is a concentration on the explicit forms of language use to the detriment   of   implicit forms.

5.   The language, both structure and lexis, found in Business English materials, is   entirely based on the intuition and experience of their authors.

However, Things have started looking better in the past few years as Dudley-Evans & St John point out:

> We would suggest that the discrepancy between the textbooks and actual data is much less than it was at the time of Williams' original investigation ... and that published textbooks are now based on a good mix of sound teaching experience and informed understanding of how different texts work in business communication.
>
> (Dudley-Evans & St John 1996:40)

Business English materials thus have certain faults and limitations in terms of their accuracy and their oversimplification of the complex language of business. Conversely, it can be said that they are considerably better than they were ten years ago. In order to improve further, Business English materials need to receive more information directly from language research - sidelining the use of intuition. It is very important therefore, that the discourse structure(s) and functions of the specific genres are identified so that these could serve as authentic inputs for designing a suitable language training courses for business executives.

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