

Do as the non-natives do in business English

Clarity not idiom important in international arena

■ **IAN BADGER** writes

In the European workplace English is spoken predominantly by non-native speakers of the language who opt to use English for communication purposes. This is not through any particular desire to emulate a British or American culture but simply because English is the language which is most likely to be understood by a large number or work contacts in different countries.

There is no point in encouraging employees of companies with little or no direct native-speaker contact to use complex structure and idiomatic language if other employees will not understand. Native-speaker managers working for these companies also need to be aware of the need for clarity. The native speaker is often outnumbered by non-native speakers in such international organisations and he/she will not be thanked for obscuring a message by using complex language. Idiomatic terms often cloud issues and make for secret codes that non-natives find disagreeable and insulting.

As teachers for the workplace, we need to help learners to express themselves clearly in language which will be widely understood and to be sensitive to linguistic diversity so that they can understand the language of different language groups, both native and non-native. If learners have only had access to a narrow model of British or US English at school, they will have difficulty in understanding the range of native and non-native accents which they encounter in their everyday working lives. The demands placed on teachers of business English of course go beyond helping with clarity and com-

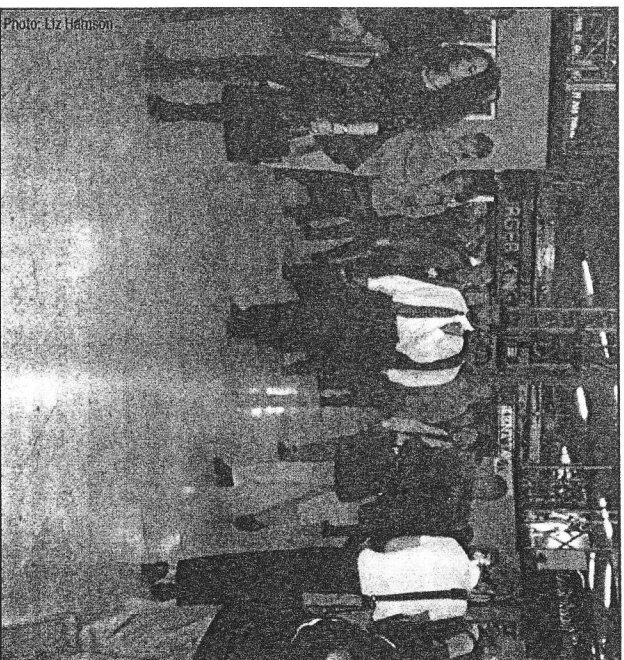


Photo: Liz Hemson

prehension. We are often expected to help with issues we feel poorly equipped to deal with: for example, our experience of how to write company brochures, annual reports or technical manuals is likely to be very limited and we are unlikely to have the necessary skills to advise on negotiating techniques. The reality is that many teachers have never worked in business and have no idea about areas such as meeting procedures, order processing and the complexities of budgeting. We need to recognise what we can do and what we cannot do to help our learners.

The following is a brief checklist for the teacher who is working with learners who need or who will need English in the European workplace. ■ Be interested in the business world - if you are not, you should probably not be teaching business learners.

English in a nanosecond

■ **DAVID EVANS** writes

THE LANGUAGE of business in the 1990s is easy to parody. After all, this is the nanosecond nineties, isn't it? A whole new era, in which every problem has become a challenge and every office cleaner a business unit. This is the dawn of a new epoch when business re-invents and revolutionises for a new, profit-centred,

age to camouflage a lack of merit or substance in the products or services they're selling. But any such cynicism shouldn't detract from the importance of two key messages. Firstly, the sudden frenzy of new business language shows that business has stopped being dull. It's no longer thought of as the grey, dry-as-dust subject it was even five years ago. Secondly, it may well be that the new business language is a genuine and necessary response to

Power context for business

■ **VICKI HOLLET** writes

ORDINARY CONVERSATION is the predominant medium of interaction in the social world. We use it to praise our kids, make friends and fall in love. And then there's business conversation, the talk we use to strike deals, work together and get jobs done. This is what business English students want to learn but how is it

recordings within companies if you can. ■ Study company literature to understand as much as you can about products and services. ■ Keep us up to date. Language needs in business are ever-changing - witness the explosion in the use of electronic mail in recent years, the use of video conferencing in many businesses, the future use of video phones. As teachers we need to be aware of changes in communication needs. ■ Be aware of your learners' working patterns and opportunities for language study. For many years regular lessons can be difficult to attend - home study whether by traditional books and cassettes or by CD ROMS and downloaded Internet programmes may be the only option over a long period of time. ■ Do not be dogmatic. Sometimes a company's "own" English may have to be tolerated. A Swedish company I work for uses the word "backlog" through their company literature synonymously with "order book". The word is used by British, American and Canadian employees of that company. We need to ensure that employees of the company understand the normal meaning of the word "backlog" but we can also accept that they can be "proud of their order backlog" within their own company context. If they were "chuffed about their strong order book", no-one in the company, apart from the very small number of UK sales personnel would actually understand what was being talked about.

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