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SPEAKING VERSUS COMMUNICATING IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Speaking versus Communicating in Business English[1]

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Abstract

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s indirectly led to an increased emphasis on communication skills in the workplace. This paper examines the communication needs of the workplace and whether the education system prepares them for these needs.

Introduction

When the Indian economy was liberalized in 1991, Indian professionals were expected to interact with international clients and customers. One of the strongest selling points for Indian businessmen abroad was the skilled workforce back in India that knew English. India appeared to have an edge over international competition because of its long association with English, the use of English for administration, and the fact that English is taught either as a school language or as the medium of instruction.

However, business organizations soon realized that our language skills in English are inadequate for international communication. In the years between Independence and liberalization, English in India was learned primarily through classroom experience making India a "multilingual scholastic English country" (A.F. Gupta, 1997). A variety of Indian English has emerged that enables Indians to communicate but it is less effective for communicating with people who are unfamiliar with the Indian context (see, for example, Zaidman, 2001, for an example of communication between Israeli and Indian business organizations).

Business organizations recognize that their staff communication skills need to be improved—to communicate not only with international clients but also to deal with

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customers in India and for internal communication within the organization. Hence, organizations have begun to invest in improving the communication skills of their staff.

In this paper, we examine some of the problems in spoken interaction that Indians face in the business world, drawing on our observations during training sessions at business organizations.

Problems in Spoken English: the view from Call Centers

Do Indians face problems communicating in spoken English and, if so, what kinds of problems do they face? One site where these issues arise is call centers and the people who can answer these questions are language trainers at call centers who provide pre- and in-service training to help Indians deal with global customers. We interviewed three managers of training centers in Delhi to identify the main problems they had to tackle during training.

Two managers said that US companies that came to India in the 1990s expecting to find an English-speaking population were surprised to find that they could not be understood. One of the managers said, "India has always been sold as a huge pool of English speakers; this is not true."

During the training, part of the time is spent on accent training. Although some companies still train agents to use specific accents (such as British and North American), most companies now aim at 'reducing' or 'neutralizing' a strong regional accent so that intelligibility is not affected. However, one manager said that "communication and solving a problem are more important [than accent]." She explained that in call centers, the agents have to handle queries and fresh graduates don't know the best way of handling a query. This is because Indians are "infants at service" –until fifteen years ago, we only had the Fiat and the Ambassador—the concept of service did not exist.

In his self-help book for call center training, Raina (2004) discusses the traditional components of spoken English, namely, accent, stress & intonation, and grammar in the

context of business English. Chapter 13 (Essentials of Customer Service) consists of brief scenarios that explain why certain responses are not appropriate.

Example

Agent: Sorry sir, we are unable to accept that source of income.

Customer: Why did you take so long to tell me this?

Response 1: We are very sorry about this, Sir. **(Service is not servility)**

Response 2: I am afraid the verification process takes a little time, Sir**. (Direct and precise)**

(Raina, 2004, p. 194).

Here Raina draws attention to the discourse level and the communicative functions of language.

Training in Business English: The Participants

During two of our training programs, we found a gap between what the participants had been taught in school/college and communication in a business context. The training programs were conducted at two Indian business organizations in New Delhi. Participants in both programs had studied in non-English medium schools; in one program, the participants were engineers whereas in the other program they were sales personnel who had to deal with customers. There were 15 students on average in each class. The classes ran for between 32 to 40 hours.

Participants' Knowledge Base

The participants' knowledge of lexis and grammar was excellent. For example, in one class, the participants did a mechanical exercise on tag questions perfectly, and explained that they had learned the rules in their Class X English course.

The problem was that a great deal of their knowledge was not appropriate for modern communication. In school, they had been encouraged to learn and use formal words. During one of the activities which was a telephone task, there was tremendous resistance

from the participants when we suggested that they replace the word *request* with *ask*, *inform* with *tell*, and *note down* with *take down*.

In short, the participants know grammatical rules and have a huge vocabulary bank. Lexis and grammar are not the problem. Instead, we need to re-orient learners to new and different contexts for using the language. Learners know the grammatical rules but they do not know the contexts in which they are to be used. The following sections give a few examples of contexts that require more than mere knowledge of words and grammar.

Appropriate Language

Although participants had a wide and varied vocabulary, these have generally been learned in word lists; as a result, they often did not know the differences between related words. For example, they used the words journey, travel, and trip interchangeably, saying "I journeyed to Chandigarh by taxi." when they mean "I travelled to Chandigrah by taxi."

A bigger problem is that even when speaking participants preferred to use lexis that is associated with the formal register. For example, they would say *utilize* rather than *use*. Such lexical items, which are reserved for written genres or formal speech, are favoured in school and students do not get an understanding either of different registers or the lexis associated with them.

A similar problem can be seen in the grammatical rules taught in schools. Take, for example, the problems associated with question forms. Unlike Standard English, in Indian English the subject and auxiliary verb are not transposed in questions. For example, "*Where you are going?"* is an acceptable form in Indian English. Although the participants could cite the rules for creating question forms in Standard English, in speaking they used the Indian English form.

Admittedly, part of the problem they faced is that they are unused to framing questions in English. This is because students rarely get a chance to ask questions in class—they spend their time answering questions.

Functions of Language

In spoken interaction, people are not just speakers or listeners—they have to play both roles to keep the interaction moving. Here are some of the common functions that speakers and listeners use during spoken interaction:

- Give their opinions (*I think that*…, *It seems to me*…)
- Ask for agreement (*Wouldn't you agree?)*
- Agree (*I completely agree*…)
- Disagree (*Yes, that may be true but*…)
- Clarify their ideas (*The point I'm trying to make is*…)
- Ask for clarification (*Do you mean*…?)
- Show doubt (*Yes…perhaps…)*
- Persuade and convince (*You must admit that…)*
- Concede (*I'll agree with you there*.)
- Refute a fact (*Actually*…)

Language is deeply implicated in these functions for they help interlocutors achieve the level of directness and politeness appropriate for the group (for example, *That's not how I see it* vs *Well, you have a point there, but*…)

Although the participants had learned the grammar of English, they were not familiar with the functions of the language and the associated phrases. For example, the phrase *Shall I* …? is frequently used for an offer. From their grammar books (such as Wren and Martin) they had learned that *shall* is used with personal pronouns (a grammatical form that has almost vanished in Standard English) but they had not been taught the more frequently used *Shall I …?* form. Again, they were aware that *can* is used for ability but did not know that it is used (along with *could*) to indicate a polite request (as in *Can I*

join you? or *Could you lend me your pen?).* Instead, to indicate politeness they thought it was sufficient to use *please* as in *Give me your pen, please*, not realizing that this is an order and not a request.

In short, although participants knew the grammatical rules and had a large word bank, their uses were narrow and restricted to a formal, even outdated, register.

Accuracy in Speaking

The participants felt that grammatical errors are not tolerated in speech and assumed that fluent speakers never make slips during speech. However, disfluencies are common while speaking and speech repairs form part of the repertoire of fluent speakers—they seek clarification, use circumlocution when they cannot find the word, etc. If schools emphasize accuracy when speaking, students do not learn how to handle breakdowns in communication; they do not learn the repair strategies that are part of normal communication.

In the training program, we used a short exercise where participants had to talk for one minute about what each of them does at work. They felt they had to put all the information about their job profile into perfectly constructed sentences with no hesitations. Hence, there were a lot of speech breakdowns. So we used a taped excerpt from a textbook where British employees describe what they do at work. Here is an extract from one of the transcripts:

> "I wish at times I was a little bit more busier. Um…"
>
> (New International Business English, Teacher's Book, pg. 29).

After participants had got over their surprise, they were more confident and enthusiastic about their own ability to speak.

Perspective in Speaking

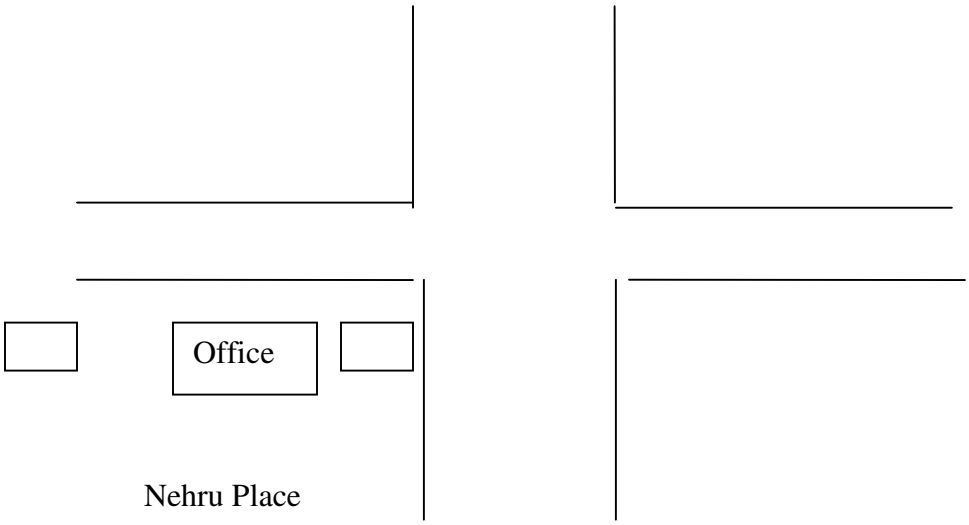
Speaking involves at least two parties who share a common ground. The speaker has to ensure that the listener understands what is said by asking for confirmation and repairing

any misunderstanding. The listener, on his or her part, confirms understanding and asks questions when in doubt.

During the classes, when pairs worked together on dialogues, two problems came up. The listeners would not tell the speaker if they did not understand what was said. The participants explained that when they do not understand something, they feel it is their fault -- either because they lack the comprehension skills or because they hesitate to question their superior (Sridhar, 1996).

The second problem came from the speaker. In one activity, the participants were told to give a customer directions on how to reach the office. The directions they provided were brief and insufficient; in addition, they were from the **speaker's** perspective and not the listener's perspective. A typical set of instructions ran as follows:

> "Come to Nehru Place. Go straight. On the right, there are a lot of buildings. You will see a sign for the office on one of the buildings. Ask someone how to get here."



These directions do not take into account any of the following:

(a) Which direction the customer is coming from
(b) That Nehru Place is a crossroads and the customer will not know which road to take
(c) The building is on the right-side for the speaker but on the left for the listener.
(d) That the office is not on the ground floor. It has to be reached via a convoluted route involving stairs, a passageway, and the elevator.

The use of the word *come* in *Come to Nehru Place* shows that the speakers view the map from the perspective of the office and do not put themselves in the customer's shoes. To a listener, the instructions are confusing because they do not take into account what s/he sees on the way to the office ("I can see a cinema hall. Is the office before or after the hall?" "Is it the third or the fourth building?") and left/right have been reversed.

Conclusion

In this paper we examined some of the issues in workplace communication in English. This paper is limited to presenting some of the problems based on our observations in teaching Business English in corporate organizations. We found that schools equip students with language skills in formal registers, but this is insufficient for workplace communication. Many of the functional aspects of language remain outside the students' knowledge base and need to be addressed when teaching students spoken English. Therefore, courses in Business English, especially short intensive programs, cannot use conventional language teaching methods; instead, we should review and design materials that focus on the skills and strategies that are used for effective communication in actual business contexts.

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