

# KEYNOTE

## The business world of the 1990s

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*This article is based on a seminar given at the British Council, Milan, in June 1993, to an audience of company training managers, directors of studies and teachers of business English.*

I take the term 'business world' in its widest sense to cover all areas of business activity: large and small companies providing goods and services, state organisations and private companies, banks, business schools and colleges. English as an international language of communication is needed in the boardroom and on the shop floor.

In the 1990s companies are becoming increasingly international in their operations. Correspondingly, people in business need to communicate with an increasingly wide range of people in many countries. Such people are as likely to be in the areas of accountancy, production and technical support as in the area of sales. They will be experienced in working in their own languages, but they need to develop their ability to work in other languages.

This article is specifically concerned with the use of English as a lingua franca in the business world, but my comments apply to any language which is used as a lingua franca.

### Current trends

The early 1990s have seen the internationalisation of many businesses and industries; this has led to an urgent need for people to improve their language skills. However, in many countries, the early 1990s have also been a time of recession. Money for training has often been short and training has had to be carefully targeted; companies have needed to ensure that the training which they organise represents value for money. This has led to a number of trends. I have observed:

1 There is an increasing demand for language training at an elementary level and a need for relevant training programmes and work-related materials at this level. As companies have formed an increasing number of international links, many employees who have not previously needed English find that they must communicate with colleagues in other countries. Their needs are often urgent, as it is their failure to communicate which can severely hamper the workings of the company.

2 There is a need to acquire specialised language skills in line with changing job demands. Such demands could be to do with the language of an unknown field, for example the production manager who has to take part in financial discussions in English. They could be to do with language and communication skills, such as when a manager has to take a seniority post in a country and run meetings in English.

There is an increasing trend for people to be in direct contact with their business partners and customers, and a decreasing use of intermediaries. For example, sales administrators who have worked through agents in the past may find that they are required to be in direct contact with customers, and that the common language is English.

Many companies are requesting training in writing skills for personnel who are able to speak the language, but who have difficulty in writing reports – this is often the case when companies nominate English as the official company language. The increasing use of fax machines and electronic media such as e-mail is placing increasing demands on writing skills in English.

3 There is a need for companies to develop highly specific training depending on where they do business in the world. Such training might focus on linguistic and cultural areas. It may involve training in helping learners to be sensitive to the jargon of their businesses in different parts of the world. It may involve training in sensitising learners to different accents which can be a barrier to communication. On a wider level such training may help learners to develop their awareness of the other business cultures of their business contacts. This type of highly specific training has implications for the trainer, of which more later.

4 A growing need in business English teaching is in helping learners who come from countries where many business concepts are unfamiliar. For many of these people an understanding of the business world itself needs to be a vital part of their training. This also has implications for the business English trainer who may be qualified to teach the language needed to do business but not the business content.

5 Finally, the trend is for many learners who have attended 'general' courses in the past to attend courses which help them to develop the language they need in their everyday work, be these everyday business-related social needs, general business communication skills, or the highly specific skills as mentioned above.

### The business English trainer

The trends noted above have important implications for the profiles of the business English trainers required to do the job. Teachers of English for business can vary from the highly experienced language teacher with business experience to the inexperienced language teacher with little or no knowledge of the business world. One way that companies can help teachers to familiarise themselves with business practice from the inside is by allowing them access to their English-speaking offices and factories where this is feasible.

It takes a long time to become a competent language teacher, and a long time to have the skills to work in business. Both skills are needed to teach English for business. Teachers with language teaching skills and qualifications need to learn about how business operates on a day-to-day basis in order to understand the needs of business learners. Without such knowledge they will find it difficult to monitor the communication which takes place in the classroom.

Trainers with business knowledge are not automatically qualified to become teachers of English for business. They need skills in teaching English to speakers of other languages – the skills required to do this will often be different from the skills required to simply teach business content or business communication skills to native speakers.

The typical business English trainer is unlikely to be both a language training and a content specialist. I would suggest that there is a strong case for co-operation between language trainers and native speaking business people in cases where specialist input is necessary. In a recent course which we have run for IT specialists working in an international environment, we have worked with an American business analyst, who has been able to assure us that the business discussion is on track, and to point out cultural differences between certain European and American ways of doing business. The language specialist has been responsible for developing the language skills of the course participants.

Trainers need to be aware of what their strengths and weaknesses are, and to draw on outside expertise where possible.

### Language training programmes

In most cases, programmes of training are required to meet the types of need identified above. Some issues which should be considered by trainers and the companies for which they work are:

- 1 Language training policy
- 2 Language training audits
- 3 Methods
- 4 Materials
- 5 Importance of self study
- 6 Reporting procedures
- 7 Evaluation

#### 1 Language training policy

I strongly recommend that companies make a clear policy statement of their language training priorities. Decisions as to who receives what training and where should then be based on the policy. Such a policy will, of course, vary from company to company but could state, for example, that company-sponsored training should only be made available to key personnel, that the company recognises that language training programmes are viewed as a vital component of staff development and therefore should be given appropriate status.

Some areas which might need to be considered when drawing up a policy:

- Is language training to be compulsory for those nominated?
- Does it have priority over other training programmes and work commitments?
- Is there to be an incentive system for learners who successfully complete training?
- Does it need to take into account the needs of special groups, for example older employees who have not needed to learn languages in the past?
- Are classes to be held in learners' own time or in company time? Is the company prepared to allow self study in work time?
- How much support is to be made available to learners prepared to study on their own in terms of materials, rooms in which to study, access to help, etc?
- What are the profiles of trainers to be employed by a company in terms of language training skills and knowledge of business practice?

## 2 Language training audits

If training is to be arranged strictly in accordance with key needs, it is essential that a company organises a language audit, by which employees are assessed in terms of their actual language level and the levels which they require to do their jobs effectively. Scales of assessment have been developed by, for example, ELTDU (English Language Teaching Development Unit) and LTS (Language Training Services). Other scales, such as that produced by the British Council, could be adapted for business purposes.

On the basis of an audit, a company can set out clear training objectives. Setting required levels needs to be a consultative process and should involve the learner as well as those personnel concerned with the learner's language development.

## 3 Methods

There is not space in this article to discuss methods in detail. As a general rule, methods should be relevant to learners and allow for monitored practice of the language which they need in their work. When time is limited, there is no point in spending time on activities which are not perceived by the learner as enhancing their work performance in English. Some useful ideas on methodology in business English teaching can be found in Nolan and Reed, and in Wilberg.

Methods will vary depending on the needs of learners at different language levels and on the skills being taught. We need to be receptive to new ideas which will improve the efficiency of learning, but we need to use methods which we and our learners are comfortable with.

## 4 Materials

I would identify three levels of materials for business English, namely:

- highly specific
- semi-technical
- core

The core level should cover the language which everyone working in a business environment needs. This consists basically of the need to manipulate structure, everyday business-related vocabulary and function. At this core level the key is to have materials which cover this language but which take account of the business environment. Whatever their level of linguistic proficiency, most learners will need materials which help them to talk about their jobs, companies, business activities, etc. They will need to meet people and to make arrangements. They will need to speak on the telephone and to write faxes.

The semi-technical level should cover specific skills areas such as presentations and the language needed in meetings, as well as language needed in specific job areas such as buying and selling, transport and distribution, production, accounting and finance. Many business people need to develop their specific skills in these areas, but not all do.



The level of *highly specific* language is best covered by the trainer's own materials prepared in consultation with companies for specific needs. Examples of such materials might be those to familiarise learners with the everyday language of open-cast mining, or to help employees of a Dutch company to communicate with a Japanese sales office. Such materials will often be invaluable but, because they are so highly specific, they are unlikely to be published.

Highly specific materials can be based on authentic written and spoken text which trainers should try to collect in partnership with sponsoring companies. Apart from forming the basis for training materials, texts, video and audio recordings can help trainers to become familiar with the language of the industries in which their learners have to operate. Often such language might not be what the trainer would expect.

## 5 Importance of self study

The business learner is nearly always short of time to study foreign languages. If the learner is able to attend classes, they are likely to consist of a course of 2/3 hours per week, short intensive courses of 2 to 5 days, or possibly 1 to 3 weeks of courses in an English-speaking country. In many cases teaching is not available and self study is the only learning option.

Even when lessons are provided, learners often have to miss them because of work commitments. They therefore need a programme of study which they can work on even if they have to miss contact time with their trainer.

In order to make the level of progress which is demanded, it is therefore vital that learners develop a self-study habit. This will not come easily to all learners. They will need help in the form of guidelines and study tips such as those given in Badger and Menzies (1993). For optimum results learners will need appropriate self study materials, trainer supervision of their studies, and the support of their companies.

The advantage of self study is that it can take place whenever and wherever the learner has time. There are times when some learners will be too busy with work/domestic commitments to study, but most people who are really motivated to improve their language skills can put some time aside on a regular basis.



One way that learners can help themselves and each other is by forming study groups. These support systems, where learners work on their own and then together in study sessions, can be particularly valuable when there is no easy access to a trainer. Such groups are of particular value for learners who have an occasional but nevertheless an important need to use English, as they provide a setting for regular spoken interaction. I explored this self study option in a company-based training environment in some detail in Badger (1990).

In that the learner potentially can spend far more time on self study than in the classroom, its importance cannot be overestimated in the overall learning process.

## 6 Reporting procedures

It is important that reports on language trainees should be businesslike and concise. They should tell the company/learner what they need to know in terms of an assessment of current ability and an analysis of areas which need to be improved. Reports should talk about the learner's strengths and weaknesses in as far as they affect the learner's ability to work in English. They should suggest future study programmes and materials.

They should be written with great care, for in many cases what a trainer says about a person's ability to do their job in English may affect that person's job prospects.

## 7 Evaluation of training

This involves evaluation of learner performance and trainer performance. The learner should evaluate what he or she is doing and has done, and should evaluate the effectiveness of the course and the performance of the trainer. The trainer needs to evaluate the learner, the effectiveness of the course, and the trainer's own performance.

For many companies where trainers are helping to develop specific language skills, the trainer's assessment of current ability according to a scale such as that mentioned earlier, plus specific comments, will suffice. However many other companies will require an external validation of their employees' progress and they will want learners to enter the business English examinations as set by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, Pitman and the American exam Toeic. Such exams are of particular value for learners who are studying business English courses focusing on core materials.

For learners' evaluation of their training programmes, I recommend that companies prepare their own assessment forms which could be completed by learners in their own language. Primarily learners should write an evaluation of their training for their sponsoring companies, but this feedback should be available to trainers whenever possible.

## Conclusion

This is a very exciting time for business English teaching. English is increasingly becoming a world language of business, which means that, for many people in the business world, learning English is vital: without a knowledge of the language they cannot do their jobs. People need to learn quickly and effectively – thus trainers must become more aware of business life and how to teach English for business as efficiently as possible.

The business world is a world where results and a return on investment are expected. As with all company training, language training should be cost-effective: a company should be able to see results in terms of its employees' improved performance at work. In the business world of the 1990s language training should be very much a part of business.

## References

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