

Current Trends in Teaching and Learning Business English: Adapting to Internationalisation

Introduction

The world of business changes rapidly, and this has never been truer than within the last ten years. With recent developments in communications and technology, the world has become smaller and business is done on a global scale more quickly, easily and effectively. Economic bases have shifted, new markets have opened and new economic powerhouses have emerged. The world has globalised, and the face of international business has a completely new complexion.

In terms of teaching and learning business English, the internationalisation of business and the resultant changes in business practice have meant significant changes to both what we teach, and how we teach it. Moreover, business English students now have different needs and expectations of what and how they learn. Globalisation has had a different impact on each society, so these needs and expectations vary from country to country. Therefore, in Japan, business English teachers need to have an acute awareness of the specific needs of Japanese business people in an international context in order to deliver effective courses that will allow Japanese business people to perform confidently and effectively on the international stage.

The changing face of international business

International business has had four major influences over the last ten years that have had an impact on the teaching and learning of business English.

Changing technology

The first is technology, and in particular the field of communications which now allow us to connect with people globally in a matter of seconds. This has meant that international business now moves far more frequently as people are able to communicate quickly and easily, and financial transactions take place at the push of a button.

New powerhouse economies

The second major influence has been the emergence of new powerhouse economies like China, Russia and India and resulting shift in economic bases. Only ten years ago, Japan was the undisputed leader in manufacturing, and while it still is in terms of quality and efficiency, it is now struggling to compete with China and South East Asian countries who can manufacture goods more cost effectively due to cheaper raw materials and labour.

New markets

Thirdly is the emergence of new markets. The collapse of the Soviet block has laid way for huge new markets in Eastern Europe with consumers hungry for new products previously denied them. Newfound wealth in those countries and also in China and India has created new markets both for raw materials and for consumer goods.

The financial sector

The fourth influence is the internationalisation of financial and commodities markets. With most countries deregulating and moving towards more open markets, this has allowed for freer and more dynamic exchanges in financial goods and commodities which for many years created unparalleled global wealth. However, this has also had a negative effect whereby crises in one country now have a major impact on the economies of others. Whether positive or negative, the world is now more closely joined together through the international exchange of financial goods and services.

The impact on what we teach

These changes have meant that business people are now very likely to be dealing with a wide range of different countries. This has had a major impact on the teaching of business English, and means that teachers now need to have more than just a knowledge of grammar and basic business vocabulary. In order to ensure effective communication, we now need to have an awareness of how people from different countries and with varying levels of English communicate globally, and how business practices have changed on the international stage due to globalisation.

Vocabulary: constantly changing

The first and most obvious area is vocabulary. Changes in the modern business world throw up new words on an almost daily basis and it is often difficult for teachers and textbook writers to keep up. Perhaps the biggest area of change is in technology and particularly the Internet. Marketing departments now look for *increased web traffic*, and worry about the number of *hits* on their website, and many companies now use *social networking sites* and *Twitter* to promote their products. The recent world financial crises have also brought previously subject-specific words into the public domain – who knew what *sub-prime mortgages* or *toxic assets* were until a year ago? As such, the business English teacher needs to constantly update his or her business vocabulary knowledge.

Different 'Englishes': grammar vs. lexis/function

The second area to look at it is the shift in emphasis from a grammar-based methodology to a lexical one. It is said that these days more than half the English spoken at any time is between two non-native speakers, so we cannot claim that there is one, homogenous and 'correct' English. Rather, there are many 'Englishes', spoken by people of different countries. Of course, it may be argued that this was always the case as American, British, and Australian English have slight differences. However, we can now add to that list any number of Englishes including Singaporean English, Chinese English, Japanese English, Indian English, Russian English, Nigerian English and so on. When we add to this the increased need for speed in modern business, the emphasis of teaching necessarily shifts towards fast and effective communication and away from complex and grammar-heavy ideas of 'correctness'. Therefore, rather than teaching straight grammar, business English teachers now focus on a more lexical approach, teaching easily and widely understood standard phrases. We call these phrases 'functional' – that is to say, they serve a function of business or of communication. To give an example, let's take a sentence that is commonly found in email or business letters:

'We would be grateful if you could send us the invoice by Friday.'

Grammatically speaking, this is a tricky construction as it is a Second Conditional structure (If + past participle clause with a 'would' clause) further complicated by the fact that the past participle in this case is actually a modal verb followed by a verb in the present participle. In a typical business or general English course, grammar like this would not be taught until intermediate level or above. However, if we look at this sentence as a lexical item with a function, it becomes much easier, as below:

'We would be grateful if you could send...' = 'Please send...'

Suddenly, what was a very difficult grammatical construction becomes an easy to understand phrase that can be used immediately by even an Elementary level student, and recycled every time the student wishes to use the 'Please send...' function.

Of course, this does not mean that grammar is completely absent from the modern business English classroom. It simply means that teachers are required to have a deeper awareness of the needs of the students. An elementary student who communicates with international clients on a daily basis through email has vastly different needs, for example, from an advanced student who needs to write complex business reports for his or her native speaker boss.

The shift to a business skills based approach

Connected with this shift in focus from a grammatical notion of language to a lexical/functional one, is the change in emphasis to a more skills-based approach. Of course, we have always taught the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, but these days English teachers are expected to be able to train business students in the soft skills necessary to perform work functions like meetings, negotiations, presentations, telephoning etc. To use the example of presentations, a teacher will now not only have to equip the student with the necessary language for giving the presentation, but will also need to give advice on using PowerPoint, structuring the presentation, body language etc. These are regarded as 'extra-linguistic' skills, but as with the shift towards functional/lexical language, the emphasis is on fast and effective communication. Using PowerPoint correctly with the right presentation structure and body language means your message will be understood more quickly and easily.

The importance of cultural awareness

Another important aspect to notice is an increased emphasis on cultural awareness. As business people are dealing with a wider range of nationalities, they need to learn how to behave and what to expect. While English is undoubtedly the international language of business, there is as yet no standardised international business etiquette. To reflect this, no modern business English course would be complete without some reference to cultural differences. It is interesting to note that while Asian students of business English are learning how to give a firm handshake, in other parts of the world their counterparts are probably learning how to exchange *meishi* properly.

Modern business English textbooks ring the changes

All of these changes in teaching approaches can be found by looking at how business English textbooks have developed over the past ten years. The topics these books use have changed, and we now see far more references to emerging economies like China, and the issue of globalisation is omnipresent. All textbooks deal in some way with cultural differences, and there is more recognition of the variety of Englishes spoken around the world. Moreover, alongside the traditional grammar and standard skills

exercises can now be found practical business skills and more up-to-date vocabulary. There has also been a huge increase in the use of case studies and most modern textbooks now use these. Case studies give the opportunity for students to analyse real (or realistic) examples of business practice, and to use the business skills they have learnt in similarly realistic contexts. With all of these textbooks, the focus is now on fast and effective communication between people of different - and not necessarily native speaker – countries.

The impact on how students learn

Recent years have seen major changes in how business English students want to learn. The emphasis now is on more flexibility in terms of time and length of course, and also on content. More people need to study English, at varying levels and for different needs. However, what students need and what employers and HR departments want do not always match.

Our working lives

Perhaps due to the changes in the way business is done internationally, people's working lives have dramatically altered. Most notably, there has been a global shift towards longer working days. The increased speed of business has paradoxically not led to less time spent at work. Rather, it seems to have increased our workloads and made our days longer and less predictable.

The need for flexibility

This, of course, has an impact on how people want to study. These days, most people prefer more flexible courses that are shorter and offer a range of different time periods. Recently, early morning classes have become popular, allowing people to not only study at a convenient time, but also to avoid the morning rush hour. Advances in technology have helped in some ways, and 'blended learning' courses are now becoming more and more popular, allowing students to study at home via the Internet alongside the more traditional face-to-face classes.

Increased need for English in business

The internationalisation of business with new markets opening up globally also means that nowadays more and more people need to use English at work. A recent international study of 25, 000 business people found that around 90% of them felt that English was either 'critical or 'important' to their jobs. However, only 9% of respondents said their English was a good enough level to effectively conduct their business.¹ Therefore, there are now vastly more people who need to study English for their jobs, all of whom are at different levels and have vastly different, but nevertheless immediate, work needs. This means that students now want more focused and flexible courses that meet their requirements directly, leading to faster progress and allowing them to instantly use what they learn in their jobs.

More specialised textbooks

These changes are again reflected in the textbook market. As well as seeing an increased number of Business English textbooks, in recent years we have witnessed a

¹ Source: David Nunan, The Evolution of Technology and the Value of Online English Language Learning, 2005
<http://www.globalenglish.com/m/dl/whitepapers/PrinciplesWhitepaper.pdf>

huge rise in the number of business skills books and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) books to meet the demand for specialisation.

A gap in the market: meaningful business skills testing

However, employers, HR departments, and certification bodies have been slow to react to the changes in how people want and need to study. Employers yearn for measurability because they want to ensure that they are spending their training budgets wisely and so insist their students take TOEIC or TOEFL exams to measure their progress. Yet both these tests, and others like them, are principally language based (grammar and vocabulary) and neither of them gives a practical measure of how a person can perform their work duties through English in the real world. It may be some time before a more skills based testing system (*business skills* as opposed to speaking, listening, reading and writing) comes onto the market.

The Japanese context: Globalisation

Globalisation has had a unique effect on Japan's business and economy, and one which some analysts suggest will threaten its status as the world's second largest economy. The main threat to this status is of course China, but other nations particularly in South East Asia are also undermining Japan's hegemony in manufacturing.

The ageing society

Japan also has an added problem which is not unique, but which is more profound in the Japanese context. This is the issue of the ageing population. Recent reports indicate that by 2020, more than 25% of the Japanese population will be above retirement age.² Coupled with a declining birth rate, huge challenges lie ahead for the Japanese economy and society as a reduced workforce attempts to support an increase in pensioners.

Innovation

A further issue is the question of innovation. Japan has always been known as a nation that is highly skilled at turning other people's ideas into high quality yet affordable commodities, but has struggled to provide the cutting edge in innovation.

Japan's unique position

However, despite Japan's unique problems, it is perhaps also uniquely placed to deal with them. In terms of manufacturing, Japan's advantages of close networks and teams and its higher quality may mean it has more ability to ride out turbulent economic times when compared to younger economies like China. Also, Japan is starting to become known more as an innovator, especially in the creative industries of fashion and design, and increasingly in technology too. If Japan can continue to innovate, then some analysts argue that the ageing population may turn into an opportunity for Japan to become the lead market in technology aimed at dealing with higher numbers of elderly people.³

² Source: Moriyuki Oe, Problems and Implications of Japan's Aging Society for Future Urban Developments, 2006 <http://coe21-policy.sfc.keio.ac.jp/ja/wp/WP89.pdf>

³ Source: Werner Pascha, Economic Mega Trends in Japan, the Industrial Structure and International Competitiveness, 2007 http://www.cbs.dk/content/download/71329/972214/file/pascha_presentation.pdf

However, none of this will be possible without English as Japan desperately needs to engage with the rest of the world in order to fight off competition, win over new markets and form international partnerships.

The Japanese context: Teaching and learning English

As we have seen, internationalisation has led to an increased need for English in the workplace, for students of widely differing levels, and this is also true for Japan. However, some differences remain, and in order to meet the needs of Japanese students, English teachers need to have an acute awareness of specific Japanese learner problems.

Accuracy vs. Effective Communication: overcoming the fear of failure

We have looked at the global shift in business English teaching from a grammar based approach to a lexical/grammatical one in light of the need to communicate quickly and effectively. This is of particular importance in the Japanese context, as traditional methods of teaching and learning English in Japanese schools have for decades focused on grammatical accuracy. Culturally, Japanese people are also very concerned with accuracy and do not like to make mistakes. When speaking English or other foreign languages, this can often make them appear shy as they are hesitant to make any utterance in case they make an error. Therefore, both teachers and students should now analyse carefully the reasons the students have for studying business English in order to create the right balance between accuracy and effective communication, and teachers need to create a cooperative, friendly and relaxed atmosphere in class in order to eradicate the students' fear of failing.

The need for soft skills and cultural awareness

Other important areas in the Japanese context are skills based learning and cultural awareness. This is because the way that Japanese people express themselves, communicate and behave in business is quite unique. For example, Japanese business meetings tend to be quite formal, and people politely take turns to speak, and decisions are often made after the meeting has finished. In contrast, Western business meetings tend to be less formal, people will interrupt each other if they want to make a point, and decisions are expected to be made clearly in the meeting. This can cause major problems for Japanese business people which are not connected to language. So if Japanese people are to communicate quickly and effectively with international clients, the business English teacher needs to ensure they have the requisite cultural knowledge and soft skills as well as the necessary language.

The biggest challenge: confidence

Finally, we should look at an issue which presents perhaps the biggest challenge to Japanese learners. This is the problem of confidence. Japanese students have a tendency to underrate their ability in English, which leads to a lack of confidence in using it. The best way to overcome this is through practice, repetition, review and reflection. As such, all business English teachers must ensure that the courses they run and the individual classes they teach provide plenty of opportunity for the students to do meaningful practice exercises and develop the students' ability to monitor their own progress through rigorous review and reflection supported by the teacher. Similarly, while internet based courses and self study are very convenient and in some ways effective ways to study, students of business English should not underestimate the importance of face-to-face and group sessions that allow for realistic practice alongside feedback and guidance from the teacher towards achieving their goals. Convenience

and flexibility do not always equal effectiveness. Moreover, employers should be aware that this kind of 'true-to-life' practice has far more meaning and practical worth in the real world of global business than a language based exam score.

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The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the British Council

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