

TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH – USEFUL TIPS AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract:

The paper presents a summary of language learning methods for those who teach Business English classes to university students and people working in the field. It also includes several tips and strategies on how to improve their reading, writing, listening and especially communication skills, while offering advice on how to better prepare them to manage in an ever-changing, interdependent, multicultural business environment.

Key words: Business English, teaching strategies, useful vocabulary.

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Nowadays, Business English is in high demand and most teachers will be asked to teach a business English class at some point. There's a lot more to teaching Business English than just introducing new business terms or handing over endless lists of business vocabulary. It is essential to learn how to make sure your students are really prepared to use English in a real business setting.

Some Business English teachers may find it difficult to decide what points to focus on when asked to guide students for that big step into the real world. As the world market becomes smaller and more interdependent, it is imperative that teachers keep in mind that some of their students may one day have to work for a foreign or a multinational company. It means not only training your students on how to develop their foreign business language skills, but also helping them come to terms with cultural differences and business styles.

The first step is to learn exactly what your students expect. "Business English" means different things to different people. To some it means the language of international trade while others define it as the language and communications skills office workers need. It is always a good idea to ask your students how they intend to use their English knowledge outside the classroom, in their work and business lives.

Give your students realistic business English practice through role plays of meetings, business negotiations, telephone conversations and more. Focus on general vocabulary and phrases used in the business world, business and professional writing such as letters, memos, proposals, preparing and delivering professional presentations, etc. Students should come away from these with a compilation of phrases they'll really be able to use. Don't overlook small talk, either. Arm your students with the appropriate vocabulary to chat with English-speaking colleagues, for example, during breaks at international conferences.

Many business English learners find it useful to practice creating and giving presentations in English. In order to help your students create such presentations, provide useful phrases for introducing a theme, transitioning from one idea to the next, concluding a presentation and taking questions.

Almost all professionals who use English for business will need to write letters, memos, invitations and short reports. For each writing lesson, it is advisable to select

just one type of correspondence, such as a letter of complaint, and provide good examples, useful phrases and practice writing a full example.

In what regards high level professionals, textbook exercises can be boring compared to the work they're used to. As an alternative, build your lessons on activities centered on solving problems and making decisions. Topics like this include deciding how to market a new product, planning a budget and choosing a new employee.

In what concerns teaching Business English speaking skills, present different themes like business protocol in a multicultural setting, how job interviews have changed over the years or the advantages and disadvantages of working in a foreign country.

Depending on the culture you're teaching in, your students may enjoy discussing matters like dealing with a difficult collaborator or boss, unfair policies in the workplace or problems in their industry. Because almost everyone has a strong opinion on such subjects, they can encourage even the quietest class member to speak up.

When teaching business correspondence, try to give your students a communication goal, rather than just having them turning their work in for a good grade.

Some people think business English is all about boring charts, diagrams and figures and very dry, dull technical processes. In fact, it's mostly about establishing good relationships with suppliers, customers, colleagues, etc. And fortunately Business English learners are normal human beings like the rest of us, and they like to enjoy learning. So play games, set challenges, and try to have fun. Everybody will learn much more as a result.

Business English students are taking classes either because they need to do their jobs more efficiently or due to the fact they study it in school. We have to be aware of what their real goals are, so we need to ask them who they have to communicate with in English, what about and why. If we can find out precisely what they need to do and in what contexts, we can then adapt our lessons accordingly. The other key question to ask is what they find most difficult. That way we can identify the skills and language they lack.

If you ask your students when they need to learn English by, they'll almost certainly say yesterday. We can't afford to waste time, so we have to set a few priorities. We can tell our students what we think their course should include, see if they agree, negotiate the curriculum, and possibly outline a list of objectives together. It's a business-like approach that ensures we all know where we're heading and that we all buy into the process of getting there.

Identifying needs doesn't stop after the first lesson and we have to keep checking that we've got our priorities right. Asking questions like 'Was that task useful?' is a good way of getting feedback, and performing quick check activities is a great way to find out what students do and don't know. For instance, maybe our lower-intermediate students already know how to say the days of the week, dates, numbers, etc. We can do a quick quiz to see. If they don't, we need to fill in the gaps. If they do, we can move on faster.

We want to get our students practicing doing their present or future jobs and that's somewhat different from just talking about them. The best way to do it is by setting tasks that reflect or imitate the jobs they need to perform in English. Clearly that can be difficult if we don't know their field, but a good Business English course book will help a lot. It will contain lots of tasks that people working in international business environments usually need. Students will be able to personalize many of those tasks too, so that they fit their own individual work situations exactly.

When we're evaluating our students' performance, it helps to think in terms of their business goals. For example, if their task is to make a call complaining about mistakes on an invoice, we might ask ourselves:

- Do they resolve all the problems with the invoice?
- How long does the call take? (Time costs money.)
- Will the business relationship be damaged, maintained, or improved as a result of the call?

If we focus on the business outcome like this one, we won't risk wasting time teaching lots of language points that our students don't need. We can congratulate successful performance and suggest improvements that will help our students achieve their short or long term goals.

We want our students to test and practice using new language when they perform speaking and listening tasks. Giving them time to plan what they want to say first encourages this. They can also make notes if they like. (Key words are preferable – not sentences.) But having a few minutes to get ready means they will be less likely to make the same old mistakes over and over again. Similarly, repeating tasks is very important. Tasks are a little like games, in that you have to follow certain rules. When people have mastered the rules of a game like Monopoly, they generally want to play it again and it's the same with tasks. Students often value the chance to have a go at a task for a second time and try to do it better.

Therefore, based on all of these aspects, a survey conducted on a number of 40 respondents concerning the importance of learning English and especially Business English in college – Students (1st year of study) at Tibiscus University in Timișoara (Department of Economics) – revealed the following:

- 85% of the respondents agreed that it is extremely important to:
 - focus on studying Business English;
 - continue this learning process throughout the three years of college;
- 40% of the respondents agreed that it is equally important to focus on:
- Only 5% of the respondents agreed that it is important to focus on:

It's learning General English instead of teaching Business English is only a lot more difficult than teaching General English. Granted it will take a bit more research depending on what business sector your students are from, but preparation is the key to seeming confident and knowledgeable in front of your students.

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