# A NEW APPROACH TO IN-SERVICE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES

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*Rezumat*

Cursurile de iniţiere in "Engleza pentru afaceri" ("Business English") pot permite profesorului metoda abordării unui manual convenţional ("course-book approach" – "General English") sau metoda fotocopierii de materiale adaptate conform cerinţelor. ("photo-copy approach" – "English for Specific Purposes"). Ambele metode prezintă atât avantaje cât şi dezavantaje. Autorul propune o a treia metodă sau alternativă, în care profesorul şi studentul negociază de comun acord obiectivele cursului. Scopul final este acela de a forma în participantul la curs atât deprinderi de comunicare corectă şi eficientă ("General English") cât şi un vocabular adecvat, dar în acelaşi timp natural mediului afaceresc ("ESP"). Astfel studenţii sunt expuşi unei "imersiuni" culturale dar în acelaşi timp şi lingvistice prin "situaţii" ("task" – uri) reale pe care ei trebuie să le "rezolve" folosind bagajul de cunoştinţe acumulat din punct de vedere comunicaţional cât şi al discursului afaceresc.

The term "Business English" covers many kinds of courses. There are *pre-service courses* for students who are training to become businesspersons and who have little or no actual business experience. The courses are usually quite extensive, stretching over three, or four years of academic studies. These courses differ in many ways from *in-service courses* provided for business people already at work. These latter tend to be either in-company, intensive courses, or courses of relatively short duration in private language schools.

It is immediately apparent that the materials and course design requirements of pre-service and in-service courses are, or should be, vastly different. All too often, however, evidence shows that teachers use the same or similar materials on the two courses. Reasons can be linked, on the one hand, to lack of appropriate material, and, on the other hand, to lack of commitment on the part of some teachers to adapt materials, which is time-consuming.

The very term "business English" provokes debate. Some people believe that "Business English" is little more than *general* English in a business context; others believe that much more student-specific materials can be devised, and that business English courses will involve a large element of job-*specific* vocabulary work. There is, of course, truth in each of these arguments, and this leads to one of the central ideas which underlies all business courses – the need for compromise. The compromises are of several kinds:

- Between general and specific language
- Between job-specific, company-specific, and subject-specific language
- Between effective, but defective communication and grammatical accuracy

These points, however, cover only the compromises related to the language which is taught. A number of other important compromises are frequently part of such courses:

- The client's requirements versus the student's requirements



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Usually a company is organising and paying for the course. The requirements of the client, i.e. the employer (course timing, length, and content) may vary considerably as to the employees' requirements (who might consider changing the job, or other interests unknown to the employer). The course can be successful only if both the client and the student will be satisfied to a certain degree, even when needs differ.

- Wants versus needs

The students' language needs may differ wildly from what it is requested. The students' needs are usually connected to individual goals (some would say "*I need to improve my vocabulary*", while others may be very good at handling it and quite poor in *grammar* knowledge). The nowadays tendency is to have courses mostly tailored towards improving communicative effectiveness disregarding other aspects of language learning.

- Needs versus possibilities

At schools students have to follow the timetable and the syllabus, which do not always fit in the students' needs. However, being included in the curriculum, both students and teachers have to reach some sort of compromise regarding the student's declared needs and objectives, and what is possible with the time and resources available. Similar situation is for students taking courses within companies; the only difference might be in the wider range of electronic equipment offered by the company to help learning process (photocopying facilities, overhead projectors, or even courses with some exercises provided on computer)

There seem to be two conventional approaches to the provision of business English courses. One is what teachers call the "*course book approach*". This is giving the student a textbook, which resembles a general English course. The textbook follows a standard pattern such as presentation of a text or dialogue, comprehension questions, vocabulary and grammar work, discussion, etc. Usually, this solution is enjoyed by both the student and the teacher for the simple "*know where we are*" reason. Our perception of the issue is that this kind of solution is appropriate for students training in universities to become future businesspersons. The textbooks provide them security, they are a hand-in tool which can ensure high marks at exams, following a clear sequence of work, and a balance of different kinds of language activity. Being rather general and quite extensive in time, the advantages of using such books become even clearer.

We think the use of such conventional course books for in-service courses is much less happy. The courses are advertised as "*tailor-made*" courses but they end following a certain standard textbook. This is, we think, the clearest example of the compromises used in constructing such courses.

The second traditional approach is "*the photo-copy approach*". Students are provided with photocopied materials from English course books, professional journals, newspapers, exercises from grammar books, etc. Although the approach might seem to tailor course content to job-specific needs, there are some drawbacks: there is no overall course plan available to student or teacher; finding "*suitable*" materials is subjective in the sense that what seems suitable to the teacher might seem unsuitable to the students; last, but not least, is the aspect of illegal photocopying which is still a hot issue to be considered.

We have presented so far two alternatives: using conventional course books, or using photocopied materials. They have both advantages and disadvantages. We present here a third alternative that might be considered as a possible solution for *in-service courses*. The principles of this approach are the following:

- The student basically provides the content of the in-service business course; In general, the teacher provides the language.



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- The book is designed from the perspective of a businessperson and not that of a language teacher.
- Students are used to underline unknown words on the texts they study, to keep a vocabulary book, to write in the margins. All they do is to try to reorganise material according to own criteria and not those imposed by the teacher. Each student thus structures the information individually so that he can re-access the information easily when needed.
- Ideas as to how to organise information, possible formats are given by the teacher to the students to apply if appropriate or adjust in case of need. The teacher is also the main provider of language input. However, he does not offer a learning programme with lessons to be studied, tasks to be solved, activities with a pre-designed outcome, exercises with answers. He provides the students with open-ended tasks, challenging the students to find out their own way of learning, their needs and gaps to be filled. The teacher's role is also that of a consultant who provides students with guidelines, proposals, and tools to use in working together. Evidence shows that there are no two identical groups. Consequently, the teacher's role as participant/consultant in businesslike group planning is enhanced and must be paid close attention to. Thus, he can:
  - Suggest structures (e.g. pair work, feedback sessions) but not impose; remember that the classes are best conducted as business meetings.
  - Suggest different arrangements for group discussion, presentations, pair or group work.
  - Organise and audit student presentations
  - Ensure supporting authentic material for use by the students: company brochures, colour magazines, video recordings, dictionaries, etc.
  - Suggest homework: pre-reading units, and making notes for discussions or presentations, doing self-study drills, writing activities, etc.

Further on, we will present some important elements of the course plan we propose followed by a few tasks:

- Resource texts should be used as a source of collocations (words which regularly occur together, e.g. *to set up a meeting, to pull out of a meeting, market confidence*, etc.), rather than grammar or vocabulary separately (e.g. *Are there any words you don't understand?*). Evidence shows that students lack collocational power.

**TASK**: The word in the centre of the diagram, *DEPARTMENT / OFFICE* is the keyword. There are different kinds of background words, e.g. *advertising, supervise, join, legal, sales, take over, complaints, run, marketing, be in charge of, finance, accounts, manage, re-structure, production*. Use different coloured pens to underline the background words so that you divide them into groups. Find some two-word and three-word collocations. Look for some collocations which include the keyword and a verb from the background words. Write four sentences about your own situation.

e.g. *take over a sales department, run an office*, etc.

**TASK**: Define a collocation (e.g. *apply for a job*) with further collocations.e.g. *fill in a form, write a letter, wait for a reply, go for an interview*, etc.

**TASK**: Which verbs can collocate with the nouns *meeting, sales, insurance*e.g. *take the minutes of a meeting, set up a meeting, increase sales, take out insurance, achieve a sales target, pay an insurance premium, make an insurance claim, launch a sales campaign, wind up a meeting,* etc. A more difficult



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**task** is to give a long list of verbs and ask students to match the nouns *meeting, sales, insurance* with the collocating verbs.

- The student's final product is to give an oral presentation, with accompanying visuals, etc. If conditions allow it, the presentations are recorded as real evidence of linguistic achievement in a professional area. Suitable topics for the presentation could include: *The student's company, A particular product, Aspects of the student's company/country, Reports (e.g. last year), Economic and political climate in home country, Best-selling Products, Marketing strategy, Company organisation and subsidiaries (history, growth, policy), Product range/descriptions, Managerial style,* etc.

**TASK**: These professional phrases will provide a structure for your presentation and make it easier for the audience to follow what you say:

- ***I'd like*** *to begin by showing you/demonstrate/suggest some distinct advantages (of the new model)/invite you to raise any questions now/close by saying*;
- ***Let's*** *take a (more detailed) look at/not forget that/move on to/look at the latest figures*;
- ***As*** *you can see/I will explain/I have explained/you know/this diagram shows*;
- ***I should*** *point out that/explain that/emphasise that/remind you that/add that.*

Now write some sentences you could use in a presentation of your own.

- Make students aware of the fact that cultural assumptions may differ greatly from country to country. We usually look at the world from the perspective of our own culture and are quite surprised that other cultures have different perspectives. Sometimes in international business, a breakdown in communication happens, and neither side really knows what has gone wrong or why it has gone wrong.

**TASK**: Sometimes products don't sell well in a new market. Suggest what went wrong in these cases. Then, look at the reasons and match the reasons (1-3) to the problems (a-c).

1. *A ladies' electric shaver sold well throughout Europe, but not in Italy.*
2. *A company had problems when it tried to introduce instant coffee to the French market.*
3. *In Saudi Arabia, newspaper adverts for an airline showed an attractive hostess serving champagne to happy passengers. A lot of passengers cancelled their flight reservations.*

a) *It seems Italian men prefer ladies' legs unshaven.*
b) *Making 'real' coffee was an important part of the French way of life. Instant coffee was too casual.*
c) *Unveiled women don't mix with men in Saudi Arabia and alcohol is illegal.*

Effective communication is helped if we are aware of our prejudices. All of us have stereotypes in our head, and stereotypes are always, essentially negative. This can be dangerous if it influences our decisions. The person who describes the German or Japanese as '*hard-working*', never means it as a compliment! Judgements which might, elsewhere, be regarded positively, are to be interpreted negatively when attributed to stereotypic figures. If you work with multinational groups, it is important to learn as much as possible about the cultural expectations of the members. In this way differences can become advantages and not disadvantages.

**TASK**: Choose one of the following cultural groups. Do not choose your own culture. Write 5-6 words that you think describe the members of this culture: Americans, Italians, British, Swedes, Japanese, Hungarians. Now choose a national group that your company often does business with. Write some words to describe that nationality. How many of your descriptions are positive/negative words? Now write the names of three of your foreign business partners and their nationalities. Are they "*typical*"?



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**TASK**: Check your assumptions about the way things are '*usually done where I come from*'. Do you think the choices you have made are the same choices that people from another company or another country you do business with would make? Have you ever felt uncomfortable because of the way others negotiated with you? Can you say why?

In a negotiation do you:

- *Get to know and use the first names of the people from the other side to establish a good climate?*
- *Continue important discussions in a social setting, for example a restaurant?*
- *Ever say 'No'?*
- *Have periods of silence to think about the issues?*

**TASK**: If you're doing business abroad, it's useful to know about the local customs before you start. Here's your chance to test your knowledge of social customs around the world:

1. *If you're in a pub in England, you have to buy a drink*
   A *for yourself*
   B *for everyone in the group you're with*
   C *for everyone in the pub*
2. *At a social occasion with an Indian client*,
   A *you can discuss business*
   B *you mustn't discuss business*
   C *you don't have to discuss business*
3. *If an American nods his/her head, it probably means*
   A '*I understand*'
   B '*Yes*'
   C '*I'm interested*'

   Answers: 1. *In an English pub, you have to take your turn to but a round' –a drink for everyone in your group*; 2. *It's bad manners to discuss business at a social occasion in India*; 3. *Americans usually mean 'Yes' when they nod their heads. An English person probably just means 'I understand'. And an Asian is just showing interest.*

• The grammar aspect is not neglected as well but the assumption we start from is the fact that the average businessperson is considerably less interested in 'getting the language right' than language teachers are. Consequently, the course will not emphasise formal sentence grammar, and in particular the grammar of the verb ('tenses'). The grammar tasks are meant to suggest some general ways in which language can be made more diplomatic, e.g. instead of saying '*That's inconvenient*', a better pattern would be '*Wouldn't it be a bit more convenient to*'.

**TASK**: Successful meetings often depend on avoiding direct disagreement. That is why good negotiators restrict general statements by using qualifiers (e.g. *a slight misunderstanding, a short delay, a little bit too early, a bit of a problem*), avoid negative words (e.g. *The hotel wasn't very clean* – instead of *The hotel was dirty*), use the comparative as alternative suggestions (e.g. *It might be cheaper to go by air*). Make these statements sound more diplomatic. Then use them to write your own examples, about your own job.

- *We have had problems with our distributor.*
- *That suggestion is useless.*
- *It's dangerous to delay the decision too long.*
- *I refuse to believe that.*
- *It's a good idea to take a long-term view.*



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**TASK**: Some important professional words have a whole family of words which are related grammatically. You have the word '*TO ADVERTISE*' in the centre of the diagram; try to find four grammatically related words (verb+noun, adjective+one/more nouns, etc)

Answer: *place an ad, full-page advertisement, colour advertisement, advertising agency/campaign/budget/restrictions/copy, advertiser*, etc.

In short, the new approach to teaching in-service Business English courses represents a real attempt to bring a lexical syllabus into business and ESP teaching. The ability to make natural word partnerships (collocations) will increase their communicative power, and, because of the level of their general English, they will make fewer mistakes. Teacher and students alike negotiate and set course objectives. Its main goal is to give students the confidence of knowing that the language they use sounds right, natural, and effective. Personal language, as well as social language, as natural and integrated parts of the business course help the students to build up a repertoire of expressions which makes them feel comfortable.

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