



Business English: Make It Easy, Make It Different

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Abstract

Have you ever dealt with a student who feels insecure when speaking English in a business setting? Do you know what happens when his mind goes black as the English words disappear from his memory during an international phone call? Making himself understood takes precedence over getting the grammar perfectly correct. Too often, business English is taught like grammar, the more complicated and the more words in the vocabulary, the better it is. Let's find ways to make it easy making it different.

English is not the most widely-spoken language in the world if we count native speakers; it's the second after Chinese. But if we were to add on second-language speakers, then English becomes number one. So we should keep in mind that speakers of English as a second language outnumber native speakers by over three to one. Taking this into account, the student should communicate in an English that can be understood both by Mr Smith and Mr Yamamoto. The main body of the presentation will deal with networking and socialising, telephoning, negotiations, presentations, and reading business texts. In each part we will deal with the specific aspects and certain hot tips, activities and skills to reinforce its learning. They don't need idiomatic and slang expressions to impress their international business partners - quite the reverse, in fact. We, as teachers, should find the way to avoid our students worrying about their accent. It may be noticeable, that's fine as long as it does not interfere with understanding, it is part of their charm and cultural background. The choice of the areas covered by this paper is based on long experience of working with international communication skills courses. The areas are the basic business communication skills we all need, the skills we also use in our business dealings in our first language. If they work in an international organisation, they need to write emails in English and make phone calls. They meet and negotiate with people, they make short presentations of themselves, their organisations and their products or services. It is simply a question of successfully transferring their business competence in their mother tongue to English (although this is easier said than done). On the other hand, the language used in memos and letters should always be simple and direct. The key to good writing is to use as few words as possible to make meaning immediately clear to the reader. The best communications, those easily understood, are short, to the point and use familiar words: anyone going to a dictionary to write a letter runs into trouble by using unfamiliar words and getting the construction wrong, very likely, the person at the other end has to go to a dictionary to read the letter. It's always best to use simple English with familiar words. We should conclude that we all make mistakes, they matter but not as much as we tend to think. Mistakes can be corrected and misunderstandings can be overcome. Anything that improves communication can make life easier and business better.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to make an overview of the different needs and interests students have in learning English depending on the professional field they belong to. This study is based on my own

professional experience in dealing with students who need to learn English to apply it to their particular profession, that is English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and not students of English as a Second Language (ESL). Most of my professional experience is in dealing with University Tourism Students so I recommend the reader to bear this in mind along the full paper. Let's make ourselves think for a moment: is there any difference between these students and other, of their same age, studying other degrees?, do they value language acquisition as a law, engineering or medicine student would do?, shall we continue with those contents they had to deal with during their time at Primary and Secondary School?

The idea is to look for an answer to these and other questions, trying to analyse what kind of teaching is the most suitable being always conscious that they are being trained to work in the tourist sector where, foreign languages in general and English in particular are vital not only to perform their job in the best possible way but also to promote in their career.

The business-economical nature of tourism has made that, at times, the specific language used in the tourist environment is part of the specific language used in business. Contrary to this opinion, some of us support the idea that the language of tourism has its own particular nature. Languages and communication skills are a key element in the education of the future professionals of the tourist sector, thus, it's necessary to frame the characteristics of the language these professionals need to improve their formation.

The number of staff with specific training needs is increasing nowadays, specially in relation with communication and international cooperation. Governments, Universities and Tourist Companies in general, point out the pressing need of pushing competitiveness in the tourist industry to be able to adapt themselves to the new technological and socioeconomical reality of the current society highlighting the foreign language framework above other educational needs.

Languages barriers often provoke misunderstandings and a frustration feeling that can easily be avoided if the staff of any tourist sector has a wide knowledge of foreign languages as one more proof of a quality service. Many professions in relation with the tourist sector ask for an advance knowledge of foreign languages both as regards interactive aspects as well as accuracy.

Nowadays English is the international communication language par excellence. This is well defended not only by companies but also by university students and so it appears in the last updates of the Spanish Educational System. But companies' interests vary: sometimes they require written skills, some others oral skills and, very often, both. This seems to be logical taking into account that English is now a globalization language in Europe and most of the foreign tourists who visit Spain are European. This is without forgetting that Spanish outbound tourism has a clear tendency towards Europe, so English language is a fundamental means of communication for the future professionals of the tourist industry in our country not only to understand and be understood with others but also to prepare and organise travels for their clients to international destinations.

2. Methodology

English for tourism should be studied in the global context of the specific field. In fact, it shares the key elements when analysing the needs to elaborate de programme, select and develop the material. Besides, English for Tourism means defining a specific corpus and stressing particular ways of communication in specific contexts, as other variations of English for Specific Purposes.

A language is learned to be used for a purpose. The teaching methodology in an English for Tourism class, although not so different from that used in a General English course, has two common features: the professor needs to have a wide knowledge of the specific topic, that is tourism, while

measuring the students' requirements to develop a programme clearly suitable for that professional field.

An efficiency communication among speakers is the best way of reaching the goals in the tourist industry, these are identifying and satisfying customers' needs. Thus, the main characteristics of an efficiency communication are: clarity and accuracy; the information has to be given and received without any possibility of misunderstanding; body language, if proper and naturally used, means a great help in the process. If there is an efficiency communication with the client, then information will be transferred with accuracy so, the professionals of the tourist sector need to acquire excellent communication skills to develop their job in the best possible way.

Students have to deal with the linguistic characteristics that belong to the English Language in the specific context of tourism reaching the communicative competence for their career. Foreign languages in a Tourism Degree are not an aim by themselves but the way to reach it.

To describe the objectives and organise the contents in a foreign language course for Tourism, the first step is to identify the specific communication needs those students have, that is, know in which situations the students will use the language and so what they want to get in each one. Once situations are identified, that is the moment to decide the vocabulary and strategies suitable in each case. The student of English for Tourism has to accept his professional role in a certain communicative situation to put the suitable linguistic means to get the maximum efficiency when showing his point of view or information.

3. ESP vs. ESL

Reaching this point in my paper, there is no doubt that we are talking about English for Specific Purposes, ESP, and not just about studying a foreign language, that is, English as a Second Language, ESL. However, it is a teacher's duty to be conscious of the differences among one and another, specially those teacher who have been mainly in contact with English as a Second Language. The most important difference lies in the learners and their purposes for learning English. ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. An ESP program is therefore built on an assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required .

English is not the most widely-spoken language in the world if we only count native speakers. It's the second, after Chinese. But if we were to add on second-language speakers, then English becomes number one. It is roughly estimated that about two billion people can communicate in English, of whom about four hundred million are native speakers. So we should keep in mind that speakers of English as a second language outnumber native speakers by over three to one.

It is at this point where we, as teachers, usually make our first mistake taking British English or American English as a model and so, we teach them to try to become the perfect speakers of "Oxford" or "Harvard" English. Everyone tried to get ten out of ten in school language tests, perfection was demanded and grades depended on it. But in real life, language is an imperfect tool and any attempt to become the perfect speaker of English is doomed to failure.

So native speakers are not necessarily the best models for these students. Firstly, their language is often filled with idiomatic and slang expressions, which second-language speakers do not always understand, "do you fancy a nosh after the do with a drop of the other?"¹. Secondly, native speakers

¹ Would you like a meal and a drink alter the event?

often speak very quickly and with strong regional accents. Even other native speakers can find it difficult to grasp their meaning, and they find it impossible to modify this accent and speed to suit the international arena. Thirdly, native speakers may use over-complicated grammatical constructions and a very wide vocabulary.

So, if we are not going to use native speakers as a model for working internationally, what do we do? Our aim is to make our students become excellent speakers of "international" English, this means communicate in an English that can be understood both by Mr. Smith and Mr. Yamamoto. They don't need idiomatic and slang expressions to impress their international business partners, quite the reverse in fact. On the other hand, their accent may be noticeable but that is fine as long as it does not interfere with understanding, it is part of our charm and cultural background.

However, ESL and ESP diverge not only in the nature of the learner, but also in the aim of instruction. In fact, as a general rule, while in ESL all four language skills; listening, reading, speaking, and writing, are stressed equally, in ESP it is a needs analysis that determines which language skills are most needed by the students, and the syllabus is designed accordingly. An ESP program, might, for example, emphasize the development of reading skills in students who are preparing for graduate work in business administration; or it might promote the development of spoken skills in students who are studying English in order to become tourist guides.

As a matter of fact, ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching. Such a combination is highly motivating because students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study, whether it be accounting, business management, economics, computer science or tourism. Being able to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases their motivation.

The students' abilities in their subject-matter fields, in turn, improve their ability to acquire English. Subject-matter knowledge gives them the context they need to understand the English of the classroom. In the ESP class, students are shown how the subject-matter content is expressed in English. The teacher can make the most of the students' knowledge of the subject matter, thus helping them learn English faster.

As an ESP teacher, we must play many roles. We may be asked to organize courses, to set learning objectives, to establish a positive learning environment in the classroom, and to evaluate student s progress. We have to set learning goals and then transform them into an instructional program with the timing of activities. One of our main tasks will be selecting, designing and organizing course materials, supporting the students in their efforts, and providing them with feedback on their progress.

4. Conclusions

People learn languages when they have opportunities to understand and work with language in a context that they comprehend and find interesting. In this view, ESP is a powerful means for such opportunities. Students will acquire English as they work with materials which they find interesting and relevant and which they can use in their professional work or further studies. The more learners pay attention to the meaning of the language they hear or read, the more they are successful; the more they have to focus on the linguistic input or isolated language structures, the less they are motivated to attend their classes.

The ESP student is particularly well disposed to focus on meaning in the subject-matter field. In ESP, English 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, English should be presented in authentic contexts to make the learners acquainted with the particular ways in which the language is used in functions that they will need to perform in their fields of speciality or jobs.



Adults must work harder than children in order to learn a new language, but the learning skills they bring to the task permit them to learn faster and more efficiently. The skills they have already developed in using their native languages will make learning English easier. Although we will be working with students whose English will probably be quite limited, the language learning abilities of the adult in the ESP classroom are potentially immense. Educated adults are continually learning new language behaviour in their native languages, since language learning continues naturally throughout our lives. They are constantly expanding vocabulary, becoming more fluent in their fields, and adjusting their linguistic behaviour to new situations or new roles. ESP students can exploit these innate competencies in learning English.

If finally these students are able to become good International English speakers, their business partners, both native and second-language speakers, will perceive them as effective communicators and, moreover, many second-language speakers will prefer to do business with them rather than with a hard-to-understand native speaker. So some key advices to our students are summarized as follows:

- Speak at the speed you want to be spoken to. In other words, model good international English, especially to your native-speaker colleagues. It helps them modify their language and makes it easier to deal with them.
- Aim to build an active vocabulary of about four thousand words. This will be enough to enable the student to negotiate well, make good presentations, run effective meetings, write good emails, etc. In other words, to carry out all those tasks expected of him in his business field.
- KISS your communication – Keep It Short and Simple . Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs. It's easier for their business partners to understand, and easier to produce.

5. References

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