

TEACHING NEGOTIATION

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Abstract

This is the last 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 negotiation 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, negotiation, teaching, textbook

Introduction

This article completes the series in which I have looked into the teaching of the most important situations of oral business communication included in the syllabus of economic universities.

Negotiation is the most complex and unpredictable of these situations. It requires a wide range of linguistic, communication, professional and cross-cultural skills. Moreover, negotiation skills improve with time and practice. With some diligence you can get your presentation, your meeting or your job interview right the first time you do it, but nobody can get negotiation right the first time. In addition, teaching negotiation properly ought to take at least one semester, as it includes a lot of theoretical input and a lot of practice. This cannot realistically be done within the undergraduate syllabus.

Consequently, this article will only deal with teaching the basis of business negotiation. It will follow the already established pattern of the series (What to teach? How to teach? How to assess?), and it will include references to textbooks and an assessment scale.

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What to Teach?

Due to its complexity and unlike the other business communication situations presented in the series, negotiation can be taught only to intermediate and advanced students. The items which need to be taught are: language, structure, communication skills, content, voice and body language.

Language. As any negotiation starts and ends with small talk, all students should master functions such as: greeting, welcoming, introducing oneself/ someone, meeting someone, offering assistance, inviting, responding to an invitation, saying goodbye.

Other functions to be taught are:

- intermediate students (B.1.2 to B.2): making an opening statement, stating aims and objectives, handing over, proposing, bargaining/ trading, making concessions, accepting, advising, promising, confirming/ rejecting, summarising, signposting, dealing with conflict, looking ahead, ending negotiations, breaking off negotiations;
- advanced students (C.1 to C.2): besides the above mentioned, they should learn functions such as: asking for clarification, interrupting, making a suggestion, stating position, signalling (i.e. stating your position in an indirect way), asking for reaction, describing needs, requesting a concession, explaining the value of a concession, hypothesising or “sounding out” the other party, testing the situation, asking for precise information, being vague, checking with higher authority, threatening, asking questions (open, closed, probing, hypothetical, leading, leading in, treat, window questions), dealing with questions, asking for information in an indirect way (by using lubricators, comparisons, silence, repetition, paraphrasing). Students should also be aware of typical English understatement used in negotiation, such as *That's not bad* meaning *That's good or very good* or *It's quite good* meaning *It's a bit disappointing*. If they don't use these understatement, they should at least be able to decode them.

The teacher can find the phrases used to express the above functions in textbooks and courses such as:

- intermediate students: *English for Business Communication*;
- advanced students: *Business Class, Market Leader* (advanced), as well as in my course *Negotiation and Conflict Management* (Constantinescu-Ștefănel, 2007: 48-50, 54, 109).

Students should also be familiar with most of the English grammar (including emphasis) and master a large vocabulary pertaining to general English, business English and even technical English.

Structure. Like any other situation of oral business communication, negotiation in and with the English has a specific structure which the students need to be aware of.

A complete negotiation includes the following stages:

- preparation;
- getting started (making an opening statement);
- building understanding;
- bargaining;
- closing.

In its turn, a negotiation meeting includes five parts:

- small talk;
- agreeing procedure or setting the agenda;
- the body of the negotiation;
- pre-concluding;
- concluding.

The students may be familiar with the structure of negotiation from their specialised courses. In this case, the teacher should draw their attention to these parts which do not exist in Romanian negotiation, i.e. agreeing procedure/ setting the agenda and making an opening statement. Information about all these phases can be found in my book "Negotiation and Conflict Management".

Several topics are discussed during a negotiation: quality, quantity, delivery time, reception, warranties, price, payment, penalties, etc. The Romanians tend to jump from one topic to the other without leading in. They can also leave a topic unresolved and come back to it later. They also feel free to add new topics to the agenda whenever these cross their mind or seem important to them. This style is confusing and threatening to the British. Students must therefore learn to approach negotiation in the British way: topics are dealt with one by one, every new topic starts with a leading in question or statement, no topic should be discussed if it is not included on the agenda agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting, negotiators summarise several times during the meeting, not only at the end of it as in Romania.

Communication skills. I wrote in my previous articles that *listening* skills were important in meetings and job interviews. I may say now that they are crucial in commercial negotiation as they help people collect information and information is power in business. Students should be able to practice phatic, active and critical listening.

Turn-taking, including no interruptions and no overlapping, is part of the English speaking style.

Attitude should be calm and neutral. Remaining polite, practicing the soft way and concealing feelings is more important here than anywhere else. Students should be taught to preserve the same attitude whether they like or dislike the proposal presented to them.

Relationship skills: “Negotiations are also about people and personalities, so relationship-building skills are vital.” (Frendo, 2007: 78). Unfortunately, these are difficult to teach in class.

As many non-native speakers negotiate in English, cross-cultural skills are the core of business negotiation, but this topic is so vast that its teaching needs a whole semester. Instructors working with undergraduate students should, in my opinion, aim only at teaching the English style.

To successfully communicate in business negotiation, students should acquire specific skills which I would call the *rules of the game*, namely that a proposal should be rejected several times before it is accepted – the best way to reject a proposal is *yes, but...* – once made a proposal cannot be withdrawn, any proposal should be justified and backed up with arguments, justifications should come before the proposal to prevent the opponent from thinking of counter-arguments, the same argument cannot be used twice so negotiators should have several arguments ready for each item on the agenda, members of the same team should not contradict each other or confer with each other during the negotiation.

Content. The content of negotiation can be more important than language. In the real business world, nobody cares if a foreign counterpart makes a grammar mistake, but everybody cares a lot if they are wrong about the content of negotiation. Students who engage in business negotiation should have a lot of economic and even technical knowledge and the teacher has to be familiar with the economic aspects as well as he/ she needs to discriminate between proper and improper, suitable and unsuitable arguments and require his/ her students to do the same. The least teachers and students can do is know what an OP (opening position) and WAP (walk away position) are and how these can be established, as well as be aware of what the balance of power means, what is the right balance of power in international negotiation and what communication strategies should be used when you are in the dominant/ dominated position.

Romanian teachers are faced with a bigger challenge in this respect as the balance of power practiced in Romania (seller in the dominant position) is the opposite to the one practiced in international negotiation (buyer in dominant position) and the students have the tendency to transfer the Romanian balance of power into negotiations performed in English. The teacher must prevent them from doing so as this is the biggest and most harmful mistake they can make when negotiating internationally.

Teaching business negotiation puts a lot of pressure on English teachers and, therefore, they need either to be trained both in language and negotiation or team up with an expert in negotiation.

Voice and body-language. Vocal qualities in negotiation concern tone, intensity, rhythm, stress and silence. These should be used skilfully to stress strong arguments or to get additional information or concessions without wasting an argument. Though very important for language teachers, pronunciation matters in the business world only in so far as it prevents understanding.

Students should be aware of some basic rules concerning body-language:

- *Gestures:* negotiators shake hands at the beginning of the first meeting. When negotiating in teams, you should shake everybody's hand starting with the team leader. In Europe, UK included, hands should be kept on the table in everybody's full view all through the talks.
- *Posture* is straight. Negotiators lean forward to bring a strong argument and backward to show that they want to break negotiations.
- *Face.* People smile during greetings and introductions. They should train to maintain a "poker face" (blank, expressionless) when receiving proposals, either good or bad ones.
- *Eye-contact.* European negotiators maintain eye contact, especially when they present proposals or strong arguments. In this part of the world, looking down or sidewise is construed as hiding something or being untruthful.

How to Teach?

The best way of teaching business negotiation consists of following the steps below:

- raising awareness and observation;
- presenting linguistic, communication and professional input;
- practicing: "Perhaps the best way [...] to practice negotiations is to adopt a task-based approach, that is, to do role-plays and simulations in class. These allow the development of non-linguistic negotiation skills, as well as providing opportunities to practice relevant language." (Frendo, 2007: 78). As negotiation is such a complex process, it is advisable to break it down and practice chunks of negotiation separately, especially when dealing with intermediate students. Such a break-down is presented in the unit "Negotiation" of "English for Business Communication". Advanced students can learn whole negotiations together, especially if they have previous negotiating experience in their own language.

How to Assess?

The only reliable way of assessing negotiation skills is by having the students role-play a business negotiation.

The scenario the students are provided with should reflect a business situation and should give as much background information as possible.

Teachers can find scenarios in *English for Business Communication*, in *Market Leader* (upper-intermediate and advanced) and in *Negotiation and Conflict Management*.

The procedure to follow in role-playing negotiation, either for practice or for assessment, is presented below:

- students are given general information (available for all of them) and confidential information (available only to one side);
- they prepare the negotiation in group and are allowed enough time for preparation;
- they appoint their representatives who will negotiate on behalf of their side, one, two or three persons according to how long and how complex the negotiation is;
- while the “representatives” negotiate, the other students and the teacher act as observers, writing down the good and bad points of the negotiation and refraining from any intervention in the role-play;
- the negotiation, with its good and bad points, is analysed by the observers. All aspects should be addressed: language, structure, communication skills, content and body-language. Results obtained are compared to the expected outcome, success and especially failures are explained.

Role-playing negotiation has many benefits. As previously mentioned, it is the best way of developing negotiating skills, particularly for students with no negotiating experience. It is highly motivating. It is a good way of practicing language spontaneously. Its drawbacks are that it is time-consuming, so difficult to practice with large classes and few hours available, and very challenging for the teachers who must have both linguistic and negotiating skills.

The scale to be used when assessing negotiation is similar to the ones used in the previous business situations. However, if they wish their training to be useful for their students, teachers should emphasise content.

Criterion	5	4	3	2	1	Comments
1. <i>Language</i> - fluency - accuracy - appropriacy - range						
2. <i>Structure</i> - adequacy to genre - topic introduction - timing						
3. <i>Communication</i> - listening - turn-taking - attitude - relationship skills - rules of the game						
4. <i>Content</i> - clear aim - OP/ WAP - arguments and rejections - concessions - balance of power - coherence						
5. <i>Voice and body-language</i> - pronunciation - intonation, stress, rhythm - eye-contact and face - gestures and posture						

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