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Teaching Factual/vs/Non-factual Information in Various Business Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the importance of teaching Business English by using concrete examples, situations or contexts derived from the business environment. Getting students and learners in touch with different types of communicative skills that are generally used in companies help them acquire and develop language abilities faster and easier. Business English is strongly centered on factual information, basically on facts and figures, conveying essential data; therefore, connecting students to work-related contexts such as meetings, presentations, reports, memos, etc. stimulates their capacity to structure their ideas more clearly, to focus on the vital pieces of the message they intend to transmit, to create a personal phrasebook to be used when needed. The interaction of students with these language structures and functions provides them with the opportunity to acquire certain language chunks, key expressions, and phrases, from the real world of business. However, despite the fact that business English is mainly based on providing particular data, it doesn't mean that it is "inflexible." On the contrary, it is volatile; business situations change frequently and students should be taught how to adapt the knowledge they "collect" in time to the situations they come across.

KEYWORDS: *factual information, formal vs informal style, cohesion, written messages*

Much emphasis has been lately placed on Business English due to globalization and hence to the great expansion of job opportunities in this field. Various specialized courses have appeared on the market, which rely heavily on case studies and on authentic business situations that are commonly met in all the sections which compose this large domain: banking, finance, IT, marketing, management, statistics, etc. They are designed to offer students practical tools to use in their future careers, by containing standardized business vocabulary, up to date documents (reports, memos, presentations, charts, etc), and grammar reviews in order to enable them to become highly communicative and competent interlocutors. Business English has a rather scientific content, dealing with terms that are specific to this domain and which are aimed to offer concrete, relevant economic information. Yet, teachers and trainers of Business English are all aware that not only the scientific content is highly important in such instances but also the ability of learners to cope in the future with different situations and contexts in their written and oral communication process. So, besides leading learners towards the specific information of the field in charge, teachers also need to emphasize other aspects of English as a Second Language, such as style, cohesion, formality, and informality, etc.

Before proceeding to the corpus of the actual paper, there should be made a clear specification of what "factual" information really means and differentiate it from "nonfactual" information.

According to <www.yourdictionary.com>, "factual" refers to actual details or information rather than ideas or feelings. On <www.quora.com>, "factual information" is related to facts provided or learned about something or someone, a vital piece of information; synonyms may be: details, particulars, facts, figures. "Nonfactual" "means not based on fact. One example of potentially non-factual information is opinion". When it comes to Business English or any ESP (English for Specific Purposes), teachers and trainers cannot leave aside the non-factual elements of a language even if they focus mainly on the factual ones.

Factual information can be found in all kinds of written business materials: memos, reports, invitations, job application letters, the minutes of a meeting, press releases, reservations, complaints, announcements, résumés, etc. They vary according to the degree of formality (formal "official" or informal "personal") and are generally classified under the designation of business correspondence.

Formal business correspondence (How to officially communicate in writing?)

There is a high variety of materials available for the formal correspondence in the Business field, materials that can easily be used by teachers in their classes as a means of a model for their students. One cannot emphasize a material against others since they are all important in the learners' future careers. Therefore, we hereby summarize some of the most frequently used materials when it comes to formal written correspondence:

1. Memos are a sort of written materials, which inform the employees of an organization about its policy and procedures or standardized formats used by the members of the same company to communicate information in an accurate way.

2. Invitations are generally written in the third person; they are official and, in most cases, they often specify the need of a reply.

3. Reports basically announce something, explain a situation or offer some recommendations. Whatever information they intend to provide, formal reports follow a certain pattern: *"referencing/numbering; title or subject heading, terms of reference (TOR) (authorize the writer to investigate a given matter for a specified purpose), introduction, main body, findings/conclusions; recommendations; appendices"* (Nicolae *et al.*, 2002: 92).

4. Formal letters

There is a wide range of business letters such as: credit and collection letters, sales letters, letters of congratulations, of appreciation, of sympathy, claims, inquiries, letters of application, of reference and recommendation, of resignation, of a job applicant, etc. Business letters focus on a specific style and approach. Businesspeople should adopt a positive attitude when writing them, should be diplomatic and make sure they alternate the masculine and feminine pronouns if the situation is required. There is a strong tendency nowadays within companies to eliminate all the sexist barriers.

5. Résumés

Résumés are always formal and factual since they are based on personal data. They are informative and well structured. There isn't a strict pattern to follow; there are some points that all résumés have in common (headings, a chronological order of the mentioned events, references, work experience, personal information, etc.) but there is not an exact order in which they should be used.

6. Minutes

Minutes are drawn up in accordance with the notes taken by someone during a meeting. Both factual and nonfactual information are mentioned as they register not only the points on the agenda that are discussed but also the opinions, suggestions, and ideas the attendants have.

7. Press Releases

A press release is a specialized business document which advertises in one way or another, the organization itself. Thus, besides being factually precise, it should be carefully written and based on reality. There is no place for mistakes of any kind since these may affect the company's reputation in the long run.

It's difficult to make up a list of all formal documents that are met in the business field. Letters, minutes, press releases, etc are only a small part of the large variety of written commercial communication papers, which may also include appointments, reservations, personalized offers, enquiries, websites, emails, company portfolios, booklets, brochures, catalogues, leaflets, etc

Generally speaking, all formal written documents in Business English should be concise and impersonal. They are meant to offer essential factual or nonfactual information in an organized format. They are often characterized by certain features in the sense that they should all be brief (not necessarily short in terms of length but they should stick to the relevant information they intend to transmit) and easy to read. Complicated, long paragraphs should be avoided but it is recommended however to use complex sentences because they are tactful and they ensure a degree of formality to the text; it is also advisable for all these official papers to be updated form the point of view of the information they contain and of the format. Another aspect to be taken into consideration when dealing with formal correspondence is the cultural one.

> In some cultures, writers will imply “yes” when they mean “no”. They may agree to things that are impossible to achieve. Hey may take on work that is impossible to do. All because their culture doesn’t make them feel comfortable saying “no”, they:
>
> - may feel they will appear unprofessional and lose face as a result
> - may believe they will be seen as uneducated and foolish if they don’t understand
> - may feel that people will think they lack endurance or resilience
> - may prefer to avoid disagreement
>
> Where you know these are likely reactions, do adapt your writing. You may simply need to ask the right questions to draw out the right answers. For instance, avoid closed questions (ones which typically lead to a “yes” or no factual answer) and try open questions such as ‘why’ or ‘how’.
>
> (Talbot & Bhattacharjee, 2012: 226)

Thus, writing formal business correspondence is not an easy task to achieve. It’s not just about using grammar and words correctly; it’s about structuring the data in a manner which best suits the register of formality. It’s about choosing the right vocabulary and being aware of the power of words. Effective sentences are built with appropriate words and arranged in a proper way. Better said, it matters how words are combined and used. All words have a denotative meaning (which is the factual characterization of a situation, idea, etc.) and a connotative one (which is related to feelings). The same word can have a denotative meaning “Robert, the new manager, is very ambitious; he wants to fulfill all targets” and a connotative one “Too much ambition caused Robert to be hated by all employees”, therefore it is essential to know how to work with words. Moreover, a word can have a positive and a negative meaning depending on the context in which it is used. Dealing with words and vocabulary correctly is a must; businesspeople need to know how to select the best phrases in situations they are confronted with the case of refusing somebody without offending that person or when they are in the position of having to announce bad news. The layout of the official document also plays a vital role except for the case where printed standardized papers are used.

Integrating these facts into the teaching procedure of a foreign language is an important task of teachers and trainers. There is a long way from the mere presentation of a certain model or pattern to its actual and proficient use in real future situations. Besides the explicit teaching procedure used in classes, one needs to focus on students' ability to apply the information to new contexts and situations. Therefore, teachers and trainers need to find the right tools for making these models work in real life.

One starting point would be that of comparing these pieces of written messages to the entire process of reading comprehension of a text. Since teachers start from the presentation of a written model of a memo, for example, then their task is identical to that of making students understand the meaning of a written text. So, in many cases, Thomas Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension may be applied to these formal communication items. In Barrett's taxonomy, we talk about certain levels of comprehension. The first level, the literal one, involves the understanding of the main ideas of texts. This can also be applied to the formal correspondence in Business, where students need to grab the main idea of the written text they receive – an announcement, an invitation, a complaint, etc. "*The information required for literal comprehension comes largely from the text itself. Recall comprehension can easily be evaluated. In responding to a literal question, the reader either can recall the information from the text or he or she cannot".* (Brassell & Rasinski, 2008: 17). The sequential level discusses the reorganization of a text in a different way.

This can also be applied to all formal business correspondence texts, when teachers ask students to reorganize the texts differently. Many times, the information presented in the text is purely informative, so students need to go beyond it and understand the real message. So, the inferential level, where students need to read between the lines, is also of high importance. *"Inferential comprehension is more sophisticated than literal comprehension because it requires the orchestration and manipulation of information from the text as well as information that resides within the readers- their background knowledge."* (Brassell & Rasinski, 2008: 17) The non-factual information, that is the information based on opinions, usually appears in the evaluation level of the comprehension process. It is very important for students to focus on this aspect as well, since they need to express certain opinions upon different situations.

The last but not at all the least important level that of appreciation refers to applying information to new situations. So, this is the moment students get the chance of using their acquired knowledge in new and diverse contexts. *"A focus on inferential and critical comprehension is appropriate, and nurtures the high-level thinking that one would expect to find in high-performing classrooms."* (Brassell & Rasinski, 2008: 18) So, the understanding of formal written messages in Business English is similar to the comprehension process of any other written text in the second language students are learning about.

At the same time, the specific focus should be placed on cohesion. All written messages should be cohesive, easy to understand so that the readers get the messages as clearly as possible. It is the role of teachers and trainers to practice cohesion with their learners, to find specific tasks with an emphasis on cohesion, or even to create tasks of their own for the students to be able to master such skills in their future careers. An example of such a task would be that of “odd-man-out” where students need to decide which linking item best suits the written message. Therefore, the awareness of cohesive sentences should not be neglected at any time.

> The concept of COHESION can therefore be usefully supplemented by that of REGISTER, since the two together effectively define a TEXT. A text is a passage of discourse which is coherent in these two regards: it is coherent with respect to the context of situation, and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive. Neither of these two conditions is sufficient without the other, nor does the one by necessity entail the other”.
>
> (Halliday & Hassan, 2013: 23)

Informal business correspondence

Informal business correspondence includes most of the documents mentioned above, but there are different guidelines to follow when it comes to writing. Short words and sentences are accepted, as well as contractions and abbreviations. Colloquial, familiar language is a mark of familiarity and a closer degree of intimacy. Context is very important when we talk about informal correspondence. Of course, the importance of register and cohesion also apply in this case since any written or oral message, be it formal or informal, needs to have cohesion and meaning.

Specific tasks found or created by teachers may be applied when it comes to making a difference between the formal and informal styles. Students may be asked to change a written message from the formal to the informal style, or the opposite, thus, raising awareness on the specificity of language items used in different situations.

In regard to the relationship between text and situation, Halliday & Hassan discuss two types: one in which non-linguistic factors dominate and we need some situational information and the other where language is highly important. They integrate Business situations into the second type of relationship where the role of language is self-sufficient:

> At the other end of the scale are types of activity in which the language is the whole story, as in most formal or informal discussion on abstract themes, such as those of business, politics and intellectual life. Here the language may be totally self-sufficient and any relevant situational factors are derivable from the language itself. The quality of texture, and the forms of cohesion which provide it, differ very much as between these two poles.
>
> (Halliday & Hassan, 2013: 24)

Oral communication in business

Both factual and non-factual information can be found in different proportions in oral business situations. Meetings, discussions, invitations, requests, negotiations, teleconferencing, telephoning, explanations, presentations, etc may include short items of factual information but also nonfactual ones such as the personal opinions of the interlocutors. In such cases, intonation, stress and the proper use of grammar structures are the most important elements since the use of vocabulary varies according to the topics the interlocutors choose to talk about.

> Communication is not a simple transmission of facts. Along with the factual, there is always the way in which the message is carried across, which adds meaning to the message. Humor, irony, wonder, interrogation, etc., are presented through change of voice, intonation, pitch and volume. (…) Similarly, a message will also carry opinion. (…) Communication will always have a degree of subjectivity, since at any given point of time; the speaker is exercising choice in the selection of words, gestures, etc., to make the communication happen.
>
> (Department of English University of Delhi, 2008: 125)

The non-factual information usually prevails in such situations since interlocutors rely heavily on their subjective way of thinking regarding a matter of fact. Students and learners of a second language need to get accustomed to different ways of expressing their opinions or of transmitting specific information to others so that their messages become meaningful and clear. Role-plays are a useful tool for teachers to lead students into the world of efficient oral communication. Nonetheless, students need to be aware of how the language varies according to different situations. Style and register are important as well as the coherence of the discourse. They need to take account of different listeners, and, as a result, adapt the message they would like to transmit.

Overall, when discussing the specific area of Business English, it is worth remembering that not only factual information is of high importance but also the non-factual one. Messages are important no matter they are written or oral, register should be appropriate, style the same and cohesion should never be neglected in the act of ideas' generation and transmission. It becomes the task of teachers and trainers of ESL to lead their students into these various contexts and situations so that their learners become efficient users of a foreign language.

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