

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Unit of Assessment: D29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Using Applied Linguistics Research to improve Business English courses: <i>Business Advantage</i>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The impact of the research is achieved via the creation, publication and adoption of a new 3-level Business English course, <i>Business Advantage</i>, published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. <i>Business Advantage</i> is the first business textbook to draw extensively on research carried out on a corpus of recorded and transcribed professional interactions. As CUP's new 'flagship' Business English course, it is being marketed internationally, and is designed to reach a large target audience of learners, teachers and programme directors.</p> <p>The impact is primarily in two areas: education and economic prosperity.</p> <p>Education: research is informing and influencing the form and content of Business English teaching and is already of international reach in a range of educational settings, including tertiary, vocational and private (e.g. in-company training) in which English for Business and Professional Purposes is taught.</p> <p>Economic prosperity: the impact involves transferring insights and knowledge gained from research to a commercial product – a mainstream Business English course by a major educational publisher with expectations, and initial evidence, of extensive world-wide sales to a wide range of customers.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research is Dr Koester's analysis of recordings and transcripts of 30 hours of office conversation from eight workplaces in the UK and US carried out between 1997 and 2010. This research led to a reinterpretation of the nature of Business English as used worldwide, specifically a thorough description of spoken professional genres (see output R2 below). Further research was carried out by Koester (50%) and Professor Michael Handford (50%) for Levels 1 and 2 of the coursebooks (with Koester's research contributing approx. 5% to Level 3) between 2000 and 2010. The research methodology used was to analyse recordings and transcripts of naturally-occurring spoken interactions in 64 meetings conducted in 26 companies from UK and abroad, compiled in a corpus of 1.8 million words. Koester's research identified decision-making as a key spoken genre in business discourse, and provided a structural and linguistic description of this and other spoken professional genres (R2 and R3). Her research also focused on the previously unidentified role played by interpersonal aspects of interaction, such as modal verbs, hedges, vague language and idioms (R2). The main contribution of her research is therefore in identifying the key role played by interpersonal elements in meetings and conversations that engage in decision-making or in giving instructions and explaining business procedures. Specific findings include, for example, that idioms and metaphor feature prominently in problem-solution patterns and in conflictual discourse (R2 and R4), or that the language used for directives differs significantly between decision-making and explanations/instructions (R3, pp.70-94).</p> <p>Additional research undertaken by Koester focused on relational aspects of workplace and professional interactions, including small talk, 'relational sequences' and humour (R1 and R3). Previous approaches to Business English, typically using non-natural situations, had treated interpersonal and relational features as marginal in the business context, but Koester's research found these elements to be integral to business communication.</p> <p>Research was conducted by Dr Almut Koester, Lecturer (2001-2007) then Senior Lecturer (from 2007) in the department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Birmingham.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>R1) Koester, A. 2004. 'Relational sequences in workplace genres'. <i>Journal of Pragmatics</i> 36: 1405-1428. [DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2004.01.003]</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

- R2) Koester, A. (2006). *Investigating Workplace Discourse*. London, Routledge. ISBN 0-415-36471-X. **[Entered in RAE 2008] [available from HEI on request]**
- R3) Koester, A. (2010). *Workplace Discourse*. London: Continuum. ISBN: 9781847061157. **[available from HEI on request]**
- R4) Handford, M. and Koester, A. (2010). 'It's not Rocket Science': Metaphors and Idioms in Conflictual Business Meetings'. *Text & Talk* 30 (1): 27-51. ISSN: 1860-7330/10/0030-0027 (print), 1860-7349 (online). **[DOI: 10.1515/TEXT.2010.002]**

4. Details of the impact

As a result of the research she had undertaken in workplace and business discourse, Koester was one of two academics invited by Cambridge University Press to join a team of authors collaborating on a coursebook project for teaching Business English, entitled *Business Advantage*. The team began work on the course project in January 2009, leading to the publication of the three levels of *Business Advantage* in 2012: Level 1: *Intermediate*, Level 2: *Upper –intermediate* (both January 2012) and Level 3: *Advanced* (September 2012). Koester was co-author of the first two levels.

Koester's research outlined in Section 2 was used to inform the following aspects of Levels 1 and 2 of the course: business skills and strategies taught, the structure of and linguistic characteristics of different types of business interaction (e.g. job interviews, negotiations, meetings), grammar, vocabulary and phraseology, intercultural aspects of communication. Her work on idioms and metaphors was used in all three levels.

Specific examples of how underpinning research (outlined in Section 2) fed into the course material:

1. The integral role played by relational talk, which is the most significant finding of Koester's research, is highlighted throughout the course, and various aspects of relational talk are dealt with at all levels, e.g. Level 1 - *BA Intermediate*, 1.3 'Beginning a business relationship' and 12.3 on polite requests, Level 2 - *BA Upper-intermediate* 13.3, 'Supporting the speaker'.
2. The topics for the *Skills* units in Levels 1 and 2 are based on Koester's description and classification of 'spoken professional genres', e.g. units on making arrangements, briefing, meetings, problem-solving and decision-making and negotiations.
3. A number of *Skills* units deal specifically with characteristics of decision-making and instruction-giving or explaining procedures as investigated by Koester: Level 1 - *BA Intermediate* 5.3, on 'briefing', *BA Intermediate* 13.3 on problem-solving, Level 2 - *BA Upper-intermediate* 4.3 on decision-making. In addition a number of *Language Focus* sections present the linguistic characteristics of these genres, such as the use of modal verbs, as identified by Koester (e.g. Level 1 - *BA Intermediate* 11.2, p.104: 'modal verbs for obligation and advice').
4. The role of idioms and metaphor in spoken workplace interactions, identified by Koester, is dealt with in a number of units, e.g. Level 1 - *BA Intermediate* 13.3, Level 2 - *BA Upper-intermediate* 6.3, Level 3 - *BA Advanced* 5.3 on 'conflictual idioms and metaphors'.

These are all innovative, research-informed features of the course **that have not previously been included in Business English textbooks**, or if the topics have been dealt with (e.g. meetings and negotiations) they have not included the language features identified by Koester's research.

As a result of the input by Koester and Handford, *Business Advantage* draws extensively on a corpus of recorded and transcribed professional interactions and on research carried out on such interactions, and **is the first business textbook to do so**. To date, research on workplace and professional discourse has had very little impact on teaching materials for Business English, and by addressing this gap, *Business Advantage* is well-placed to be a vehicle for significant research impact on the teaching of Business English.

Informing and influencing the form and content of Business English teaching

Business Advantage is a course for the international market produced by one of the world's main English Language Teaching publishers, Cambridge University Press, which markets its products round the world. It is aimed at a wide target audience: teachers, programme directors and learners of English at tertiary level (for example enrolled in MBA programmes) as well as those already in

Impact case study (REF3b)

work. Key markets, in addition to the UK, include Germany, Russia and Eastern Europe. By July 2013, the course had been adopted by at least 7 institutions in 6 European countries, **totalling over 600 students or more**, and at least two further institutions, including one in Brazil, were considering adoption for 2013/14.

Between the launch of the course in 2012 (Levels 1 and 2 published January 2012 and Level 3, September 2012) and July 2013, the Student's Books alone had **sold over 17,500 copies**. Total sales including all components (Teacher's book, Personal Study book, Audio CD, DVD and Classware) were at 30,484 (source 1). Cambridge University Press's *Professional English Online Website* (<http://peo.cambridge.org/>), the key vehicle for promoting the course, had 67,394 visits and 54,084 unique visitors in 2012, indicating the demand for information about the course. Data for the *Business Advantage* pages are as follows (source 2):

- Business Advantage Intermediate resources page: 14,161 hits
- Business Advantage Upper-intermediate resources page: 9,256 hits
- Business Advantage Upper-intermediate resources page: 8,275 hits

The course has been very well received both within the teaching community and by students. *Business Advantage* has been reviewed in at least one print (*English Language Gazette*) and two online resources for English teachers and by one Economics university. All reviews have been positive throughout and highlighted the research input of the course, for example **referring to the material as 'ground-breaking' and the approach as 'inventively authentic'** (sources 3-5). In order to assess the impact of the language research input of the course amongst those already using it, a questionnaire for teachers and learners was sent via Cambridge University Press's Marketing Department to customers in the following countries who adopted or piloted the course in 2012: Lithuania, Poland, The Ukraine, Switzerland and Brazil. Both students and teachers rated the course as 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good' overall and **the research-informed components of the course (spoken skills, writing and language focus) were rated very positively**. 'Strategy training based on real-world examples' was highlighted as a **unique component of the course**, and 'the amount and quality of listening practice' (which is also research-based) was highlighted as particularly useful (source 6).

Koester delivered workshops and presentations focusing on the research impact on course material from *Business Advantage* at 3 teacher/educator conferences and 5 teacher training events in 5 countries between 2011 and 2012. As the researcher on this project, Koester has a key role to play in demonstrating how research has informed the teaching materials and showing teachers how such findings can be incorporated into their teaching. Feedback on the research impact of the talk was gathered via a questionnaire at the teacher training events for example, with 94 in total completing the questionnaire. The vast majority responded positively, 98% agreeing that it is important for Business English courses to be based on research into real business communication and 85% that the material presented from *Business Advantage* draws on research in a pedagogically effective way. **More than 97% of respondents indicated that they would consider teaching with this material** (source 7).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] Sales data from publisher - Cambridge University Press (available on request)
- [2] Website hits: Cambridge University Press
- [3] Teflnet April 2013: <http://edition.tefl.net/reviews/esl-business/review-business-advantage/>
- [4] "Hotch Potch English Website" 14/08/2012
<http://reviews.hotchpotchenglish.com/2012/08/book-review-business-advantage-by.html>
- [5] *English Language Gazette* July 01, 2012, p. 19
- [6] Collated testimonials from teachers and students: Cambridge University Press (available on request)
- [7] Audience figures and participant feedback from talks and workshops (available on request)