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With thanks to Claire Hart for the lesson plans contained in this eBook.
This eBook has been produced by Fauzia Eastwood, Marketing Executive for Adult, Business, ESP and Methodology. If you would like further information on any of the products mentioned here, you can contact us via help@macmillan.com
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Introduction

Beyond language: Business skills in today’s workplace

As business English teachers, we are in the business of helping our students cope with and succeed at using English in the workplace. When students actually come to use their English language skills, however, they will not be doing so in a vacuum, but in an environment where they need to be leaders, mediators, name-droppers and negotiators, among other things. While language remains at the heart of what we do, the training we provide has to go beyond it.

The range of skills that international communicators need to master seems to have grown in recent years. Business professionals have always had meetings and negotiations face to face, but then the telephone came along and the personal computer, closely following by the Internet, email and a whole new world of virtual communication. Globalisation, coupled with technological development, has also given rise to the virtual team. A greater tendency to see employees as individuals and to take an interest in their well-being has resulted in more importance being placed on interpersonal skills in the workplace. There is also a wider range of networking opportunities available to business professionals today than there has ever been before. As the volume of business travellers attests though, doing business face to face hasn’t been completely superseded by technology and the need for more established business skills such as the ability to take part in a face-to-face discussion definitely remains.

An awareness of the business skills our students need to be using is an essential item in the business English teacher’s toolkit and one we can use first to build rapport with our students. This awareness enables them to see that we understand the realities of their working lives, and then to select and exploit business English content effectively. Communication with our students is key here and we need to use it to identify and prioritise the business skills that are important for them. Language input and presentation are essential, but we also need to look at the communication strategies students can integrate that language within and give them meaningful and realistic opportunities to practise using it. We are no longer purely there to provide input and monitor output, but increasingly to give students communication rehearsal opportunities through role-plays and simulations where they can practise using business skills in a controlled, low-risk environment and receive feedback on their performance before going out and using those skills in the real world.

The following pages will provide lesson plans and activities incorporating some of these skills, along with links to downloadable pdfs for teachers from our most popular business English titles.

We hope you enjoy your business skills eBook!
Informal to formal: Writing emails that get the right message across

If you ask the typical business English learner which skill they need most in the workplace, their answer will most likely be email writing. Students also tend to say that they find email writing easier than, say, having a face-to-face conversation with someone because if they’re unsure of which word they should use, they can always check it in an online dictionary. However, one aspect of email writing that students can’t check in a dictionary is whether the email they’re writing is formal or informal. Failing to achieve the appropriate level of formality can create a negative impression: send an email that’s formal when it should have been informal and you appear cold and distant: send one that’s informal when it should have been formal and people may not take you seriously.

1. Tell students that the focus of the lesson is going to be on formal and informal emails and elicit from them what the typical elements of each are and demonstrate some examples of these.

2. Ask students to work in pairs, or threes if you have an odd number of students. Give one of the students a formal email and ask them to rewrite it using informal language. Then give the other student an informal email on another topic and ask them to rewrite it using formal language. Tell them that their rewritten emails should still communicate the same message as the original did. When they have finished writing, tell them to exchange emails with a partner who then has to write another version of the email in the opposite style. Students can then compare these second versions with the original emails they were given.

3. Follow this up by presenting a series of situations and asking students whether they would write a formal or informal email for each one. Possible situations could include: asking a colleague if they want to have lunch with you in the canteen (informal); asking customers to complete a customer satisfaction survey (formal); responding to a request for a quotation from a potential new customer (formal); thanking a colleague for a project update (informal).

4. Students then choose one of the situations and write either a formal or informal email for it.

5. Ask students to put their finished emails in a box. They then take another email from the box and write a reply to it, maintaining the same style.

NB: Where students are writing emails that will later be read by other students, remind them to ensure their handwriting is legible!

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**Activity: Informal to formal**

**Time needed:** 60 minutes

**Level:** B1+

**Resources needed:** Paper for the students to write their emails on and, if possible, some kind of cardboard box or tray

**Aim:** To reinforce the differences between formal and informal emails and give students the opportunity to practise writing them.

**You can do this activity with a group of any size.**

This lesson plan is based on a topic taken from *Email English 2nd edition* by Paul Emmerson.

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Want to see more step-by-step lessons on writing emails in English? *Email English 2nd edition* is packed full of original lessons and activities.

Download more lessons [here](#).
Let’s discuss this!

The discussion format is a key element of business communication because discussions result in decisions and plans being made, problems getting solved and information being shared. We start with a question, a problem or an information gap and go on to share information, opinions, perspectives or look at options, before bringing all of these threads together, reaching a consensus and formulating action points or outcomes. At lower levels, we’re working to raise students’ awareness and facilitate their use of strategies for giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, checking understanding, clarifying and turn-taking in English.

As their abilities develop, however, they can work on enhancing their performance in discussions by learning and practising vague language for situations where they don’t want to be or can’t be precise, and using politeness strategies to avoid conflict. Simulations and role-plays are an effective way of giving students the opportunity to practise using the strategies and language they’ve learned as well as rehearsing real-life discussions.

Activity: A pyramid discussion

Time needed: 60 minutes

Level: B1+

Resources needed: Cards or strips of paper

Aim: To give students the opportunity to practise using communication strategies and language needed in discussions by taking part in a pyramid discussion simulation.

This is a group activity and you will need to have a minimum of four students in your group.

This lesson plan is based on a topic taken from The Business English Handbook by Paul Emmerson.

Activity: A pyramid discussion

Full agreement
That makes sense. You’re absolutely right. Yes, I would agree with that.

Half agreement
I see what you’re saying but… I agree with you up to a point, but…

Polite disagreement
Well, of course, it all depends. I’m not sure I agree with that. Really? Do you think so? Don’t you think that…?

Simple disagreement
I don’t think that’s true. I disagree with you about… That’s not how I see it.

Beginning the main topic
Right, let’s get down to business. Why don’t I give you an idea of…?
I’d like to start by… (imp).

Moving from point to point
So, that’s decided, then. Shall we move on? Okay, let’s go on to the next point.

Changing the focus
There is another way of looking at this. Perhaps we should also consider…

Returning
Going back to what I / you said earlier. Let me back up (AmE).

Interfering
Could I just interrupt for a moment?

Blocking
I think we’re losing sight of the main point. Sorry, if I can just finish, I was saying that…

Buying time
It’s a difficult issue. I’ll have to think about it. Could I get back to you on that? Why don’t we come back to that later.

Asking for more information
I’d be interested to know something about… Could you tell me a little more about…? Could you be a little more specific? What (exactly) do you mean by…? What sort of price were you thinking of? Was that the kind of thing you had in mind?

Asking for repetition
Could you go over that again, please?

Checking the other person’s understanding
Does that answer your question? Does that make sense?

Checking by using your own words
So, if I understand you correctly… So, basically what you’re saying is…

Responding
Yes, exactly. Yes, that’s right. Well, let me put it another way. No, that’s not what I meant. No, what I’m trying to say is…

Phrases taken from The Business English Handbook by Paul Emmerson
1. Ask students to suggest work-related questions and agree on one to generate answers during the discussion simulation. Possible areas are: how they can improve something at work; how they can solve a problem they currently have at work; how to plan something they will be doing at work or sharing their ideas/opinions on a work-related issue, e.g. how successfully teams work together in their company.

2. On three cards or strips of paper, students should write three words which come to mind when they think about the question or topic chosen (one on each card or strip of paper). They do this on their own. It is acceptable for students to write two words, e.g. a compound noun or a collocation, instead of single words if they want to, but remind them that they shouldn’t be writing longer phrases or whole sentences.

3. Students then work with a partner (or in threes if you have an odd number of students) to share their words and explain what they mean to them and why they connected them with the question or topic they’re focusing on.

4. Each pair or group then talks to each other to decide on and write three more (different) words on three new cards or pieces of paper which come to mind after looking at the original six words they had written.

5. The class then comes together to share all of their cards and give their explanations or interpretations of the words they wrote. They work together as a group to decide on and add three other (different) words which they think of when they look at all of the words they already have.

6. Students work together as a whole group to decide on which categories they could divide the words into, and organise them into these categories.

7. The students then discuss the question or issue they chose and use the categories they’ve created as the points they will cover in their discussion, with the words in each category acting as ideas or prompts. They decide who should be the leader or chair of their discussion and at this point you may wish to elicit and recap what the role of the leader or chair in a discussion is. Tell students that the aim of their discussion is to formulate either action points, e.g. if their question was how they can improve something at work, or outcomes which summarise the group’s opinions on a topic, e.g. how successfully managers give feedback to their employees in the company. Finally, before students start their discussion, tell them what their objectives are. These will vary according to the students’ level and what you’ve done in previous lessons, but here are some possibilities: use strategies for agreeing and disagreeing; use turn-taking strategies; use polite language effectively; cooperate effectively as a group to reach a consensus.

8. Monitor the students during their discussion and make a note of any examples of good language use or areas for improvement so that you can provide feedback when they’ve finished.

When the students have finished their discussion, ask them to choose a spokesperson to present the action points or outcomes they’ve decided on. Ask students to reflect on their performance in the discussion as a group, focusing on: what they did well, what they could have done better and what they would improve or change next time.
Developing effective arguments

Business often comes down to one person making an argument to persuade another person to do or not do something: buy this, invest in them, don’t sell those. As a result, business English learners are likely to find themselves having to construct and deliver arguments. Whether you want to convince another company’s board of directors that merging with yours would be a positive move or you’re trying to talk your boss into giving you a pay rise, you’ll have to give reasons why they should give you what you want and do so in a clear, coherent and persuasive way. For business English learners, developing a successful argument in English requires a wide range of language and communication strategies from using linking words to generalising and summarising, and the greatest challenge is likely to be achieving coherence while structuring their argument and being persuasive.

1. Tell students they’re going to work together in a group to prepare and present an argument. They will be arguing for a change which they think should take place in either their workplace, company or industry. An example could be: employees in the company should be allowed to take as much holiday as they want when they want because this will increase their productivity and creativity.

2. Ask students to form groups of two, three or four. Tell them they are going to prepare and deliver a chain presentation in these groups. Once the groups are formed, ask them to think of a possible argument which is of interest to them as a group and which they could present.

3. Students work together in their groups to prepare their argument, which has to have either three points if they’re working in a group of three, or four points if they’re working in a pair or group of four. Where students are working in pairs, they will take it in turns to deliver a point at a time, with both students delivering two points each. Remind students that it is very important that their argument has a clear structure and that there are links between the points delivered by the different group members.

4. Monitor the students as they’re preparing their arguments and assist where necessary. Suggest that they may want to use visual aids to illustrate and support their arguments, e.g. key words or diagrams on the board or the flip chart.

5. Students deliver their arguments to you and the rest of the group. If you have a larger group of students with several groups delivering arguments, you could ask the other students to decide or vote on whose argument was the most convincing, giving reasons for their decisions.
Diplomatically speaking...

We’re most likely to need diplomatic language in the workplace when we engage in interactions where either the stakes are high or there is a significant potential for conflict between ourselves and the people we’re communicating with. We can also use it at any time to demonstrate respect and politeness towards colleagues and business partners. More specifically, diplomatic language is useful if you’re giving someone bad news or negative feedback, asking for something substantial or you’re simply commenting on the state of a project to others who are involved in it. “We seem to be running a little behind schedule.” is usually more likely to inspire your project team members than “We’re late!”

1. Start by re-establishing with the students what diplomatic language is (they should already have been introduced to it in a previous lesson). Elicit from them what the elements of diplomatic language are and an example expression or sentence for each one, and write them on the board/flip chart. Possible elements could be: using could instead of can; using might instead of will; using just; using negative questions, etc.

2. If your students come up with more than five different elements, ask them to discuss and agree which are the five most important ones. Make sure that everyone can see the final five elements that the group has decided on.

3. Tell students that they are now going to take part in three simulations with a partner where they’ll need to use diplomatic language. The scenarios are:
   • Giving negative feedback to an employee you’re responsible for.
   • Telling your boss that you disagree with something they have done or want to do.
   • Asking your boss for a pay rise because you feel you’ve earned one.

Encourage students to personalise the scenarios to their own, real-life work situations. The students’ objective is for both of them to use each of the five elements of diplomatic language at least once during their conversation.

4. Ask students to form groups of three for the simulations. One group member is an observer each time and should make notes on which of the five elements the others used, with examples in the form of key words and expressions. If you have an even number of students in your group, ask them to form groups of four. Students will then do four simulations and there will be two observers.

5. Students decide who is going to be involved in which simulations as speakers and which roles they’re going to take. Then give them some time to prepare and think about how they can incorporate the elements of diplomatic language.

6. Circulate and monitor the students while they are doing the simulations. When they’ve finished, ask them to report back to the rest of the group on the examples of diplomatic language their partners used.
Out of office

One way of breaking down the training room walls and bringing the real world into business English courses is by using authentic materials, such as texts, documents or even objects that haven’t been created as learning materials, but which can be used as such. Articles on work- or business-related topics are a popular resource which we can exploit for useful language, production and skills work as well as benefit from the relevant content.

Activity: Making the most of articles in class

Time needed: 60-90 minutes

Level: B1+

Resources needed: Business Spotlight article (download from link below) or any other business-related article. Flip chart or board to write on.

Aim: To use genuine or adapted articles to present and consolidate language knowledge with students and use articles as a stimulus for production activities.

You can do this activity with a group of any size. This lesson plan is based on a topic taken from a Business Spotlight lesson from onestopenglish.com.

1. Start by tapping into any experience students may have that is relevant to the topic of the article by either: giving them discussion questions to answer; giving them a topic and asking them to brainstorm key words related to it or showing them an image related to the topic and using it to elicit relevant key words. Write up any key words on the board or flip chart so you can refer back to them later.

2. Authentic articles are likely to contain vocabulary students aren’t familiar with, so pre-teach or check the meaning of vocabulary they will need to know in order to understand the article’s message.

3. Give students a pre-reading task to engage their interest and focus their attention. You may want to use a prediction task where you give students the article’s title and ask them to predict what words they think will be in it and/or what points it will make. Students can then check how accurate they are when they’re reading.

4. Remember to give students a task to complete or questions to answer before they actually start reading so they have an objective. You can also vary how the students read the article by, for example, cutting the article up into pieces, giving each member of a group a different piece, and asking them to read their piece and report back to the rest of the group on its contents. This helps to create an information gap and makes the reading process more interactive.

5. Depending on the article, you may want to focus more closely on specific examples of language use, e.g. the use of phrasal verbs or the present perfect. Encourage students to deduce the rules after having seen them in context and then practise using them.

6. Finally, articles usually provide an excellent springboard to the discussion of a given topic or related issues. Encourage students to share their opinions and bring in examples from their own experience.

Want to see similar lessons? Business Spotlight lessons on onestopenglish.com are packed full of dynamic lessons and activities.

Download samples here.
**Invaluable telephoning skills**

Telephone skills are one of the things students are likely to need most frequently when working internationally, but they’re also among those they’re likely to find most challenging. Many students are filled with fear when they see that someone is calling them from an international number and often it’s not that they don’t know the right words or phrases to use, although this is definitely an issue for some, but rather that they are intimidated by having to communicate with someone they can’t see face to face and who they may not be able to hear very well. It is, therefore, important that we show our students how to deal with difficulties on the phones and give them practice which is as authentic as it can be.

When we’re creating opportunities for students to practise their telephone skills, we also need to give them plenty of preparation time for role-plays and simulations. Start by writing out short conversations on paper, then practise the conversation while sitting facing a partner, and then perhaps sitting with their backs to a partner so they can’t see each other or having a shouting conversation on opposite ends of the room (if this won’t disturb anyone), and then finally having the conversation on a real phone in different places. Of course, this is particularly important when you’re teaching lower levels and here we need to show sensitivity towards their need to take things slowly and their possible reluctance to have a conversation on the phone in English.

**Activity: Are you free on Tuesday?**

- **Time needed:** 30-90 minutes (depending on the students’ level)
- **Level:** A1+ or higher
- **Resources needed:** Students will need to have access to smartphones, another mobile device or a computer. Flip chart/board to write on.
- **Aim:** To practise leaving a message and making an arrangement on the phone
- **You can do this activity with a group of any size. This lesson plan is based on a topic taken from the new Starter level of *In Company 3.0.*

1. **Tell students that they’re going to practise leaving a voicemail message for someone.** Check that students are aware of the difference between taking and leaving a message and what each one involves.

2. **Students will have to do the following things in their voicemail messages:**
   1) Say who they are,
   2) Say why they’re calling,
   3) Say what they want,
   4) End the call.

   Elicit phrases from them that they can use and write them up on the board or flip chart so you can refer back to them later.

3. **Put students into pairs (or threes if you have an odd number of students) and tell them they’re going to leave a 20-30 second voicemail message for their partner.** They want to meet with their partner sometime next week to discuss something and they will have to decide with their partner what that is. Depending on their level, students then either write out their voicemail message in full (A1+ to A2), make notes in the form of key words or phrases on what they’re going to say (B1 to B2) or just think about what they’re going to say and write down one or two key words (B2+ to C1).

4. **The students then record their voicemail messages using either a voice recording app on their phones or a website with a voice recording function.** Students may have to spread out or go into another room so that they can all record their messages at the same time, although some background noise may add authenticity to the situation!

5. **When students have finished recording their voicemail messages, each should play the message for their partner who should make notes on what they heard and then use their notes to say as much of the original message as they can back to their partner.**
6. Tell students that they’re now going to try calling their partner again to make an arrangement to talk next week, but this time they get through and have the conversation. Students should use a real calendar on their mobile phone, tablet, laptop or diary. Check students know the vocabulary they will need to be able to describe what they’re doing at times when they’re not free to meet. This will most likely take the form of verb-noun collocations, e.g. have a meeting.

7. Check that students also have the functional language they’ll need for asking when their partner is free and answering in the affirmative or the negative, giving the reason why they’re not free then. If you have more advanced students (B2+) you could suggest they just choose one day and time in the week when they’ll be free, and make up a plausible-sounding excuse (which they could also have prepared in advance) for not being able to meet at any other time.

8. As mentioned above, preparation time will vary according to the level of the students, but all students should be given time to prepare or practise their conversation before making the actual call.

9. Students then have their conversations on the phone. You may want to ask students to perform their conversations one pair at a time in front of the rest of the group or have all students doing them at the same time while you circulate to monitor. Those students whose conversations were particularly good could perform them again for the rest of the group. Debrief the students and invite self-feedback and peer feedback on their performances.

Want to see more? In Company 3.0, a five-level business English course for working professionals, is packed full of similar lessons and activities.

Download sample lessons here.
The art of effective conversation

Making conversation may not initially appear to be an important business skill as it’s something we can also do in our free time, and conversation topics usually aren’t confined to business and work. However, conversations are key to building relationships with colleagues and business partners and connecting with them on a different level. Good conversation skills are essential for successful workplace interaction and can even determine whether a deal or a sale is successful or not. Despite the importance of conversation skills, many students struggle to use them. In some cases, they won’t feel very confident making conversation in their first language either. When teaching conversation skills in business English courses, it’s important to remember that making conversation involves a whole series of sub-skills: diplomacy, impression management, active listening and turn-taking, to name but a few, and our focus needs to be on teaching and giving students the opportunity to practise these sub-skills.

Activity: The perfect conversation partner

Time needed: 30-60 minutes

Level: B1+

Resources needed: Conversation cards (enough for one per student), board/flip chart.

Aim: To practise starting conversations and engaging conversation partners, establishing shared interests, changing the subject and ending conversations diplomatically.

You need to have a minimum of four students in your group to do this activity.

This lesson plan is based on a topic taken from The Business 2.0 Pre-intermediate level.

1. Start by eliciting strategies for:
   • starting a new conversation
   • changing the subject during a conversation
   • ending a conversation politely or diplomatically

   Tap into students’ own experience of making conversation to generate some example phrases for these strategies. Then write the strategies and examples up on the board or flip chart.

2. Tell students that they’re now going to take part in a simulation where they have to make conversation. They will each be given a card with one topic that they want to talk about and one that they don’t want to talk about. Their aim will be to talk to the other students until they find someone who wants to talk about the same topic as they do. When they find someone who wants to talk about something they don’t want to talk about, they will have to change the subject or end the conversation diplomatically. In real-life situations, we all have some topics that we like talking about and others that we’re not comfortable with, and this activity reflects that.

3. When you’re creating the cards, give each student one topic that they want to talk about and one they don’t want to talk about. Ensure that there will be two students who want to talk about the same thing and that some of the topics are ones that some students will want to talk about but others won’t. Possible topics could include: how work is going at the moment; your colleagues; cars; football; or family.

4. Encourage students to stand up, move around and talk to each other. Once they’ve found the person who wants to talk about the same thing as them, they can continue their conversation on that topic or start a conversation on a different one. Circulate and monitor students while they’re doing the activity and give them feedback on their performance when they’ve finished.

Want to see other lesson plans on this topic and more? The Business 2.0 is Macmillan’s five-level business English course for the next generation of business people, and is packed full of engaging lessons and activities.

Download sample lessons here.
Giving great presentations in English

Many of us find giving presentations in our first language nerve-wracking. It’s hard to stand up in front of a group of people whose eyes will all be on us and speak clearly and fluently on a subject while maintaining the audience’s interest. Of course, presenting in a foreign language can be even more intimidating, but it’s something that our students are increasingly being asked to do in the globalised workplace. Speaking in English on a subject without simply reading aloud is a major challenge for many and, due to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation limitations, not all students are able to get their message across clearly. However, if they’re going to become truly effective presenters, they will not only need to deliver their message, but also make an impact on the audience. Again, we have to give them the tools and strategies they need to achieve this, then follow this up with presentation practice. Feedback on the presentations students give is also key and student, peer and trainer feedback need to be brought together and exploited for maximum effect.

1. Tell students that they’re going to give an introduction to a presentation to the rest of the group, (i.e. the first 40 seconds to 2 minutes of a longer presentation). They will all be introducing a presentation on the same topic.

2. Split the students into groups of three or four and ask them to discuss and reach a consensus on the topic of the presentation. Tell them that it should be a work-related topic which is specific to their company or the work that they do. Collect feedback from the group as a whole and establish what the topic that everyone will be presenting on is.

3. Review the key elements of an introduction to a presentation and the phrases you can use in order to include these in your introduction.

4. Draw students’ attention to the fact that they will all be presenting on the same subject and so they will have to do something to make their own presentation stand out so that the audience doesn’t get bored and switch off. Brainstorm with the students what they could do to give their presentation more impact. Elicit things like choice of text, font and images, as well as intonation and pausing when delivering the actual presentation.

5. Students then prepare and perform their presentation introductions for the other students. As each student does their introduction, the others listen and make notes on what they hear and see so that they can then provide feedback on the performances. Tell students that when they’re giving feedback, they should focus on how clearly the presenter communicated their message, and how much of an impact it made.

Want to see more activities like this? Get Ready for International Business is a two-level international business English course with either a BEC or TOEIC version, and packed full of engaging lessons for A2-B1 levels. Download sample lessons here.