

## Integrated Projects for a Content-based Business English Curriculum

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a shift in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from a skills-based or grammar-based to a more content-based approach. The textbooks typically used in many Business English courses have a similar format and formula. They generally focus almost entirely on the use of the text itself, but lack any broader range projects and authentic material for use in class. Business English classes can be found in many university curricula in Japan due to two main factors; the notion that Business English is practical for the students' future, and the fact that it is a relatively easy subject for which to find native speakers to instruct, as opposed to other content-based courses such as History, Economics, Geography, Psychology, etc. The challenge for educators at Colleges and Universities is to create curricula and courses which fulfill a real academic role while at the same time providing a legacy of practical knowledge which will stay with the student long after graduation. "Almost everyone has had occasion to look back upon his school days and wonder what has become of the knowledge he was supposed to have amassed during his years of schooling." (Arcaro, p. 21) What type of Business English projects will provide a more useful and beneficial role in the students lives?

Content-based language and instruction and English for Specific Purposes are effective ways of delivering better curricula to the students. "For more effective instructional content, ESP is considered an intelligent option." (Orr, p. 19) This paper will review the development of content-based Business English curricula and then outline four practical suggestions for assignments and projects for use in Business English courses, each with the dual focus of giving the students interesting and meaningful material, and making curricula more academic in nature while still providing the necessary groundwork in communicative English.

## 2. Development of Business English Curricula

At lower student ability levels, Business English curricula are similar to mainstream English conversation classes. That is to say the commercial texts and courses available cover much of the same basic material as regular conversation courses, such as: greetings, staying at a hotel, making an appointment, giving and understanding directions, describing products, going to the airport, and meeting people, to name a few. These skills while all essential for basic communication, and linguistically accessible for most lower-level students, can easily be supplemented in the classroom with other projects and assignments which provide the student with more authentic content and with more practical uses for their English.

Besides making projects and activities in the foreign language classroom more practical, it is also important to create tasks which give the students a sense of purpose and direction. In the words of Brinton, et al (1989), "This effort involves devising skill activities which derive from the content material and allow students to utilize newly learned language and critical thinking skills." (p. 94) The challenge is to make projects which reflect these needs and to develop curriculums which encompass both communication and academic skills.

Business English courses, if designed well, can focus and cover a large range of critical thinking skills, while still providing the essential knowledge to the students. Critical Skills, according to Southworthy (Arcaco, 1995) include: problem solving, cooperation, decision making, collaboration, critical thinking, independent learning, creative thinking, management, communication, leadership, organization, and documentation. (p. 17) Any number of these skills can be incorporated into foreign language courses and Business English classes.

An examination of several commonly used commercial texts in Business English courses reveals that few offer any real classroom projects and assignments. *Business Venture 1, and Business Venture 2* (Barnard and Cady, 1993), which are both well-written communication textbooks are designed for students who are false beginner and pre-intermediate levels respectively. Both texts cover a range of useful Business English areas including: telephone language, describing products, making an appointment, describing company products, meetings and discussions and dealing with problems. The topics covered are organized in a logical order with activities such as gap-filling, in class surveys, listening and vocabulary building exercises. However, both *Business Venture 1* and *2* do not provide, nor outline extended supplementary activities and projects which incorporate authentic materials.

*Cubic Listening: Getting Down to Business*, (Kiggell and Barnard, 1997) a listening based course book which has 20 short two page units is part of a series of nine supplementary listen-

ing books graded into three levels. *Cubic Listening: Getting Down to Business* covers a similar range of topics to the *Business Venture* series, but differs in that each unit introduces key vocabulary and has three listening exercises but no further gap-filling exercises or speaking activities.

One of the more popular texts in Business English courses at Japanese Universities is *Business Objectives* (Hollett, 1996) which emphasizes listening and speaking. It contains similar business topics such as: meeting people, describing companies and products, describing business trends and business travel. The text draws some material from real companies and has a number of gap filling exercises, listening, and speaking activities, but has no projects which incorporate authentic materials from outside the text itself.

While there are a number of good business English communication texts, most lack integrated projects which provide students with authentic materials coupled with practical skill enhancing activities. Furthermore, integrated projects give the students a focused activity which has the dual role of integrating authentic materials in the classroom within the framework of a feasible project that also gives the instructor a project for student assessment. In content-based courses, many successful programs and courses use a multitude of projects and evaluation schemes including: summaries, oral presentations, homework, semester projects, and examinations. (Brinton, et al, p. 193) The basic classroom activities and projects covered in this paper are: resume writing, business letter writing, market research, and company presentations. In considering topics and projects for any given class, it is essential to choose ones with themes which appeal and challenge the students involved. "Proponents of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) note that for successful language learning to occur, the language syllabus must take into account the eventual uses the learner will make of the target language." (Brinton, p.3) All of the above mentioned projects have the same common focus of providing the student with meaningful and accessible projects.

### **3. Resume Writing**

Used in the Business English class, resumes provide a practical and interesting initial project for students. This project requires a minimum of class time, and gives the students concrete results that they may one day be able to make use of in the business world. In any organization, the human resource department plays a critical role in the viability of the organization. When hiring a new employee, businesses "want to make sure that new hires will have the ability to contribute to the corporate objectives, will perform well, and will easily fit into the corporate culture." (O'Brien, p. 44) As part of the hiring process, resumes and interviews fulfill an

important role.

Resume writing offers an excellent opportunity to teach fundamental differences in culture. While the basic information covered, such as educational history, work history, skills, etc. are found in both Japanese and North American (N.A.) resumes, most similarities end there. Culturally, there are some key differences in regards to the information that is included. In North America, due to the potential for discrimination based on sex, marital status, appearance, and age, most people do not include information such as date of birth, marital status, photographs, sex, and personal information such as height and weight. In Japan, the company name, not the position and university attended are considered more important than experience by the majority of employers. (Hane, p. 397–398) Conversely, in North America, the actual job title and responsibilities held are valued by and examined more closely by most employers, and the detailed job descriptions on N.A. resumes reflect this. In Japan, resumes are also generally written in a set format on a pre-made *rirekisho* (resume) form and the information is hand-written, while in N.A., resumes are always typed. These differences and the reasons for them need to be explained to the class. Most students are both interested in and surprised by some of the differences.

## 2.1 Writing the Resume

Providing the students with samples of resumes gives them some ideas of what a typical N.A. resume looks like. It is then necessary to explain the sections of the resume and what kind of information should be included. In class the students work on resumes in pairs, asking each other for their partners information for the various sections of the resume using a N.A. resume template (with several sections including: personal information, education, work history, skills and qualifications, interests, and other). Vocabulary frequently used for job descriptions is also important to teach, as without it, many students are at a loss as for how to adequately describe and detail their part-time work experience in English. The students then take the resume template with the information their partner wrote down and use it as a basis to work on their own final typed resume done on their own time. It should be emphasized to the students that they are to write a N.A. style resume detailing job descriptions and responsibilities, and also to include their part-time work experience. One or two weeks is sufficient time for the assignment to be completed.

## 2.2 Mock Job Interviews in English Using the Resumes

When the students finish their resumes and bring them to class, they then use them to make mock job interviews more realistic. In the interviews, the students work in groups of

three, with two acting as interviewers and one the interviewee. Taking turns, they carry out simulated job interviews which they have prepared questions for. The resumes are used to add realism to the simulation and also work as prompts for the interviewers to use. Questions such as, 'I see from your resume that...', or 'Why did you work/study at...' bring the interviews closer to real life and make the students answer questions in a manner which is closer to a real-life situation.

### 3. Business Letter Writing

Writing a business letter is a useful skill, but having students write a letter just for the sake of practice results in predictable boredom and is simply practice without a goal. Given a solid reason to write a letter and someone to write it to, they are much more motivated. Directing the students to write a letter to a foreign company, organization or school which sends information or mail-order catalogues overseas provides an effective and interesting goal. The students write and send the letter abroad to the company requesting the information in a business letter format.

#### 3.1 Writing the Letters

Hand out a list of companies and/or private colleges/schools abroad which send information to potential customers abroad. There are literally thousands of companies and schools which do so. Each student selects a different company/school from the list and writes a letter. Give the students a sample business letter template showing layout, appropriate greetings and salutations. On a separate handout, the instructor provides a number of sentence starters for requests, and common business letter expressions. Handing out fully written letters as samples will predictably result in many students simply copying it word for word as much as possible. With the separate handout, they are forced to formulate sentences on their own.

After the letters are written, the teacher checks the English for glaring mistakes and clarity, then the students rewrite (or type) the letter, and address it to be sent. Experience has shown that some companies respond extremely quickly and students receive the information they requested within a couple of weeks, however the average seems to be about 4-8 weeks with some responses taking as long as three or four months. If there is concern that each student may not receive an answer, sending two letters would likely insure a reply. In the end approximately 90% or more of the students should receive something assuming the instructor has chosen companies carefully. The ones who don't probably will not receive a reply due to a change in company policy (i.e. the company no longer sends catalogs abroad or requests a fee for ma-

terial sent). Most students will receive a full-size catalog which is full of the real thing – English – which is then used in class for a later project. For the students who receive no answers, the instructor can provide catalogues which have been previously collected.

#### 4. Market Research

In the present information age, market research has become pervasive, and an ever-present phenomenon in numerous and often unseen aspects of our lives. From the simple purchase of an item at a convenience store, computers collect information from thousands of customers daily. On a slightly more obvious level, point cards and credit cards also provide businesses with data every time a customer goes to a store and makes a purchase. Point cards for stores or malls inevitably have application forms with questions about the applicants sex, age and profession and often more information. Each time a customer goes to a store and uses the card, the store gets more detailed information about consumer spending habits. In the airline industry, air mileage clubs also play a similar role and provide carriers with a lot of information, and the opportunity for further marketing, as well as often having airmiles campaigns in conjunction with other businesses which include supermarkets, hotels and international phone services to name a few. (Noble 1998, p. 14)

The most obvious form of market research are questionnaires found in books, those mailed to customers, in CDs, on restaurant tables, or with the purchase of any number of items. While not every customer fills these out, the ones that do provide the producers and stores with detailed information about consumers personal information, preferences and product/service complaints.

The information-gathering industry has become a huge business employing thousands of people in virtually all industries from the financial sector to the service sector. In fact, the “data-mining” or “business intelligence” industry was expected to spend 21 billion dollars in 1998 alone on technology and expertise to gather and analyze the huge volume of data collected. (Noble, p. 16–17) Companies use these vast data-bases to reconstruct consumer behavior. While data-mining and more conventional market research are different in approach, the former using electronic means to examine consumer behavior and the latter using a more direct questioning approach, marketing specialists use the data for the same purpose. To increase sales and keep track of and predict customer behavior.

In the Business English class, the use of market research for class projects provides many accessible and interesting opportunities. In class, using an approach which gives the students the opportunity to use spoken English, design a market research survey, conduct the survey, analyze

the data and present the market research and findings, covers many skill areas. It also gives the students the flexibility to be creative and incorporate their own ideas and opinions within a framework which has specific goals.

#### 4.1 Introducing the Topic

First, outline market research to the class and how pervasive it is in everyday life. Simply asking students to pull out their wallets and look at all the point cards and credit cards they have accumulated is a good start. After explaining and encouraging the students to elicit the various types of market research that are used, get them to conduct a simple survey on a few classmates (this could be a handout made by the teacher, or pre-made photocopiable activity). After that, the students form groups of three. For market research projects, setting up a cooperative-learning classroom environment is highly effective. The cooperative learning environment tends to increase student's efforts to achieve, to foster more positive relationships among students, and to increase confidence and self-esteem for learners of foreign languages. (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 6-7) Working together to jointly complete and carry out specific tasks and assignments gives the students a higher level of personal responsibility. In their group of three, the students choose a service or type of business to do market research on. Topics could include: travel agencies, convenience stores, fast-food, pubs, restaurants, bookstores, hotels, airlines, soft-drink companies, breweries, and schools, to name a few.

#### 4.2 Making the Survey Questions

After choosing a topic, (each group should select a different topic) the groups start to make a list of possible survey questions. Question types can be true or false, multiple choice, choose A or B type, open-ended, or continuation type questions (i.e. if you answered A, go to question X, if you answered B, go to question Y). In upper-intermediate and advanced classes, a short lecture on market research which touches on some theory and principles of market research will benefit the survey and analysis process. The students must think about the kind of questions which are more likely to give relevant data that could benefit an actual business. Starting with general questions such as sex, age and frequency of product use before moving on to more detailed questions provides a good beginning.

#### 4.3 Conducting the Survey

After making a rough draft of the questions, the students are then instructed to make sure that the questions are in a logical order and then to ask the rough draft questions within their

group. By doing this, the students are given cause to think more about whether or not their survey as it stands is sufficient in scope and well-planned enough to get meaningful and useful data. After re-thinking, re-writing, and editing the questions, the students ask other class members their survey in English and devise a way to collect the answers. In total, each group should ask between from 40 to 60 people to get a big enough base for their data. That means 15-20 people each, with perhaps a third from within the class (depending on class size) and half from people outside the class. In class, naturally the surveys are conducted in English and the students are encouraged to ask their survey questions in English to people they ask outside class.

#### 4.4 Analysis of the Data and the Report

Once they have asked the required number of people within a set time period (one week is enough), the groups then get together and tally the answers. Each student then is assigned a different task in the preparation of the report. One group member must write the answers and all the data. Another must make graphs for at least five of the questions (in class, different graph styles such as bar graphs, and pie graphs should be explained with examples). Since many students are computer literate and can use word processors effectively, almost every group which does this project will have at least one member who can make graphs and tables on a computer.

Then, working as a group, students must analyze the data and make suggestions to companies in the field their research was in, based on the data they collected. Questions and suggestions for how to analyze the data need to be explained as well as the focus the report should take. The third member of the group is responsible for typing the report.

#### 4.5 Market Research Presentations

If classroom time permits, group presentations are effective. The groups of three present the topic of their research, the questions, the findings, and analysis of the market research to the class. The graphs and the blackboard are good visuals, and the bulk of preparation has already been completed for the presentations. The instructor needs to provide suggestions for presenting the information and how to organize it. As it is a group presentation, cooperation and a balance of speaking time between the students is also essential. Presentation techniques and strategies along with rationale for presentations are outlined in further detail in the next section.

In conclusion, market research projects used in class give the students a comprehensive project which encompasses several skills including: speaking, cooperative effort, analysis, and report

writing. They use spoken English to carry out the survey and the presentations, and the cooperative learning approach means that a fair amount of English is also used when the students work together. Additionally, not only do students do the research itself, but they also must think about how to analyze the data collected and how the project could be applied to situations in the real world. The finished product (the report) is more often than not fairly professional looking, and much more comprehensive than if they were to only do one or two parts of the project or work individually.

## 5. Business Presentations

Presentations in any language class are an effective way for students to demonstrate their abilities. Presentations in language classes can vary from topics of the students' choice such as 'my hometown,' or 'the NBA,' or 'my trip,' to subjects like 'cities of the world'. They can also be in the form of debates or research-based presentations in a content-based language class. In Business English, there are numerous possibilities for presentations which mimic presentations in the business world. Having students make presentations is effective, however guidelines and a certain amount of realism are necessary to make them more interesting and meaningful. Using catalogs as a tool for Business English presentations gives both a touch of realism, and provides a clear and useful visual aid for the project. Catalogs contain a wealth of information in the target language, are a ready-made visual aid containing a variety of information including product descriptions, photographs, order forms, company history, and show specific products and services to pitch. Students who have sent away for a catalog to a foreign company or organization then also have cause to use the material they received.

Class presentations do have the drawback that they "are expensive in scarce class time. Therefore, if this technique is to be effective, its purpose must be made clear." (Tiberius 1990, p. 83) With this in mind, it is clear that the misuse of class time and presentations without focus and structure are to be avoided, and that the purpose must be laid out well in order for the students to have the maximum benefit possible.

### 5.1 Introducing the Project

First, talk about the relevance of business presentations and what kind of preparation is necessary. The students should clearly understand the point of view in which they are to present (in the first person as if they are representatives of the company) and have a set time limit. Presentations which drag on, or which conversely are too short should be warned against as they use limited class time. Students, with practice and proper preparation should be able to fit

their presentations into the specified time. Five to fifteen minutes is reasonable depending on the class size and the student's ability.

### 5.2 Preparing for the Presentations

Students prepare information to be presented as if they themselves were representatives of the company so they must speak in the first person. A list of useful phrases, connecting words, expressions often used in presentations, a basic outline of presentation structure, and key points which may be included need to be reviewed first. Students then must make an outline for their presentation covering the company itself, some of the products/services available, how to apply/order, and selling points. On top of this, in class a review of basic presentation strategies forms a starting point for business presentations. In *Secrets of Power Presentations* (Bender, 1991), Peter Urs Bender outlines what he calls the 'the five quintessential elements of a power presentation,' the speech, body language, equipment, the environment and preparation. (p. 21) It is beneficial for students to review these in class and make them aware of the scope of successful business presentations. *Italics* (Harrington and LeBeau, 1996) is an well-designed and comprehensive presentation textbook for foreign language students and provides numerous practical tips for presentation skills. For classes with more time available, it makes a good course book or alternatively provides a lot of accessible and practical material for presentation skills. Using the catalogs, blackboard and other props is essential for successful business presentations and students must be encouraged to use several visual aids to enhance the clarity of their presentations.

### 5.3 Presentations and Role of the Class

Depending on the size of the class and the level of the students, the presentation lengths will vary from five to fifteen minutes. While the students are presenting, it is important to provide those listening with an active role. In other words, "there need to be clearly assigned roles for the 'audience'". (Tiberius, p. 84) Presentation evaluation forms are useful, and more than just giving the students something to do, should give them pause for thought. Furthermore, it is beneficial for students to receive evaluations, comments and criticisms from their peers. Giving the students evaluations their peers have written is useful, but many students do not like to criticize others openly, so by making the evaluation forms anonymous, these fears are diminished. At the same time, complete anonymity may also make students slack in their evaluations and comments since there is no accountability. By designing evaluation forms with the observers name at the top, it is possible to make the students more diligent in their evaluations since the instructor can see what individual students write while at the same time maintaining the students

anonymity amongst themselves, as the observers name is cut off before the evaluation forms are given to the students who presented.

It can be observed that class 'personality' and the outspokenness of the students have a large range. With this in mind, asking each student to think about three questions to ask the presenter, and in classes where there are no questions forthcoming, randomly get students to ask questions increases student participation. Knowing that the instructor expects questions after each and every presentation creates an atmosphere where the students know they could be called on to ask a question, and as a result pay attention and prepare more.

## Conclusion

It can be seen that Business English courses offer practical and focused study of English and that many commercially available texts do not incorporate projects which incorporate authentic materials and activities in the classroom. Adding the type of projects described in this paper to Business English curricula leads to greater student autonomy while providing interesting and motivating aspects to Business English courses.

The options available for useful and worthwhile projects in Business English courses are numerous and by no means limited to those described in this paper. By injecting more realism and authentic materials into the Business English curriculum, the level of student motivation and benefit is greatly increased. Business English itself is considered by many students to be practical, but in order to be truly practical, it must incorporate realistic projects and outside materials to broaden the scope. The four projects discussed in this paper; resumes, business letter writing, market research, and business presentations, provide some examples of useful classroom projects which incorporate a broad range of skills for use in the Business English classroom.

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