

## CHALLENGES IN MEETING OBJECTIVES: TEACHING GRAMMAR TO BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Grammar has always been one of the key areas covered by any language course, and continues to be so, in spite of the shift in focus from traditional teaching of the language structures through rule learning, translation and/or structural drills, to active use of the language in communication. In teaching English to students of business, acquiring “the grammar of business English” [1, p.3] is one of the specific course objectives, subordinated to the wider goal of developing the students’ communicative competence in oral and written English, of which linguistic competence is an important component.

On the face of it, attaining this objective may seem a fairly straightforward task. Nevertheless, in the actual classroom the teacher is often faced with a seemingly paradoxical situation: business students who, in terms of their knowledge of English, would rank as intermediate students, find it difficult to learn grammar, and sometimes even refuse to do it. They may be quite fluent in English, yet they constantly make mistakes when it comes to speaking correctly, from a grammatical point of view. To cope with this challenge, one has to address two related issues: (a) what are the reasons for this situation and (b) how should the business English (BE) teacher deal with it, so as to be able to reach the course objectives, as stated above.

In the present article, I will try to pinpoint, explain, and risk some answers to these questions. I am not claiming to offer a complete or exhaustive list of answers; rather, I will make some suggestions about possible ways of dealing with this frequently encountered problem.

To attempt an answer to the questions above, let us look into the student’s mentality. What does he/she expect when walking into the classroom, with the intention of attending an English seminar? Note that I am speaking of students whose entrance examination

has not included any assessment of their English level. Most probably, two of their basic expectations are the following:

1. That the teaching materials should be **comprehensible**. The texts they use should **not** be **too difficult** for their level.
2. That the teaching materials should be **interesting** and **relevant**. This second expectation can be further divided into two sub-expectations:
  - a. The materials should **not** be **too easy** for the students’ level, from the point of view of the language. If all the words are known and all the grammar problems are familiar and easily explainable, they will lose interest. In other words, the teaching materials should be challenging (although not too challenging) as far as the **form** is concerned.
  - b. The materials should be **interesting** as far as their **content** goes. The topics covered should be of topical interest to the students, for them to attend the seminar in order to learn new things, instead of just to pass the final exam.

So far, two problems have already arisen. First, it is quite difficult to strike a balance between “challenging” and “manageable”, for any text. It is difficult for a text to find itself halfway between the two major risks: that your students find it too difficult to understand, or that they are bored. The problem is all the more difficult since the level of a group of students is rarely homogeneous. There is, however, another problem, a subtler one. If you concentrate too much on the form, you risk losing control of the content, and the other way round.

The second expectation mentioned above actually brings into question an important issue in any case of second language acquisition, namely the issue of **motivation**. What do we need to do in order to keep

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our students motivated? And why is it that each time grammar is explained to them they suddenly seem to lose interest?

This ‘unreasonable’ behaviour is easily explained by the above-mentioned issue of motivation. Business students are reluctant to really make an effort towards grammar acquisition because, on the one hand, they think they know all there is to know about grammar already (although this knowledge they presumably have rarely goes beyond high-school reminiscences) and on the other hand, they do not see why they should bother to learn something they think they will never need or use. Business students have no real incentive to learn grammar. They are convinced that they can do without it, and that fluency is more important. Fluency is what they think will “sell”, counting as good knowledge of English when joining, say, the multinational company of their dreams. We live in a consumer society, knowledge has a price, and we need to “use” it; so what is the point in learning “useless” grammar rules?

Moreover, there is another problem. Some students will diligently study and learn all grammar rules possible by heart. At the same time they may be quite fluent when asked to carry out a conversation on no matter what business topic. However, they find it very difficult – if not impossible – to do both at the same time. When they are doing an exercise, their “grammar frame” [6] is activated, they focus on “correctness” and they perform the task impeccably. When engaging in a conversation, their “conversation frame” is activated, while they turn away from any knowledge of grammar they ever had, and they start speaking fluently, but with a total disregard for grammatical correctness. When stopped and corrected they become inhibited, and sometimes stop speaking altogether. These students experience a mental blockage, an impossibility to “connect” the two skills they master separately. One reason for this blockage springs from the fact that focusing on content (which a student does while speaking freely) makes it more difficult to focus on form (i.e. on grammar).

This inhibition the student undergoes might have serious consequences for him/her. If corrected too often and not allowed to speak freely, he/she might lose the self-confidence necessary when using a language that is not one’s native tongue. On the other hand, we should not forget that being fluent is not the only requirement in business communication. Accuracy and appropriacy are equally important, particularly when it comes to producing written documents (e.g. contracts, reports, letters, memos) or participating in rather more formal instances of oral

communication (meetings, oral presentations, negotiations).

What, then, should the teacher of English do in order to strike the right balance in reaching these two complementary objectives: fluency and accuracy? A shift from emphasis on **language learning**, the traditional approach in this country, to **language acquisition** would be a first step towards solving this difficulty. Specialists know that “language acquisition is a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop their ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are using language for communication” [3, p. 10]. Thus, the immediate result of language acquisition – language competence – is also subconscious. Under this approach, students develop a sense of what is correct and what is not correct; language awareness is therefore sacrificed in favour of ‘assimilating’ correct linguistic patterns.

In our schools and even colleges, the most common way of helping students develop competence in a second language has been language learning. The term learning – opposed to acquisition – refers to “conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. In non-technical terms, learning is «knowing about» a language, known to most people as «grammar» or «rules» [3, p. 10]. Concretely speaking, when using the Present Perfect Tense, the student must be able to explain about an action which happened in the past but which has obvious results in the present.

Yet, let us face it. How many business students really get to this point? How many of them speak correctly, and are also aware of the reasons why they do so? A few, the elite. Many students become bored, uninterested, or overwhelmed with a cluster of rules they simply cannot grasp. We must not forget that they are not philology students.

Therefore, how can grammar be explained to the average business students with the best results? First of all, some grammar issues would better be, if not skipped, then mentioned only briefly. To give just an example, a tense such as the Future Perfect in the Past Continuous makes some students wonder in a whispered voice if they will ever in their lifetime come across such a thing, let alone use it. Grammar explanations should be limited to what can be briefly defined as clear, concise, and above all, **natural** use of language.

On the other hand, there are grammar issues that deserve special attention. To mention just a few, for instance, the use of the present tenses with a future time reference; transitivity in language; the passive voice; and, most importantly, modality. Since modals are the emblem of what is known as polite behaviour (something students will certainly need in their future activity in multinational companies or elsewhere), special emphasis and attention must be placed on them.

However, it is my contention that grammar explanations should not be given as such. In a traditional approach, a grammar problem is explained and subsequently a text is analyzed for exemplification. It is my belief that the procedure should be reversed. Thus, the teacher should start from an application, say, a business text containing a number of grammar problems. It is important that this text be taken from an authentic source: this could be the Internet, the media, specialized journals or other real language sources.

The text should be first read and understood by the students. Only then should the grammar problems be identified **in the text** and discussed in the classroom. The approach should be inductive: from the particular occurrence of the problem, to the general rule. To ensure motivation, grammar should be pointed out in business contexts, rather than presented as a target *per se*. After identification of the problem, there should follow clear, brief grammar explanations, to which the students could be encouraged to contribute. Then the grammar problem(s) identified in the text should be backed up with other examples, if possible also from authentic sources. Young people today are particularly easy to motivate if they are given texts from the Internet.

The next step should be a low content practise exercise (such as gap filling or matching exercises), and then another contextualised task, based on telephone calls,

conversations, e-mails, articles and company reports. These materials should be diversified depending on what productive skill is being targeted: speaking or writing.

To put it in fewer words, approaching grammar in the classroom yields the best results when starting with **inductive reasoning** (from particular example to general rule), followed by **deductive-iterative reasoning**: from the general rule (not much insisted upon, but only briefly mentioned) to other instances of real-life examples. Thus, this second stage would consist of a diversification of the range of examples, enabling easier assimilation (acquisition) of the language structures. The language mechanism will thus be acquired, subconsciously assimilated by the student, rather than simply learned. By providing various examples which exhibit the same linguistic pattern, the student will be “tricked” into subconsciously assimilating - rather than consciously learning - the correct use of language.

The present article has tried to identify some problems commonly faced by business English teachers when trying to teach grammar to their learners. Students in business and economics are not very motivated to learn grammar theoretically. Moreover, many of them believe that what they know is enough to help them throughout their future careers. Besides, since we live in a consumer society, where everything we know has to “sell” for the highest possible price, students are not interested in learning rigid theoretical rules. This is the reason why I believe that grammar should be taught to them along the lines of a two-fold approach: inductive in the beginning (from exemplification of the grammar problem to its explanation), followed by a deductive-iterative one, in which the explanation is backed up by other examples up to the point where the language mechanism, rather than the formal rule, has been assimilated by the student.

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6. Frame here refers to a fixed, pre-existent knowledge structure in memory. For more details, see [5, p. 85-87].