HumanEnglish
Live Online Business English Training

white paper

Learning Practical Business English

The Problem: People who know the rules can't always communicate

Imagine a typical European businessman attending a meeting. He's at a conference in a foreign city with colleagues from other countries. Although the meeting will be held in English --not his first language --he feels comfortable.

He spent a lot of time learning English. His company paid for a teacher to come twice a week to teach him and his colleagues. He has just finished a 40-hour course at a language school. With extra help from his teacher, he prepared a presentation for today. He delivers his presentation and is pleased with his performance. Then, disaster!

- People start asking him questions. He doesn't understand them. When he tries to answer, his audience doesn't understand what he says.

- At lunch, people are talking about their lives, their families, their travels. He doesn't understand half of what is said.

- Someone tells a joke. Everyone at his table laughs…except him. He doesn't understand.

- As he is going back to his hotel room, a group of colleagues invite him to join them for dinner. He declines, feeling uncomfortable because he thinks his English isn't good.

Typical? Unfortunately, for thousands of businessmen and women, the answer is yes.

Although they spend years learning about the English language, their ability to use it in real-world situations is not good. This inability has a direct business impact, as well as a negative personal impact, on their daily working lives. The reality is that they haven't learned the English they need to succeed. With so much time and effort invested, -why does it continue to be such a huge problem?

Why knowing about the language does not mean knowing how to use it

The problem is that very often the English they are taught is not practical, it does not reflect:

- How English is used in business and social situations.

- How they can best learn English (the learning context).

- How English works and how users say what they want.

- Specific needs of professional people working in a global environment.

- Important differences between how we speak and how we write.

Seven myths that are the foundation of most language courses

Language education is still based on a number of out-dated assumptions that are at best half-truths and at worst simply wrong. They are myths. Here they are:

Myth One: Form is more important than meaning.
A particular sentence structure is taught. Learners then practice this structure until the teacher is satisfied that they 'know' it. To do this, they replace words in a model sentence with other words. Here is an example from a popular grammar book:

"For the purpose of practicing Conditional #3, complete the following: Rome (be captured) by her enemies if the geese hadn't cackled."

After more practice, they are expected to use this structure at the right time and without making mistakes. This simply doesn't happen!

Myth Two: The basic unit of English is the sentence.
Courses are organized around sentences. Lesson One might be about the Present Simple, Lesson Two about the Past Simple, and so on. It is assumed that knowing these 'key structures' is the same as knowing how to use the language.

This approach minimizes the importance of pronunciation, vocabulary and rules about how the language works 'beyond the sentence'. It makes learners believe that these elements can be added without changing the meaning. Here is an example from real life;

A student at a language school in Lisbon just spent 90 minutes studying the difference between the Past

Simple and the Present Perfect. In the school café the teacher sits down with the student for coffee. Here is their conversation:

Teacher: You look very sad today José? Are you OK?

José: My grandfather. He has died at the weekend.

Teacher: No José. My grandfather…Past Simple…he…

José (louder): My grandfather he has died at the weekend.

Myth Three: *Formal descriptions of sentence rules helps people learn them*
For most people formal descriptions don't help. More often than not, descriptions confuse them. The result is that very often people use the basic structures of English in the wrong way.

Myth Four: *Practicing these structures helps people to remember them*
Many people have studied, for example, the Present Perfect many times and still can't use it correctly. For example, Jose still couldn't remember when to use the Past Simple after 90 minutes of study. He had studied this 10 or 12 times in his life already.

Myth Five: *People recall the right structure when they need it.*
Learning structure happens when the time is right. It cannot be forced. It should not be the primary objective for learners.

Myth Six: *Studying sentence structures lets students use correct structures automatically.*
Focusing on sentence structure ignores other, equally important, aspects of language like pronunciation and vocabulary.

Myth Seven: *Learning basic grammatical structures will help a Learner speak it better.*
This comes from the idea that grammar and vocabulary are two distinct systems. They are not.

The result of these myths? Classes where the focus is on learning sentence structures. This is probably the way you learned English. But learning English in this way ignores important facts about how, when and why language forms (not just sentences) are used in reality. It

misses important social and idiomatic uses of those forms. It misses the fact that often we don't say exactly what we mean.

For example, if I say 'I'm over the moon', it doesn't mean literally "I am above the Earth's satellite". It means "I'm very happy". These parts of the language are crucial in being able to use it well. The way the English language is usually taught minimizes these features of the language.

The results are that Learners:

- Can't say what they want to say, when they need to say it.

- Make a lot of mistakes despite having practiced the same concepts

- Often can't understand what other people say.

- Waste a lot of time and money on training they can't use in real life.

Most learners are probably not motivated to take another class. Why would they? They would be wasting valuable time on structures that they have 'done' many times over, without being able to communicate in real situations. Here's an example:

A Russian businessman has studied English for five years. He walks into a bar in London. He needs to light his cigarette. 'Have you fire?' he asks the bartender. The barman looks at him, but doesn't understand. The businessman tries again. 'Do you have illumination?' Again, no response. The businessman is frustrated. He approaches a smoker and asks 'Are you the match's owner?'

Funny? Not really. He has wasted his time and his money. It happens every day. Is there an alternative to a way of learning English that produces positive results?

There is an alternative to "rule-based" language learning

The good news is that there has been considerable progress made in the field of language learning in recent years. The bad news? The majority of courses are still based on the myths mentioned.

How can this change happen? Is there a solution? The solution does exist. The solution involves a new and

practical approach which brings together four important developments in language learning and teaching:

1. Communicative language teaching

2. Task-Based Learning

3. The Lexical Approach (focuses on words, vocabulary and word groupings)

4. New information about how spoken and written languages are different

What would happen if the best features of all of these developments were brought together?
The result would be training courses created so that people who need to book a plane ticket, take an important order over the phone or deliver an excellent business presentation can do so. And they can get a light for their cigarette next time they walk into a bar.

1. Communicative language teaching: Putting communication first

Teaching people how to construct sentences will not make them fluent users of the language. When this was realized in the 1970s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was the result.

With CLT, more emphasis is placed on people learning how language forms are used in real communication situations: telling a joke, buying something in a shop, reporting what happened in a meeting etc..

This type of language teaching focuses on being able to use the language accurately (follow the rules), but also how to use it in context, and how to chose the right form to say what you want to say, and how you want to say it. For example, do you want to be polite? Or are you in a hurry and giving an order?

One idea can be expressed in many different ways. The form used almost always depends on the context. Here's an example.

Which of these forms would you use to ask someone to deliver a report that was due yesterday?

Match the phrases with the people

The sentence used	when you are talking to:
1. Report!	a) A senior manager in your company.
2. The report?	b) Someone of slightly higher status.
3. Can you give me the report?	c) Someone at the same level as you.
4. If it wouldn't be too much trouble…	d) A student on work experience who you don't like.
5. Could you possibly see your way to handing me the report…at your earliest convenience?	e) A colleague you have a good personal relationship with.

The approach used in most teaching situations doesn't even ask questions like this. And this really matters in the business world, where being polite and getting results, for example, need to be balanced in the right way. Learners need to choose the right language for the situation or they could be in trouble.

What really matters in a CLT lesson is the need to communicate. The activities used in lessons should replicate real communication as closely as possible. To do this various techniques are used, including role-plays, simulations, pair and group work. Although these techniques are used in many of today's classrooms, most of the time they are used to practice the same old structures as before. These activities should use a variety of language forms to achieve the desired goal, not just focus on sentence structure

What is needed a strong form of CLT, one where Learners access real language problems. At the same time a form of training is needed where **accuracy becomes less important than the successful performance of the task itself.** The tasks used in lessons should mirror, as closely as possible, the tasks in real life. As tasks are completed, language problems are revealed – and solved – more directly and quickly.

There IS a strong version of communicative language teaching, one that fits all of these requirements. This is **Task-Based Learning (TBL).** This approach works for professionals because it actively searches out their problems and deals with them constructively.

2. Task-Based Learning: Practical lessons addressing individual needs

Lessons mirror what Learners do, or will need to do, in real life. TBL lessons are not organized around sentence structures or grammatical rules. They have Learners working on the language needed for a particular task while uncovering learning gaps. These are the gaps that cause problems when Learners do the same tasks at work.

Here's how Tasked-Based Learning works.
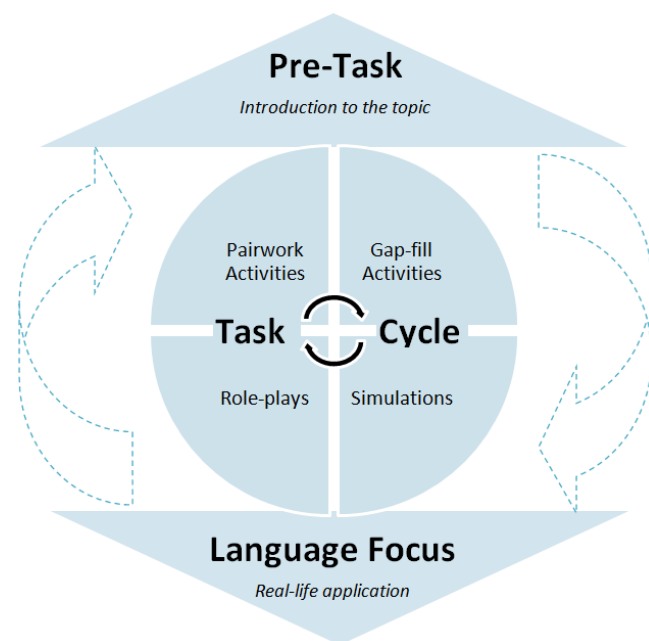
Pre-task: Introduction to the topic.
This stage helps the Learner think about the skill or task they are going to practice. It activates the language Learners already know and helps them begin to formulate communication strategies they will need so they can do the task. Language normally used for the task is also highlighted at this stage.

Task cycle: Instructions are given to the Learner. They understand what they must do (Task)
Instructions save time. Learners are given preparation time before the task begins. In this time they develop the strategies they are going to use. They are shown the language used naturally by people doing that task in real life. This means Learners' attention is fully focused on the task. The task will not be interrupted and they can concentrate on what they are doing.

They then do the task as well as possible, without the help of the trainer. This is where the gaps in the learner's language and skills are shown. The trainer pays very close attention to the language used and makes a note of this for later.

Language Focus: The Learner's performance, and ways to improve, is discussed.
The effective or ineffective use of language appropriate to that task is evaluated. Errors are corrected, useful language patterns highlighted and areas for improvement isolated. The language comes from the Learner, with help from the trainer, to do the task.

Using this framework, lessons are structured so Learners go beyond their limits. Yet Learners can rely on the comfort zone provided by a familiar lesson framework. They also have the support of a knowledgeable and empathetic trainer who acts as a facilitator of learning. The result? The next time Learners do the same or a related task, they notice improvements. Their confidence in using English will grow.

Example:
A French project manager for a company developing marine technology uses English to make presentations to his client in Saudi Arabia. His presentation features PowerPoint. In this lesson he first gives a presentation he has written without help. The trainer gives him feedback on his use of English. The trainer isolates the language problems he has. Generally his English is good. However, his pronunciation is a problem. He emphasizes the wrong syllables. This sometimes causes the listener to miss important words. The trainer has noted these during the presentation and shows them to the learner.

The trainer then gives the learner a new scenario. The learner understands the information and what he has to do. His task is to use the new information to prepare a short presentation on a project to set up a tourist park in Saudi Arabia. It is very similar to what his real presentation is like, in terms of structure and vocabulary. The trainer has told him that he must include the words he had mispronounced in the other presentation.

The learner prepares and practices for 10 minutes before giving his new presentation. This time his pronunciation is much better. For homework, the learner is asked to prepare a more detailed version of the presentation. In the next lesson he gives a full presentation. His presentation is excellent and easily understood. His language confidence increases.

Like real-life communication, TBL relies on Learners actively experimenting with an existing store of knowledge and language. **They use deductive skills and independent thinking to find solutions.** The lesson objectives help focus on those areas needed to use

English more effectively in workplace situations. By preparing for specific tasks, Learners notice the language they need in order to do those tasks successfully. **Communication becomes the primary motivation.**

Learning in this way:

- Identifies real-life business situations and tasks.

- Collects the language needed to complete these tasks successfully.

- Gives needed support by helping where help is needed the most

- Gives an accurate picture of the language and knowledge gaps.

- Saves time by focusing on what is important in real life

3. Vocabulary takes center stage: The Lexical Approach

A lexical approach to language learning puts the relationships between words first. It includes an approach that focuses on words, vocabulary, and word groupings. In authentic speech people ensure fluency by using pre-fabricated chunks of language, such as;

Collocations	Sentence Frames
• *make a mistake*	• *Would you like a…?*
• *attend a meeting*	• *The thing is…*
• *intercultural communications*	
	Social Formulas
Multi-word verbs	• *Catch you later…*
• *get on with*	• *Take care.*
• *switch off*	
	Discourse Markers
Idioms, catch phrases, sayings	• *I take your point.*
• *part and parcel*	• *By the way…*
• *the more the better*	
• *speak of the devil*	

Thinking of language not only as rules or words, but as groups of words and phrases means a complete revision of the way we think about language and language learning. Why?

- We can't say anything without vocabulary. We can say a lot without grammar.

- The 50 most frequently occurring words in English account for 50% of all talk. Rather than learning more words, we should look at how to use words we think we know.

- The meanings we want to communicate exist in the most frequently used words and word combinations. Words typically go together with other words to create specific and particular meanings. These combinations are either right or wrong. Learners need to know which combinations are possible and what these combinations mean.

- These combinations, known as 'pre-fabricated chunks', help people communicate. For example, our Russian friend didn't know that the words *have* and *light* go together to form the combination *have a light*. There are thousands of such combinations in English. People need to know them.

To teach English effectively, teachers should pay more attention to these pre-fabricated chunks of language. Courses should focus on giving learners the language chunks needed.

4. How does spoken and written language differ? Why is this important?

Researchers have identified the most frequently used words and grammatical patterns in both spoken and written English. One conclusion from this work is that there are important differences between the two forms. For example, sentences are typical of written language but not typical in spoken language. Asking people to learn English sentence structures doesn't help them speak well.

For example, speech takes place in real time. It is unplanned and requires the ability to recall the vocabulary items needed immediately. Speaking is interactive. It requires cooperation and understanding. It requires the abilty to take turns, signal intentions and leave parts out. It is highly contextualised and has a looser structure than writing. To be able to speak the speaker needs to transform vocabulary into strings of sounds which are recognizable and meaningful to the listener. Most people say they want to be able to speak the language. Yet they are rarely, if ever, given the chance to see how spoken English actually works.

The unique experience of learning online

With the expansion of the Internet, all of the themes discussed in this paper can be brought together. Previously, this type of learning was only available in classrooms and when teachers came to the learner's workplace. Even then, it was very rare to find these ideas being put into practice.

Leading on-line courses put these ideas into practice and give Learners the opportunity to practice what they need to learn in real-time with real people. On-line courses make it possible for modern business people to:

- Learn without leaving the office or at home.

- Join groups of other learners with similar needs and focus.

- Record lessons and sections of lessons for later review.

- Learn in manageable periods of time, ensuring better retention.

- Learn with an experienced and expert facilitator (trainer) in real-time lessons.

Learning focused on speaking skills and useful vocabulary includes live, face-to-face interaction. This gives learners practice practical English skills in an environment which harnesses the power of the Internet. The result?

- A culture where authentic communication is given priority.

- A place where speaking skills are used at every opportunity for real communication.

- A place where communication mirrors the concerns of learners in their day-to-day lives.

English for professional people is not only about language. It is, more importantly, about language use. In order for learners to function well they need to understand.

Studies have shown that the best way for Learners to understand is for them to:

1. Increase the vocabulary used so they can say what they want to say in context.

2. Learn this vocabulary in the contexts it is found in real language use.

3. Practice language in real-life tasks where there is need for genuine communication.

4. Analyze the language which needs improvement after the task has been completed.

5. Give Learners the confidence to be able to say and do what they want.

Spending more time and money on learning the same language rules in the same way leads to frustration and ineffectiveness. Learners who are able to take classes where the focus is on the language they need in realistic situations are better prepared to communicate in the real business world.

Let's look at our initial example. Our friend still has to make a presentation at a work meeting, except now, he has taken a class that puts him in real-life situations. After his presentation:

- People ask him questions. He understands them, and is able to answer so his audience understands what he says.

- At lunch people are talking about their lives, their families, their travels. He not only understands, but he tells people about his life. They get to know and trust him better.

- Someone tells a joke. Everyone at his table laughs... and he makes a comment that makes the joke even funnier... and people laugh even more.

- As he is going back to his hotel room, his colleagues invite him to dinner. He accepts eagerly, feeling confident with his English abilities. During dinner, he gets to know someone even better. They exchange business information. The person becomes a valued client ... an opportunity he would have missed before.

When this type of learning happens, Learners feel more confident in their business dealings. And, as their confidence increases, so does their ability to use the language correctly, well and insightfully.

About the author:

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25 years as a teacher, teacher-trainer, academic manager and course writer with leading language teaching organizations in Portugal, France and the UK.

Currently in Lancaster, England he is developing a way to provide quality learning experiences for working people through a principled approach to learning English online.

Tony's interests include approaches to learning and teaching English as a second or other language, SLA, the relationship between word groups and meaning and language patterns in spoken English.

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