Keynote

ESP in the Classroom: Applying Findings From Business-Discourse Research Professional Contexts

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This paper is concerned with the difference between what is possible and what is probable in spoken business interactions. In other words, while speakers may have a range of semantically meaningful options when communicating, their choices are very much constrained by the particular context. The first part of the paper will discuss the disconnect between research into spoken business discourse, and the language that is taught in business course books. The issue of "authentic materials" and the difference between "language doing business" and "language about business" are raised here. The second part will give an outline of some of the typical linguistic features in business English, with reference to recent corpus-informed research. The collaborative, convergent nature of much business discourse and the implications for learners will be discussed. I argue that the prescriptive language in business English course books should draw on research from authentic situations, as otherwise learners may acquire language that is detrimental to their careers.

When thinking about language, a fascinating distinction concerns what people can say compared to what people typically do say. In any given situation, interlocutors can potentially choose from a huge range of possible options, and yet recent corpus-based research into spoken contexts shows that although speakers are often linguistically creative (Carter, 2004), much of our language in particular contexts is repeated, and often made up of recurrent fixed and semi-fixed expressions (Sinclair, 2004; Handford, 2010). For learners and those who use English as an international language in business, knowing the difference between what is possible and what is probable in their workplace may directly affect things like job prospects, promotion, achieving sales targets and making friends.

Many workplaces nowadays are truly international and often intercultural, but issues of, on the one hand politeness and respect, and on the other clarity of expression and mutual intelligibility are common to all workplaces. This paper will explore some of the research that has been conducted into professional discourse, and will argue that business language course books need to better reflect such findings, as otherwise we may be endangering our learners' chances of achieving their transactional and interpersonal goals in their work. The paper draws mainly on corpus-informed research, as corpora have helped revolutionise the way we see language and provide attested instances of actual communication (Sinclair, 2004).

What Is the Gap Between Research and Materials?

This section discusses the gap between the findings from research into professional spoken discourse, and course books that are used to teach professional communication. One of the earliest papers exploring this gap was Williams (1988), who compared the language used in authentic business meetings with that taught in textbooks of the time and found that the latter was simplistic and inaccurate. If we fast forward to the last decade, we find that several studies have reported similar findings. Nickerson (2005), in a survey of teaching materials for English for Specific Business Purposes, found few books that made reference to research into the field, as did Nelson (2000, 2006), Cheng and Warren (2010), Handford (2010), and Koester (2010). A common theme is that course book language tends to be far more direct than actual business discourse, and according to Koester (2010), the research gap is particularly pronounced for spoken workplace genres (e.g. meetings, presentations, negotiations and so on).

A relevant distinction for this discussion, from Nelson (2000), is the difference between language *doing* business and language *about* business. Examples of the latter are interviews with business experts, articles in business magazines or newspapers such as *The Financial Times*, whereas examples of the former are actual meetings or presentations in workplaces involving people doing their jobs. As such, both types of language have been described as "authentic". This distinction is relevant for two reasons: the language and functions each employ are different, and many textbooks claim to use authentic texts when developing materials as a key selling point.

On the first point, corpus research comparing the language and functions in the former and the latter categories show that professional interviews and articles feature a far higher density of what we might consider "typical" business nouns, such as *industry*, *merger*, or *profit*, whereas meetings feature far more interpersonal language, and repeated phrases with specific functions, for instance, *we need to* occurs over 400 times in the million-word CANBEC (Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus[1]) corpus of business meetings (Handford, 2010). Further examples will be outlined in the next section.

On the second point, I surveyed (Handford, 2010) over 20 best-selling business English textbooks from the major publishing companies and found no lessons based around real spoken business interactions (e.g., telephone conversations, meetings). Many of these books feature what are termed "authentic" texts, such as extracts from newspaper articles or interviews with real business people, and some books feature case studies of real companies (although many do not). But all of these texts are examples of language *about* business, not of people *doing* business. All of the books surveyed had lessons on meetings, negotiations, telephoning, presenting, problem-solving and so on, yet none of these were based on recordings from real companies involving actual business people doing their real jobs. The lessons were based on either simulations of interactions, or were seemingly created by the authors, and as such were examples of creative writing. Given that many people involved in the writing of business textbooks do not have a background in doing business, they are breaking the first rule of creative writing classes: write about something you have experienced. A typical example, and the implications of this for learners, will be discussed below.

How Can We Describe Professional Discourse?

Students, professionals and teachers often ask, “How is business English different from everyday English?” This is an important question because in general both learners and teachers are initially more proficient in everyday English than in the use of “secondary registers” like business discourse; it is the former that is acquired first in the home or in the language classroom. According to Koester (2010) there are five main areas where business discourse differs from everyday language:

1. The use and frequency of lexis, collocation and phraseology is distinctive.
2. It is goal-oriented and often involves differences in power/status.
3. It is structured and carried out through genre-based activities, such as meetings.
4. Though largely transactional, relational concerns (e.g., solidarity, power, identity) are expressed/negotiated in discourse, such as through relational talk and politeness features.
5. Problem-solving is a key activity in the workplace, and this is reflected in the discourse.

In respect to the first point, which is the main focus of this paper and can inform an understanding of the other four points, “distinctive” can mean the use of different words and phrases, and the different use of the same words and phrases. Corpus studies, for example, have shown that there is some overlap between the language used in everyday settings and in “doing-business” settings (Nelson, 2000; Handford, 2010; Koester, 2010), but that the latter setting features a constrained usage. In other words, the same words may be used in both situations, but in the business context the meanings and applications are restricted.

For instance, in everyday situations the word *partner* can have a wide range of meanings, such as the other person in an intimate and committed relationship, someone you play sports with, or someone you dance with, but in a business context it almost always means someone you are involved in a business relationship with. While the other uses are possible, they are statistically less probable; in other words, it is not down to chance, and this can be shown using

Table 1
Top 30 Keywords in CANBEC

1 We	2 Okay	3 We're
4 Hmm	5 The	6 Customer
7 Need	8 Order	9 Meeting
10 Sales	11 Thousand	12 Hundred
13 Orders	14 If	15 Which
16 Will	17 Customers	18 Per
19 Price	20 Mail	21 Business
22 Is	23 Month	24 Stock
25 Issue	26 Product	27 Following
28 Cent	29 Problem	30 So

corpus software such as Wordsmith Tools (Scott, 1999) or the free software AntConc Tools (Anthony, 2014).

In a comparison of the CANBEC corpus of business meetings, and a larger corpus of everyday English (Handford, 2010) using the keyword tool (Scott, 1999), the words that are phrases statistically more likely to occur in meetings were pinpointed. Table 1 shows the top 30 keywords, although the complete list is over 500 words.

While some of the items might be expected, for instance, *meeting* or *sales*, several are perhaps less so. For instance, the top keyword was *we;* it is used more than twice as frequently in meetings than it is in everyday settings. I recently published a 9,000-word article on *we* (Handford, 2014) and feel that the paper barely scratched the surface of its use in business meetings. What is arguably most interesting about *we* is that it can both reflect and constitute the collaborative element of workplace interactions, both on the local linguistic level and the wider sociocultural level. Not only do people need to collaborate to get work done, they need to create the impression that they are collaborating.

This preference for cooperation is evident in everyday discourse too. As Heritage (1984) states: "There is a 'bias intrinsic to many aspects of the organisation of talk which is generally favourable to the maintenance of bonds of solidarity between actors and which promotes the avoidance of conflict" (p. 265).

In other words, the communicative practices we are socialized to follow make it easier for us to agree and cooperate than to disagree. Disagreement is usually more linguistically demanding than agreement, and in business, converging towards agreement is the norm (Bhatia, 2004). In an early groundbreaking study of authentic workplace discourse, Boden (1994) argues, "Deferring disagreement or debate is not a casual or random matter; it is central... to the smooth and practical everyday enactment of the organisation" (p. 155). Boden here is not suggesting people do not disagree, but instead is making the point, supported in subsequent studies (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Koester, 2006) that disagreement is often indirect and postponed to a later date.

One of the most frequently used items that allows businesspeople to create this sense of solidarity and to defer disagreement is *we*. In the training room and the classroom, encouraging learners to choose *we* instead of *you* or *I* or passive forms can help them achieve these important communicative practices.

This brings us back to the language found in textbooks. Many bestselling textbooks do not draw on corpora or other sources of authentic interactions to validate the language they prescribe for doing business, but instead seem to draw on what the authors and editors think "sounds good". Probably the most successful business textbook series is *Market Leader*. In the Intermediate unit on decision-making, for instance, the phrases taught for disagreeing are *I totally disagree* and *I don't agree with that at all* (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2005; p. 105). A search through CANBEC shows that neither phrase occurs at all, whereas *Yes, but* or *Yeah, but* occurs 236 times. The *Market Leader* language, while being semantically meaningful, is pragmatically inappropriate in most business contexts. In other words, it is possible but not probable.

Use of emphatic items like *totally* or *at all* are often used to reflect or create a conflictual situation (Koester, 2006; Handford and Koester, 2010), whereas expressions like *Yes, but* suggest disagreement in an indirect, face-protecting way. And it is the importance of maintaining the "bonds of solidarity" in typical business contexts that explains this difference in frequency of use. By prescribing *I totally disagree* and other such pragmatically inappropriate forms as model language for doing business, teachers put learners in danger of inadvertently damaging relationships with colleagues and clients. Given the importance of relationships and power in business, the implications of this could be very serious for the individual's career if used with a gatekeeper or powerful person at work. It should also be noted that this preference for agreement, and concern with potential face-threats, is evident in both L1 communication and lingua franca business contexts (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Handford, 2010; Handford and Matous, 2011, 2015; Poncini, 2004; Tsuchiya and Handford, 2014).

Returning to the corpus findings, also unexpected among the top keywords was *if*. The item *if* has many functions in spoken business contexts, such as politeness (e.g., *if you look at the screen*, meaning *look at the screen*), but it occurs most typically in problem-solving discourse when interlocutors are hypothesizing about possible solutions. This reflects the importance of problem-solving in all workplaces. Table 2 shows some of the most frequent 2- and 3-word phrases found in problem-solving encounters in CANBEC (Handford, 2010), and once again they reflect the importance of interpersonal attention in professional settings.

Problem-solving often follows a linear pattern, although more complex problems may require a more circular approach (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Handford and Matous, 2015). Table 3 shows the most typical stages of problem-solving in a linear pattern (pinpoint problem, generate ideas, decide best option), the most typical functions that constitute each stage, and some frequent language that can invoke the functions. As can be seen, it is at the second stage that *if* tends to occur.

Table 2
Typical Problem-solving Phrases

I don't know	We need to	Not an issue
I don't know if	We have to	Not a problem
I don't know, but	You have to	The problem is
If we can	I mean	A problem with
If you	I don't think	An issue is
If you say	So I think	(move forward)
We might	So we can	At the end of the day

Table 3
Stages, Functions and Language of Problem-solving

Stage	Example functions	Example language
1. Pinpoint problem	Clarifying Identifying (evaluating)	*that's not a problem...this is the problem.* *the issue is...*
2. Generate ideas	Hypothesizing Supporting (evaluating)	*If we can...* *If you...* *So if...* *We can...*
3. Decide best option	Rejecting Directing Evaluating	(metaphors and idioms) *...the best way forward...* *We need to...*

Another keyword is *need*, as a semi-modal verb, for instance, *we need to do this*. As mentioned above, *we need to* occurs over 400 times in CANBEC meetings, making it one of the most frequent 3-word units. As can be seen in Table 2, such modal forms often occur in problem-solving, although they also appear in other business contexts as well, such as negotiations and appraisals.

Traditionally, certain modal forms have been described as synonymous, such as *have to* and *must*. Once again, the difference between what is possible and what is probable is crucial here. While *have to*, *need to*, *should* and *must* may belong to the same semantic category and have overlapping denotational meaning, in terms of their behaviour in actual contexts of use, we find there are big differences in frequency which reflect contrasting connotational meanings. Figure 1 shows the frequency of such items in CANBEC: while *need to*, *have to* and *should* all occur very frequently, *must* is hardly used at all. To explain this difference, once again issues of face and politeness are relevant. Whereas *need to* or *have to* connote a sense of organisational obligation or something that is required, *must* has a stronger personal sense and implies a strong face-threat when used in spoken contexts. Such differences are of clear importance to learners, and encouraging them to treat such items as pragmatically the same could endanger their success at work.

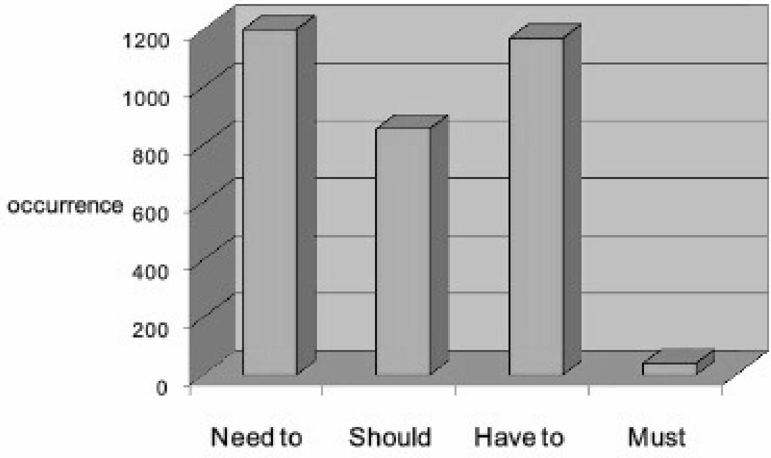

Figure 1. Frequency of deontic modal verbs in CANBEC.

Conclusion

This short article has explored the gap that exists between the research that has been conducted on authentic business interactions, and what is often taught in business course books. While there are challenges with applying authentic materials in the classroom, in a context like business where the stakes are often high, such applications are necessary. Otherwise, we may be teaching our students language and functions that are not merely useless, but actively detrimental to their professional well-being. Mike Nelson, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2003, asked the following question, which is no less pertinent today: "Next time someone tries to sell you a BE [business English] book, you are entitled to ask them, 'How do you know it is business English?'"

Notes

1. CANBEC (Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus) is a one-1 million word corpus of authentic spoken business discourse. It contains 64 meetings from 26 companies, amongst other interactions. Project Directors Profs Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy. I was the researcher responsible for creating the corpus. Copyright Cambridge University Press.

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