

# 'Leading by example in the Business English classroom'

Workshop given by

Tom Smith and Stephanie Ashford at the

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*Here are some reflections on this workshop and a similar one we did at the ESP-Conference in Ulm, Germany, in September 2007. The issues raised by the people attending are presented below in the form of 'frequently asked questions'.*

## **So, why are you offering this workshop?**

Some learners are expert at chairing meetings, interviewing job applicants, advising clients, etc., but simply lack the English. Others expect us to provide skills training as well. Whatever the constellation of their expectations, we should be able to do what we teach, and demonstrate that we can do it.

As multi-tasking Business English trainers, we can draw on our learners' expertise, create materials to motivate and engage them, provide correction and feedback, and present ourselves as models of language use. If we occasionally slip out of our role as language trainer and into the role of someone they often communicate with at work (customer, supplier, colleague, bank manager, patient, etc), then we are helping them to rehearse for their professional roles outside the classroom.

The aim of this workshop was to demonstrate the value of taking part in simulations that we've developed ourselves, and to consider some of the pitfalls. To kick off the workshop, Tom Smith gave a short presentation aimed at a fictitious group of learners who need both 'English for presentations' and vocabulary consolidation in a specific area. His presentation was followed by a question-and answer-session with the people sitting in the front rows, who were asked to be 'in role' as learners. The other delegates were given tasks as observers and then invited to comment on aspects of language and other issues.

## **I'm a lousy actor. Does this matter?**

Not really, but if we expect learners to be able to act and improvise, we should be prepared to do the same. Oscar-winning performances are not required, nor even acting in the sense of pretending to be someone else. We only need to imagine what we would say in a particular role and with a particular aim. For example, how might a sales rep go about flogging dodgy horsemeat? An advantage of stepping outside the normal context of 'trainer + participant' is that it allows learners to interact with us in ways that might otherwise make them feel uncomfortable. We are giving them a 'safe' context in which to challenge and confront us, perhaps even be downright rude to us.

### **Is it possible to take language notes while participating in the simulation?**

Doubling up as observer and participant isn't easy, but it comes with practice. The question-and-answer-session following the presentation showed that a clipboard is a useful prop. It gives the audience the impression that we're busily noting down details of their questions (focus on content), when in fact we are discreetly noting down their errors and language gaps (focus on language).

### **So how can this approach be exploited?**

Depending on what learners need, the text of the presentation and the responses from the audience can be used to teach any of the following:

- Skills/ competencies (e.g. structuring and delivering a presentation, taking notes, dealing with questions)
- Topics (e.g. business ethics, investment, stocks and shares, R&D)
- Functions (e.g. 'chunks' for persuading, asking for information)
- Specialist lexis (e.g. vocabulary relating to the pharmaceutical industry)
- Structures, e.g. tenses, question forms

Of course, one can bring all of the above into play. A versatile, multi-layered session that switches focus provides the '*Methodenwechsel*' needed to keep the buzz going. By giving learners the text of the presentation afterwards, their attention can be drawn to some of the 'high-surrender' language. Better still, we can ask learners to identify language that will be useful to them. Also, giving a presentation is just one example of this 'leading by example' approach: It can be extended to simulations in which the trainer steps in to chair a meeting or act as an interlocutor in a negotiation or interview.

### **Would you use this presentation for language input?**

No, probably not. With adult ESP learners it is difficult to predict what items of language everybody will or won't be familiar with. The presentation works best for recycling language that learners are likely to know or have just learned, not as a vehicle for introducing new language. As trainers, we can 'seed' the text with language pitched to the level of our learners. If there is lexical overload, they won't be able to ask questions on the content afterwards.

### **Should we give feedback on the non-verbal aspects of a presentation?**

Yes, if that's what learners have asked for. Unsolicited feedback on aspects such as body language and appearance can backfire, so it is important to have a clear mandate. If participants have asked us for feedback on non-linguistic aspects (or have accepted our offer to give it), then we could even invite members of the audience to give their feedback. Their impressions can be as valuable as ours. For group feedback to work, though, there needs to be a considerable level of trust and rapport between the members. Here our '*Fingerspitzengefühl*' is needed.

### **Wouldn't videos or audio recordings be better?**

It depends. While recorded scripts are useful for exposing learners to a wide range of dialects and accents, they are not interactive. When we take part in simulations, we can respond spontaneously, we can subtly re-cast unclear language and we can steer dialogues in a constructive way. Recorded dialogues, whether authentic, scripted or improvised, cannot offer this type of interaction.

### **Would you use the text of the presentation to teach tenses?**

Yes, if that's what learners need. Indeed, we can seed the text with the very tenses they have problems with. However, rather than anticipating these problems, it may be more useful to have participants give their own presentations, and deal with grammar points as they arise.

### **What if participants feel uncomfortable about the topic?**

If they're likely to feel uncomfortable, then avoid it! Provocative topics are great as long as they don't deal with issues that people are sensitive or uncomfortable about. It's best to choose topics that people will want to respond to, but that will not make them feel threatened or embarrassed in any way.

### **Isn't there a risk that as a 'performer' you become too dominant?**

Yes, if you allow this to happen. Therefore it is important that this activity is contextualised in some way, so that your 'performance' is no more than one step in a series of tasks. It also helps to choose a topic that interests your learners and that will encourage interaction.

### **Creating your own presentations isn't easy, is it?**

No, and it's even harder for our students who have to do it in English. So this is where we fit in – we lead by example. A 'template' approach can help, i.e. flagging up a basic structure and providing a choice of useful expressions.

### **So, what's the upshot of all this?**

Let's exploit our assets. With so many excellent publications and audio/visual recordings available on the market, it's tempting to let materials provide the input, and the learners provide the output. This reduces us to ... well, what? As Business English trainers, we do have some strings to our bow: First of all, we have the advantage of being a reliable model of spoken English that learners can interact with. Secondly, we are close to our learners and have an educated interest in their field, so we know best what they need. Thirdly, if we lead by example (even if this means putting our heads on the block occasionally), we encourage learners to have a go at things themselves.

### **And finally...**

Thanks to those of you who came along to the workshop, and for your contributions!

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