

The Need for Special Academic Course and in-company Business English Training for Business Executives of India

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Abstract: As there is no specific course in business English at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and as the training at schools and colleges is mostly grammar-based, most business executives during their college education are deprived of the necessary training in the use of English in business situations. The knowledge of grammar which they acquire in schools and colleges is of little help because they also need to know the rules of language to communicate effectively in real life situations. So, it is important that business executives, who in their schools and colleges have been trained in grammatical accuracy; need to be trained to become effective communicators so that they can utilize their flair and talents in their relevant areas of business. They need to get a fair exposure to a rich variety of linguistic and social-cultural material with its focus on what to say when and how. Therefore, a specialized course in English for business executives is essential. Such a need gains more significance in the absence of in-company training programmes in the use of English for business executives.

Keywords: Business English, College, Business executives, In-company training

1.INTRODUCTION

The need for a specialized course for business executives (mid level) working in corporate sector in India is much more significant because of various reasons. For Instance, there is no specific academic course in business English at pre-university or university level . Very few business organizations offer their executives an induction programme/initial orientation training programme which includes a course in English. There are many business executives especially with mother-tongue regional medium background who had difficulties in coping with the current requirement of the English language . Therefore, there should be a specialized course in English for the Indian business executives. The components of such a course are summarized in following sections.

2. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

This study covered sixty business executives from various firms, institutions, etc. in India. These executives who formed the representative's sample for the study were identified by using resources available to researcher. For instance, some business executives were contacted because of the familiarity of the researcher with them. Some other business executives were contacted with the help of the researcher's acquaintances. Further, some of the business executives themselves helped the researcher contact other business executives known to them. Care was taken to see that data was collected from only those business executives who usually required English or used English to transact their business.

The research procedure for this study consisted of two stages. In the first stage, questionnaire-I consisting of fourteen questions was administered and collected after a couple of days. However, the interviewees were given to understand that the researcher would meet them once again in case he needed any clarifications of some of their answers, or for an interview which would be recorded.

Next, on the basis of the analysis of the response to Questionnaire-I, it was found that the data was inadequate. So, Questionnaire-II consisting of seven questions was prepared. That is, Questionnaire-II was a continuation of Questionnaire-I. Questionnaire-II was administered and collected after a couple of days, depending on the convenience of the sample group.

After the collection of questionnaire-II, the business executives were interviewed depending on their responses to the questionnaire. The interviews were recorded on note.

To administer the questionnaires and recorded interviews with the executives, the researcher met them on appointment at their work places. However, the business executives who were the acquaintances of the researcher were requested to come to their residence to provide the necessary data.

In addition to administering the two questionnaires, samples of actual written correspondence from the business executives were collected as far as possible throughout the fieldwork. Apart from all these, data was also collected

through informal conversations with the executives concerned. Different samples of the data collected for the study are described in detail below.

3. SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILES OF BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

The analysis of the data also indicated that there was a relation between the business executives' social backgrounds and their degree of proficiency in using the language. Therefore, three groups of business executives who were distinctive in their social backgrounds and language competence could be identified.

The three groups were identified after not only taking into account the response of the subjects to the two questionnaires, but also after analyzing the oral and actual written samples of their official/business correspondence as well. For instance, some executives answered that they did not have any problem in using any of the four language skills, namely speaking, writing, reading and listening. However, it was identified through the oral or/and written data that some of them did have difficulty in using the language. So, these executives were also grouped with those who had difficulty in using the language.

The three groups were (i) those who were able to use the language fluently and effectively, (ii) those who were able to use language reasonably well, and (iii) those who were not fluent and could only manage to communicate in English. As mentioned above, the sociolinguistic profiles of the three groups were developed on the basis of (a) the degree of their proficiency in using the language and (b) the important factors of their social backgrounds. The following social factors were taken into consideration as these factors generally influence one's second language learning and competence :

- Age
- Qualification
- Medium of instruction
- Type of educational institution
- Place of educational institution
- Position in the office
- Type of organization
- Total job experience
- Parents' education
- Parents' occupations

As far as the age was concerned the executives were grouped as those who were between 25 and 34 years, between 35 and 44 years, and 45 and above. The grouping was also made according to whether they had studied in English medium till high school and later joined English medium for their further studies. Similarly, they were grouped according to the type of school and college they studied- i.e. whether private or government. Their educational qualification- i.e. whether graduates/diploma holders, professionally qualified or studied till/below high school level. The place of their education .i.e. in an urban or non-urban area. Their position in the office i.e. the lower, middle or level management. The type of their organization – i.e. whether self-employed professionals, employees in private or government organizations. Their job experience- i.e. whether 1 to 4 years, more than 4 to 10 years or above 10 years. Their parents' occupation – i.e. whether their parents were in highly –privileged, privileged or underprivileged positions.

The above grouping was done in order to match their sociolinguistic backgrounds conveniently. The grouping facilitated the identification of specific English language needs of business executives according to their distinctive social background so that a specialized course in English can be designed for those who do not possess adequate communication skills in English. Before we proceed to present the group profiles, the groups are briefly described here.

The three groups can be described as the third, second and first generation learners. The third generation learners are those whose parents are/were proficient in the use of English. Moreover, their grandparents too had some knowledge in the use of English. That is, the third generation learners are the third succeeding generation to have gained proficiency in English. This group is a socially privileged group in terms of financial position, education of parents, occupation of parents, place of residence, medium of education, etc. Expectedly this group's competence in the use of English is better than that of Groups II and III.

Group II largely comprises the second generation learners. They are the second consecutive generation in their families to have proficiency in English after their parents. Their grandparents were not proficient in English. Though the executives of this group are also socially privileged, they are not as privileged as Group I. their English language competence is also not as good as that of Group I

Group III comprises mostly the first generation learners. These executives are those whose parents cannot communicate in English. That is, these executives are the first in their families to have some knowledge in the use of English. This

group is a socially underprivileged group. Their use of English is also not as good as that of Groups I and II. The sociolinguistic profiles of the three groups are presented in detail below.

Group I:

A large number of the executives of Group I are professionally qualified. They studied in English medium either from the beginning or began their education through regional medium but at a later stage joined English medium. Only 8% of them are from regional medium throughout their education. Most of them are from private schools and colleges in big towns and cities. Only 19% of them studied in semi-urban areas. Many of them are in top-level management and only a few are still at the lower level management. There are many among them who have more than 10 years of experience as an officer or executives. The parents of these executives were educated and in highly privileged position as far as their occupation were concerned. Most of the executives of this group had an adequate exposure to English at their home, school and college. They had a library at school and college, and had the habit of reading storybooks, comics, novels, magazines, etc. in English. They watched English movies at the theatres. They interacted in English both in speaking and writing with parents, other members of family, their teachers, classmates, friends, relatives, etc.

The business executives of this group are able to communicate in English fluently and effectively both in speaking and writing. They are good at reading comprehension and listening comprehension. They are also very confident of their proficiency in English. Some of them, however, require some help in the use of grammar. They mentioned that though they were fluent, sometimes they were not very sure of the language they used.

Group II:

Almost half of the executives of Group II are professionally qualified. Most of them began their education through regional medium but at a later stage joined English medium. Many of them are from private schools and colleges in big towns and cities. Only 24% of them studied in non-urban areas. Some of them are positioned at the top-level management and only 18% are still at the lower level management. About 29% have more than 10 years of work experience. Some of their fathers were educated and in privileged positions as far as their occupation was concerned. Many of these executives did not have adequate exposure to English at their home, school and college. However, most of them had a library at school and college, and had the habit of reading storybooks, comics, novels, magazines, etc. in English. Some of them watched English movies at theatres. Some of them interacted in English both in speaking and writing with their teachers, classmates, friends, relatives, etc.

The business executives of this group are not as good as those of Group I in communicating in English. However, their use of language is better than that of their peers of Group III. Though not fluent, these executives are able to manage well in English – especially, while speaking in English. In written English, they are poor and require either some training or a couple of years of additional exposure. They also need to improve their grammar. Thus, these executives need to be trained more in the productive skills.

Group III:

Only few of the executives of Group III are professionally qualified. Most of them studied in regional medium in government schools and colleges. Only few of them are from big towns and cities. Most of them studied in non-urban areas. About 35% of them are at the lower level management. Only 12% of these executives have more than 10 years of experience as officers or executives. Only some of their fathers were educated and in privileged positions as far as their occupations were concerned. Most of their mothers were not literate, and almost all of them were housewives. Most of these executives did not have adequate exposure to English at their home, school and college. Though most of them had a library at school and college they did not have the habit of reading books in English. They hardly watched English movies. They did not have adequate scope to interact in English both in speaking and writing with parents, other members of the family, their teachers, classmates, friends, relatives, etc.

The executives of this group are not fluent in using English, both in speaking and writing. Though they use English, they are not confident enough to manage their business communication in English as well as the executive of Groups I and II. The Executive of this group require training and a lot of exposure to specific functional English at their work. Their confidence level in using English is very low. Thus these executives need to be trained in both the productive and the receptive skills as well. They also need to be trained in vocabulary and pronunciation.

The above profiles are discussed comprehensively with a view to identifying business executives' current language needs in English on their job from the sociolinguistic point of view. These profiles help us identify the necessary components of a course in English for business executives who not possess adequate communication skills in English. But, before we proceed to discuss the components of a specialized course in English for business executives, the important for such a specialized course is discussed in detail below.

4. THE NEED FOR IN-COMPANY BUSINESS ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAMMES

As mentioned above, there exists a big gap between theory and practice. For instance, the language that students are exposed to during their academic education is different from what they actually need at their work places. Also, when pre-experience business executives are recruited, they may have a general awareness of the nature of their duties they are expected to perform. They do not usually have a very clear knowledge of the functional aspects of language required for these duties. Therefore, some organizations provide their executives with orientation or induction training in order to improve their job awareness and performance.

But, generally, such training programmes do not focus attention on improving the communication skills of the executives. During such programmes, the newly-recruited are given an orientation on the product knowledge, specific nature of their duties, about their organization, their competitors, the relevant market situations, and so on. Though the importance of communication skills in English is often stressed in such orientation programmes, the pre-experience executives are not given any training in the use of English. Rather, they are expected to possess already adequate language competence to deal with different personnel on their job. Therefore only a few tips are given about communication skills in English.

The approach of an in-company training programme assumes, as Singh (1998 : 10) points out that 'survival of the fittest' is the best form of training. Its motto seems to be 'throw a business executive into the territory and very quickly he will sing or swim'. 'Under such circumstances marginal business executives who could have been trained, will give up. Even a number of good business executives who could have been trained to become outstanding will struggle to be, at best, average producers, (Stroh: 1973:2). The neglect of the study of communication skill in English is unfortunate given the fact that the main objective of training programmes is to prepare business executives for a face-to-face encounter with their clientele, and language is the very medium through which they have to communicate.

However, even for an organization in India, to offer a course in communication skills in English for its executives, there should exist sufficient material for teaching business English. The material should be based on an empirical study, preferably done on the needs analysis of business executives in India. But, there does not appear to be adequate research done on business English in India.

5. COMPONENT OF A SPECIALIZED COURSE IN ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

The data indicate that a course in English specially designed for the Indian business executives should comprise all the four skills and the language functions which are usually performed in day-to-day business contexts. The requirement of such a course is summarized below.

A specialized course in English for business executives should comprise the following functions as the data indicated that a majority of business executives usually performed these functions/tasks through the use of English on their job:

- Give information/assistance to superiors, colleagues, subordinates, customers etc.
- Request for information/assistance, etc from superiors, colleagues, subordinates, customers etc.
- Explain and instruct on the job
- Negotiate with customers and with executives from other department or branch or company
- Establish and maintain successful social relations through expressions of respect, politeness, acquaintance and familiarity through appropriate responses.
- Give clear instructions on the telephone
- Actively participate in discussions or meetings, and also answer questions concerning their field
- Suggest ideas or courses of action, discuss, agree, disagree, persuade and convince
- Report progress, content of meetings, etc and discuss problems with senior colleagues/superiors

The data also indicated that business executives usually used English with the following people on their job:

- Customers/clients
- Business executives from other organizations
- Professional superiors
- Colleagues/counterparts in other departments
- Subordinates
- Government officials

A specialized course should also take into account the following contexts, as these were the common contexts in which business executives use English, as indicated by the data

- On the phone

- In informal discussions and meetings
- While receiving and entertaining visitors
- At formal meetings, conferences, etc
- While giving instructions and training
- While chairing meetings, conferences, etc

The important aspect of the four language skills, viz, speaking, writing, reading and listening, as components of a specialized course are summarized in the following sections.

Speaking:

A specialized course for business executives should be focused on the following aspects of speaking to help executives speak as well as many executives commonly encounter these difficulties in speaking in English:

- Using grammatically correct sentences
- Using appropriate vocabulary
- Speaking fluently
- Speaking with correct phonetic articulation
- Speaking with confidence.

Writing:

As far as the writing skills are concerned, almost all the executives who had difficulty in writing said that using appropriate vocabulary was their main difficulty. The other difficulties were writing grammatically correct sentences, sequencing of sentences, organizing paragraph and using appropriate sentences to close a piece of writing. Therefore, a specialized course in English should focus on the above aspects of writing. The course should also help them communicate easily, clearly, precisely and effectively through writing.

Reading:

The reading skills should also be an important component of a specialized course for business executives. Many business executive are poor in reading skills and need to be trained in these skills. The data revealed that their response to certain questions in the questionnaire were neither appropriate nor relevant.

The significance of the reading skills as one of the important components of a specialized course is also evident because of various other reasons. For instance, 93% of them (i.e. 56 executives) indicated that it was necessary for them to read technical or professional journals or books in English. About 85% of them (i.e. 51 executives) mentioned that they regularly read journals or book to keep themselves up-to date in their fields. Further, 73% of the interviewees (i.e. 44 executives) also indicated that they read popular magazines in English. It should also be noted that 77% of them (i.e. 46 executives) used fax, 70% of them (i.e. 42 executives) used computer, 47% (i.e. 28 executives) used e-mail, 23% (i.e. 14 executives) had access to internet and 12% (i.e. 7 executives) used telex.

Therefore, business executives today are expected to possess good reading skills so that they can read and grasp quickly and accurately the information from technical or professional journals or books and other modern media such as the Internet.

Listening

Like speaking, writing, and reading skills, listening skills are also important for business executives, and should be an important component of a specialized course in English for them. Almost 92 % of them (i.e. 43 executives) felt that listening was important to them on their job similarly, 71% of them (i.e. 43 executives) indicate than listening skills should be an important component of a specialized course for them. Moreover, almost every business executive who was interviewed emphasized the importance of listening skills for them on their job. They felt that they had to listen to and grasp quickly what their customers/clients, superiors, colleagues, etc. say to them. Therefore, a specialized course in English should also focus on the executives' listening skills.

The executive felt that apart from the four language skills mentioned above, a specialized course should also include other related aspects of learning. For instance, presentation skills, group discussion, debate and brain storming sessions should also be part of such a course. The course should make use of audio visual aids. It should be based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and, thus, task based and learner oriented in nature

We have, so far, summarized the findings from the study. The important outcome of this study was identification of the current language requirements of a specialized course in English for business executives. These requirements included language functions, the productive and the receptive skills in various business contexts. Significantly, these were

looked at from the sociolinguistic perspective of business executives. The implications of the findings of the study for pedagogic action are discussed in the next section.

6.SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

The business executive needs to use English appropriately in order to handle communication acts in the work place.. Therefore, syllabus designers try to plan suitable teaching syllabi and topics for Business English . For these reason, the researcher has proposed a sample and the main topics of the business English syllabus for it by taking into consideration the specific register for business English teaching which meet the syllabus topic divided into four modules:

Module one

Language

Common Vocabulary, Phrases used in Corporate Sector, Vocabulary related to Industry, Workplace, Materials, Product Manufacturing, Processing, Market place. Distribution, Service and other Business terminology.

Module two

Interaction

Introducing Self, Introducing others, participating and sharing ideas in meetings , discussions, Interpersonal communication, agreeing and disagreeing on a topic telephoning skills, etc

Module three

Correspondence

Business correspondence focus on business and professional writing in English such as : letters, memos, e-mails, reports , proposal , interpreting graphs and Charts, by providing texts which provide examples and practice in various formats.

Module four

Presentation

Formal presentation, presentation by using different latest audio-visual aids , press interviews, focus on preparing and delivering professional presentations individually and with colleagues.

These proposed topics help to design syllabus for future business executives in order to prepare more efficient future business executives.

7.PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The presents study has identified the important current English language needs of Indian business executives. The study has also suggested how an existing specialized course in English for business executives can adopt the various findings of the study to make the course useful to the target learners. Therefore, the findings of this study stand very useful for designing a specialized course in English for business executive or those who wish to be successful business executive.

There are few courses in business English offered non-academically. The findings of this study can also be of use to this course as well. These courses can benefit by adapting necessary changes from the findings of this study in the course structure to make it much more relevant useful.

Further, as the language needs were identified from the sociolinguistic points of view, they would be very relevant and useful in the Indian contexts.

For instance, if the course is designed for executives of group 1, the course should meet the language requirements which the executives of group 1 need as mentioned above. Or if, the course focuses attention on the language requirements of group 2 type, the course should focus attention requirements of group 2, as so on.

On the other hand, if the course is common to a heterogeneous group of business executives, it should cater to language needs of all executive from various sociolinguistic backgrounds. That is, the course should take into account business executive's specific difficulties in the use of English, the speaking contexts, the persons to whom business executives usually speak, the functions for which they use English, etc., as found in the study.

However, even if there is such a core course offered to all business executive in general, as mentioned above, it should be supplementary with additional modules or components which can fulfill the specific requirements of individual executives within this large group. The supplementary course material should be in compliance with the specific

sociolinguistic background of the executive of the group – i.e. group 1, 2, 3, as mentioned earlier. That is, additional care should be taken to help the executive with specific requirements of English depending upon their type of group. This is necessary to make the core course much more relevant and useful to the executive individually. Further, the course in business English should be based on ESP and CLT principle.

Perhaps, grouping or sociolinguistic profiles such as the one mentioned above is very relevant in the present situation as there have been a number of business executives with different sociolinguistic backgrounds who are increasingly stepping into the realm of business. Therefore, the study has highlighted sociolinguistic factors as an important variable to be considered for course design for business executives.

8. PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES OF ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

One of the most important points of business English teaching in emphasizing performance, that is, trainees, in order that they will be able to perform effectively. According to Ellis and Johnson (1994), what business English executives need to acquire could be broadly summarized as follows:

- Speaking confidently and fluently
- Developing skills for organizing, structuring and restructuring information
- Developing language accuracy to communicate ideas without ambiguity
- Knowing of appropriate language and behavior for the cultures and situations in which they will work

These performances are expected to be seen in business situations in which learners will be involved.

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study has focused on the current English Language needs of Business executives from the sociolinguistic point of view. The study has confined itself to Hyderabad, Raipur, Bangalore and Nagpur only.

The study has made an attempt to analyze the specific language needs of business executives who usually communicate to others who are also Indians. That is, the study did not analyze the specific language needs of those who usually (have to) communicate to their customers/clients or counterparts, etc. who are abroad. In other words, due to the constraints of time and space, the study is confined to (Indian) business executives who communicate with Indian business executives.

No actual conversation between business executives in a business encounter/dealing was recorded for the purpose of the study. The findings were based on the data procured through two questionnaires, recorded interviews and also based on the written samples collected from the executives' respective work places.

Further, again due to the constraints of time and space, a course for business executives could not be designed in the present study. This study has conducted the needs analysis of business executives from the sociolinguistic perspective and offered suggestions for a specialized course in English for them.

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