

NEW CHALLENGES IN TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH – SOFT SKILLS

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Abstract: Communication is essential in any type of human interaction. Consequently, it is inextricably related to business relations, economic growth, development, progress, etc. Perhaps one of the most thoroughly studied areas, business communication, remains an extremely prolific topic for those interested in fostering relationship building and cooperation in view of professional development. Beyond hard, technical skills, the acquisition of soft skills has thus turned essential in training business professionals. The aim of this paper is to explore the key soft skills that Business students need to acquire and the means by which Business English trainers could enable them to succeed in so doing.

Keywords: business communication, soft skills, intercultural awareness, politeness, conflict management

Communication is broadly defined as “the process of giving information or of making emotions or ideas known to someone; (...) the process of speaking or writing to someone to exchange information or ideas” (MacMillan Dictionary, 2006, p. 277). It is thus the means by which people exchange information, opinions, ideas, etc. Communication can be primarily categorised as verbal (either written or oral) and non-verbal (when facial expressions, gestures and various tones of voice are used). However, non-verbal communication is also based on clothing, accessories, tone of voice, etc. Although the tone of voice may be easily associated to verbal communication, it actually belongs to meta-language, which could be regarded as a tool enabling communicators to interpret the message. Tone, rhythm, sounds, pauses, all these contribute to expressing emotions and feelings: for example, an enthusiastic person will most likely use a high tone of voice while someone who lacks self-confidence will most likely use a low tone of voice. Nevertheless, our focus is on what is generally acknowledged as verbal communication, written/oral Business communication, particularly.

One key word generally occurring in the context of business communication, either written or oral, is “effective”. Effectiveness implies that “the message has been received and understood by the receiver, and the sender knows that it has been understood” (Stimpson and Farquharson, 2011, p. 228). Therefore, beyond sender, message, medium and receiver, another key element of effective communication is feedback – confirmation of receipt. The medium of communication may be oral or written. Oral communication includes and is not limited to conversations, interviews, presentations, meetings, etc. Written communication includes and is not limited to: letters, memos, faxes, reports, minutes, e-mails, etc. Both media have advantages and disadvantages: for example, the messages transmitted orally are supported by body language, gestures, but can be negatively affected by external factors such as noise and by the fact that they can be easily forgotten or overlooked by listeners who, due to various reasons, can get distracted during speech. On the other hand, written communication has the advantage of being recorded and can thus be referred to whenever necessary despite the fact that it bears the risk of being misinterpreted and lacks the support provided by body language, facial expressions and immediate feedback (Stimpson and Farquharson, 2011, p. 230).

Beyond financial information, balance sheets, management and accounting, business professionals need to be able to communicate effectively and most importantly, to build up relationships based on trust and mutual respect. It is in achieving this particular purpose that soft skills can prove extremely useful. In order to cope with the nowadays challenges in professional settings, business people need to be able to socialize, to negotiate, to ask for and offer information on the telephone, to write reports, memos, emails, even letters, to lead and participate in meetings, to deliver presentations, to know how to listen and how to build rapport, to communicate interculturally, etc. According to <https://www.businessphrases.net/hard-skills-list/>, hard skills are described as “teachable abilities that can be defined and measured much more than soft skills. Hard abilities are easy to quantify. Soft abilities are personal-driven and subjective skills.” Examples of hard skills in business include financial operations, accounting, business plans, programming, etc. As for soft skills, “the ability to go beyond the subject specialism and be able to communicate well in professional (and by extension ESP) contexts is called *soft skills*” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_skills). According to <https://www.careercontessa.com/advice/soft-skills-definition/>, “soft skills are a combination of people skills, emotional skills, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. Typically, soft skills are inherent to a particular person, and are not exactly *teachable*” (<https://www.careercontessa.com/advice/soft-skills-definition/>).

However, despite the fact that, to many, soft skills may appear as rather *unteacheable*, for Business English trainers, they can be a prolific source in terms of teaching topics. We may focus on a wide variety of abilities, all based on what we acknowledge as hard skills in our field – linguistic awareness and accurate use of grammar and discourse rules: from writing job applications to memos, from delivering presentations (internationally) to socializing, from (active) listening to partners to discerning between formal and informal register. Some key soft skills which form a solid ground for the successful development of others (e.g. socializing, presentations, meetings, negotiations) are intercultural awareness, politeness, conflict management and, particularly in the case of written communication, though not restricted to it, use of appropriate register, i.e. formal/ informal/ neutral. Writing skills are essential in information management. As already mentioned above, there are some risks that occur in business writing, i.e. de-contextualisation (the message is written at a certain moment which is independent from the one when it is read); permanence (the message is permanent and cannot be altered, by any means); in the case of e-mails - technology (huge amounts of work can be lost within seconds). Nevertheless, there are a few guidelines that business students may consider in order to improve their writing skills: any written message, either a letter or an e-mail, should be concise, i.e. it should be to the point; the language used should be as simple as possible despite use of jargon and abbreviations; the use of structure is very important because it provides coherence and thus serves as a guide to understanding the message. The choice of register remains of paramount importance and perhaps a key piece of advice would be to adapt to the context of communication – that would justify the use of soft skills, i.e. the ability to adapt to the context of communication. It is for all these reasons that written communication heavily relies on hard skills and thus goes beyond the purpose of this paper.

There are three main soft skills which we consider essential in effective communication in business and which can be taught to undergraduate business students during Business English seminars and lectures: *intercultural awareness*, *politeness* and *conflict management*. As already stated above, these also form the basis for the successful acquisition of other skills such as: socializing, delivering presentations, participating in meetings, negotiating, etc.

Intercultural awareness

Given the increasing awareness of the fact that worldwide progress in any field relies on effective communication and effective communication, in its turn, is based on understanding and tolerance of diversity, nowadays, in most universities, irrespective of country or profile, intercultural communication has become a discipline in itself and has thus come to hold a well deserved top position among research topics. Either simply defined as “the way we do things around here” or as “the software of the mind” (Geert Hofstede), culture is indisputably regarded as an unlimited realm of research. Pioneers such as Geert Hofstede, E.T. Hall, Fons Trompenaars, Martin Gannon, Richard Lewis, etc. opened the path to new lines of thought by introducing basic concepts which still represent a valuable source of inspiration in terms of intercultural communication. Geert Hofstede’s 1980 cultural dimensions can still form the basis of any Intercultural Communication course: *The Power Distance Index* (PDI) - the degree to which people accept the unequal distribution of power, more specifically, the degree to which employees are independent, structures are hierarchical, bosses are accessible, people have rights or privileges, progress is by evolution or by revolution; *The Uncertainty Avoidance Index* (UAI) - the degree to which people can take risks, accept conflict and stress, work without rules; *Individualism/ Collectivism* (IDV) - the degree to which people work in groups or alone, relate to their task or to their colleagues; *Masculinity/ Femininity* (MAS): the degree to which people believe in consensus, put work at the centre of their lives, expect managers to use intuition; the degree to which a national culture tolerates aggressive and materialistic behaviour; *Long-Term Orientation* (LTO) - the degree to which people have a long or a short term view of their work, to which they persevere with a job, to which they spend or invest (Utley, 2004, p. 63).

Among the concepts E. T. Hall introduced, *polychronic* and *monochronic time* and *high and low context cultures* are the best known. In *high context* cultures, people speak indirectly, show respect, and harmony is maintained. Directness is considered rude. On the other hand, in *low context* cultures, people speak directly without adding unnecessary information. Indirectness generally causes suspicions. (Utley, 2004, p. 69).

In the same line, Martin Gannon’s work provides learners with the opportunity to understand national cultures from a metaphorical perspective. A powerful and eloquent example would be the metaphor that Martin Gannon identified as representative for the British culture, i.e. the *traditional British house*. According to him, The British culture may be compared to a house: traditional, with strong foundations and a rather rigid structure. (Gannon, 2001, p.11)

Current research in the field of intercultural communication conducted by specialists such as Bob Dignen, Ian McMaster, Robert Gibson, Ken Taylor, and others very much relies on practical tips, interviews, story-telling, case studies, all meant to immerse learners in relevant and real-life contexts. The relevance and usefulness of their input to the educational process in the field of business English is unquestionable.

However, the works of the above authors, all pioneers in the field (i.e. Hofstede, Hall, Trompenaars, etc.), form the strong foundation for contemporary developments in Intercultural and specifically, Business Communication. Their contributions are a valuable resource for classroom activities meant to enhance Business students’ knowledge of intercultural communication and ability to successfully interact and cooperate internationally.

Politeness

An important part of an individual’s language and culture (accounting thus not just for the language used, but also for the culture one comes from), politeness can be considered yet another instrumental soft skill in cross-cultural communication. Broadly, politeness means

being aware of the particular social interaction scenario in which one participates, or, more precisely, the relations built among the participants in that specific social interaction.

Put forward by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978), *politeness theory* accounts for the way in which people make use of politeness strategies to manage identity (irrespective of whether it is their own, or somebody else's identity) by means of interpersonal interaction. Drawing on earlier work by Erving Goffman (1955), **politeness theory** is grounded on the concepts of **face** and **facework**, both explaining the way in which interpersonal interaction is built on politeness. As posited by Goffman (1955), the process of human interaction resembles theatre performance. That is to say, it involves a variety of scenes, settings, actors and audiences and, depending on the purpose and setting of each type of interaction, participants tend to put on a different mask, so as to emphasise (or play down) various aspects of who they are, all depending on context.

The concept of **face** refers to the individual's 'public self-image' (an image individuals care for to and try to protect), which is generally associated with other concepts like honour, prestige or dignity. It could be therefore defined as that side of one's identity that one wishes to show to the others, a somewhat desirable self-image. The two dimensions typically associated with the concept of **face** are the positive and the negative face. While the positive face reflects the individual's longing for acceptance and the eagerness to be seen as qualified, the negative face reflects a drive for independence and autonomy and a desire to maintain their status.

Politeness-related issues occur in conversation because of confrontational self-images. In other words, all the participants have self-images that they want to preserve (they want to 'save face'), and sometimes one's individual face needs may conflict with the face needs of his/ her interlocutor. This clash takes the form of **face-threatening acts (FTA)**, which may result in the 'loss of face' and require the use of facework strategies to restore status ('save face'). As shown by politeness theory, the most frequent face-threatening acts are *apologies, requests, compliments, criticism or threats*. Both negative and positive, these behaviours are likely to endanger – to an equal extent – the speaker and the listener's face. Consequently, politeness is required to clarify the type of facework needed in order to mitigate, or to prevent, the effects of a face-threatening act.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), there are five facework strategies, classified, from the most polite (indirect) to the least polite (direct), into: **avoidance** (communication that avoids face loss or embarrassment), **going-off record** (a hint to an FTA, which reduces face-threat: e.g. *"I am going to be out of office next week, and I really don't know how I'll handle customer care emergencies"*, hinting that a colleague could volunteer to take on this responsibility), **negative politeness** (emphasis on the negative face: e.g. *"I am really sorry to ask you at the very last minute, but could you please help me....?"*), **positive politeness** (emphasis on the positive face: e.g. *"I wouldn't have asked you to take on this project if I didn't know I could count on you"*), and, finally, **bald-on-record** (straightforward use of an FTA: e.g. *"I expect you to take on the project."*). Each and every one of these strategies has a range of implications (both positive and negative), and they are typically determined by factors like power, prestige or risk.

By and large, face and facework strategies vary widely across individuals, specific relations between individuals and, ultimately, across cultures, and (business) English learners need to acknowledge their importance in order to communicate effectively in business contexts.

Conflict Management

Conflict is a risk inherent to any human interaction and we may assume that, at least in business, it is inevitable. Familiarisation with the various sources of conflict is essential. Once learners become aware of these, they may act proactively so as to either avoid conflict

or mitigate it. Although stereotyping is undoubtedly a negative phenomenon and its avoidance has long been promoted among learners of intercultural communication (and not only), it may, though to a limited extent, be used to prevent conflict. That is why dealing with them through case studies and simulations in business English classes can be extremely productive and helpful in teaching students how to deal with conflict. We may definitely assume that stereotype awareness can lead to conflict avoidance in business settings. Nevertheless, as Ian McMaster rightfully argues, in the “increasingly uncertain business world, it is impossible to give dos and don’ts for international communication. Instead, we need to accept uncertainty, to see its advantages and to learn how to manage it more effectively.” (McMaster, 2014, p.1)

Another means of teaching students how to cope with conflict would be by cultivating what is generally acknowledged as “emotional intelligence” - the ability to process both their own and others’ emotions. Highly fluid, controversial and largely debated, emotional intelligence remains a challenging area as culture in terms of possibilities of being taught. However, by cultivating values such as empathy, flexibility and a great deal of self-awareness may prove extremely useful in our attempt as Business English trainers to teach conflict management.

Clearly, all these strategies could not possibly bear fruit unless used by means of appropriate language. Therefore, despite all emphasis on soft skills, i.e. intercultural awareness, politeness, conflict management, etc., successful communication could not possibly be reached in the absence of linguistic skills (i.e. hard skills).

According to specialists in the field of intercultural communication, one key skill in dealing with conflict is the ability to use diplomatic language; once more, the importance of hard skills acquisition – i.e. linguistic structures aimed at softening language is emphasised. Also, it is essential to enable students to become aware of various conflict styles, to practice strategies of dealing with conflict, to suggest new paths for facing and mitigating conflict in international business situations. The best means to do so is by case studies, simulations, class debates.

Conclusions

As Richard Lewis rightfully notes, “the English language, like any other, cannot exist in a vacuum or be disembodied from its speakers with their innate sense of time, space, authority, appropriacy, morality and sensitivities.” (Lewis, 2014, p. 9) Consequently, a foreign language cannot be taught in the absence of cultural input to the same extent as intercultural communication is generally taught by using English as a medium of message transmission. It is therefore obvious that soft skills, which have nevertheless become essential in nowadays communication (both professional and personal) cannot be taught entirely independent from hard skills which are required in order to ensure coherence and clarity to the message. As shown above, intercultural awareness, politeness and conflict management constitute the three pillars on which mutual trust and respect are built in international business (and not only) relations. These abilities cannot be successfully used in the absence of the hard skills necessary to develop the ability to transmit coherent messages in English, which can be acquired by means of practicing linguistics and vocabulary, both general and specific.

However, trust remains crucial in any human interaction and the importance of business partners’ soft skills has come to clearly outweigh that of their linguistic abilities and therefore, our focus, as trainers, should be shifted towards developing a curriculum based on our learners’ need to acquire such skills: intercultural communication, politeness, conflict management. In order for the Business English class to become the appropriate environment able to provide learners with the soft skills, which are highly required in the current

international business context, both trainers and students must acknowledge the importance of mutual trust and personal dedication necessary to achieve a common goal.

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