

Teaching Tips for ESL University Business English Instructors

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This article provides an overview of language learning strategies for teachers who instruct business classes to university students. The paper includes tips on improving their reading, writing, oral and listening skills, while offering advice on how to better prepare them mentally to function and manage themselves in an ever-changing, interdependent, multicultural global business world.

Introduction

Some business English teachers may find it hard to determine what points to focus on when asked to navigate students for that big step into the real world. As the world market becomes smaller and more interdependent, it is imperative that the instructor bear in mind that some of their students may someday have to work for a foreign or International Joint Venture (IJV) firm. It means not only instructing your students on how to improve their foreign business language skills, but also helping them come to terms with cultural differences and business styles which may often be more useful resources than impediments.

What are the Characteristics of Business Teaching?

Business teachers who have not had the opportunity to acquire prior professional work experience may find it difficult to provide effective advice and/or guidance based on their own actual experience. So what may an instructor do to compensate for this? First of all, at the end of their course, their students not only need to walk away with better comprehension and speaking ability, but a flexible, international perspective of our competitive business world. As the world economy moves ever faster toward a highly interrelated, interdependent state, no nation will be immune to the forces of the global market. However, increased interdependency does not necessarily mean market uniformity, but rather cultural, political and, to some extent, economic diversity which differentiates nations and creates unique market segments. Preparing students to effectively understand and operate in this global environment requires a clear comprehension of its diversity.

Business Writing Classes

Business writing classes may begin by first explaining the differences between traditional British and American writing styles. Some of these differences are:

- Headings
- References (upper left vs. lower left or right)
- Dates (British style) Day, Month, Year versus (American style) Month, Day, Year
- (British style) Messrs (Company name), address, tel/fax numbers, e-mail address, homepage address, etc.) versus (American style) Dear Mr./Ms./Mrs./Miss full name, title, company name, address, tel/fax numbers, e-mail address, homepage address, etc.
- (British style) Attention line: name of recipient versus (American style) Dear Mr./Ms. Smith: salutation or first paragraph of message.
- (British style) Dear Sirs, (American style does not contain this.)
- (British style) Subject line (American style does not contain this.)

Further practice via sample business, social or formal letters may be your next step. Also, I would suggest getting students familiar

with using basic English software i.e. Windows Word, Excel and Power Point, to better prepare them for future written and oral presentations after becoming employed.

a) Letters of Inquiry (LOI)

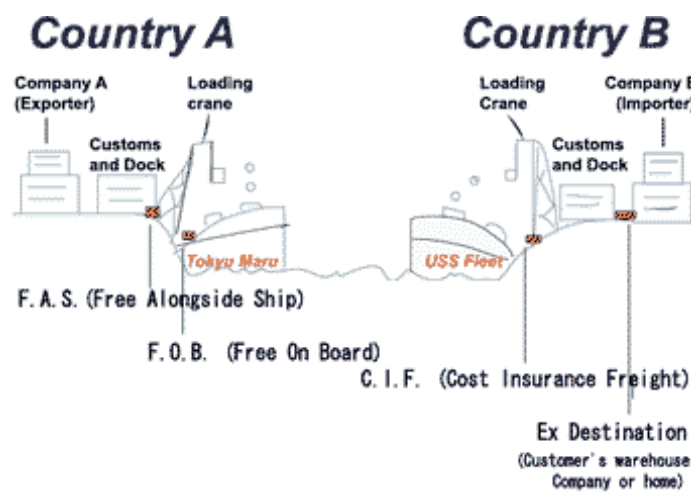
After students get a basic idea of the format and content of general business letters, the next step may to move into letters of inquiry (LOI). This includes general domestic, import, export, social and formal event inquiries. This can be done using several examples from your text or from copies you make and have students expand upon them via homework or in class projects.

Once students have become thoroughly accustomed to the basics of social and business LOI's, you can then explain the common shipping and payment terms and problems associated with them. Regarding shipping, you'll need to explain the different methods such as air versus sea vessel and express versus regular sea mail. It may be necessary to remind students that certain items, ie perishable goods, plants, food items and medical items will require special customs clearance procedures.

Both air and shipping methods basically require the same means of preparation: the supplier must either drop the goods off at his own port for further shipment to be handled by the customer or send them directly to the customer's warehouse or office. The basic four different methods are:

- **FAS (Free Along Side Ship):** Goods are delivered by the exporter to his or her own port and after clearing customs, dropped off next to the vessel for further arrangements. The exporter covers prior costs of getting products to the port, through customs and next to the ship and the customer bears all costs thereafter.
- **FOB (Free On Board):** Goods are delivered by the exporter to his or her own port and after clearing customs, loaded onto the vessel for further shipping to the customer's port. Shipping arrangements to the exporter's port are paid for upfront by him/her and all remaining expenses to get the products to the buyer's destination are handled by the customer him/herself.
- **C&F or CIF (Cost & Freight or Cost Insurance Freight):** Goods are delivered by the exporter to his or her own port and after clearing customs, loaded onto the vessel and shipped overseas to the customer's port where the customer picks up the items. All upfront expensed incurred to get the goods to the customer's port are paid for by the exporter and all remaining expenses are endured by the customer.
- **Ex Warehouse or Destination:** Goods are delivered by the exporter to his or her own port and after clearing customs, loaded onto the vessel and shipped to the customer's port and eventually to the customer's required destination. All prior expenses must be handled by the exporter in this case.

To further clarify these terms, the instructor can write an illustration on the board of two ships at different ports and number the above terms accordingly, drawing lines from each into the illustration as noted below:



The Most Common Payment Methods

- **Cash, credit cards and check payments:** Done up front or after delivery of the products.
- **T/T (Telex Transfer):** otherwise known as wiring money: Done from the customer's bank to the supplier's. An effective method to explain this using an example might be to use a ball pen and a voluntary student at the front of class, moving the pen in each direction depending upon where the student requires the product sent, and later informing him/her the differences in costs. Don't forget to emphasize that methods A and B can be risky, since either side will have to accept 100% risk should the

other not abide by his/her commitment.

- **30 days net:** where half of the payment is made before the products are sent and the remaining half sent within 30 days after the products have arrived and have been checked by the customer.
- **L/C (Letter of Credit),** an instrument issued by a bank on behalf of the importer promising to pay the exporter upon presentation of shipping documents in compliance with the terms stipulated therein. Here, the banks are substituting their credit for that of the buyer and seller by compromising between them and taking responsibility for handling all payments leaving little to no risk for either party.
- **Drafts (Bill of Exchange):** are unconditional promises drawn by one party, usually the exporter, instructing the buyer to pay the face amount of the note upon presentation. Drafts represent the exporter's formal demand for payment from the buyer and afford the exporter less protection than an L/C, since the banks are not obligated to honor payments on the buyer's behalf.
- **Consignments:** where the exporter ships the goods to the importer while still retaining actual title to the merchandise.

b) Letters of Quotation (LOQ)

This leads us to our next step, the letter of quotation (LOQ). In addition to emphasizing answers to general domestic, import, export, social and formal event inquiries, including extensive research into costs and profit estimates, the LOQ should include added value statements to stimulate the reader's attention, i.e. discount prices for larger orders, newer models or products, and news about your company including joint ventures or acquisitions. This should provide lower prices and added value products for the customer. It is very important to remind students that the LOQ is not only a simple answer to the LOI, but a tool to inform the customer of the seller's new products and eventually consummate ongoing business. When writing LOQs, I also recommend having the students use Excel for making price sheets, graphs, and pie charts, to emphasize cost comparisons. The students then re-paste these charts back into the Windows Word document LOQ for an added computer learning approach.

Further business letter writing topics may include negotiation letters (counterproposals based on the prices quoted in your LOQs), general sales letters (direct mail advertisements, fliers, pamphlets and other forms of advertisements), confirmation letters of shipment orders, and complaints and trouble shooting responses.

I also recommend using games, which may enhance the student's apprehension of materials covered. One is to divide class members into teams of four to five and ask them questions about topics covered. All teams are eligible to answer and the order can be determined by who raises their hands first. A correct answer not only wins the specified points, but also gains sole control of a subsequent five point bonus question. An incorrect answer to the toss-up not only loses the points earned by the team, but may also be stolen by one of the other groups. An incorrect answer to a bonus question does not result in a loss of points, nor can it be stolen. The winner is determined either by a pre-set point goal, i.e. 1st team to reach 100 points, or when all of questions are completed, and whatever team is leading becomes the winner.

The nature of the game dictates that a 10 or 20-point toss-up question be based on a primary principle or concept, while the five point bonus question be based on a secondary principle or application of the primary principle. Your questions can relate to basic knowledge, application or a recent article covered in class.

Reading Exercises

Students can develop respective business literacy outside of class via homework projects, enhanced through numerous reading exercises. However, students may become discouraged with lengthy, difficult and boring financial articles or text readings in and outside of class. Instead, you could have them do a general synopsis on the content. Early in the term, you may bring to class several short business related articles (i.e. one or two per month) or assign students the task of collecting several of their own from different local, regional, national or financial newspapers. Then, make and distribute forms to be attached to each article where the student can also check what news source the article is from, whether the reporting in the article is neutral, pro-company, pro-consumer, or pro-other non-company related. In closing the class session, you could have the students discover patterns of biased reporting, editorial writing, or discuss the pros, cons, strengths and weaknesses of the article content and writing style.

5) Oral Business English Classroom Projects:

a) Personal Introductions Using Group Projects:

Students are often required to form their groups early in the semester before they have had the opportunity to interact with each other

in class. As a way of making the group formation process easier, I have found it helpful to devote class time to the development of community among students. You may want to do this early in the semester, preferably during the first two class sessions. Students are given 4 x 6 note cards and asked to write their names and Tel/fax numbers/ e-mail addresses, major/minor and graduation dates, current job title with a brief description, and career goals. When students have completed their note cards, they are formed into groups of four to five. Each group is then asked to converse for at least 10-15 minutes about each other's information. To enhance discussions, students can also be given cards with topics such as what their favorite sports, foods or movies are and why. I have found that these active games help enhance comprehension while making a potentially dry course interesting.

b) Presentations

Presentations can be done as bi-semester exercises, where the first semester presentation topic may be the students' choice, and the later a power point presentation on a company of their choice. The company presentation should at least cover:

- The company's history
- History of products and service(s)
- Financial information (current fiscal sales figures, losses, gains, market share)
- Goals and future marketing strategies, management changes, etc.
- Student's assessment of the company (pros and cons and suggestions on how the company should improve as though he/she was an outside consultant)

c) Consumer Behavior: Perception is Reality

I would also suggest reminding students that consumer behavior and perception towards products and advertisements will vary extensively depending upon the market place and country they are targeted. Many companies have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in unsuccessful overseas advertising campaigns due to a lack of research into cultural differences. One example of this was when a soap powder manufacturer placed an ad with a picture of dirty clothes on the left, a box of soap in the middle and clean clothes on the right. The soap didn't sell well in the Middle East because the advertising company forgot that in that area of the world, people usually read from right to left.

From the consumer's standpoint, products themselves can be easily deceiving, and to clarify this point, Professor Joe F. Alexander, University of Northern Colorado, suggests a very simple yet effective way to demonstrate this in his article "Perception IS Reality". After emphasizing the importance of viewing products from the standpoint of how consumers perceive them, he displays a carton of a dozen eggs to the class. There is one real egg and 11 plastic eggs in the carton. He asks the students to tell him what they see and then he breaks the real egg into a drinking glass for all to observe. Next he throws the remaining 11 plastic eggs high into the air so they land directly in the middle of the classroom. After this he asks the students, "Which factor determined your behavior, your perception of what was in the egg carton or the reality therein?" Naturally the point of this presentation is that what you see isn't always what you get, and often packaging, design and colors can easily distort our perception of products (or services), no matter how good or bad they may actually be. The complete details of this game can be accessed by visiting the web page listed in the reference section of this paper.

Conclusion

In this report, I tried to pose suggestions for business English instructors with emphasis on a global management approach. Business instructors should bear in mind that it is extremely important to emphasize business cultural differences including consumer behavior, product perception, pricing, distribution, promotion, communications, and planning, in addition to routine business letter writing, presentation and reading comprehension exercises. The goal is to not only to develop students' business language skills, but also foster a multi-cultural, international perspective for our ever-changing, interdependent business world.

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