

Short Certificate – Teaching Business English

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I. Some Business English FAQs

This module will help you understand what is required of you as an EFL Business English teacher.

Here are some of the questions teachers often ask about teaching Business classes:

What do Business English language learners want to learn?

People attending Business English courses may want to develop their communication skills for either business or professional purposes. Sometimes they need to improve their writing skills for academic purposes.

What they want to learn and what they need to learn often differ, but a needs analysis will give a good idea of their level and requirements.

Often students know the technical and professional terms associated with their work and what they frequently need is the bits in between such as word partnerships, collocations, common social expressions and natural everyday social language.

How do I prepare group lessons for people who have different jobs?

The same elements of the language are not always relevant to everyone in a group course, but participants will still expand their general language skills and benefit from communicating with people from different fields. They also learn to communicate more effectively in a variety of situations. Some learners will need to study intensively for a specific purpose and choose to pay more for 1-1 tuition.

How do business students feel about their study?

Teachers are sometimes a little nervous about the idea of teaching highly ambitious and successful people. However, it's worth remembering that being in a learning situation where they are not in charge can make successful people extremely anxious.

Where can I find appropriate teaching materials?

The range of teaching resources for EFL is huge. You can search EFL bookshops on the internet, in the EFL section of large bookshops (where you can also find teaching materials for specific jobs). EFL business language teaching organisations have teaching materials and their resources include work related dictionaries, vocabulary lists and communication activities.

You can also read the business sections of newspapers, professional journals and find work-related topics on the Internet.

II. Student needs and motivations

1. A Needs Analysis questionnaire

It is a good idea to hand out a Needs Analysis questionnaire to your students in the first lesson. It should consist of a series of questions related to why the students want to learn English, their past experiences and current needs. You should also find out about their job. You may include questions which are not work-related. A needs analysis questionnaire is normally completed by the students and then discussed with the teacher. In a small group the teacher will address general needs with the group and specific needs with each student.

Here is an example of a Needs Analysis questionnaire:

1. Why do you want to learn English?
2. How long have you been learning?
3. When do you use English?
4. Who do you communicate with in English?
5. Which of the following do you need English for:
 - negotiations?
 - meetings and discussions?
 - telephone calls?
 - socialising?
 - e-mails?
 - report writing?
 - presentations?
6. Which skill is most important for you?
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Listening
 - Speaking
7. Which skill do you find most challenging?
8. Are there any other aspects of the language which you need to work on?
9. How much time can you spend on learning English?
10. What is the name of the company where you work?

11. What is your job?

12. What does the company specialise in?

13. What are your main responsibilities?

14 . What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

15. Is there anything else you wish to tell us about your language needs?

16. What do you expect to achieve from this course?

Although most participants will be elementary level and above, you will also have to teach people who:

- are false beginners
- have limited vocabulary
- are unfamiliar with the structure of the English language.

Naturally a Needs Analysis for low level students will be different from that for higher levels, as will your classes. You will have to teach very basic structures including irregular verbs and small 'chunks' of high frequency language. At times information overload can be overwhelming and you will need to be flexible with your language input and lesson plans when working with lower levels.

2. Motivation challenges and solutions

An enjoyable aspect of working with business language learners is that they are usually extremely enthusiastic about improving their language skills, highly motivated and able to cope well with a challenging learning regime.

Of course this is not always the case. There are all kinds of reasons why motivation may not be at a premium, but one of the main challenges business English students encounter is external pressure. The learner can be under a lot of pressure from an employer to reach a high level and criticised for failing to do so very quickly. Their job prospects may depend on reaching a certain level of English within a specific time.

Here are some more challenges faced by business English learners:

- Senior and junior members of staff may be learning in the same group. The senior member may feel uncomfortable participating as they don't know very much, or the junior members might worry about participating with the boss. This is especially true when the students are asked to share opinions related to working at the company.

- Sometimes when the company pays for the course it can feel like free time and the student goes there for a rest.
- In in-company courses sometimes the students only want to talk to the teacher and not to one another.
- If a student's previous language learning was rule-governed, the student may have problems adapting to a communicative or skills-based approach.
- Students may have had bad learning experiences in the past.
- They might not use English at work but have been told to take the course.
- A huge workload may prevent students from focusing on the course content even when they are able to attend. Homework maybe out of the question.
- When you work in company there can be interruptions and demands from work colleagues so the students are unable to concentrate.

Here are some possible solutions for the above challenges:

- Identify potential reasons for lack of motivation or progress.
- Use a thorough needs analysis which will allow you to tailor your course to your students' needs.
- Talk to the students, show an interest in them and the challenges they face.
- Choose relevant activities that highlight the advantages of learning English.
- Ask students for their suggestions as to how to improve the lessons
- Create a pleasant, co-operative learning environment where errors are seen as part of the language learning process so that no-one feels uncomfortable participating.
- Use role play so the students don't have to talk about their own job situation if their boss is in the same group .
- Use a fun warm-up to get the students thinking in English at the beginning of class and to stop them thinking about work.

III. Techniques of teaching Business English

1. Activities for teaching business communication

There is so much more to language learning than grammar and vocabulary. In fact, it's possible to have a high level of both grammar and vocabulary but to be unable to communicate very well during a meeting or on the phone.

During your Business English classes it's essential that you encourage your students to communicate competently both orally and in writing. You may find this difficult in many situations, especially if your students are used to learning grammar and doing written exercises.

Here are some examples of classroom activities that can encourage your students to communicate orally:

- Video-conferencing
- Role plays
- Asking and answering open (Wh) questions
- Surveys
- Dialogue building
- Giving presentations and taking questions
- Business meetings
- Debates
- Producing a TV programme or advertisement
- Case studies

Here are some ideas for written communication activities:

- Writing a market report
- Writing and responding to emails
- Writing memos
- Note taking
- Writing a set of guidelines
- Preparing a Powerpoint presentation
- Writing slogans and advertisements

2. Ideas for the practice and production stages of a lesson

Teaching speaking and writing for business English students is the same sequence as for general English students. Start with controlled tasks, move to semi-controlled practice tasks and finish with production (free practice) tasks.

Students need to learn how to build business relationships with co-workers, clients and customers. Help them do this by getting them comfortable asking good, open questions. Such questions are also referred to as “Wh” questions (including those beginning with “How”.) Ideas for working with ‘wh’ questions include providing answers and having your students provide the questions, or jumbling up the words in the questions for a 'word order' activity.

Start with controlled questions. Elicit the questions. Drill them. Then do a whole group question and answer drill. This is where one student asks the next a question. The second student answers and then asks the same question to student three. In this way the students have controlled practice with the same question.

Another way to have controlled practice is to do a mill drill. Each student has one question which they ask all the other students. You can turn this into a survey if the students record the answers.

You can enhance the question and drilling activity by getting your students to produce graphs or charts showing their results.

At the production stage the students are in control – well, just about! You could give your students the subject but let them ask the questions they want. You could also give the students a task to solve using questions. Presenting the results of their surveys to the class also provides free practice.

3. Dialogues

Let’s look at a practice stage task. One common task is to create a dialogue. Remember that creating and practising dialogues form the practice stage of a lesson, before your students go on to do a role play in the production stage.

(The production stage could be the students using similar dialogues to talk about themselves. Alternatively, you could give them role cards to role play a similar dialogue.)

One way to work on a dialogue is to use a gap fill task. Here is an example:

Task 1 - Fill in the blanks:

Write a sentence of a question in each space.

Context: Robert Jones of Educational Software Ltd. is at Mike Sanders’ office for a meeting. Robert Jones’ secretary has told Mike Sanders that he’s arrived and shown him through into Mike Sanders’ office.

A: Good morning, Mr. Jones. I’m Mike Sanders.

B: Hello Mr. Sanders.

A: Please call me Mike.

B: OK, Mike and I'm Robert.

A: OK, Robert. Please take a seat.

B: (1) _____.

A: Can I offer you something to drink?

B: Yes, a coffee would be great.

A: (2) _____?

A: White, no sugar.

B: (3) _____.

A: Thank you.

B: You have a slight Scottish accent. (4) _____?

A: I'm originally from the northeast of England but I've lived in Scotland for the last 10 years.

B: Really? (5) _____?

A: In Glasgow.

B: That's a great city. I've been there quite a few times.

A: (6) _____?

B: No, not yet but we are considering opening a branch in Edinburgh as our market research team has recently identified Scotland as a prospective market.

Suggested answers

(1) Thank you.

(2) How do you like it / your coffee?

(3) Here you are.

(4) May I ask where you come from? / Where do you come from?

(5) Whereabouts? / Where do you live in Scotland?

(6) Does Educational Software Ltd. have offices in Scotland?

Do you have any branches in Scotland?

Another way to work with dialogues is select the most appropriate option out of those provided. The choice is often between the more formal and the more informal style, whichever is more appropriate in a given scenario.

Task 2 - Multiple choice:

A: How interesting! Anyway, Robert,

7. a) Let's get down to business.
b) Back to business.

I would like to learn more about your company's software packages.

8. a) What new language learning programmes have you got?
b) Do you have anything new in language learning?

B: Yes, we do. We've recently increased our range of products to include software for developing pronunciation and also for improving writing skills. You may remember that our basic range focuses on developing grammar and vocabulary.

9. a) Which one can I show you first?
b) What do you want to see?

A: I'd like to see the one for developing writing skills first, please.

B: OK. Let me just get the laptop set up.

Suggested Answers

- 7 a) Let's get down to business.
8 b) Do you have anything new in language learning?
9 a) Which one can I show you first?

4 . Role-plays, debates and other activities for the production stage

You can work on gap fill exercises at the practice stage, but when you go on to the production stage, you can try role play.

Role plays

Role plays allow students to take a specific part, normally given to them on a cue card. As such, you need to have presented any new language the students will need first and given them a chance to use this language in a controlled (practice) situation first. Don't forget, this can be a very versatile activity, and you are not just restricted to two people in a role play scenario.

Here is an example scenario for a role-plays:

Situation 1:

YYY Ltd. is a small company facing a choice between a short time profitable contract with the government and a long term research project with a private sector company that could guarantee the company a major scientific breakthrough.

Student A :

- You are the financial director of the company.
- You're in favour of the government contract.
- Prepare your arguments in favour of this contract (and against the private sector company.)

Student B :

- You are the marketing manager of the company.
- You think a research project will bring the company good publicity and more benefits than the government contract.
- Prepare arguments to convince your partner that this is the right choice.
- Debates, meetings and decision-making activities

As variations of role plays, or in addition to role plays, you can have debates, meetings and decision-making activities as shown here:

Situation 2:

The Christmas party. The manager of Oxford Language School is meeting with the D O S and Senior teacher to plan the Christmas party for the teachers.

Together you need to decide the following points:

- a suitable venue for the party;
- the menu options, as there will be a meal;
- the entertainment; and
- a small gift for the teachers.

Work in groups of three to plan your Christmas party.

Student A:

You are the manager of Oxford Language School.

Student B:

You are the D O S (Director of Studies) of Oxford Language School.

Student C:

You are the Senior teacher of Oxford Language School.

Case studies

Role plays can also form part of another typical business activity – the case study. Case studies can form the basis of several lessons. There is generally a series of initial information about a company and a specific situation, followed by a series of activities solving a problem or working through a specific situation. E.g.

- Reading background info about the company
- Setting the scenario: Lovely Lollipops Ltd., a British company, is already well-established in Europe and is looking to expand into other markets.
- Listening to oral presentations on possible markets or viewing video presentations
- Role play using the information received in the first three stages: The M D meets with the marketing director and the finance director to discuss best options
- Writing a report to the board of directors explaining the proposed course of action.

Case studies take place at the production stage of the lesson. You will have previously taught the language that your students will need for the role play. They will also have studied how to write a report (the written production task.)

Games

A great way for your students to practise language is through the use of games. There is a wide variety of games you can use, but here are just a few suggestions:

- Word matches, using business vocabulary and its definitions. You can do this on a worksheet or as 'pairs' game using cards. You could even create a game of dominoes.
- Word searches or crossword puzzles.
- Business Bingo
- Quizzes
- Hangman

5. Teaching vocabulary: collocations, words with multiple meanings, phrasal verbs

Business English students need to expand their vocabulary and you can help them by reading the business sections of daily newspapers regularly; this will let you know current business buzz words, and will enable you to become familiar with the sort of language your students may wish to learn.

You will also learn about new business trends, changing technology and current developments in international markets. The ability to demonstrate an awareness of such things will help you to establish yourself as a Business Language teacher and give you confidence.

Students will usually assume that you are able to teach them general English but will appreciate your knowledge in these areas and your ability to help with some language for their job.

The internet and professional journals are also an excellent source of information for job specific language, and most business language schools have a large selection of materials for teaching Business and Professional English: these include monolingual dictionaries, vocabulary lists and role play activities.

You will also need to discuss with your learners how they plan to remember new language and encourage them to devise strategies for remembering and producing it.

Collocations/word partnerships

Students are often unaware of collocations (the way in which words are used together regularly) which are sometimes called 'word partnerships'. Make sure you include them in your lessons so as to limit misunderstandings. Here are some examples of word partnerships.

When the meeting ended, no decisions had been reached on key issues.

The collocations are:

- to reach a decision
- key issues

The Board made a lot of empty promises.

The collocations are:

- to make a promise
- empty promises

The government policies encouraged a consumer boom followed by a deep recession.

The collocations are:

- a consumer boom
- a deep recession
- encouraged a boom

Words with multiple meanings

Another difficulty that students of business English encounter is words that have more than one meaning. As native speakers we know which meaning to use given the context but this can be complicated for the students. Normally you will teach one meaning at a time.

Your decision to teach more than one meaning will depend on several factors including the level of the students and the number of unfamiliar words you have decided to present.

Look at the following example with the word table:

Please put the book on the table.

This is the meaning of the word that your students will already know, but what about the following meaning?

Can you display this information in a table, please?

Your students may take this literally and put the information on top of the piece of furniture rather than represent it graphically either on paper or on a computer.

Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs can cause problems for learners, as their meanings are often impossible to work out from the meaning of their parts.

A phrasal verb is made up of a main verb plus a particle, for example:

- back up (support)
- chip in (contribute money)
- put off (postpone)

Once you have taught new vocabulary, you need to think about how you can help your students to remember the words. Encourage your students to record the new vocabulary in a vocabulary notebook or glossary.

They need to write down the new word, how to pronounce it and a context to use it in. You should also recycle the language in class using a variety of tasks, for example by using gap fill tasks or playing games.

IV. Cross-cultural communication: business rules

Cross cultural communication issues may have never been as relevant as they are today in our globalised world. Today it's very easy to do business with people wherever they may be in the world – face to face or electronically.

It's important for business English teachers and learners to be aware of the different attitudes and customs around the world. It is obviously impossible to know everything about every culture but you can at least try to identify potential areas of conflict and efficient strategies to address them.

Now take a look at some common business rules you should be aware of in Europe:

Sensitivities

Avoid talking about in-depth politics, money or personal matters. Don't be ostentatious in any manner - it is advisable to keep a low profile so you're not misinterpreted.

Forms of address

Using first names is increasingly common, but be careful as it may not be appropriate. Wait to be invited to use someone's first name.

When you meet

Your handshake should be quick and with quite a light grip unless you are dealing with Americans who often prefer a strong grip. Women do not have to shake hands, but may.

Business meals

Good, cultured conversation is usually as important as the food itself. Remember your manners!

Punctuality

Be on time. In the U K this will normally mean arriving a few minutes before a meeting. If you are late it is important to apologise.

Good judgement and tact is particularly important in Business English classes, so as to avoid awkwardness or embarrassment.

For example, you could ask most people "Where do you work?" or "How long have you been an accountant?" or "How long have you worked for Ford?" However, you may not have been so sure about more personal questions, such as "What do you do in your free time?" or "Do you have any children?" This type of question is more appropriate as you get to know someone in a business environment.

In the U K (as in many countries) it's unlikely you would ever ask someone "How much do you earn?" However, in a job interview the interviewer is likely to ask you what your current salary is and what you are hoping to make in a new job.

V. Business lesson planning

1. Key questions

When planning your lessons, remember that business English lesson plans must be objective and goal-oriented, so start by identifying the objective of the lesson.

A good plan should always evoke a yes to each of the following questions:

1. Does the target language help to meet the objective of the lesson?
2. Does the sequence of the lesson meet the objective?
3. Do the stages follow the PPP sequence? (Presentation, Practice, Production)
4. Do the students get support at the practice stage?
5. Does the plan start with a fun warm-up?
6. Lesson structure – is it logical?
7. Interaction – is there variety?
8. Activities – is there variety?
9. Is there a good balance of TTT (teacher talking time) vs STT (student talking time)? – ideally students should talk more than the teacher

2. An example lesson plan and its evaluation

Here is an example business plan. As you can see, the teacher wants her intermediate level students to be able to give a short oral presentation about sales trends using various types of visual input (such as graphs and charts). Read through the plan and then the answers to the 9 key questions about it.

Business English Lesson

Objective: to give a short oral presentation about sales trends using visual input

Group level: intermediate Lesson length: 4 5 mins.

Target language: Verbs used to describe graphs and charts:

To go up, to go down, to peak, to fluctuate, to drop rapidly, to reach, etc.

Assumed knowledge: Students have a fair grasp of tenses.

Anticipated problems: Understanding information on graphs and charts.

Problems saying large numbers.

Solution: Discussion of what the chart means.

Pair dictation in the warm-up.

Resources: visuals (charts, graphs)

Stage	Interaction	Timing
Warm-up: Pair dictation of numbers and dates. Whole group review and problem-solving.	S-S T-S	5 minutes
Take in homework.	T-S	1 minute
Presentation: Set the context of a sales meeting where the students will present recent trends. Elicit target language. Drill if necessary.	T-S	5 minutes
Practice: Listening Gist listening: Students listen to a short presentation and answer 2 gist questions: 1. What type of business is being discussed? 2. Is the trend generally negative or positive?	S S-S T-S S S-S T-S	8 minutes

<p>Pair review.</p> <p>Whole group feedback.</p> <p>Detailed listening: Students listen for a second time and write down the verbs from the target language that they hear.</p> <p>Pair review.</p> <p>Whole group feedback.</p>		
<p>Written practice: Students use the verbs they identified to label various graphs and charts and fill in the gaps in the tapescript.</p> <p>Whole group feedback.</p>	<p>S-S</p> <p>T-S</p>	<p>8 minutes</p>
<p>Oral practice: Students use the tapescript and visuals from the previous stage to practise giving oral presentation.</p>	<p>S-S</p>	<p>5 minutes</p>
<p>Production: In groups students take turns at making short presentations on the graphs and charts.</p>	<p>S-S</p>	<p>8 minutes</p>
<p>Whole group feedback and error correction from the production task.</p>	<p>T-S</p>	<p>3 minutes</p>
<p>Set homework – students prepare a graph from information in a brief reading text.</p>	<p>T-S</p>	<p>2 minutes</p>

1. Does the target language help to meet the objective?
Yes.
2. Does the sequence of the lesson meet the objective?
Yes.
3. Do the stages follow the PPP sequence? (Presentation, Practice, Production)
Yes.
4. Do the students get support at the practice stage?

Yes. It's common for teachers to expect their students to use the language before they are ready. Support at the practice stage will help prepare students for the production stage.

5. Does the plan start with a fun warm-up?

There's a warm-up but whether it's fun or not will depend on how the teacher sets it up. Students don't like dictation! A fun warm-up will help get your students ready for class and thinking in English. It will also relax them. You should use it to review assumed knowledge. This will mean that if the students don't understand the assumed knowledge well you'll be able to adapt your lesson plan to review this knowledge before moving to the new target language.

6. Lesson structure – is it logical?

Yes, the lesson follows PPP structure.

7. Interaction – is there variety?

Yes, there is variety of interaction using the whole group, small groups, individuals and pair work.

8. Activities – is there variety?

Yes, there is plenty of variety in the activities.

9. TTT (teacher talking time) vs STT (student talking time)

The teacher talks more during the presentation and then less in the practice and production stages, which is good.