

Fifty ways to improve your
Business English
... without too much effort!

提高商务英语水平的
50种方法



Ken Taylor

提高商务英语水平的 *50* 种方法

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内 容 提 要

本书是由资深商务英语教学专家 Ken Taylor 编写、适用于在工作中使用英语的商务人士，旨在帮助他们全方位提高英语综合应用能力。它是一本不谈任何理论而集中从微观层面关注和介绍沟通技能与技巧的实用书。

本书包括商务情境中的听、读、写、商务英语词汇、语法 5 项语言技能，以及电话、演讲、谈判、会议、社交 5 项沟通技能，共 10 个方面内容。作者系统地、循序渐进地向读者介绍了提高商务英语水平的 50 种便捷的方法，最大特点是生动、简洁、有效。书中配有多幅漫画，图文并茂、深入浅出。作为手册，常备常用、随学随翻。

Foreword

Do you sometimes feel insecure when speaking English in a business setting? Does your mind sometimes go blank as the English words disappear from your memory during an international phone call? Do you sometimes feel irritated when you can't express exactly what you really want to say during the meeting?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'Yes!' – then this is the book for you.

This is a self-help manual for those business people:

- *who have English as their second language*
- *who need English in their work*
- *who have little time to improve their linguistic competence.*

You can use this book in several ways:

- You can read it from cover to cover on the aeroplane or on holiday.
- You can 'dip-read' or 'skim-read' and pick out the bits that look interesting for you.
- You can do the self-assessment on page x and follow the advice given when you check the results.
- You can look at the index and choose those chapters that deal with the problem areas you know you have.
- You can give this book as a present to someone you know will benefit from it. (And borrow it back if you need to!)

Learning takes time. But there are some short cuts. The 50 tips in this book will allow you to make noticeable improvements with the minimum of effort. So whichever way you choose to use this book – get started now! Read the introduction, or read the summary at the end. Read the *Presentations* module if you make presentations in English, or assess your grammar in the *Grammar* module. Do something, anything, to break into the book. And remember that doing five minutes every day is better than planning hour-long homework sessions that never take place because something urgent comes up that you have to do instead.

If you have read this foreword without too much difficulty you are at the right language level to benefit from this book.

Introduction

*'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit.
No use being a damn fool about it.'*

W C Fields

What kind of English should you speak?

English is not the most widely-spoken language in the world if you only count native speakers. It's the second, after Chinese. But if we were to add on second-language speakers, then English becomes number one. It is roughly estimated that about two billion people can communicate in English – of whom about 400 million are native speakers. So we should keep in mind that speakers of English as a second language outnumber native speakers by over three to one.

In school your teachers used either British English or American English as a model. You were taught to try to become perfect speakers of 'Oxford' English or of 'Harvard' English. And this has coloured your way of looking at the language ever since. Everyone tried to get ten out of ten in school language tests – perfection was demanded and grades depended on it. But in real life, language is an imperfect tool. And any attempt to become a 'perfect' speaker of English is doomed to failure.

Native speakers are not necessarily the best models for you.

Firstly, their language is often filled with idiomatic and slang expressions, which second-language speakers do not always understand – *'Do you fancy a nosh after the do with a drop of the other?'*¹ Or their language is culture bound – *'I was on a really sticky wicket and was totally stumped.'*² In this case the speaker is using language from the game of cricket to describe an everyday situation. In the States you might hear an American use baseball terms in business – *'I really struck out on that deal.'*³

Secondly, native speakers often speak very quickly and with strong regional accents. Even other native speakers can find it difficult to grasp

¹ Would you like a meal and a drink after the event?

² I was in a difficult situation and had no solution to the problem.

³ I failed to get a deal.

their meaning. And they find it impossible to modify this accent and speed to suit the international arena.

Thirdly, native speakers may use over-complicated grammatical constructions and a very wide vocabulary. It has been estimated that an educated native speaker may have an active vocabulary of about 8,000 words. A good second-language speaker may have only 3,000–3,500 words at their disposal.

So, if you don't use native speakers as your model for working internationally, what do you do? You aim to become an excellent speaker of 'international' English.

- Communicate in an English that can be understood both by Mr Smith and Mr Yamamoto. You don't need idiomatic and slang expressions to impress your international business partners – quite the reverse, in fact.
- Don't worry about your accent. It may be noticeable. That's fine as long as it does not interfere with understanding. It is part of your charm and cultural background.
- Speak at the speed you want to be spoken to. In other words, model good international English, especially to your native-speaker colleagues. It helps them modify their language and makes it easier for you to deal with them.
- Aim to build up an active vocabulary of about four thousand words. This will be enough to enable you to negotiate well, make good presentations, run effective meetings, write good emails, etc. In other words, to carry out all those tasks expected of you in your business field.
- KISS your communication – Keep It Short and Simple. Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs. It's easier for your business partners to understand (and it's easier for you to produce!).

When you use good International English, your business partners, both native and second-language speakers, will perceive you as an effective communicator. And many second-language speakers will prefer to do business with you rather than with a hard-to-understand native speaker.

How do you learn?

Do you remember the lessons and teachers you liked most at school? If you do, this might help you in the process of identifying your particular learning style. We are all different and we all learn in different ways.

For example, when your teacher gave you ten new words to learn, how did you go about it? Did you have a photographic memory that enabled you to look at the list once and then remember everything? Probably not, as most of us have to work hard at fixing things in our memories. Perhaps you sat and read and re-read the words – occasionally covering up the English and trying to remember from the translation. Or did you draw doodles and pictures to help stimulate your memory? Or perhaps you stood up and walked around with the paper in your hand, saying the words aloud to yourself? Or perhaps you did all of these?

The 50 ways to improve your business English include a mixture of learning activities that suit different learning styles. Try to get a feeling for the type of activity that works best for you. You can then concentrate on those exercises and approaches. In other words, make sure that what you plan to do is not only valuable as far as the content is concerned, but also that the method of learning is stimulating and motivating for you. Learning is more effective if it is fun and enjoyable.

What are the ten key improvement areas?

The choice of the ten areas covered by this book is based on long experience of working with international communication skills courses. Eight of the areas are the basic business communication skills we all need – the skills we also use in our business dealings in our first language. If we work in an international organisation, we need to write emails in English and make phone calls. We meet and negotiate with people. We make short presentations of ourselves, our organisations and our products or services. It is simply a question of successfully transferring our business competence in our mother tongue to English (although this is easier said

than done!). The two other areas are based on pure language competence: improving grammar and extending vocabulary.

Most second-language speakers mainly want to practise and improve their speaking skills. You feel that the more passive skills are a little easier to manage. With reading and writing you generally have more time to go back and check what you have done. With listening your passive vocabulary is larger than your active one, which gives you a more secure feeling.

A survey carried out by Business Spotlight in Germany asked its readers to list their biggest problems when working in English. The eight business communication skills areas in this book cover the top eight business skills mentioned in the survey, in descending order of difficulty.

What should your target be?

Imagine a scale of English language competence where 0 = absolute beginner and 5 = native speaker. Getting from level 0 to level 1 (survival English) will not take too long. But getting from level 4 (full professional competence) to level 5 might take a lifetime!

If you are at level 3 (competent intermediate) or 3+, you need to be realistic in your approach to language-learning and improvement. You cannot expect a huge improvement across the board. Instead you need to make improvements in those areas where you gain the greatest benefit. This will also improve your self-confidence in specific situations and this, in turn, will gradually affect your general level of competence.

Do the self-assessment. This could help you decide where those areas of improvement should take place. But be realistic.

To parody a well-known saying – ‘Improvements will be made immediately but miracles take a little longer!’

Self-assessment

'Experience is the worst teacher, it gives the test before the lesson.' Vernon Law (American baseball player)

To help you focus on your real needs, take a few minutes to do the following self-assessment. Assess the ten skills below on the 5-point scale, first in their importance to you in your work, and then in your performance as you see it at the moment.

| Importance to me | | VERY IMPORTANT | | QUITE IMPORTANT | | NOT IMPORTANT |
|------------------|--|-------------------|---|--------------------|---|------------------|
| 1 | I need to be able to socialise in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2 | I run or take part in meetings in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3 | I negotiate in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4 | I make telephone calls in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | I make presentations in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6 | I listen to people speaking with different accents in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7 | I need to read business texts in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8 | I write emails in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9 | I need to find the right word in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10 | I need my English grammar to be correct | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| My performance | | POOR | | FAIR | | EXCELLENT |
| 1 | Socialising in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2 | Running or taking part in meetings in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3 | Negotiating in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4 | Making telephone calls in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | Presenting in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6 | Listening to people speaking with different accents in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7 | Reading business texts in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8 | Writing emails in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9 | Ability to find the right word in English | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10 | My use of English grammar | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Simply by doing the assessment and thinking about your needs might well have crystallised your study priorities. But if you would like a more 'mathematical' approach, then add together the importance and performance scores for each of the ten skills. Any skill which scores 8 or over is of high priority. Any skill which scores 4 or under is of low priority. If you still need help deciding on priorities between two or more skill areas with the same number of points, then decide which of the skills you need most frequently.

This simple self-assessment allows you to select what you need from the book if you do not want to read it from cover to cover. Or you can start with the high-priority chapters, going on to the others if and when you have the time.

Right! That was the easy part. Now it's up to you. If you want to improve your business English you have to start somewhere. As the Nike advert says, 'Just do it!'

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Networking and socialising

'When all things are equal, people prefer to do business with friends. And they even prefer to do business with friends when things are not equal.' Mark McCormack



Most of us want to create long-term business relationships based on trust and mutual respect. This means that networking and socialising are important activities, especially when working internationally. In some cultures the relationship is even more important than the particular business in hand. A great deal of time and energy goes into building and maintaining good personal relationships in order to make difficult business discussions and decisions easier to handle.

Here are five tips to improve the English you need to network and socialise in English.

1

Say 'hello' properly

The first words you say set the scene for the rest of the relationship. 'You never have a second chance to make a first impression' is an over-used saying that contains a great deal of truth. When we say 'hello' we are telling our business partner how we are feeling about meeting them. And we have a large number of 'hellos' to choose from. You can be highly formal – or very informal. Your partner is expected to mirror this feeling in their reply.

How would you reply to these greetings?

- a *It's an honour to meet you.*
- b *How do you do?*
- c *How are you doing?*
- d *How're things?*
- e *Hi there.*

You can find the answers below.¹

But instead of simply reacting to other people, why not seize the initiative and set the level of formality you prefer? Be proactive. This also means being flexible. If you don't want to sound too friendly because you want to bring up several complaints during the meeting, then choose a more formal greeting. If you've built up a good relationship over the phone or by email, then choose an informal greeting.

My favourite greeting when I meet someone for the first time is: *Nice to meet you*. It's friendly but business-like. It's easy to get the reply right as well – *Nice to meet you, too*.

What do you say after you've said 'hello'? Well, if this is a first meeting we often need to say who we are, and this can cause cultural problems. In Germany, for example, business people might only offer their family names – *Schmidt*. In Sweden you might only be offered the first name – *Sven*. When working internationally, use both names. This is useful information to match the business card you offer and it can allow you to be proactive again. Don't say, 'I'm Manfred Schmidt.' This means your business partner has to choose whether to call you *Manfred* or *Mr Schmidt*. Indicate what

¹ a Thank you b How do you do? c Fine thanks, And you? d Great. And how're things with you? e Hi!



you want to be called – rather like James Bond in the movies. In the official MI6 meetings he introduces himself as *'Bond. James Bond.'* In other words, he's telling you to call him *Mr Bond*. His first name is simply for your information. But in the bar with the beautiful blonde he says, *'Hi there. I'm James, James Bond.'* In other words, he's telling her to call him by his first name. In

most international business settings this last approach is probably the best one. Which means that your first two sentences would sound something like this: *'Nice to meet you. I'm Manfred, Manfred Schmidt.'*

HOT TIPS

- Be proactive
- Choose the appropriate way of saying 'hello'
- Be like James Bond

- Two Japanese businessmen are visiting a stand at a Hanover trade fair. They meet three German sales representatives, Heinz Schmidt, Franz Schmidt and Helmut Krantz. In correct German manner the first Mr Schmidt shakes hands with each of the Japanese and introduces himself with just his family name – 'Schmidt. Schmidt.' The two Japanese are then greeted by the second sales representative in the same way – 'Schmidt. Schmidt.'

Slightly confused, they move on to the third person and, taking the initiative, the first Japanese greets him – 'Schmidt. Schmidt.!'

2

Make active small talk

Some people love to small talk, others hate it. Some cultures demand it whilst others ignore it. In international business, small-talk can be extremely useful. By talking about neutral, non-controversial topics you can start to break the ice, get a feeling for the communication style of your partner and begin to tune your ear to their English. Neutral topics – the weather, the trip, the hotel, the town – are easy to talk about without disagreement. In Britain it is said that there are three taboo subjects for small talk – politics, sex and religion. Why? Because it's easy to get into an argument about them. What you are aiming to do instead is to build a platform of agreement on which to do business. This platform of agreement will help when you might have to disagree later on in the meeting.

Even if you come from a country where small talk is not part of your culture, try to use it as an icebreaker with your international guests – before the meeting, in the taxi, at the airport or over a coffee.

Your main linguistic tool in successful small talk is the open question. Small talk is like a friendly game of tennis: the idea is to keep the ball going backwards and forwards over the net. This means the questions you ask should require more than a simple 'Yes' or 'No' answer. Use the 'W' question words instead:

What? Why? When? Where? Who? Which? how?

Asking open questions and inviting longer answers makes it easier to develop a conversation.

- *What would you like to see here during the visit?*
- *I'd like to go to The Museum of Modern Art.*
- *Oh, why is that?*
- *There's a couple of Van Gogh's there I'd like to see.*
- *Which are those?*
- *Two views from the time he spent in Arles.*

Such questions open up the conversation and start the ball rolling.