

TEACHING MEETINGS

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Abstract

This is the second article of a series meant to provide important clues for less experienced instructors engaged in teaching the main oral communication situations in business English. It focuses on teaching meetings and is divided into three main parts: What to teach? How to teach? How to assess? The article provides information about textbooks where instructors may find materials connected to teaching meetings to foreign students, as well as a scale, devised by the author, to assess students' oral productions in this specific speech situation.

Keywords: assessment scale, business English, meeting, teaching, textbook

Introduction

I have argued, in a previous article (Constantinescu Ștefănel, 2009: 183), that teaching business English means providing the students with linguistic and communication skills which enable them to adequately perform in business situations. The current article will focus on another common business situation, i.e. the meeting. It will follow the same pattern as the previous article, namely: What to teach? How to teach? How to assess?

What to Teach?

Meetings take a lot of a business person's time. There is a wide range of meetings, starting from small informal ones and ending with large formal ones.

Like presentations, meetings can be taught to students of various levels of language, as follows:

- *elementary* (A.1.1 to A.2): students can participate in small informal meetings, which involve limited vocabulary and grammar structures, as well as functions such as agreeing, disagreeing, asking for opinion, giving an opinion, making a suggestion. The textbook which can be used to this effect is *Market Leader* (elementary) as it provides both the necessary language input and case studies;

- *intermediate* (B.1 to B.2): students can engage in larger and more formal meetings, which need a whole range of vocabulary, grammar structures and functions;
- *advanced* (C.1 to C.2): practically, students should be able to participate in any kind of meetings, but the teacher should focus on the formal ones, as informal meetings should not be a problem at this level.

Textbooks recommended for intermediate and advanced students are *English for Business Communication* and *Business Class*, respectively. As the range of both linguistic and professional skills presented in the former textbook is very wide and significant, I think that the checklists it includes should also be used for advanced students. Since teaching meetings to elementary students requires only very limited means, I shall focus on the intermediate and advanced levels.

The items to be considered when teaching meetings are: language, structure, communication skills, content, voice and body-language.

Language

According to Ellis and Johnson, “within this area, three distinct kinds of behaviour can be identified: controlling, participating and co=operating. Each requires specific kinds of language and language skills.” (Ellis and Johnson, 1994: 90).

Controlling is the prerogative of the chairperson. The language functions he/she needs to master are: opening the meeting, introducing the agenda (nominating topics, accepting/rejecting topics), stating objectives, introducing discussion, calling on a speaker, keeping people on the subject, postponing a topic, coming back to a topic, referring to time, summarising, moving the discussion on, concluding, closing the meeting, confirming action, referring to next contact.

Participating refers mostly to the other people involved in the meeting. The language functions they will need are: negotiating procedure, stating opinion, asking for opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, checking comprehension, rephrasing, expressing reservation, making suggestions, interrupting, handling interruptions, setting out facts and figures, supporting an argument, adding new points, expressing advantages/disadvantages, postponing, promising.

Cooperating is required from both the chairperson and the participants. It involves functions such as: calling attention, giving background information, clarifying, checking, rephrasing, showing understanding, confirming, dealing with lack of cooperation.

Various grammar structures are needed to perform the above functions: modal verbs, verb tenses, connectors, tag questions, check questions, statement questions.

Students must also be familiar with the vocabulary related to the topic of the meeting and be conversant with the language expressing the level of formality required by the specific type of meeting.

Structure

Like all professional communication situations which take place in English, meetings have a fixed structure which students must observe: opening the meeting, agreeing the agenda, examining the topics on the agenda one by one, summarising each point and making decisions, closing the meeting.

Communication skills are very important for the success of a meeting and the teacher should insist on them. Broadly speaking, these skills are:

- *Listening* is perhaps the most essential skill involved in both controlling and participating in a meeting. The chairperson cannot summarise accurately without having heard and understood everything. The participants need to understand and respond to other participants' opinions and arguments.
- *Turn-taking* in English is different from turn-taking in Romanian. Students must be aware that they are not allowed to interrupt and overlap. If they need to interrupt, they should excuse themselves and ask for permission. If they wish to take the floor without being appointed by the chairperson, they have to raise a finger and ask for permission.
- *Attitude*. Unlike Romania, Great Britain has a neutral culture where emotional displays are not welcome. Consequently, students should stay calm and polite and contain their feelings. Also, unlike Romania, Great Britain has group leadership, which means that everybody participates in making decisions. The chairperson must therefore refrain from being directive and should stick to democracy and co-operation.

Cross-cultural skills

Many international meetings take place in English. To take part in these, students should acquire a good deal of intercultural knowledge and skills. However, this field is so large that it cannot be covered within the time allotted to teaching meetings in the undergraduate syllabus and should make the object of a specialised course in a master programme. I therefore believe that instructors involved in teaching undergraduate students should aim at training their learners to efficiently participate in British meetings.

Content

Meetings are scheduled later in the syllabus than presentations, when students have acquired enough professional knowledge. They should consequently deal with business-related topics which students must be able to handle properly.

Communication is both form and meaning and, as teachers in economic universities claim to teach not merely business English, but also business communication, I believe that language and content should not be separated. Teachers' purpose is not reached if their students use beautiful language to speak nonsense. This undoubtedly puts more pressure on the teachers, but I think that, as members of the staff of such an university, we should put up with this.

Voice and body-language

These two functions refer to posture, typical gestures like raising your finger when you wish to speak, intonation, rhythm and stress, as well as being calm and poised.

How to Teach?

As I explained in the previous article (Constantinescu Ștefănel, 2009: 186), I believe that the best way of teaching meetings to elementary and intermediate students includes the following steps:

- 1 - **raising awareness and observation;**
- 2 - **presentation** of linguistic, communication and professional skills;
- 3 - **practicing** the skills in exercises and activities;
- 4 - **production**, i.e. participating in a meeting.

Both textbooks recommended above contain plenty of material to achieve these steps.

As far as advanced students are concerned, the steps to follow are:

- 1 - **raising awareness and observation;**
- 2 - **presentation** of linguistic, communication and professional skills;
- 3 - **production**, i.e. participating in a meeting.

Since formal meetings taught to intermediate and advanced students involve a wide range of vocabulary, grammar structures and functions, most of these should have been taught and practiced in previous courses and only revised when teaching meetings.

How to Assess?

As previously argued, it is advisable that assessment of business communication skills in English should take the form of a task, in this case role-playing a meeting.

Several textbooks provide examples of meetings which can be used to this effect. Examples of small meetings for elementary students can be found in *Market Leader* (elementary) starting with unit 6. The chapter dedicated to meetings in *English for Business Communication*, as well as *Market Leader* (intermediate)

contain several role-plays suitable for intermediary students. Teachers training upper-intermediate and advanced students can find role-plays in textbooks such as: *Business Class*, *Market Leader* (upper-intermediate and advanced), as well as *Keys to Management*, an older textbook containing very good examples of tasks. These materials have the advantage of training students to solve business cases besides enabling them to use the proper language.

To properly achieve a role-play of this complexity, the teacher should follow a certain procedure:

- give students enough time to read the background information and their role card and to prepare for the meeting;
- have the students perform the actual role-play in front of the class if possible, without intervening in their acting;
- have the class analyse the participants' performance, which has both the advantage of improving students' knowledge of communication in meetings and giving rise to genuine class communication;
- state his/her opinion about the participants' performance, namely emphasising their strong and weak points.

Finally, as I previously did for presentations (Constantinescu Ștefănel, 2009: 188, 189), I would like to suggest an assessment scale adapted to meetings. It is an analytical criterion-referenced scale, containing five criteria which refer to the items mentioned in the chapter "What to teach?", i.e. language, structure, communication, content, voice and body-language. This scale is suitable for intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced students.

Criterion	5	4	3	2	1	Comments
1. Language -fluency -accuracy -appropriacy -range						
2. Structure -adequacy to genre -logical sequence -timing						
3. Communication -listening -turn-taking -attitude						
4. Content -relevant contribution -relevant opinion/argument -coherence						

Criterion	5	4	3	2	1	Comments
5. Voice and body-language -pronunciation -intonation, stress, rhythm -gestures and posture						

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