

## Surviving teaching in companies

Teaching English in companies can involve teachers working in an unfamiliar environment with restricted resources and a range of cultures, customs and constraints they are not accustomed to. On the other hand, the scenario presents some great opportunities. Learners in this context often have very immediate and specific language needs and come to class highly motivated. It can be very satisfying to work with them towards achieving these needs and to see the results first-hand, when your students tell you about how the lessons have helped them with this or that meeting, phone call, presentation or business lunch.

Here are six of the most common challenges mentioned by teachers, followed by our comments and advice.

However, it is very useful for you to get to know your learners and their business. Ask your learners to explain what they do in detail and what role English plays in that. A good idea is to conduct a needs-analysis test at the beginning of the course (see the example analysis we have provided at the end of this article). Use the company website, brochures, company promotional material or emails they have written and received (if they are not confidential). It doesn't matter if the material is not in English. Your students can explain visuals and explain or translate texts for you. They will probably teach you some of the special language or terms they use. Showing an educated interest in your learners' business is much more effective than trying to be an expert in it.



### 1 I don't know 'business English'.

This teacher feels daunted by the prospect of not knowing 'specialist' language their students might need. Business is conducted in English by people all over the world but there is no real evidence to suggest that they use language much differently when they do business than in other situations. Students are more likely to want to learn how to interact in English in a range of situations which don't require any specialist language.



### 2 My students hardly ever come to class. They are always so busy with their work.

This situation can be tackled from two angles: principled and pragmatic. In the principle-driven approach you make it clear to learners that the situation is unsatisfactory and how it will adversely affect their learning goals. Discuss time management, prioritizing and company culture if you and they feel this is helpful. If possible, talk to the person responsible for language training in the company and / or your director of studies.

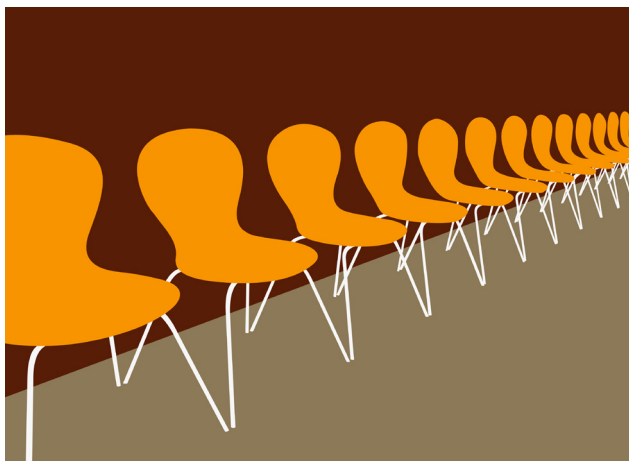
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The pragmatic approach is to deal cheerfully and positively with the situation as it is. Develop strategies. For example, if the class is interrupted by a mobile phone, ask the student to recount in English the gist of what the call was about. Take advantage of the situation to teach common phrases when doing this, such as:

*Sorry, that was ... (my wife, the manager, an important client)*

*He / She wanted ... (to know about the project, another phone number, to talk with me)*

Or just relax and accept it. Plan self-standing lessons that learners attending irregularly will be able to participate in comfortably. Always start the lesson on time but plan activities so that late arrivals can be incorporated easily. If you think of the lesson as belonging to the learners, it can help avoid potential feelings of resentment.



### **3 We do the class in a huge meeting room and there are only three of us!**

You can usually move chairs to avoid having learners sitting miles apart or all in a line facing you. It can be tempting to sit round the conference table for the entire lesson because it feels more business-like. This isn't business, though – it's teaching and learning. If learners need to work in pairs or groups, make that happen.



### **4 There's no computer, audio player or even a whiteboard!**

This is a fairly common situation when teaching in companies, where classes take place in offices rather than purpose-built classrooms. You may find you can use your own laptop, ipod etc. to bring audiovisual materials into the lesson. However, this situation may have other advantages which we will be exploring later on in our series.



### **5 My students just don't seem motivated.**

Three areas can affect motivation when teaching in companies: content, method and attitude. Content may be perceived as not relevant enough; perhaps the teacher is doggedly ploughing through a coursebook which isn't relevant to the learners' needs (see below) or perhaps the wrong agenda has been set by the training manager. Perhaps the content is 'too relevant'; classes usually take place in employees'

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free time, before, during or after a full working day. Class time is part of the learners' *social* rather than *working* space, so simulating and discussing work situations can be demotivating. Discuss the balance of business and non-business content with your learners.

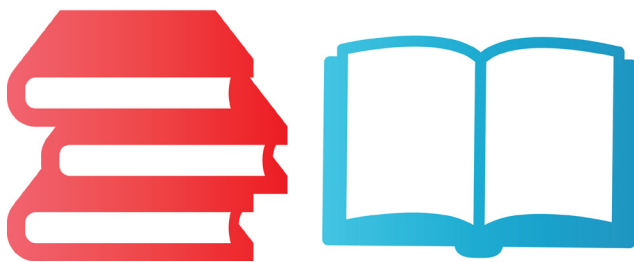
Let's consider method or approach. In many business cultures language training is thought of as something which is delivered – a bit like lunch in the canteen. It is served up, more or less appetizing, and you consume it. Learner-centred approaches and even communicative approaches may lead to confusion on the part of the learner if not sufficiently explained by the teacher. If you meet resistance, be prepared to modify your approach to meet learners halfway.

Learners in the company setting may be unwilling participants in the company's language training policy, which they neither understand nor care about. It may simply be that they have no real need to use English professionally or socially, at least at present. If you have a group with this sort of profile, you need to work on *here* and *now* motivation. In other words, make the class itself an enjoyable social and learning event that people want to attend for its own sake.

units you think are relevant and leave out those you don't. Supplement these with authentic (and up-to-date) material from the internet and the learners' own working environment.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Emerson, Paul and Hamilton, Nick. *Five-Minute Activities for Business English*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Harding, Keith. *English for Specific Purposes*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Frendo, Evan. *How to Teach Business English*. Longman, 2005
- Barton et al. *The business English Teacher*. Delta publishing, 2010



### 6 My students don't like the coursebook.

Business coursebooks, particularly the more recent ones, contain many examples of texts and language work (written and spoken) which are interesting and relevant in a general sense to learners. This is very helpful to teachers. However, a coursebook needs to be treated as a restaurant menu rather than a novel you read from cover to cover. You and your learners can select the

# SURVIVAL GUIDE

By Lindsay Clandfield and Duncan Foord

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### Example needs analysis for in-company classes

Please complete the form below and return it to your teacher. This information will be used to plan future lessons and help us teach you better.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

What is your job and when do you use English in it?

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How do you use English outside your job?

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Think of the last time you used English. What was the situation? Who were you communicating with? Did you have any problems? How did you feel?

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What activities do you like doing to learn and practise English in class?

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How much time do you want to spend on different areas of communication on this course? Circle a number, from 0 (no time) to 4 (a lot of time).

Discussions and meetings 0 1 2 3 4

Telephoning 0 1 2 3 4

Social English 0 1 2 3 4

Discussing products 0 1 2 3 4

Presentations 0 1 2 3 4

Negotiating 0 1 2 3 4

Emails 0 1 2 3 4

Writing reports 0 1 2 3 4

How much time per week are you prepared to dedicate to practising English outside class?

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Do you have any other objectives for this course? Is there anything else you would like to tell your teacher to help him / her plan your course?

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