

Specialist or generalist?

Level: Intermediate upwards

Timing: 90 minutes plus

Material needed: One copy of the student worksheets and Vocabulary record per student

Group size: Any, including one-to-one

Overview

This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based around an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* Issue 4/2010. The article is written by an American career coach and discusses why we should consider becoming specialists (rather than generalists).

The tasks in the student worksheets will encourage the students to learn and use new business vocabulary and functional language and also to develop and practise (new) skills that could be useful in business situations, such as report writing, meetings and presentations.

The teacher's notes provide suggestions for teaching and learning strategies as well as ideas on how to present the tasks in the classroom, any necessary answer keys and extension tasks and lesson plans.

Warmer

Introduce the topic by getting the students to answer the questions – first by talking in small groups and then as general class feedback.

Key:

1. A 'jack-of-all-trades' is someone who is competent in many areas of work.
2. ... a master of none.
3. students' own answers
4. a generalist

Key vocabulary

These key words will help the students understand the article. By pre-teaching them in this way, you are enabling them to read the article without interrupting the flow to look up words essential for the comprehension. Encourage students to do this in pairs or small groups so that there is also a speaking element involved in the task.

Short definitions of a few other words – which would usually be considered non-essential business vocabulary but are necessary for the easy comprehension of this article – are given at the end of the reading text.

Key:

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1. researcher | 7. mundane |
| 2. counsellor | 8. field |
| 3. dabble | 9. narrowness |
| 4. hedonism | 10. lack |
| 5. altruism | 11. niche |
| 6. monumental | |

Teaching and learning strategy: Essential and non-essential business vocabulary

It's human nature to pick up on things that are unusual or out of the ordinary. In class this often means that students will want to write down and learn vocabulary that is 'different' and sticks in their minds. This often results in learners having vocabulary books full of words and terms that are not very useful to them. An example from this article would be that students pick up on *rose hybridizer* as being unusual, exotic and fun but ignore words such as *field* and *researcher* which will be of much more use. The challenges for the teachers are: 1. how to overcome this and convince students that some words are going to be more useful to them than others, and 2. how we (and they) can be sure which words are going to be more useful.

The answers can be found in a good learners' dictionary, which would highlight the most commonly used words in English. Once the learners are aware of this, they can look up new words in their dictionary and decide whether the word is one they really should integrate into their active vocabulary or whether it is just fun to know but can happily remain in their passive vocabulary. Macmillan's learners' dictionary uses a red stars system to highlight the 7,500 most commonly used words in English: three red stars indicate the 2,500 most common English words; two red stars indicate very common words; one red star indicates fairly common words.

If we look at the words above (*hybridizer*, *field* and *researcher*) and search for them on www.macmillandictionary.com, we discover that *field* (as in *field of work*) has three red stars next to it. *Researcher* is derived from *research*, which is a two-star word. *Hybridizer* does not warrant a mention at all in the dictionary – *hybrid* does, but it is a simple black entry with no red stars. So, we can see that although *hybridizer* is probably fun to say, learning the meanings and usage of 'mundane' words such as *field* and *researcher* are much more likely to improve the students' level of language. Unless your students are horticulturalists, of course!

Summary: General information

By filling the gaps in the summary with information pulled directly out of the article the students demonstrate that they have understood both the article and the author's opinions and suggestions. This shows understanding of the overall message of the text.

Specialist or generalist?

Key:

1. career coach
2. pianist, medical researcher, teacher, school psychologist, professor, rose hybridizer, college counsellor, career counsellor, actor, director, writer
3. jack-of-all-trades
4. deeper
5. field
6. specialists
7. generalists
8. expertise/speciality
9. mundane
10. specialist
11. passionate/good
12. career

Summary: Specific details

In this task the students are asked to look for specific details. Ask them to underline, circle or highlight (using two colours) their answers in the article and compare them with other students' answers before writing them into the table.

Key:

(suggested answers)

advantages
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. most extremely successful people are specialists 2. you could make a bigger contribution to your field (e.g. medical discoveries) 3. you become passionate about your work 4. becoming an expert makes you feel good 5. it is likely to help your career 6. you can concentrate on your niche interests

disadvantages
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. progress is often slow 2. it may lead to excessive narrowness 3. it may hinder your chances of promotion 4. your interpersonal skills may suffer 5. it requires a lot of discipline

Discussion

Give the students a few minutes to work by themselves and make notes about their own ideas and opinions before asking them to discuss the questions in groups. Set a time limit on the group discussions and tell everyone that they will be required to give feedback to the rest of the class. Make sure that at least one person in each group makes

notes about their group's discussion. These notes will be helpful in the feedback part of the task.

Project: Becoming a specialist

Set students the task of working either alone (in one-to-one teaching situations) or in small groups. If possible, they should work with people who have the same or similar jobs to themselves. If that is not possible, then set them the additional task of comparing and contrasting ways of becoming an expert in their different jobs and fields. The task can either be carried out in class time or set as homework. Students should later present their ideas and findings.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all the new and useful vocabulary they have learned during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

More on this topic

For follow-up lessons on the same or related topics go to the following lesson plans in the Business tasks series on onestopenglish:

Business tasks: Ability and skill
<http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?catid=59913&docid=156899>

Business tasks: Knowledge
<http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?catid=59913&docid=156385>

Specialist or generalist?

1 Warmer

Answer the following questions.

1. A 'jack-of-all-trades' is ...
 - a. ... someone who studied a building trade at college.
 - b. ... another word for apprentice.
 - c. ... someone who is competent in many areas of work.
2. Read the first paragraph of the article to find out how the saying continues.
3. Is there a similar saying in your language?
4. Is a 'jack-of-all-trades' a specialist or a generalist?

2 Key vocabulary

Scan the article to find the key words that match the definitions. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. someone who collects facts and ideas to develop new products, services, etc. for their work _____ (para 1)
2. someone whose job is to give advice and help to people with problems _____ (para 1)
3. a verb meaning *to be involved in an activity for a short time in a way that is not very serious* _____ (para 2)
4. the practice of only doing things that you enjoy and that give you pleasure _____ (para 3)
5. a way of thinking or behaving that shows you care about other people and their interests more than you care about yourself _____ (para 3)
6. incredibly large and important, requiring a huge amount of effort _____ (para 4)
7. ordinary and not interesting or exciting, especially because of happening too regularly _____ (para 4)
8. a subject that you study or a type of work that you do _____ (para 5)
9. thinking about and concentrating on only one thing; not being able to see the wider picture _____ (para 6)
10. to not have any or enough of something that you need or want _____ (para 6)
11. a job or activity that you are good at, are able to specialize in, and that is very suitable for you _____ (para 7)

Specialist or generalist?

Specialist or generalist?

by Marty Nemko

It's worth becoming an expert in one field! Marty Nemko says why.



1 Many people find it fun to be a jack-of-all-trades (and master of none). I'm one of them: I've enjoyed being a pianist, medical researcher, teacher, school psychologist, professor, rose hybridizer, college counsellor, career counsellor, actor, director, and writer of everything from columns, to plays, to movies, to proposals for reinventing education.

2 Intelligent people often dabble widely because they can usually progress quite quickly. Unfortunately, it takes a lot longer to go from good to great. As Malcolm Gladwell reported in his book *Outliers*, most extremely successful people go deep for decades. I doubt that the person who will cure cancer will have dabbled at it.

3 So, should we force ourselves to take the time to become a real expert at something? Answering that requires us to look at this key question: to live a good life, where should we be on the continuum between hedonism and productivity/altruism? Can we take the easy route and simply say that it's a matter of personal choice? I don't think so. If everyone just pursued hedonism, most of the time would be spent eating, drinking, having sex, watching movies and so on. Soon, there'd be little food and our sewers would never get repaired. In contrast, if everyone spent maximum time on productivity, we'd have more medical discoveries, better (and less expensive) food and the like.

4 Thus, I invite you (and me, too) to take a look at the areas in which you have some expertise. Is there one you feel you should go deeper into? It doesn't have to be monumental – you could decide to become an expert on pricing widgets. After all, if you price a widget right, more people will buy it and benefit from it, and you make sure the widget company's employees have jobs. Who knows? You may find that going into greater depth gets you passionate about a field, even if it's mundane.

5 I know people who, having become expert at something, turned passionate about such prosaic products as accordion doors! It feels good to become an expert on something. And going deep is likely to help your career. Except at the very top of a field (for example, CEO), society rewards specialists, not generalists.

6 Of course, there's a negative side to going deep: excessive narrowness. We all know technical experts who are locked into lower-level jobs because they lack the leadership skills and organizational ability to move up. They may also lack the interpersonal skills to be good friends, lovers and parents. But it seems wiser to start by becoming an expert in something and then to learn those other skills, rather than to start by dabbling in them all.

7 To be honest, I don't think I have the discipline to give up dilettantism and go deeper into one thing, although I could make a bigger contribution by becoming a true expert on how to career-coach doctors, a niche interest of mine. But how about *you*, dear reader? Is there something *you* want to go deeper into?

Marty Nemko is one of America's top career coaches. The author of 'Cool Careers for Dummies', he has been advising clients for more than 20 years. He is based in Oakland, California.

Language help:

rose hybridizer – someone who grows new types of roses from two existing roses

sewers – the underground tubes and passageways that remove waste water

widgets – a small object or piece of equipment that you do not know the name of

accordion doors – folding doors that fold in the same way an accordion does

dilettantism – (here) working on something you don't really know much about

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3 Summary: General information

Complete the summary with information from the article.

The author is a professional (1) _____, but he has also dabbled as a (2) _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, _____ and _____. Therefore, he describes himself as a (3) _____.

However, he says that if you want to be great at something, rather than just good, it is important to go (4) _____ into it. The people who are extremely successful in their (5) _____ of work are (6) _____ not (7) _____.

So, whether the area in which your (8) _____ lies is monumental or simply (9) _____, the author suggests you become a (10) _____. It will make you feel (11) _____ and will help your (12) _____.

4 Summary: Specific details

What, according to the author of the article, are the advantages and disadvantages connected with being a specialist?

advantages of becoming a specialist	disadvantages of becoming a specialist
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	

Specialist or generalist?

5 Discussion

Do you consider yourself to be a specialist or a generalist?

Do you agree with the author's opinions and the advice he gives in the article?

What other points or comments would you like to make on this subject?

6 Project: Becoming a specialist

Do a project on the following topic:

What measures can you take to help you become a specialist in your field of work?

Look at aspects such as further qualifications, professional development, national and international organizations and associations, professional awards, and past and present experts.

