

International Business English

What should we be teaching?
BESIG Business Issues 3/1999

Christine Johnson and Cath Bartlett

Christine Johnson has been training and writing materials for Business English for more than 20 years. She has been senior training consultant at LTS, Bath since 1988. She designs and delivers in-company courses around Europe and also runs courses for Business English trainers preparing for the LCCI Certificate in Teaching English for Business Purposes. She is co-author of the book 'Teaching Business English', OUP 1994.

Cath Bartlett has more than 10 years experience teaching business English and writing course materials in a variety of contexts. After completing a MA in applied linguistics, she worked in Japan with major Japanese and multi-national companies. She then worked with LTS training and consulting in Bath. She has also worked in Indonesia and a variety of European countries. She is now working free-lance and can be contacted by e-mail at cathbartlett@pitstone86.freeserve.co.uk

Standard English

As teachers, we feel confident most of the time about what is or is not correct (or standard) English. Some or most of us would probably want to correct the following, for example:

1. some people delay to pay their tax
2. this is belonging to me
3. he is teacher

However, these utterances are acceptable, according to Peter Trudgill, in his book "Varieties of Standard English". (1.) is standard in Australia, (2.) in Ireland and (3.) in Singapore. Trudgill's book lists many such utterances that are standard in various parts of the world but which would probably be corrected in the language classroom/This leads us to ask the question: what is standard English? According to Trudgill, it is the form of the language that can be either written or spoken, and which is used by educated speakers. It does not include dialect forms. So it seems that the idea of standard English has to be very flexible if we are not to be bound by our own culture as teachers.

Global English

This becomes even more obvious when you think of the huge numbers of people who speak English around the world today. According to the British Council survey, English 2000, there are about 1.5 billion speakers of English. Of these, only about 400 million are native speak-ers. Another 400 million are speakers of English as a sec-ond language, for example in India or Singapore. The majority of English speakers, by far, are non-native speak-ers: at least 700 million of them. This large number arises from the fact that English has become the language of international

communication - not only in business but also in politics, science, technology, sport and so on. A German doing business in China will use English, as will a Russian in Indonesia or a Spaniard in Egypt. This global English is the key tool for international communication.

Learners on Business English courses need English as a tool. Although some may use English to communicate with native English speakers, the vast majority of their interactions will probably be with other non-natives.

Universals of Language

At LTS (Language Training Services) in Bath we noticed that learners from a variety of language backgrounds were producing many of the same (non-standard) patterns. We decided to investigate this, and our reading and discussions led us to ask the question: is Business English a pidgin? English is used as a contact language for trade and business, and many pidgin languages have arisen from contact trade situations. In fact, a common definition of a pidgin is "an auxiliary trade language". There are various theories about the origin of the word "pidgin", but they all point to a link with trade: one theory is that it is a Chinese corruption of the English word "business"; another is that it comes from the Hebrew "pidjoni" meaning barter. Thus Business English is similar to a pidgin language in both context and use

Pidgins have commonly been regarded as degraded or inferior languages. However, it is now recognized by linguists that they are in fact a sign of human creativity: they develop where there is a need for communication. Pidgins are neither debased nor static, but expand, sometimes becoming the official language of a nation (for example Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea.) Where pidgin languages are adopted as the mother tongue and have native speakers, they are then known as creole languages. Pidgin and creole languages are of great interest to linguists because they all have similar structural simplifications whatever their origins. This fact indicates that Universals of Language underlie their development. We decided to investigate this and to see if there was any similarity between the common features of non-native speaker English and pidgin languages.

We collected examples of learner English from role plays, simulations and presentations, that is from situations as close to real life as is possible in a training situation. These were recorded, then scripted and analysed. We recorded examples from speakers of every language group in Europe and from Japanese and Korean. We looked specifically for non-standard patterns that: (a) caused no communication problems and (b) were common to learners from different mother tongue backgrounds.

When we compared the utterances of our BE learners to pidgin and creole languages, we found many similar patterns of simplification. These are summarised in the table on the left.

From the striking similarity between IBE and pidgin and creole languages, we concluded that IBE is developing through the same process as pidginisation: it is developing in accordance with universals of language. Thus, IBE could be a variety of English with regular features and patterns of simplification. These simplifications help

to make the language more transparent and so aid communication between non-native speakers.

How does this insight into International Business English affect our work as trainers, syllabus designers and course book writers?

Impact on Business English trainers

We suggest that there are three areas in which the patterns of IBE should influence trainers: giving feedback, syllabus design, and communication strategies.

Giving feedback

Trainers should not regard everything that is apparently non-standard as an error. Perhaps the speaker is using a simplification that will be more easily understood by other non-native speakers. So, when giving feedback, the trainer should focus on what might obscure understanding. For example, "He participated to a meeting" doesn't cause any confusion whereas "It increased with 10%" could.

Feedback will be important if the meaning or intention is not clear, or if the utterance is confusing or if it is inappropriate. The following examples may illustrate the point:

1. My meaning is... (= In my opinion...)
2. Thank you for all the worthless (= invaluable) information.
3. We made a lot of experiences in this area (a lot of research)
4. How are you? So so. (gives a bad impression)
5. No - you're wrong. I want a bigger discount (could cause offence)

In correcting appropriacy, we believe that trainers should aim at producing a form of English that is as culturally neutral as possible.

Restricted vocabulary

Simplified vocabulary (e.g. We'll call together -not each other; We 're waiting for them to sell our products - not expecting)

Non-count nouns lacking

(e.g. I have a news)

(We need new equipments)

Pre/postpositions reduced

(e.g. I'll pay the coffee)

(Have you listened the news?)

Simplified question forms

(e.g. Why you are here?

You understand me?)

Simplified tense/

mood system

Simplified tense!

mood system

(e.g. Tomorrow I go to London)

Passives avoided

Simplified sentence structure (morphemes dropped)

(e.g. a technical driven company)

(That represent only 10%)

Conjoined not embedded sentences (e.g. That's one of our main topics and that ~ one of the reasons that you're here that we come together; we know about the project in the other countries and then we every month call together)

No gerunds/ present participles

(The infinitive form is always preferred e.g. It k not worth to do)

Few relative clauses! simplified relative pronouns

(e.g. My company which name is...)

We have (no expression meaning there is)

We have used rater than there is

(e.g. We have a lot of traffic in Seoul)

Resumptive pronouns (e.g. All the members they was in contact)

However, we are not advocating that a trainer should speak simplified English. It is good for learners to be exposed to standard English as it helps them to deal with native speakers in real life. The trainer is a useful model and helps to build learners' passive knowledge. We also believe that it is important to give feedback on basic structures, vocabulary and pronunciation of key sounds.

Syllabus design

If you look at the development of pidgins and creoles, certain more complex structures develop very late. These include compound tenses (e.g. I will have been writing...) reported speech, embedded structures and complex relative clauses. Many course books, even at a lower intermediate level include input on these structures, but they are difficult to process and handle and often add very little to meaning. Is it really important to say "He said he had been there" rather than "He said he was there"? We believe not. People need to be able to mark the difference between the past, the present and the future, but more complex tense distinctions are often unnecessary, except perhaps for advanced learners who have to deal with native speakers. In the same way, complex politeness forms (I was wondering if you could possibly...) should be omitted. They are very culture specific as well as difficult to process. "Could you please" is more effective.

Omitting unnecessary language input allows more time to focus on basic structures, vocabulary, pronunciation and communication skills.

Sequencing of the items in a syllabus could also follow the development patterns of language. Easy forms should come before less easy, and useful before less useful.
Communication Strategies

If you accept that good communication skills are more important to BE learners than learning complex structures and culture-bound idioms, it makes sense to build communication strategies into the training programme. These could include:

A) Active Listening

Showing understanding, misunderstanding and supporting the exchange of information

B) Repair Strategies

Dealing with breakdowns in communication, asking for clarification and signalling when in difficulties.

C) Describing and explaining skills

Being able to paraphrase to explain the meaning if you don't know the exact word.

D) Stalling

Being able to hold the floor and give yourself time to think.

E) Signalling

Being able to signal speech intentions with phrases such as:

“Can I interrupt” and “Can I ask a question”.

F) Logical Organisation

Clarifying meaning and showing the logic of an argument.

G) Emphasis and delivery

Use of appropriate phrasing and pausing; clear articulation and correct phonemes. Poor pronunciation and delivery is a major cause of misunderstanding in international situations.

In addition, listening skills and listening strategies need to be developed. Learners need mixed listening exercises including a great deal of extensive listening with exposure to different accents and types of English.

In conclusion, simplified IBE structures together with good communication strategies provide a sound basis for effective communication in the international business world. What is more, being able to communicate effectively increases the learner’s motivation, and this in turn enhances the learning process. So perhaps trainers need to re-think some commonly-held beliefs about course design and training practice.

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