
DEALING WITH LEVELS OF FORMALITY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Effective business communication, either written or oral, depends on good command of language (i.e., English) as much as on cultural awareness, particularly when the act of communication involves different nationalities. Both good command of English and cultural awareness are prerequisites for the use of the appropriate degree of formality, which is, most often, determined by the context of communication. For these reasons, Business students must acquire the ability to deal with the various degrees of formality required in their professions as well as in the different situations (formal or informal) they may encounter throughout their lives. This paper aims to identify some key aspects related to formality degrees in Business English and to explore the manner in which the level of formality, in general, can contribute to describing a culture. This would enable speakers with different cultural backgrounds to adapt to new situations and adopt the appropriate attitude for successful communication.

Keywords: *cultural awareness, business communication, register, degrees of formality.*

Introduction

The main purposes that Business English trainers generally aim to achieve with students are *fluency* and *effectiveness*. While *fluency* is generally concerned with speed and effort of speaking, *effectiveness* deals mostly with the impact of discourse on the audience. One of the major differences between General and Business English stems from the different treatment of the following issues: while General English is mostly concerned with developing accuracy and fluency, Business English is rather focused on fluency and effectiveness. However, they are undoubtedly interconnected but not necessarily interdependent: there are students who have already acquired an impressive amount of specialized vocabulary and grammar rules but who have failed in building an effective speech; there is another category who, although capable of effective communication for a limited period of time, thanks to some other abilities related to it – use of gestures, eye-contact, mastering of context-related structures - once outside their specialist area, are no longer capable to deal with a spontaneous communication situation (Brieger 1997). Also, the ability to use the appropriate register is nevertheless a challenge for most Business English students. As a Business English trainer, I often ask my students whether they are aware of the difference between *argot* and *jargon*. Surprisingly, most of them are incapable to tell the difference between the two terms: *argot* – “words and expressions which are used by small groups of people and which are not easily understood by other people”; *jargon* – “special words and phrases which are used by particular groups of people, especially in their work” (cf. *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* 2006).

Formal vs. Neutral / Informal Register in Business English

Aware of the exhibition of differences that seems to dominate our lives nowadays, I adapt teaching to the trend that my students generally adopt (at all levels): contrasts. In order to explain register in oral communication, I bring forth some eloquent examples of neutral/informal and formal (business) communication: *socializing* and *presentations*.

“Small talk” is used to ease communication when people first meet, to build and maintain rapport between people who do business, or create positive relationships for successful business outcomes. Much of the spoken interaction occurring in a business context is concerned with building and maintaining positive relationships, which ultimately play an important role in obtaining successful business results. Most of the times equated to “small talk”, the socializing stage could be essential for the final result of a business meeting. The cultural issue almost automatically intervenes since socializing normally occurs between people who do not know each other and who very often come from different cultural backgrounds. Climate, social customs and traditions, historical events, ideas and beliefs, religion, geography, all create the basis of a culture. When dealing with socializing, Business English courses familiarize students with the structural patterns of building “small talk” (travel, accommodation, weather), of welcoming visitors, of introducing oneself and responding to introductions. As far as cultural awareness is concerned, this is a rather controversial issue. While some scientists argue that knowledge of cultural difference is compulsory in order to avoid any tensions between partners and thus achieve success in business communication, others believe that too much attention given to details which are rather irrelevant for the business context could only enable the occurrence of stereotypes.

Part of our speaking proficiency depends upon our ability to speak differentially, depending upon our audience, and upon the way we absorb their reaction and respond to it in some way or another (Harmer 2001). It is probably the best starting point for a successful presentation in business. Presentations relate mostly with effectiveness but effectiveness could not possibly be attained in the absence of fluency and accuracy. The key to building an effective presentation is to agree upon the points which constitute it: *content, structure, delivery, language*. These are important aspects of presentations since they trigger the coherence or absence of coherence in a message.

While socializing – meant to release tension and create relationships - involves the use of a rather neutral, close to informal register, presentations are eloquent examples of formal language. Students enjoy “small talk” simulations and experience the stress exerted by public speaking when they have to deliver Presentations in English. It is this type of practice which familiarizes them to the various degrees of formality and to the appropriate contexts in which these should be used.

As for written communication, perhaps the clearest (and, most often, the most relevant) example in terms of formal register is revealed in cover letters. The cover letter (covering letter, letter of application) is primarily aimed at convincing the employer to grant an interview; it may be regarded as a *sales letter* whose main purpose is to market the applicant’s skills. For these reasons, it must be written from the employer’s perspective and it has to be tailored to the requirements of the job. A cover letter normally accompanies a CV and is meant to explain why an applicant wants the job by highlighting his/her skills and experience. Cover letters are written according to the rules of general business letters: they should be as easy to read as possible, they use formal language, and should not be too long (1 page). The standard format of a cover letter, provided by Kirchhoff et. al, is rendered below:

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| | Sender's address : Title, full name Street address Post code and town Country Telephone Reliable/business-like email address |
| Recipient's address : Title, first and last name Position of recipient Department (optional) Company/ organization name Postal address Post code Country | |
| | Date (dd/mm/yy) |
| Salutation : Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr/Professor + last name (no punctuation) Dear Sir or Madam (if you do not know the name) | |
| Subject Line (in bold) Name the job you are applying for and quote the reference number | |
| Opening paragraph | |
| Main body of the letter | |
| Final paragraph | |
| Close Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr/Professor + last name - Yours sincerely (no punctuation) Dear Sir or Madam – Yours faithfully (no punctuation) | |
| Your handwritten signature Your full name (typed) | |
| Indicate that you are enclosing your CV Enclosure : CV/ Encl. : CV/ Enc. : CV | |

The opening paragraph of a cover letter should provide context, i.e. the writer should introduce himself/herself, mention how he/she learned about the job. He/she should also name the job title he/she is applying for and keep an enthusiastic tone. The middle paragraphs should develop the information provided in the CV. The applicant should come up with examples for each detail which qualifies him/her for the job. Each paragraph should be

limited to one such point in order to avoid confusion. In the final paragraph, the candidate should show willingness to provide further information, express interest in an interview (but restrain from suggesting a date for it), thank the recruiter for their time and say that he/she looks forward to hearing from them. (Kirchhoff, Petra, Raaf, Bettina, Pledger, Pat 2009)

The particularities of writing business letters in general and cover letters in particular are taught to second year students of Economics and Business Administration. By the time they reach this stage, they have already acquired knowledge related to the field of Economics and Business and have already made up their mind regarding their future career. The ability to write proficiently in a foreign language and to discern in terms of the appropriate use of register is nevertheless among the greatest challenges students have to face.

Register and Culture

Despite the varied array in terms of formal/ neutral/ informal register use examples in Business English, the most popular topic among students remains the cultural one. Case studies in which Chinese people interact with Americans or Americans have to work with Germans are most appealing to our students, thus introducing them to the degrees of formality imposed by cultural aspects. I have found Martin Gannon's work on cultural metaphors extremely useful for it provides students with valuable insight into various cultures. To Gannon, the metaphor that best represents the French is *wine*, the British is a *house*, while Germans are compared to a *symphony orchestra*: "German culture is represented by the symphony's staying power, its harmonization of individuals and their talents into an intricate and beautiful work of art, and its well-developed organization and complex set of rules. (...) Precision and synchronicity are critical to achieving a flawless performance. (...) the symphony is an idealized, elaborate and traditional form of music that requires great musical and economic resources and much practice to perfect." (Gannon 2001) Therefore, students can easily assume that the recommended style in Business communication with Germans is the formal one. On the other hand, American culture is, according to Gannon, clearly represented by American football – a team game, where violence prevails, with players striving to achieve a common purpose. Paradoxically, although heavily relying on team work, American football has the individual at the centre and things seem to be similar in Business. In this case, formality, as well as hierarchy, is hardly a priority at the organizational level.

An example of an activity which generally goes well with second year Business students is provided in John Corbett's *Intercultural Language Activities* (2013). Students are given a context: "An American and a Chinese professor of English are attending a conference. At the opening reception, the American professor notices the Chinese professor is standing alone and looks lonely. The American decides to say hello." Students are then asked to brainstorm what the two might say in such a situation. They are asked to decide whether the two should address to each other formally or informally, whether they should use each other's first name or title plus surname, whether they should stand close to each other or not, eye contact. After discussing all these aspects, students are given a formal version of the dialogue between the two and are asked to turn it into an informal one. Students work in pairs and do the task:

A. “American: Good evening. May I introduce myself? I’m Professor Joe Williams from UCLA.

Chinese: Good evening. My name’s Xiao Zheng.

American: I’m delighted to meet you, Professor Zheng. Have you travelled far to the conference?

Chinese: Yes, I’ve travelled from Shanghai.” (Corbett 2013)

B. “American: Hi there, how’re doing? I’m Joe Williams from UCLA.

Chinese: Hello. My name’s Xiao Zheng.

American: Pleased to meet you, Xiao. Where are you from? Beijing?

Chinese: No, I’m from Shanghai.” (Corbett 2013)

Students further reflect on the levels of formality employed in the two examples and decide which of them made them feel more comfortable. They are explained that people from different cultures might have different expectations regarding the degree of formality employed in situations like this: the American professor might feel at ease with an informal tone while the Chinese one might consider the former’s direct approach a sign of unfriendliness and disrespect, thus preferring a more formal style of introduction. Therefore, they both need to adjust their expectations and take into consideration the cultural background of the other.

Conclusion

It has been widely argued that effective business communication, either written or oral, depends on good command of language as much as on cultural awareness, particularly when the act of communication involves different nationalities. For these reasons, it is essential that Business students acquire the ability to communicate fluently in written and spoken English by employing the appropriate degree of formality, which may be imposed by context, cultures involved in the communication act or both. Register may be taught at a stage when students are familiar with English grammar and pronunciation and have already acquired some specialized vocabulary in their field. Moreover, some culture-related knowledge would clearly represent an advantage for this might serve as a hint into the degree of formality specific to every country. In the case of a lack in cultural information, the acquisition of the ability to use various degrees of formality would undoubtedly help learners easily adapt in the various intercultural communication situations that may occur in their future professional lives. For these reasons, the study of register and its appropriate use is essential for Business English students.

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