

Effective Teaching Strategies for Learners of Business Communication: A Case Study from INTI University College, Malaysia

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Business discourse views language as contextually situated social action constructed by its social actors and aims to understand how people communicate strategically in an organizational context. This paper presents insights and experiences of teaching Business English Communication to undergraduates in a well-known University College in Malaysia. It aims to share scholarly views, effective strategies and practical methods that can be incorporated in any Business English Communication classroom. In this paper, the methodology of teaching ESP for business is reviewed with special emphasis on the usage of authentic materials, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools for teaching and learning, and continuous assessment. The learners need to get involved in learning activities in the classroom in order to enhance their abilities to communicate effectively in the business world.

Business discourse views language as contextually situated social action constructed by its social actors and aims to understand how people communicate strategically in an organizational context. The term *Business English* is used to cover the English taught to a wide range of professional people, and students in full-time education preparing for a business career.

Business English or business communication is a rapidly growing field within the area of English Language Teaching and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). According to Dudley-Evans and John (2000), English for specific purposes, which is related to specific disciplines, is designed to meet specific needs of the learner. ESP focuses on language skills; however, it may take place in specific teaching situations. Therefore, its methodology differentiates ESP from general English.

Business English has attracted increasing interest and awareness in the last two or three decades. Business English course books and other teaching and learning materials are proliferating and almost all the undergraduates who study at business, trade, or commerce schools have to take some courses in Business English Communication.

In recent years, there have been a variety of ideas concerning the conception of Business English as it should be included in the range of ESP because it shares similar features with ESP, such as the analysis of demand and the selection of language materials (Ellis & Johnson, 2002; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Wenzhong Zhu (2008) has reviewed some recent studies done in 2005 and 2006 which argue business communication as English for General Business Purpose (EGBP). In this case, Business English Communication aims to add some common knowledge in the skills of business language. In similar studies Business English is classified into English for Specific Business Purpose (ESBP). In the context of ESP, EGBP targets those learners who have lack of working experience (pre-experienced or low-experienced learners) while ESBP is designed to train those professional people who have business working experience (job-experienced learners).

In this paper the focus is on the field of EGBP. This paper presents insights and experiences of teaching Business English Communication to a group of undergraduates in INTI University College, Malaysia. These undergraduates are young degree students who have no background knowledge or experience in the business world. The students are non-native speakers of the English language and are pursuing their studies in business fields such as Marketing, Accountancy, Finance, and Business Administration. The Business English/Communication curriculum in INTI does not overtly seek to teach English language ability per se. The students have conscious knowledge of the rules of Standard English even when they do not consistently apply them. Generally, these pre-experienced learners gain their knowledge of business largely from books; as a result, such knowledge is incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. They are also less aware of their language needs in terms of communicating in real life business situations. The methods, approaches and activities that will be discussed in this paper are the results of our observation and experience of teaching business English/communication. They can easily be incorporated in any Business English Communication classroom.

Course Description: English for Business English Communication

This course is designed to prepare students for a career in business by familiarizing them with various business-related topics. The main objective of this course is to develop the students' academic productive skills: writing, reading, and speaking effectively in English in an academic business context. Students are able to exercise their thinking skills in solving business-related problems in the classroom. There are also plenty of opportunities for students to be involved in small group discussions and to present ideas to the class. This course is offered as a compulsory subject in a franchise degree programme from University of Hertfordshire, United Kingdom. The following materials on the content of the course and assessment in this paper are adapted from the course structure and coursework specifications of ENL 207 (last update 2009), INTI University College, Malaysia.

Learning Objectives

This course aims to:

1. Facilitate students to take and make effective notes for synthesizing source information
2. Facilitate students to write academic essays using appropriate conventions
3. Provide students the opportunity to speak in public and take part in discussions, seminars, and tutorials
4. Enhance students' ability to communicate effectively in the business world—oral and written.

Learning Outcomes

Successful students will be able to:

1. Read business articles and synthesize source information
2. Draw relevant materials from different sources, e.g., the internet, books, and journals

3. Conduct a case situation, research, and solve problems using creative and critical thinking skills
4. Write academically—both extended academic assignments and exam writing skills.

In this paper, the methodology of teaching ESP for Business is reviewed with special emphasis on the usage of authentic materials, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools for teaching and learning, and continuous assessment.

Authentic Materials

Mainstream textbooks in the 1980s typically rely on sample letters and sample phrases to be used in “standard” situations (Jenkins & Hinds, 1987). Business English Communication is taught as a mechanical skill that can be learned through specimen letters and “fossilized” phrases. The trend continues into the 1990s, and Business English Communication is still too often treated as a store of phrases and idioms separate from the actual business world and professional skills. Despite the abundance of materials for the teaching of Business English Communication in the 1990s, there are very few Business English textbooks for tertiary education, which would meet the needs of the new skills required by the corporate workplace (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996). In their attempt to cover the widest possible market, they aim at wide applicability by presenting standard solutions to standard problems. In this they rely heavily on the tailor-made or imagined business situations which sometimes focus on outdated business materials and concepts. In classroom, lecturers are usually more dependent on the textbooks. The students as pre-experienced learners have to imagine the situations and deal with the materials that are neither authentic nor tailored from the authentic materials. It takes time for them to grasp the business situation or sometimes they don’t reach the context before the class ends. Therefore, the use of authentic materials can be considered as one of the key approaches to the teaching of Business English Communication. It is also recommended to adapt the authentic materials or tailor them based on the students’ language needs. In both scenarios the key is authenticity which can enhance the possibilities of creating authentic business contexts for students in the classroom. Authentic materials can be defined as “any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching” (Nunan, 1989, p. 54). These materials must be taken from the real world with no intention of creating them for the purpose of language teaching (Ellis & Johnson, 2002).

In the context of Business English, there are various types of authentic materials. The main source of authentic materials and activities for teaching and learning Business English Communication is the internet. The following are examples of authentic items which can be used in Business English Communication classrooms.

For pre-experienced learners, the most convenient approach is to use the course books which use authentic materials in their content. In addition to the course books, authentic materials can be selected and taken from various sources. Articles or excerpts from newspapers, magazines, and Business English journals chosen for their relevance or interest are most likely useful. For instance, *Business Today*, *The Times*, and *The Economist* are among good business magazines. Advertisements, illustrations, commercial documents, or diagrams to demonstrate business concepts can also be selected. The BBC World Service provides various kinds of information that can be usefully incorporated in teaching and

learning materials. www.bbc.co.uk is an extensive website that offers a lot of features such as a glossary, which many learners find particularly useful, and a link which allows the learners to open a short video clip and understand the context of the language that is used. In the section of “Business English” in BBC, students can learn various language skills that are related to Business English Communication. Students can read recent business news and get familiar with the business concepts and vocabulary that are being used in the business world. They can also listen to and watch these excerpts and improve their listening skills. In the “Talking Business” section students are offered various oral communication skills such as presentations, negotiations, dialogues, conversations, and meetings.

At INTI-UC, all the classes are equipped with LCD projector, a PC, and broadband technology. The access to the Internet makes it possible for us to expose our students to authentic materials and also to show them how to use the materials for further study or homework. In other words, this method helps us to move toward student-centered learning.

Other than BBC there are many websites such as Business.com and Longman Business English that offer authentic materials that can be used in teaching and learning of Business English Communication. Once the term *business* is entered into the search engine, almost all the topics that are related to business are available for further exploitation. Longman Business English offers one article on a particular company once a month with some comprehension questions.

Specific corporation information is a vast category that covers a variety of business teaching and learning materials, such as annual reports, letters, faxes, emails, memos, minutes of meetings, contracts, written instructions, product information, company advertising brochures, company websites, and so on. Learners of Business English Communication are often attracted to company websites that are popular and established. These websites not only provide authentic materials, but also furnish the learners with up-to-date statistics as most corporate websites publish their company details and annual reports on the World Wide Web. In particular, company websites give details about company history, marketing strategies, product information, advertising methods, and so on. In order to create an authentic business context, the teachers can bring real companies into the classroom. For instance, the learners could be asked to compare and contrast two organizations (Samsung and Nokia) that belong to the same industry (cell phone technology). The books that provide specific information about particular companies are either hard to come by or are nonexistent. Therefore, the internet is a great source of information for the learners of Business English Communication.

Within Business English Communication, the lecturers have greater freedom to create different “scenarios” or ideas for role-playing, using a text as a point of departure. Much of the language is functional, which means it is applicable to many situations. Depending on the proficiency of students, the lecturers can expand or limit the scope or complexity of any lesson, by picking and choosing what is appropriate for the class. Case studies or teaching cases are very useful tools in order to discuss business contexts in the classroom. Case studies are defined as descriptive scenarios that serve as the source of classroom discussions (Lynn, 1999). Using case studies to facilitate learning is often recommended by educators as it enhances various learner skills, such as critical and analytical thought. Lynn (1999) states that teaching case is a story based on actual events or circumstances, that is told with a definite teaching purpose in mind and that rewards careful study and analysis. Gideonse (1999) believes that almost anything can be a case as long as it presents a predicament from practice

demanding some kind of action. In the context of Business English Communication, it is a written description of a problem or situation that is taken from the business world. The purpose of a case study is to place the participants in the role of decision-makers, to identify central alternatives among several issues, competing for attention, and to formulate strategies and policy recommendations. Cases are not presented with their own analysis, but the learners are to apply the theory that they have learnt to a “real situation” (Husock, 2000). Thus, it is evident that the case method provides more authentic contexts for the Business English Communication learners as they present real situations in the business world. Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994) discuss that the case method enables students to discover and develop their own unique framework for approaching, understanding, and dealing with (business) problems. In other words, the learners are to understand the case, identify and analyze the possible problems, and provide recommendations using a problem solving tool or a framework.

To create authentic business contexts for students the lecturer is to choose real case studies from the Internet. One of the websites that is used for the students at INTI in a Business Communication course is “Case Studies and Management Resources” (ICMR) at www.icmrindia.org. These cases are usually long; therefore, the unnecessary details are omitted to make them shorter. It is important to note that the context of the case would not be changed. In this way students deal with real problems which companies face and come up with practical solutions and recommendations. For the pre-experienced learners who have limited business knowledge, the lecturers need to prepare “a simplified case study” from the extensive cases which can be found in the Internet. However, to make the context authentic the lecturers should “understand the case and omit the unnecessary details without disturbing the real context of the case” (Sampath & Zalipour, 2009, p. 5). The task and background information must be properly stated according to the students’ language proficiency level.

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Tools

Technology-enhanced learning has been recognized as one of the effective ways to teaching Business English Communication. There are a number of different types of e-learning resources specially designed for Business English Communication teachers and learners. Implementing ICT in Business English Communication classrooms is a way to bring the outside world into the classroom, thus, creating an authentic context for the learners to acquire the skills they will need in the business world. The following sections demonstrate how ICT can be used in teaching and learning of Business English Communication at INTI-UC. The e-learning system that is used at INTI UC is called INTI Online. This online system facilitates teaching and learning Business English Communication in various ways.

Features of INTI Online

INTI Online creates possibilities for lecturers to teach Business English Communication more effectively. It also makes learning more interesting for students to develop their language and communication skills. INTI Online has many features. In teaching and learning Business English Communication courses, some features of INTI Online are more useful such

as Online Forum, Online Assessment, Coursework Marks (grades), Contents, Emails, and Chat.

Contents. Lecturers are to upload lecture notes to INTI Online Learning Management System (LMS) where students can download and study course material such as notes, lessons, and exercises before they come to class. For instance, students can go through the reading comprehension passages and look up the words that they do not understand before coming to the class. In this way they are given more time to work on their tasks. The same way students are asked to read and familiarize themselves with case studies at home and look for the concepts and study the frameworks that can be applied to solve a particular case study.

Online forum. This is another useful feature of INTI Online which provides the students with opportunities to express their ideas and opinions in a logical manner. This method of communication assists the learners to interact with each other in a more effective way. Lecturers can create a forum topic on interesting business concepts such as “The characteristics of a good leader,” “Is online shopping reliable,” or “E-commerce.” The topics must be selected based on the students’ field of study (marketing, accounting, business admin, finance).

Students are to respond giving their opinions and ideas, agreeing or disagreeing with each other in the forum. The lecturer constantly monitors and controls the discussion if it goes off topic. This creates a platform even for introverted students to voice their ideas and gain confidence, empowering them to be more active in the actual classroom.

Online assessment. This provides additional practice for the learners where they can choose an answer or write their responses. Students feel less stressed as these exercises will not be counted in their summative assessment. For instance, to teach business vocabulary and writing, the lecturer can set five sentences with a business phrase in each and students are to write the meaning of these phrases in that context. This exercise can be developed to writing paragraphs or essays. Online assessment includes multiple choice questions (MCQ), true/false (T/F), fill-in-the-blank questions, or multiple response questions.

Coursework marks. One of the advantages of INTI Online is that the lecturers can type in raw marks (coursework marks) on a regular basis. Students can view their own marks and see their progress in the subject. Once the mark for one task (for instance, tests, assignments, oral presentations) is entered out of one hundred, the system automatically calculates the percentage. When students see their marks they can also see the feedback given by the lecturer. In the oral presentation component, for example, students may see teacher comments such as “Reading from the slides,” “Improve eye-contact,” “Focus more on content,” “Lacks comparison and contrast,” or “Inappropriate gestures.”

Continuous Assessment

“Assessment is a process of measuring, and one formal method of measuring is to test. There are less formal, more qualitative methods of assessing which are particularly important for feedback on learning” (Dudley-Evans & John, 2000, p. 210). Terminal and continuous

assessment are considered as two contrasting paradigms of assessment. *Terminal assessment* is based on the principle that it is best to wait until the end of a course before carrying out the ultimately recorded part of the assessment. On the other hand, *continuous assessment* is carried out on an on-going basis while students are actually working their way through a course. The assessment can take a wide range of forms, including tests, various types of assignments, presentations, among others.

The ultimate proof of a Business English Communication course is how well the learners fare when using communication skills in their target situation. Therefore the best and fairest way to assess students' performance is at the end of each stage or soon after the lesson has been completed, or in some cases, while the work is actually being carried out. This method is much more useful to the students, since it provides them with a number of benefits, rather than leaving the real learning process to the very end.

The assessment scheme of the Business English Communication course in INTI has been designed to help the students develop their skills in a cumulative and systematic way. The coursework components carry 50% of the total mark that the learners can obtain and they are carried out throughout the semester, which is comprised of 14 weeks. The components listed in Table 1 are the six parts of course work and they carry different marks.

In Assignment 1, students are required to compare and contrast two companies based on an outline given by the teacher. Students research the real companies using various ICT tools and resources. They have to produce a write-up/project paper in pairs. This assignment is designed to provide the students with useful feedback and they are guided throughout their project, which is one of the advantages of continuous assessment. This assignment is done in three steps; Draft 1, Draft 2 and the Final Write-Up. The first draft is done during the fourth week of the semester and the second draft is done during the sixth week. Finally, the complete assignment is submitted in the eighth week. Some parts are completed in class in order to avoid potential free-rider problems, a situation in which an individual gets benefits without contributing anything. Most importantly, the lecturers discuss the students' outlines and drafts in class and recommend the changes that need to be made. Thus, students are guided throughout the process of their assignment. In addition, the marking guidelines and descriptors are provided to the teachers and learners of Business English Communication, so that consistency and standards are maintained.

Assignment 2 is a case study which is done in groups. Students are to solve a case study using a problem-solving framework. The framework can be generated from a few problem-solving tools. The salient features given in the case study are the available details and statistics of real companies. Like in Assignment 1, this is done in several steps. In order to assess the students continually, this assignment is carried out within a period of seven weeks. There are three consultation sessions in which students meet up with the lecturer. In the first consultation, students are required to show the draft of Step 1, 3, and 5, where they provide the background information of the case study, discuss the possible problems that they have identified, and the tentative solutions. As part of the mark allocated to this assignment, students have to be present in the consultation session and discuss their work with the lecturer (face-to-face feedback). The lecturer explains the unclear concepts, corrects language errors, and makes recommendations for improvements. In the second consultation, students present their Steps 2 and 4. Students analyze the salient features of the given information using charts

Table 1

Course work components:

1. Assignment 1:	12.5%
2. Presentation 1:	6.25%
3. Test 1:	6.25%
4. Assignment 2:	12.5%
5. Presentation 2:	6.25%
6. Test 2:	6.25%

and graphs in Step 2, and in Step 4 they are to write the root cause or the problem statement. In the last consultation, the lecturer checks their Step 6, in which the students evaluate each proposed solution. Students brainstorm and discuss the advantages/ disadvantages, constraints/limitations, and internal/external factors. In addition, during the third consultation students will be guided to do their last step in which they defend the implementation by giving three recommendations.

Good presentation skills are essential in today's workplace. Even though some jobs do not require employees to make presentations regularly as part of their job, employees may have to present information occasionally at meetings. Public speaking even in a business setting among co-workers can be stressful for many people. Thus, students of Business English Communication are expected to learn oral communication skills. Continuous assessment systems also help the learners improve their presentation skills. Presentation 1 and 2, which carry 12.5% of the final grade, are based on Assignment 1 and 2. Using ICT tools like PowerPoint slides, flash videos, or other helpful tools, students are to present the information gathered in their assignments. Learners are given individual marks as oral communication skills vary from one person to another. After each presentation, feedback is given on the presenter's delivery, content, language, visuals, team effort, and other dynamics. The assessment criteria for oral presentation are given in Table 2.

One of the most widely used forms of continuous assessment is to give students ongoing tests. As the students proceed, they are given short tests from the lessons they have completed. Test 1 and Test 2 are conducted in Week Seven and Week Twelve and the total percentage of these two tests is 12.5%. The test questions take variety of forms. The students' ability to read a business article, answer the comprehension questions, and paraphrase/summarize are assessed in the first test. The second test focuses more on students' writing ability where they have to write an answer based on a case study and a 350-word essay on a business topic.

Therefore, it is apparent that the Business English Communication course is continually assessed through ongoing tests, assignments, and presentations which lead to the progressive development of intellectual, analytical, creative, and critical thinking skills of the young individuals. Course work components are assessed based on the detailed and meticulously prepared guidelines and descriptors. As an essential part of continuous assessment, students receive constant feedback on their progress, highlighting both their strengths and weaknesses.

Table 2
Criteria for Oral Presentation

Criteria	Marks			
	Excellent: (8-10)	Good: (5-7)	Fair: (3-4)	Poor: (0-2)
Delivery Holds audience's attention Vocal: volume/speed/articulation Non-vocal: eye-contact, gestures, poise, handling of visuals, use of notes.				
Language Use Language style - informal / personal / simple - use of links and transitions				
Content Present appropriate well-organized material. - opening / introduction - supporting details - conclusions / closing				
Visuals Aids - appropriate choice of aids - readable and clearly written - well prepared - adequate viewing time				
Team effort - all members participated equally - manage to answer questions as a group - coherent in delivering the content of the presentation				
Total marks:				
General comments:				

By enabling on-going monitoring of students' performance, continuous assessment can provide early warnings to those who are having problems with a course, and thus allow appropriate remedial help to be provided in time. The potential usefulness in continuous assessment lies in the array of options, criteria, and resources which support the system in its totality, more than the use of any of these in isolation.

Conclusion

In ESP, Business English Communication should be presented not as a subject to be learned in isolation from real use, nor as a mechanical skill or habit to be developed. On the contrary, Business English Communication should be presented in authentic contexts acquaint the learners with the particular ways in which the language is used in function. This means that they will need to perform in their fields of specialty or jobs.

This paper has attempted to discuss the effective teaching strategies for learners of Business English Communication based on a case study from INTI University College in Malaysia. We believe that the most effective way to increase pre-experienced learners' practical knowledge in Business English Communication courses is to concentrate on creating authentic business contexts in classrooms. ICT plays a fundamental and crucial role in enabling the lecturers to do so. As emphasized earlier, the best method is to make use of authentic materials for teaching and learning of Business English Communication by implementing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as teaching and learning tools. Continuous assessment at INTI has made it possible for the lecturers to increase the interactions with the students. Frequent interactions means that lecturers know the strengths and weaknesses of their learners. These exchanges foster a lecturer-learner (pupil-teacher) relationship in which the pupils learn that their lecturers value their achievements. The assessment outcomes also help the lecturers to evaluate and modify the pedagogical strategies. Every teacher enjoys trying out different approaches, adding variety to lessons, and discovering the most effective methods of instruction. As you bring a new perspective to your classes—the challenges of everyday business life—you will be adding both variety and meaningful communication to the study of Business English. It is a challenge, though, that carries with it significant benefits in making teaching and learning methods, strategies, and approaches of Business English more practical.

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