

SETTING UP FOR BUSINESS ENGLISH SUCCESS

AE TEACHER'S CORNER



A quick Internet search of “Business English” produces more than 500,000,000 videos and more than 800,000,000 links to resources, how-to guides, and lesson/activities for teaching and learning Business English. In addition, there are Business English dictionaries, textbooks, workbooks, teaching guides, etc. With this overwhelming number of resources, how can the average English teacher combine the knowledge of teaching English with the particulars of teaching Business English?

During this month’s Teacher’s Corner, we’ll be discussing the value of doing a needs analysis when preparing for a class and how a needs analysis can help teachers identify the content and strategies they will use in their class. Although a needs analysis can be used with any type of class, we will explore this tool as a way of preparing to teach Business English.

Needs Analysis

As teachers, we often jump into a new class looking for texts and materials, designing a curriculum and planning lessons forgetting one crucial component: the needs analysis. A needs analysis helps a teacher determine the content and language focus of the course. The most

effective needs analyses will involve the students from the first day of class so that the course is relevant and useful for the students. If students are excluded from this process then the course is planned based on what teachers and professionals think students should know, which might differ greatly from students' actual language and content needs.

In planning a needs analysis, teachers will want to consider the following questions as a first step in designing a Business English course.

What are the goals of the learners in this course?

This question is multifaceted with smaller questions to ask students: *What are your business goals? What tasks or activities do you want to do in English? What are your goals in taking a Business English course?* By asking students why they are in the course, what their personal goals are, and how they see a Business English class supporting those goals, teachers are better prepared to meet the wants and needs of the students. They can then design the content to be relevant, thus enhancing buy-in and motivation from students.

Where and when will learners use English?

A lot of information can be gathered from learners' places of work or places of business. Some Business English classes are commissioned by businesses for their employees. By sitting down with different employees, a teacher can gather useful information as to the purposes of creating a Business English course. Teachers should also take time to observe employees working in the business in an effort to see when and where English is being used on a regular basis.

In addition, this question will help teachers recognize common speech acts used in the business as well as communication styles and important areas of vocabulary. For example, in terms of speech acts, a teacher might observe that employees regularly engage in purchasing negotiations with clients, colleagues and organizational partners. The teacher can then prepare lessons and activities related to the pragmatics of negotiation and corresponding vocabulary. Another analysis might be to review the types of documents written and read in the business. In reviewing such materials, the teacher can identify the level of formality used in different contexts and the field-specific vocabulary. Furthermore, observations and conversations with employees will help a teacher better understand the hierarchy, structure, and day-to-day happenings of the business, which in turn can be used for scenario and context practice in the classroom.

What are the language levels of the learners?

As with any English language class, it is important for teachers to have a sense of the language level of the learners. For example, a teacher who plans a Business English class believing that the students have an advanced level of English will have to re-design the course if students are

actually at a low-intermediate level of English. Business English can be designed and adapted for students at almost any language level.

What language skills are necessary for learners to achieve their Business English goals?

The answer to this question also plays an important role in course design. Students who would like to fine-tune their small-talk skills with customers will have different language, content, and course needs than students who need help writing company-wide memos. Identifying the necessary language skills can help further define the course's purpose.

A needs analysis is merely the first step of many in planning, designing, and teaching an effective Business English class.

Materials and Logistics

Once a thorough needs analysis has been started and is in process, teachers and course planners can begin to choose materials and texts that will best suit the needs and goals of the learners. There are a myriad of online resources that are free and available to teachers with limited funds in addition to published materials for purchase. In addition, teachers should think about the technology and tools that are required to deliver content. Overall, what materials and logistics should be considered when designing the course? Here are some questions to help with these considerations.

What types of texts are needed?

Teachers should ask themselves what kinds of materials are needed in relation to the skills that will be taught and the level of the learners in the class. For example, if a significant portion of the course emphasizes listening, then the teacher needs to find audio clips and sound bites that are both relevant and level-appropriate for the students. Depending on the level of the learners, teachers also need to ask if authentic materials would be accessible to learners or if it would be better to use materials designed specifically for EFL learners.

What materials, technology, and supplies are available?

Whether using audio materials or reading texts, having students write on paper or type on computers, teachers should think about what materials and supplies are available to the class. First, clarify questions around funding and supplies.

- Who is paying for the course?
- What materials and supplies will be made available for the participants?
- Is technology considered in that budget?

Then, think about the number of students in the course and their own financial means.

- Can learners be expected to bring laptops or will teachers need to supply them?
- Should learners buy their own pencils and paper or will the teacher have those on hand?

After answering some of these basic questions, teachers can then ask questions about the classroom space and the logistics of conducting the course.

- If listening to audio clips is a part of the class, how will the audio be played for students?
- Will the teacher need to bring a set of speakers or will the classroom space come with a sound system?
- Is there a chalkboard/whiteboard with chalk/markers?
- How is the classroom set up? Are there enough seats for everyone? Can the furniture be moved around to form new set-ups?
- Will the teacher have access to either a video projector or an overhead projector?
- Is the space quiet enough to support listening and speaking activities?
- Is there computer access? Can laptops be brought into the class?

Course Design

As teachers continue to determine the answers to more questions throughout the needs analysis process and start to identify some of the issues around materials and logistics, they can begin to outline the course. The needs analysis plays a crucial role in defining the overall goals of the course, which, in turn, gives teachers some guidance in breaking the course into comprehensive and achievable units.

Once again, there are a few questions that need answers before planning a single lesson:

- How often and for how long will the class meet?
- How many students are estimated to participate?
- What is the duration of the full course?

While these questions may seem obvious, they make a big difference to the overall planning and course design. A course that meets one hour each week for four weeks will look very different than a class that meets two hours per day, five days each week for fifteen weeks. With this information and the overall goals of the course in hand teachers can start to outline and draft a plan.

- How do the learning goals break down in terms of language skill? in terms of content?
- What content and language skills serve as building blocks for achieving the final goals?
- Of the content and language skills required, what should come first? What content and language skills build up from a particular topic?

Once teachers start to tackle some of the big-picture questions about the course design, they will start to see a natural organization and pattern take shape. The emerging shape leads to

designing separate content and skill units that will serve as smaller, more achievable parts of the whole course. Each unit will include clear, measurable, achievable objectives, content and skill instruction, and tasks and activities that contribute and lay a foundation for what comes next. Once a rough outline of each unit with objectives drafted are in place teachers can then go back and start lesson planning and incorporating the materials chosen. If ever in doubt as to how the course is coming together, the teacher can return to the initial goals of the course and see how the smaller pieces fit.

Assessment

Finally, a teacher and a course's stakeholders must consider the assessment process.

- Will there be formal assessment as a way to measure progress?
- Will teachers be required to utilize standardized tests at the beginning, middle, and end of the course to show progress?
- What does it mean if a student in the course doesn't make progress or doesn't advance according to the expectations of stakeholders?

Assessment questions and considerations can weigh heavily in a Business English course, especially if a company is paying the bill or employees (students) are expected to achieve certain goals in order to retain their jobs. As a result, teachers should get some clarification early on in order to set up the course and its participants for success.

- What diagnostic assessment will be given initially to determine an initial language level for each student?
- What formal assessments will be given throughout the course and/or at its end to track student progress?
- What is the criteria for success? Will students be required to show progress to get a certificate? Does participation warrant completion? How will success be measured?
- What are the consequences for not passing the course or showing progress?
- Who will design the assessments or will a set of guidelines and corresponding standardized tests be used?

In addressing such questions, the teacher can get a better idea as to how to plan and design the course with the assessments in mind. If one of the larger goals is to show progress in X, then the teacher can plan for that in the unit objectives and tasks. What is critical is that the teacher is involved in understanding how the assessments are used and how the results will impact the course and students.

All English courses require careful consideration and planning, but the needs analysis and the information it presents are essential to the planning, materials development, design, and assessment of a Business English course. Business English courses are so varied in their goals and objectives and so targeted in their outcomes that no aspect of planning and development can be overlooked. And while it may seem overwhelming in some ways, teaching takes time, creativity, and thoughtfulness to be its most rewarding for both teachers and students.

Next Steps

Each Monday we post something new for you to explore or do. Here is the schedule for this month:

1st week: Join our private Facebook group here:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/AETeachersCorner/>. Please answer all three questions completely. You will not be accepted into the group unless you answer the questions.

2nd week: Respond to the question prompt that will be posted Monday morning on the AE Teacher's Corner Facebook page.

3rd week: Discuss Business English with other group members, using the prompt that will be posted on Monday on the AE Teachers Corner Facebook page.

4th week: Browse the list of resources on this topic, which will be posted on the AE Teacher's Corner Facebook page.

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