

Business English

The Essential Subject

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Abstract

The subject of Business English is getting more and more exposure, both in terms of classes offered and books published. The reasons for this have only been discussed in a cursory way as a kind of general nod to the need for English in international business. This paper attempts to broaden and deepen the context wherein the need for Business English has arisen—especially in Japan—and use this expanded context to offer suggestions for Business English teaching methodology as part of a change in focus and objectives in university level education.

What is Business English and Why is it so Important?

As a basic starting point, Business English could be defined as the variety of the language as used in international law and commerce. The operant word is “international” because commerce has become global and there are too many languages in the world to make it practical to use all of them. Additionally, having a designated business *lingua franca* accepted by all serves the purpose of establishing common ground for negotiations and eliminates the one-upmanship of whose language to use in cases where the two parties speak different languages.

As such, it is essential for those working in international trade and, as such, it is crucial in Japan, a country overwhelmingly dependent upon exports. The primacy of this to students—adults or younger—cannot be overstated. If education is to serve any practical purpose, it is impossible to separate economics from education.

But more than this, Business English sits squarely at the intersection of

the three overwhelming realities of the modern world: 1. The globally-based economy 2. The interconnected, non-geographically-centric Internet-based social and cultural ecosystem 3. The integration of market-based thinking and commerce into nearly all aspects of everyday life 4. The need for a *lingua franca* that encompasses these realities in an efficient way. Thus it is impossible to separate Business English from “globish,” the term given to the fast-evolving global version of English..

A recent *Newsweek* cover story defined Globish as a language “ [...] that responds to the 24/7 demands of a global economy and culture.”

Key to understanding the importance of Business English as the formalized part of globish is the *Newsweek* reference to both a global economy and culture.

Each of us comes from a geographically-centric culture, but to a great extent these interfere with international business because it is part of the *global* culture.

An Export Nation in Economic Crisis: the two economies of Japan

If globalism is the new reality and global English is the *lingua franca* of the global community, that helps explain why Japan has been in a state of economic decline since the early 1990's.

Japan's economy has been increasingly dependent upon exports—which requires workers and managers who can think and act globally. But the domestic economy is intrinsically linked to Japanese culture, which is one of the most xenophobic in the world. This has led to a steadily increasing schism between the domestic economy and the export economy.

Japan's population and domestic economy have been steadily contracting for many years and this has led to major changes in the working world. The population of Japan is shrinking by about 50,000 people a year. So the domestic market for everything is getting smaller. To make matters

worse, salaries from domestic-based companies have been steadily eroding, reducing purchasing power. Plus, the population is getting older and more frugal.

Not only have the number of jobs and salaries paid been generally declining on the home front, in the past, Japan traditionally had horizontal equality in compensation—that is the same job paid about the same across different companies. This is no longer the case. Now the same job at a company with more employees and larger capitalization will pay more than that offered by a smaller firm. And of course, the larger firms are usually export-oriented and usually have offices and factories—and even subsidiary companies—outside of Japan.

Because of the intense competition in international business and the decline of the domestic consumer market these companies are under increasing pressure to adopt efficient global business ideas and culture—which are often at odds with the traditional Japanese way of doing things. This is true of all global companies, regardless of origin. One of the reasons for the Korean electronics firm Samsung's extraordinary success is its home-culture-free mind-set. Part of Samsung's credo states "we are not a Korean company."

Samsung—and Korean companies in general—benefit from a global mentality fueled by the large Korean expat population living in the U. S. Their influence flows freely back to the home country and the changes they bring are welcomed as benefiting the country. This is not so in Japan, where doing things "the Japanese way" is regarded as sacrosanct.

The multi-national Japanese corporations have adapted to this handicap by separating their overseas divisions from the home companies functionally and culturally. More and more of their hiring is done locally in the foreign country and news of expansions of foreign-based operations are kept quiet on the home front. The Japanese workers and executives that do work in these overseas branches are often "returnees," people who studied English

abroad.

This new reality is accompanied by another change. In the past, Japanese firms accepted the role of training newly-graduated college students in business. In the ultra-competitive world of international commerce, this puts them at a disadvantage. And they have not been doing so well. It's a shock to most people to hear that the Korean company Samsung mentioned above is now the largest electronics firm in the world, surpassing Sony and Panasonic in both size and reputation for quality and innovation.

This sort of competition, fueled by more up-to-date management styles and more localized marketing and distribution channels, means that Japanese companies no longer can afford the cost or time of the traditional system of being *de facto* business schools for naïve new graduates. So on the home front, they are hiring more mid-career workers and fewer recent college graduates. To be sure, the Japanese university system has been ranked as one of the worst in the world at preparing students to compete in the real world.

This situation has been coming for a long time, but the current and ongoing economic crisis has brought it to a head. Thus, the increase in interest in Business English—both for adult learners and as college courses—as a sort of band-aid on what is actually a much larger problem.

How Business English Has Manifested Itself in English Teaching in Japan

Business English classes are starting to appear at many colleges. Of course, in Japan there is a giant industry of various types of adult conversation classes, many of which are populated by business people seeking some kind of help with their workplace English issues.

Business English textbooks have also proliferated. Comparing the recent catalogues with ones from a few years ago of any of the larger ESL publishers will reveal an explosive growth in the number and prominence of

Business English textbooks.

In their simplest forms, these can be almost like vocational school texts. They have “office vocabulary” and lessons on how to write such things as letters of recommendation. But these types of books are by and large out of date.

There are some Japanese publishers offering books that have brief histories of famous Japanese companies, such as Shohakusha’s *Leading Companies in the 21st Century*. These usually have a lot of stuff printed in Japanese surrounding each story and have a lot of translation footnotes.

The majority of the newer books are actual English language instruction books—Business ESP books. Two examples of this are Oxford’s *Business Ventures* series and Thomson’s four-level *Best Practice: Business English in a Global Context* series.

As is the case with most of the newer ESL texts, many of these start by creating scenarios and using these scenarios to introduce the phrasing and grammar appropriate for that situation. The sophistication of these is geared to the level of the book. In most cases, Level I texts begin with simple introductions and increase in complexity as the levels and presumed competence of the learner increases. Business English texts follow this pattern but use simulated business scenarios and introduce phraseology and vocabulary that might be appropriate for each scenario. Like regular ESL texts, these often start with introductions and proceed to situations ranging from simplified job interviews to more complex activities. These are used to introduce business terms, generate writing and listening activities, and occasionally mention presentation skills. So they are taught from the point of view of the subject of English, rather than the subject of Business. Therein lies the beginning of the issues in Business English instruction.

Application to College-level Language Learners

Foreign teachers are generally surprised by the low level of real-world economic awareness of Japanese students. In China, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, not only are the students generally much more fluent in English, their real-world knowledge and awareness of business is much greater. And, as is the case in the U.S, it is not unheard of to encounter a student from these countries who has either invested in the stock market or started some kind of home-based business.

By contrast, Japanese university students usually don't even have any idea what kind of job they want upon graduation—or even that it might be a good idea to even think about it. Most of them don't really know what the stock market is or have even an elemental knowledge of facts about Japan's economy. Some don't even know what their father does for a living! So even basic aspects of business known to most college students in both developed and developing countries must be taught to Japanese university students as part of Business English or else the context of the exercises is completely lost to them.

Application to Continuing Education

Working adult Business English learners are usually currently immersed in the real world of international business—or hoping to do so. They very much need a real-world approach. This presents a challenge for teachers because even the best of the Business English books are not as good as continuing education teaching tools as actual business publications or real-world situations. However, these may be difficult to use or re-create for many English teachers who have little practical knowledge of business, much less experience in the business world. This is perhaps the most seminal issue.

Teacher Education

In order to really understand how to teach Business English a teacher must familiarize him or herself with that world. A good start is to read *WSJ.com* or *MSN Money* or *The Economist* or other easily-accessible business publications every day. You can read international business news and follow markets. Economic trends affect all business people and they are something that most people (not just business people) talk about in their conversations and discussions. Real business news is also the best way for a teacher to get a feel for the mix of slang and formal terms that is the lingo of business.

Most of my initial insight into teaching Business English came from my own experiences in business and from talking with Latin American and Asian business people I met in classes. I have since supplemented this with an MBA.

Before I became an English teacher I had had stints in the U.S. as a stockbroker, a corporate account manager, director of marketing of a tour company, and an accent-reduction coach—originally for television and then branched out into corporate. For the latter, I got lots of Latin American business people whose main problem was that clients and business associates found their English unintelligible on the telephone. My first institutional ESL teaching job was for LA Unified teaching Adult ESL at night, mostly to poor Hispanic immigrants with some Korean businessmen mixed in. Their motivation was purely practical. They needed language competence in everyday situations. For the Koreans especially, this meant a lot of business dealings—with banks and non-Korean business associates.

Since I came to Japan in 2004, I have noticed that more and more of my private student referrals are for Business English situations. In 2008, Nanzan Tandai received an administrative edict to start offering Business English, which I teach.

Meeting student's real-world needs.

Business English is very large topic and just what is needed by an adult learner is dependent somewhat on what they do in their job.

In Japan, one of my first private adult students had a reconditioned used forklift business that did business in China, Russian, and India, among others—all in English. His problem was not business *terms*, it was in the networking/bonding part of business—which is the time spent drinking and eating together—and speaking *casual* English. This concern has been echoed to me many times. A related agony faced by Japanese business people is the telephone. Without visual cues, understanding natural English on the telephone is nearly impossible for many. The trick they employ is to say “I’m a little busy right now. Please send me e-mail.”

Another one of my Japanese private adult students was a banker who was being transferred to an office in Belgium. His job was hedging in the currency markets, something I had done when I was a stockbroker. He was especially concerned with reading financial market news and conversing and writing about trends in these markets and how they affected businesses involved in international trade. So we read a lot of business news together.

Reading articles in any established business publications will reveal a combination of business terms and a stunning amount of very contemporary slang. English teachers expecting exclusively formal English in business writing will be surprised at how “young” the English sounds in business articles. This is because business is very much concerned with the here and now. Marketing and economics, and business trends, get old very fast, so there is a kind of “business cool” that has a media-English sound to it. This is an aspect of Business English that mirrors globish in that the source of vocabulary and style is contemporary media, not literature. “Contemporary” is the keyword, as in the international Internet world, being on top of what is happening now is crucial.

Consider the following headline from the May 21st 2009 edition of *WSJ.com*, the online version of *The Wall Street Journal*:

Japan's GDP Shrinks as Consumer Spending Feels the Pinch

In order to understand this, the reader must understand the economic terms “GDP” (Gross Domestic Product) and “Consumer Spending,” but must also be able to grasp the idiom “feel the pinch.” Another one of the many examples from the same page is this article title:

Edgy Bond Market Threatens Agenda

Here we have the more “slangy” version of “nervous” couple with “Bond Market.”

Teaching Business English as a regular English course at Nanzan Tandai has really brought home the point to me that business vocabulary can be divided into *terms* and *idioms*, with both having equal importance.

Business idioms can be explicit—and pregnant with implications. For example, to make a sale is to “close” the deal. But this carries a greater meaning. To a salesperson, getting a sale is like a sports game score. There is no ambiguity to what constitutes doing well in sales: doing well means making sales, making scores. There is no “almost.” That’s why there is a special mystique attached to people who can finalize a deal with a signature and financial commitment. There is no greater compliment that you can give a salesperson than to say they are a good “closer.” A deal that was a sure thing is called a “slam dunk,” from the basketball term for leaping above the basket and jamming the ball through the hoop in an unstoppable way. Business idioms are frequently based on sports.

Business terms can be divided into formal terms, such as “Gross Domestic Product” mentioned above, and jargon terms that can be generalized to all business or specific to a given aspect. For example, in Marketing, a new product is never “introduced,” it is “launched.” Understanding Marketing is important to understanding business. A book I recommend is Peter and Donnelly’s *A Preface to Marketing Management*. It

is short and easy to read and will help you understand the business mindset. This mentality can be quite different from that of the academic English world.

Real-World Business Culture vs. Academic Culture

Another challenge for a would-be Business English teacher is to shed some academic language attitudes and jargon. I recently had a striking example of the difference in values and perceptions between the academic and business worlds. In a conversation at Nanzan Tandai, a colleague of mine used the term “English Imperialism,” a term that one can hear bandied about by liberal-arts academics at conferences. That same day I was having a discussion with some Japanese bankers and I mentioned the term. They all laughed out loud! They assumed it was a joke! To them, attaching a political value to English was something comical. They need the language as a skill and more than this, a way of connecting. To a Japanese businessman chatting with clients, not understanding slang or jokes is a source of pain and embarrassment—and exclusion from the group. They have a very practical and immediate need to network socially.

This also underscores the irrelevance of much of what is hashed and rehashed at academic language conferences, which often consists of highly-political (and dated) interpretations. In the contemporary, post-Post Colonial world there is no political connotation to English. It is simply the most useful language to make money and communicate globally. The ossified world of academia has generally been decades behind the real world. This was not a major problem in the past, but now it has become a serious economic and social issue, as transmitting this attitude to students may be harmful to their future success.

In this world, the concrete has value, the abstract does not. For example, in the business world, knowing what a Ferragamo necktie is counts for more

than knowing what “English Imperialism” is.

Outside of the protective cocoon of academia, the world runs on commerce. Because of the Internet and international trade, traditional culture as indigenous to a particular place is becoming eclipsed by borderless group membership cultures. This is especially true in business. And since English is the language of international business, culturally, Business English is a mix of global cultural references from the Internet with a core of references based on business culture.

It’s no coincidence that the number one English school in China and South Asia is called “Wall Street English.” They recently sold their China division to Pearson for \$145 million, who has retained the name. Though this company is not a business school *per se*, the implication from the name is clear.

The Obsolescence of a Humanities education

Global economics has become a force of nature affecting our daily lives in countless ways. The competition for jobs has made concern for one’s future something that should begin at a young age and be accompanied by an education that supports that future.

But rather than gathering information and helping students deal with the economic realities of the competitive market-based world, the reaction of most liberal arts academics has been an almost universal condemnation of *reality*. Of course, real economic facts and the notion of somehow applying their teaching to helping students directly cope with those facts is anathema to most liberal arts academics. The most obvious reason is that it portends their own obsolescence as shaman of knowledge.

In the past, a college degree was a promise of a job. The content of the student’s education was irrelevant. The professors held exclusive power much like religious shamen. Now there is no automatic promise of a job

unless the student has studied something that the job market needs. So this means that much of what comprises a Humanities education would now be a kind of “luxury item:” nice to have but only if you have already taken care of survival needs.

Business English for Evolving Japanese Students.

Recently, I was surprised by one of my Tandai students who said gravely, “I’m concerned about my future.” This is quite a change from the students of the past who were blissfully unaware of the relationship between Japan’s economy and their career path. In fact, the students of a few years ago were pretty much unaware they had something called a “career path.” But now it is hitting them square in the face. Traditionally, graduates of Nanzan Tandai were virtually guaranteed to find employment from the job placement office. Now the second year students go on interview after interview and get nowhere.

In my Business English class at Tandai, students choose an imaginary business that they retain throughout the course. I give them business terms and they write descriptions of their businesses, place ads for new employees, conduct job interviews, design marketing plans, and respond to economic changes I send them via e-mail. At first, this seemed strange to them, but now they are getting the idea much more quickly.

I originally wanted to teach this class because the student’s naiveté was disturbing to me and I wanted to help them by giving them practical skills and increasing their awareness. Now the latter is happening anyway and for a much harsher reason. It is ironic that something as seemingly cold as Business English is ultimately humanistic in the way it is a response to human need.

Business Project-based Class vs. Traditional Style

Old-style classes were based on an old-world notion of an accumulation of knowledge. We thought of a person with a vast store of collected information as a kind of ‘walking encyclopedia’ and even used that expression as a compliment. But encyclopedias have become obsolete. Information can change or become irrelevant faster than it can be printed. Also, there is simply too much information—and more importantly—too many possible different types of applications in which information could be needed to make any one source practical. Encyclopedias have been replaced by Search Engines, Aggregators, and Wikis.

A parallel development has been the democratization of information. In the past, information control was maintained by information asymmetry, that is one side had more exclusive knowledge than the other. This was the case with old-style marketing and is the case in old-fashioned teaching pedagogy that continues today—especially in Japan.

Old-style teaching and businesses were based on a hierarchical model. The new paradigm is the network. Businesses today need workers who not only have some knowledge of business, but more importantly they have the necessary ability to connect information.

Below is a comparison of teaching that requires only memorization to teaching that requires a real-world application.

Old-style rote learning:

Read an economic text and answer multiple choice questions on a test. For example, The initials GDP stand for:

- a. Gradual Demand Parameter*
- b. General Demarcation of Population*
- c. Gross Domestic Product*
- d. Gradually Declining Population*

Real-world application learning:

Research the following question on the Internet and answer by e-mail:

Japan's total government debt is what percent of the country's total G.D.P. Please e-mail your answer.

The first example is memorization without context or application. The second requires multiple thinking processes on the part of the student. He or she must

1. Try to find the answer using a search engine such as Google.
2. Once they have found what they think is the right answer, they must try and discern whether or not it really is. In order to do this, they must try and understand both meaning and context. In doing so, they also learn something important about contemporary economic issues that affect them.

Conclusion

As the globalization and interconnectivity of commerce continues to accelerate, the importance of the lingua franca of international business' will continue to grow. These same forces are also putting a priority on developing curricula that will help the university student cope with this new world once they graduate.

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