

# Teach Business English

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Why this book?**

Recent political and economic changes have meant that more and more company employees – or their managers – are asking for English courses which directly address their needs. These so-called Business English courses are becoming more and more popular amongst working adults, who often choose them in preference to General English classes offered by the same language school. At the same time, many teachers working in the field have been trained to teach General English to adults or children, or have no relevant training or experience. New teachers coming into the field from a variety of backgrounds are forced to survive with few guidelines and inadequate support.

This book provides practical help. It is a synthesis of my experience working with a wide range of Business English students of many nationalities who work in US or European companies, or who need English so as to conduct business abroad or study their subject. My work – in the UK, Japan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Greece and Morocco – has brought me in contact with many teachers who have appreciated ideas to bring their classes to life or to solve seemingly insoluble problems. My experience comes not only from my training for EFL and state school teaching and my studies of economics and business, but also from working (outside teaching) in a wide range of companies in the UK, France, Germany, Morocco and Japan. The suggestions I make in this book are also strongly influenced by my own experience as a language learner with very practical, work-oriented needs.

After looking at differences between general English and Business English, I give guidelines for teaching and practical suggestions for procedures from the enquiry stage to course evaluation. The book caters for both the novice and the experienced teacher, for the teacher of both mono- and multi-lingual classes, for the teacher with a knowledge of other languages and for those with none. Most of the procedures described will be useful to teachers in a range of teaching situations from extensive courses to short-term intensive one-to-one tutorials. The Glossary will be useful if you are new to the field and the addresses sections will enable you to find out more about relevant support organisations, resources and examinations. Section 10 – Moving towards a

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better future – gives ideas for follow-up activities. This book, along with the follow-up ideas, will help to provide you with a framework and approach for teaching Business English.

### **1.2 What is Business English?**

Teaching Business English involves teaching English to adults working in businesses of one kind or another, or preparing to work in the field of business. The businesses could be large multinationals (such as Procter & Gamble), small private companies or even state-run concerns involved with providing products or services. Courses may be long or short. Classes may be taught in-company or in a language school or other rented premises.

Business English has much in common with General EFL, but in many ways is very different since the aims of a course may be quite radically different from those of a General English course. Aims – whether broad or narrow for a particular course – will always relate to students' work. Sometimes this will mean developing generalised business skills (such as giving presentations), and sometimes it will mean something much more technical or academic (if the students' work is highly specialised, or if the students need to learn how to take notes and participate in meetings or prepare for a training course conducted in English). Since course organisers often fail to differentiate between Business English and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) or EAP (English for Academic Purposes), you need to be a little open-minded when going into this area of teaching!

The main thing to remember when considering what Business English is relates to expectations – not so much yours, but your students' or their sponsors'. Course organisers will have requested 'Business English' because they want a course which relates to occupational or professional language needs. Investigating, analysing and fulfilling Business English students' needs is, in fact, so important for the success of any Business English course that a great deal of attention is paid to these processes in this book. Even if you see your role as a teacher as being quite well-defined, as a Business English teacher you would do well to consider tasks or concerns which may seem peripheral or beyond a normal teacher's role. Your priority, after all, is to run successful courses, and in order for this to be possible in the field of Business English you may need to consider wider issues, such as those discussed in Section 2 and 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 4.6 and 4.7.



### ***The student population***

Students on Business English courses might have (or be preparing to have) a wide range of jobs; they could be clerical staff or top-level directors or anything in between; they might equally well have a speciality, such as advertising or patent law. If they are young or still studying, they are unlikely to know much about their work; if they are older and more experienced (which is more likely), they may be experts in their field. Instead of working in an office, they may work in a plant, a lab or out in the field (e.g. in market research or sales). Students may be studying with colleagues or with total strangers in a group, or even on their own if their needs are considered sufficiently urgent or important. If bosses and their subordinates are in the same class, internal politics may affect the learning atmosphere.

Various other factors will also influence the atmosphere of classes, including finance, timing and motivation. In other words it may be very significant whether or not students are paying for the course themselves and whether or not lessons are held inside or outside work time. Motivation will be influenced by the status of English in the students' actual or potential working environment and by the students' own attitude towards both the language and training, quite apart from more obvious factors such as promotion prospects for employees with better English. Sophisticated and stimulating management training seminars or on-the-job training which focuses on tangible, immediate results may have made students a little cynical about what they perceive to be 'traditional' classes. On the other hand, if students have not had any formal training since leaving school, they may be dazzled by your modern teaching techniques!

Whether students are self-confident and assertive (because of their superior knowledge of their work) or apparently unmotivated, you needn't worry! Even students who are tired and preoccupied and apparently uninterested in English can become highly motivated if the need for English in their work is made clear to them and if they are treated as partners in the business of learning. This is perhaps because of the scope in Business English for teaching language which is truly useful to students.

### ***The purpose of a Business English course***

The purpose of a Business English course is to fulfil students' work-related needs. These are usually very specific and cover a wide range of language. If students are employed by a multinational corporation their prime need will probably be to be able to use the phone, report to

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foreign managers, reply to or write faxes and e-mail messages, read periodicals on their subject area and perform other tasks typically associated with the workplace. If students are doing business with companies abroad, their main need might be to survive on business trips, communicate on the phone and by fax, and negotiate contracts. Students who work in an industry whose language is English (e.g. telecommunications or computing) will need to be able to digest large quantities of reading matter in English; they may also need to be able to give presentations or discuss their work in English.

### *The content of a Business English course*

Since courses are set up for many different reasons, the content of individual courses may vary considerably. However, the content of any particular course is usually quite specific and will always be determined by the students' needs and objectives. The most successful courses are the ones which identify appropriate content and which fulfil students' needs most completely in the shortest possible time. Since language training is expensive, both adults who are paying for themselves and companies sponsoring staff will want cost-effectiveness. Needs can usually be fulfilled most quickly if the content is chosen with students' learning and affective needs in mind, and if as much as possible is made job-related. The balance of specific elements will depend on students', or their managers', priorities and the learning process, i.e. some things can be learnt more quickly than others or are more easily learnt before or after other language areas. If you should ever want to violate this principle of needs-directed teaching, you need to be very sure you can justify this both to yourself, your students and to the people you will be reporting to.

### *Language in class*

The language studied is also governed by students' needs. This often means a high technical content, with frequent use of common business terms. It also means a focus on styles of speaking or writing which are appropriate to the students' working environment and to the tasks they have to perform. This means students will need to develop a keen awareness of style – formality vs. informality, directness vs. indirectness. Most importantly, through language study in class students will need to become aware of the cultural context of language use, i.e. national or local cultures, industrial cultures and corporate cultures. As well as the language specifically studied in class, teacher talk (i.e. a teacher's meta-language) can also provide valuable input and exposure for students. In order to capitalise on this opportunity, it is important to make this

metalanguage as adult and business-like as possible. See 1.3 and 3.4 for more on this.

### *Teaching objectives*

Objectives for lessons and stages of lessons need to be made very clear to students on a day-to-day basis. If objectives are clear, students will work with enthusiasm and intelligence, which will naturally make your life easier. Decision-making and objective-setting can frequently be passed on to students, who are often used to making decisions, setting objectives and respecting deadlines in their day-to-day work.

### *Methods used*

While objectives are concerned with ‘what’ one is teaching, activities and techniques focus on the ‘how’. Since these can affect whether or not any learning actually takes place, they must be selected and used with sensitivity – according to teaching aims and student response. Variety is often highly desirable and a great range of teaching techniques can be used very successfully. However, it is important to develop personal teaching principles which will give you criteria by which to judge the success or effectiveness of specific methods used and to combine methods effectively so as to provide a coherent course. See 3.2, 4.1 and 4.2 for more on this.

Students will appreciate hearing why certain methods are used for specific language areas. Naturally, if they understand why things are happening as they are, they will usually cooperate with greater enthusiasm.

### *Student-teacher relationships*

On the most effective courses, students and teachers work in partnership to build a constructive learning environment which is appropriate to individual students’ professional and personal situations. As well as being a learner, the student is also a provider of information and material, if not also expertise. Above all, he or she is the client and the teacher an agent providing a service. See 1.3, 2.1, 2.6, 3.1, 3.4, 3.6, 4.5, 4.7, 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 for more on this.

### *Accountability*

The teacher’s role as ‘tracker of progress’ must never be forgotten. Students are often used to working under pressure and they usually take for granted the idea of being accountable to bosses. They will expect

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promises made in class to be kept and for you to be accountable for the results of the training programme. In addition, students' bosses and supervisors, and/or the person setting up the English training in a company may want to observe classes. Reports may also be expected on a regular basis so that students' attendance and progress can be tracked, especially if the company is paying. See 2.1, 2.2, 2.6, 6.1, 6.6, 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 for more on these areas.

Since students are basically clients, their level of satisfaction is important. If they are dissatisfied with the language teaching you provide you will soon find yourself without a job! Although business practices and contractual agreements should ensure that you are treated like the professional you are, results-oriented managers are the norm. See 6.6 for ideas on how to cope with bad feedback!

### **1.3 Why is Business English special?**

Business English is special because of the opportunity it gives you to fulfil students' immediate needs for English. In General English classes students' needs are rarely so immediate or urgent. Since work is so central to most people's lives and since Business English relates to students' occupational or professional needs, you have the opportunity to make a real difference to your students' day-to-day experience.

An example of a real-life experience might serve to illustrate how real your link with students can be. A student returning from a trade fair, when asked how it had been, said that there had been one particularly interesting piece of equipment. However, he had written off the possibility of getting this for the company because he had been made well aware of budget constraints for his department! I decided to take a less cynical attitude about budgets and helped this student, who was studying in a class of six students, to put together and practise a short presentation on the virtues of the equipment; it was relatively easy to incorporate this work into the rest of my lesson plan. The next day, having delivered this impromptu and informal mini-presentation to his boss, the student came to class glowing; his supervisor had appreciated the longer-term advantages and cost-cutting features of the equipment and had found a way of approving its purchase.

In order for Business English to become special in this way, you need to build a special relationship with your students ... otherwise you will never hear enough about your students' working lives! Students will be grateful to you if you succeed because in developing a good relationship with them you will be helping them to become self-reliant as learners and users of English. This is an important thing for people who are used to being in control and who may have limited time to attend

classes. So what do you need to do in order to build this relationship? Firstly, you need to address your students appropriately so that they will communicate with you openly and informatively. Secondly, you need to give your students more power than is sometimes the case in a student–teacher relationship. See 3.4 and 3.6 for some practical suggestions on how to do this.

When students meet you halfway in a constructive working relationship, Business English is not only special, it can become an exciting and surprising area of teaching. As a result of your efforts to improve a few people’s lives you are likely to have interesting classes, increased job satisfaction and a window into other people’s worlds. You may also have a springboard into other areas of work, such as those suggested in 10.1.

## **2 Setting things up for success**

Effective pre-course work for in-company or in-house Business English courses will not only make the beginning of courses smoother, it will also help to make courses successful overall. Teachers, students and students' bosses will be approaching the English course with an appropriate set of assumptions and helpful attitudes.

You personally may become involved in some, or even all, of this pre-course work. Roles of individuals vary greatly between organisations, but even in cases where you have no official role it may be helpful – from everyone's point of view – if you become involved. Negotiate your school's political structures carefully though, and make sure that communication channels remain open and are enhanced by your involvement. As long as your contributions are known and well-explained, they are likely to be welcomed and appreciated.

### **2.1 Customer care**

Effective customer care involves listening carefully to what individual students (or sponsors) say and then taking appropriate action. In order to do this, both effective record-keeping and information dissemination are essential. Clear, efficient, consistent and courteous treatment of customers – both inside and outside class – is also essential if students and sponsors are to feel that they are being well looked after.

#### ***Record-keeping***

Customer care starts at the enquiry stage. At this point records on individuals' requests or expressions of interest can be noted down (perhaps using a form such as the one suggested on p. 10) and then filed for future reference. (A computer database can, of course, make future sorting and access of information even easier.) As soon as a student enrolls for a course, either a public course or a private group course, the student's notes need to be transferred to a student record form, such as the one provided on p. 24. This will then need to be kept up-to-date as the student progresses through various courses and examinations.

### ***Information dissemination***

Whenever your school offers a course which might be of interest to a student, or potential student, he or she should be informed. For example, if several enquiries were received about BEC3 exam preparation courses which were currently not on offer at your school, as soon as these courses are set up the previous enquirers need to be informed. (To find out more about BEC3, see the Glossary.) As well as showing care for your customers, disseminating any relevant information is, obviously, of great value to a school because it is a kind of advertising and might well result in fuller classes, as well as students who feel they are being kept up-to-date.

### ***Clear, efficient, consistent and courteous treatment***

When dealing with students and sponsors, bear in mind the following points:

- Customers will need to know exactly what is on offer to them, at what price and when.
- People will only perceive your service as efficient if they are dealt with quickly and reliably. Nobody likes long waits or unfulfilled promises.
- Potential students or sponsors will probably also be contacting other language schools. Even though you need to take this into account, some people will naturally be offended if you make negative statements about your competitors.
- Courtesy is defined differently by different nationalities so it is a good idea to learn about, then take into account your customers' national preferences.

## **2.2 Initial contact with clients**

Companies and individuals approach schools in various ways, largely depending on local practices. Whether you are involved only occasionally or on a regular basis you may be able to influence the way enquiries are dealt with by providing suggestions or even a form for enquiries – such as the one suggested on the next page. At this initial enquiry stage the client's main concerns might be price, the credentials of teachers and the approach to evaluating and ensuring results. Don't make exaggerated or misleading promises. This is the first stage in a long process in which clients will gradually come to rely on your honesty and expertise. Individual students and personnel managers will have most respect for a realistic approach which looks at real results and probabilities.

## 2 *Setting things up for success*

During initial conversations with potential clients, irrespective of the country or culture, it is probably best to leave most of the speaking to the client. However, focus on finding out:

- where the real impetus for the course came from, and whose idea it was to contact you
- why the enquirer wants to join or set up a course
- what she or he wants to achieve

If you find out the answers to these questions it is much easier to confirm (and satisfy) clients' needs later on. It is often at the enquiry stage that needs are most clearly expressed.

At this initial contact stage it is often also a good idea to encourage potential students to take a placement test and complete a needs analysis form, such as the one provided on p. 11. Scores and responses (or information on appointments, if it is a telephone enquiry) should also be recorded on the original enquiry form – for ease of reference later on. If tests and forms are readily available at your school's reception desk they can be administered quickly and efficiently. Immediate follow-up oral interviewing – if practically possible – can then quickly result in immediate registration for courses.

Note that placement testing often comes later in the pre-course needs analysis for two reasons. Firstly, different tests might be used for different needs. Secondly, if a large number of new students are involved (e.g. when setting up courses in-company), special arrangements will need to be made. More detailed notes on placement testing are given in 2.4.

### *A form for initial telephone or face-to-face contact*

<b>BUSINESS ENGLISH</b>		ENQUIRY		Date:	Time:
Name: .....		Company: .....			
Contact numbers: .....					
Interested in:					
Reasons for wanting English:					
Previous courses taken?			Exams already taken?		
Placement test taken:		Y / N	Score:	Date to be taken:	
Needs analysis completed:		Y / N		Date to be returned:	
Suggested / promised:					
Enquiry dealt with by: .....					



## A form for needs analysis

**BUSINESS ENGLISH NEEDS ANALYSIS**

Name: ..... Company: .....

Contact numbers: .....

To help us make the English programme useful, please fill out the form below.  
What do you need to do in English? How good are you already? Do you urgently  
need to work on improving this skill? Look at the key at the bottom before you start.

Language area	How good am I?*	How urgently do I need this skill?*
talking to clients	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
letters or formal faxes	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
using the telephone	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
dealing with visitors	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
talking to colleagues	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
reporting to managers	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
giving presentations	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
attending meetings	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
negotiating	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
note-taking at meetings	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
e-mail, faxes or memos	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
report-writing	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
understanding the news	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know
other: .....	0 1 2 3 4 5	now very soon next year don't know

**\* KEY:**

- How good am I?      0 = I can't do this at all  
                               1 = I try but I'm not very good  
                               2 = I can do it but I make a lot of mistakes  
                               3 = I'm OK at doing this but I make a few mistakes  
                               4 = I'm quite good at doing this – I don't make many mistakes  
                               5 = I'm very good at doing this – I hardly make any mistakes

How urgently do I need this skill? Circle the words which are true for you.

**Any comments or requests?**

*Thank you for your time.*