

The Impact of Information Technology on Communicating Business Matters – Challenge for ESP Teachers

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Abstract

Nowadays it is becoming more and more unusual to find a business that does not use some type of computer system. Practically every department, ranging from the front office to the storehouse, uses a computer processing service. Thanks to it the exchange of information via the net, i.e. either the Internet or the intranet, is much faster and more efficient, and the information itself is short and always to the point. It leads to a new way of communication that is simplified, but not simple. For someone not involved in the business it may even be incomprehensible due to a large number of abbreviations, acronyms, neologistic and jargon expressions typical of one particular business environment. A great many graduate trainees face this reality in the first weeks or sometimes even months of their hard-earned jobs. Despite being thoroughly trained in their professions and having a relatively good command of English, those ambitious entrepreneurial youngsters feel at sea when it comes to understanding their older, more experienced foreign colleagues and superiors. Short text messages, e-mails, internal documents of various kinds which they have to deal with on a daily basis as well as teleconferencing and training courses - all in English but somehow this English differs from the language learnt and used while studying. They seek help from ESP teachers who are well-versed in technology-soaked business jargons. Being one of them, one who once used to repel technology, I would like to share my experience and present my discoveries and obstacles which I encountered during my lessons and make suggestions how to take advantage of the knowledge that I acquired myself in the process of teaching.

The focus of my interest is the field of finance, with particular attention put to the language of accounting.

1. Introduction

Teaching English for Special Purposes (ESP) requires a knowledge of professional terminology used in various specific fields, e.g. business administration or finance and accounting. University-trained ESP teachers are experts in those fields when it comes to the use of English in formal documents and everyday business correspondence as well as in face-to-face communication for such purposes as networking, socialising or negotiating terms and conditions of contracts. There is a lot of formality and precision in this kind of communication. However, when teachers get hired by companies, they are asked to make the company employees proficient English speakers able to communicate business matters smoothly and concisely, using all sorts of electronic tools currently available in the market. What both teachers and young, not yet experienced in their jobs graduate trainees soon discover is the fact that despite having a good education they get totally lost during induction courses, teleconferences, ordinary telephone conversations and business meetings run in English because the language used by the company associates seems to be a kind of professional code that nobody taught them at university. The same problem they encounter in e-mails and short text messages. For many of them it is quite a shock. And now comes the question of the new role of an ESP teacher, which I personally find a challenge. His or her task is not only to teach the employee English, but first

of all get familiar with the professional code used in this particular organisation, consult all the linguistic doubts and misunderstandings with the ones who are already acquainted with the code and finally teach and train the employees, showing them that nobody is perfect and even a language expert sometimes does not fully understand what one is saying. It means that rule number one for both teachers and students is: "Do not panic!".

2. Information technology in accounting

The headword starting a discussion on this sort of issues is "information". It is referred to as certain good that we need to make our activity efficient. This is how information is treated in accounting, or widely understood finance of enterprises operating in all fields of economy. Therefore while analysing the use of information technology in processing financial data we ought to answer the question what information we expect. The first words that come to our minds are such adjectives as: fast, comprehensive, clear, updated, accurate, objective. As a result information allows us to make rational decisions. Thus we may conclude that correctly processed information forms the basis for rational decisions. How important this matter has become for modern enterprises is proved by the distinct division of finance into two sections: accounting and so called financial controlling. The first one is a quantified measure of an entity's financial status and activity. It registers all events connected with cash flow in the business. The second one analyses them by asking: how, why, what results from it?

All those processes are inextricably linked with everything that informatics offers. The basic reason for this is time (pace), amount and precision of the processed data, that is information. Informatics with the tools and methods of operation it provides is the field without which modern accounting and controlling are hardly possible. Electronic tools are becoming irreplaceable in building databases and their transfer. According to the latest research great hopes for the growth of business in the markets of banking, insurance and telecommunications are put on new chains of distribution, mainly via the net or in the form of call centres. In CRM (customer relationship management) electronic tools are more and more used and valued.

3. Language of computerised accounting

An important element of the job of an accountant is clear communication. As the language and measure of business, accounting is a critical tool in communicating and understanding business reality. A significant part of communication in this field is classification and unification of its terminology as well as simplification of the exchange of information. When it comes to multinationals the terminology is still not unified, although experts are working on it. The difficulties result from differences between national accounting systems and furthermore from various computer software programs used by businesses. Another important factor that has a large influence on precision in communication is corporate culture.

Electronic tools impose the usage of simplified means of expression. Thus concision is a characteristic feature of reports, memos and other messages sent by e-mail.

In order to support my thesis I present a set of examples collected in a Polish subsidiary of a multinational that is a leading claim management company. The system of financial reporting is designed in English by the mother company located in the United States of America. All the countries are supposed to follow the rules imposed by the system. The terminology that appears in charts and tables is commonly used not only by the Accounts Department, but all the employees in both written and oral communication. While teaching the employees I found out that when the system was introduced the exact meanings of many words and expressions were not understood, despite their existence in dictionaries. Thanks to clear and open communication with business associates from other countries the majority of the terms were clarified.

3.1 Acronyms and abbreviations

In what follows there are examples of acronyms and abbreviations used in internal business correspondence. Information what each of them stands for has turned out to be insufficient to be clearly understood. Therefore descriptions that plainly explain the exact meaning of each item are helpful, if not necessary for employees to get familiar with in order to avoid misunderstandings.

BuCa = Business Case. It is an internal document used to assess the projected revenues and related development costs for any solution/service. The BuCa determines the financial rationale for progressing the development of any new solution/service.

VP = Value Proposition. It describes in detail the value added that the solution/service will deliver to the customer organisation. It is financially driven. Often the expected benefits will be validated by the customer during a pilot of the new solution/service. Customer commitment is normally supported by **LOI** (Letter of Intent) to purchase, subject to delivery of the stated financial and efficiency benefits as stated in the Value Proposition. The VP is also a good base on which to price the solution/service and is part of the BuCa.

VD = Vision Document. It defines the stakeholders' view of the solution/service to be developed, specified in terms of the stakeholders' key needs and features. Containing an outline of the envisioned core requirements it provides the contractual basis for the more detailed technical requirements.

ASV = the Annualised Sales Value. It indicates the potential income one customer brings to the company within a year at the moment they sign the contract or when they sell him an additional SW license (i.e. new business and additional business).

SW = software. Computer programs used for vehicle damage calculation by insurers, assessors and bodyshops.

RUP = Rational Unified Process. A software development methodology. RUP organises the development of software into four phases (Inception, Elaboration, Construction and Transition), each consisting of one or more executable iterations of the software at that stage of development.

KStats = Key Statistics. They cover ASV split into new business and additional business.

IOU = I Owe You. It is the acknowledgement of a personal debt. The expression is used in short e-mails, for instance: "(...) has a lot of IOUs".

PDP = Product Development Process. It is the company's milestones reporting system to monitor the progress of the service development.

DPs = Decision Points. These are the PDP milestones.

3.2 Neologistic and jargon expressions

Creating neologistic and jargon expressions is the fruit of corporate culture. Examples of neologisms found in reports are as follows:

Estimatics - assessment transacions, assessments transacion based; estimatics show how many times a user entered the system to make a calculation.

Feature Lead - also referred to as Facilitator. It's the coordinator of the feature team that works closely together on a day-to-day basis to achieve the successful delivery of a solution/service. The Feature Lead coaches the team in establishing RUP.

Ossining Lines - Ossining Reporting is the company's monthly management report. In terms of revenue it contains the service/module structure, in terms of cost it is a cost center reporting (with defined cost centre structure).

When it comes to accounting jargon or even slang, such examples quite often appear in informal correspondence. It makes the serious language of accounting more friendly. Below I present some of the expressions used e-mails:

Cook the books (slang) – to purposely manipulate (as in changing a recipe) the financial statements in order to distort the truth. The term has a joking connotation with an imprecise idea of somehow intervening in financial reality. The fact is that most reporting entities “cook” a little. The judgemental nature of many aspects of accounting tends to tolerate subjective interpretations of fair presentation. As in the kitchen, the right dose of spices enhances the dish. But going too far, if the ingredients are fake, ruins the dish and, in the extreme, can poison.

Slack budget - a budget with a purposely built-in understatement of revenues and/or overstatement of expenses that will allow it to be easily achieved by even lazy or incompetent management. Slack budgets are contrary to an ideal budget's goal of being an “achievable stretch” - motivation which leads to hard work and commitment.

Low balling (slang) – to bid at a price that is so low that it only allows a modest profit or even a loss.

Bean Counter - a humorous term for an accountant

Sweat equity (slang) – the hidden but possibly real value accumulated from the owner's hard work and business skills as opposed to any funded investment of cash or assets.

Window dressing – any effort to purposely hide or distort the true financial condition of a business.

“Big Bath” write-down – purposely exaggerating the magnitude of expenses in an early period in order to reduce expenses, and enhance profitability, in the following period.

Go down the tubes, chute (slang) – to experience financial catastrophe. Usually associated with bankruptcy and liquidation. You're pretty well all finished.

Dogs (slang) – an enterprise with low growth and low market share that offers unpromising future to investors and creators

Cash cows (slang) – opposite to dogs

Black ink (euphemism) – profitable results. In one of the e-mails we read: “we're operating in the black”. Origin is from bookkeepers' antiquated habit of writing credit entries (used for revenues) into ledgers in black ink to distinguish them from debit entries (used for expenses) written in red ink.

4. Conclusions

The application of electronic tools in business communication has imposed simplicity and conciseness of expression. As far as comprehensiveness of meaning is concerned, an ever larger number of abbreviations, acronyms and jargon expressions in messages may cause confusion among the ones who are not in the know. Therefore clarification of the exact meaning of terms used by members of an enterprise is advisable. ESP teachers are the best consultants in this matter. I suggest they should not only collect information regarding the new way of communicating business issues in companies but also share this information with both students and other ESP teachers. The examples presented in this paper are only a drop in the ocean of linguistic surprises which I come across almost every day while teaching business English. Getting acquainted with them and passing the acquired knowledge on to others is a challenge thanks to which I constantly develop my teaching skills.

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