Teaching Business Discourse

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Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics

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Part I

An Introduction to Teaching Business Discourse

1

What Is Business Discourse Teaching?

This chapter will:

- Define *business discourse teaching* as it will be referred to in the rest of this book;
- Discuss the most important *approaches* that have been taken in business discourse teaching;
- Give a *geographical overview* of how business discourse teaching has evolved around the world;
- Provide a *case study* that illustrates one approach to business discourse teaching, alongside a set of *tasks* related to the business discourse classroom and a set of further *readings*.

This chapter will define the concept of business discourse and show how it underpins our understanding of business discourse teaching. It will introduce the most important approaches that have been taken to understanding business discourse and how to teach it, and it will introduce a number of important people located in different parts of the world who have helped shape the development of the field/discipline. The chapter will conclude with a set of further readings, a case study that provides an example of how to teach business discourse, and a set of tasks for readers to complete to help them understand more about business discourse teaching and how to integrate it into the classroom.

1.1   What Is Business Discourse Teaching?

In 2013, we wrote, "Business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done" (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2013: 3). We saw business discourse as social action that takes place in different contexts as a means of completing a set of work-based tasks. We will be using this as the premise of this volume, where our concern will be how best to prepare different types of learners to communicate effectively in business in order to complete those tasks to achieve their work objectives. Business discourse teaching, therefore, is all about helping learners to communicate effectively in talk or writing to get their work done. In part one of this volume, we will be exploring how different findings in business discourse research have been incorporated into the classroom, including the different research methodologies that have been of influence, and we will also identify a number of possible ways in which the field may develop in the future.

In addition, as we have discussed elsewhere (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2013; Nickerson and Planken 2016), many people who are active as business discourse researchers are also involved with teaching, and their research findings have been influential on the approaches that they then take in the classroom. Some have also published in the area of business discourse teaching or they have created textbooks that combine both their research findings and their experience with business learners. In part two of this volume, we will showcase some of the projects that have combined business discourse research and business discourse teaching, and we will also look at several sets of teaching materials that are based on research findings.

Finally, in part three of this volume, we will present an overview of different types of learners and what works for them in terms of teaching, and we will also hear directly from a number of prominent researcher practitioners located in different parts of the world whose work has shaped and will continue to shape the field in the future. They include Ulla Connor and Diane Belcher for North America, Stephen Bremner, Michael Handford, Jane Lockwood, and Zuocheng Zhang for Asia, and Pamela Rogerson-Revell, Julio Gimenez, Stephanie Schnurr, Evan Frendo, and Almut Koester for Europe. Our concluding chapters will present a set of additional case studies that aim to illustrate the ideas we have put forward in our discussion and provide readers with a list of other resources including notable books and journals, professional associations, and conferences that are likely to incorporate research work on the teaching of business discourse, as well as other ideas for further study outside of this volume.

1.2   The Development of Business Discourse Teaching

Business discourse teaching has evolved from several parallel developments in business discourse research. Many researchers have taken what they found in their own study of business discourse and applied it in the classroom, and then, in turn, their experience in the classroom has found its way back into their research. In the examples below, from the context of Hong Kong, we first showcase Chan's (2017) study of spoken business discourse and the way she integrated her findings into the classroom for use with Cantonese speakers of English. This is followed with an account of Evans's (2012) approach to business email in the classroom, and the reasons why he selected certain features of that email for practice and discussion with his students. Both studies start by analysing a particular aspect of business discourse as it occurs in real life, and then show how this can be used to pedagogical effect with learners. We present them here as an introduction to business discourse teaching and its relationship with business discourse research. We will look in more detail at these specific studies and additional work by both Chan and Evans in part two of this volume, when we focus on classroom-based projects.

Clarice Chan: Spoken Business Discourse and Business Discourse Teaching

In 2017, Clarice Chan published an account of using transcripts of authentic workplace talk in the teaching of spoken business English. This was a groundbreaking study as it was one of the first discussions of how to incorporate the research on spoken business discourse directly into a set of classroom exercises. In addition, Chan's study also provides details on the learners' reactions to using the transcripts, which allowed her to adjust the content and the approach she took to teaching in follow-up classes.

In her approach to teaching Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, Chan first presented them with several examples of the transcripts of authentic workplace talk focusing on interpersonal communication (Data 1.1). The transcripts had been collected from previous research into spoken business discourse, such as the accounts of business meetings given by Handford (2010, 2012). Chan focussed on a number of different aspects of meeting language, especially how participants use power in their interactions, and how and why people use vague language, humour, and hedges. The learners were asked to study the meeting transcripts, and then answer a series of questions designed to raise their awareness on topics that included the relationship between the speakers, what they were trying to achieve, and specific features in the language, like face threatening behaviour or hedges. Chan then provided them with a task that was designed to replicate this talk in a series of meeting and negotiation role plays. She worked with the learners

to identify where their discourse was similar or different from the discourse produced in the original transcripts. At the same time, she also surveyed the participants to find out what their opinion was of learning in this way. The learners appreciated the fact that the language was real, and they also found it interesting to work directly with the transcripts. Chan reports that some learners showed an increased awareness of politeness and interpersonal language as a result of working with the real language. She concludes, "pedagogically-oriented research can help to refine research-informed teaching ideas and to strengthen the link between research and pedagogy in business English" (Chan 2017: 72).

Chan, C. (2017). Investigating a research-informed teaching idea: The use of transcripts of authentic workplace talk in the teaching of spoken business English. *English for Specific Purposes Journal, 46*, 72–89, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.12.002

Data 1.1 Transcript of Spoken Business Discourse in Chan (2017)

Transcript 1

1 Mike okay (.) the uh topics I wanted to handle when we get together right now were (.) uhm distribution of David Johnson's database after he's gone and that's something we have to decide kind of now.

[….]

11 Mike so uhm (.) David Johnson's database –here's the deal. With- with Murray um what we offered him was basically [….]

Taken from Koester (2004: 54–55).

Stephen Evans: Written Business Discourse and Business Discourse Teaching

In 2012, Stephen Evans published an account of the approach he took to teaching business email in English in the context of Hong Kong and why he decided to take that approach. It provides a useful example of the close relationship between research and teaching for written business discourse, where a business discourse researcher is also directly involved with his or her learners.

In order to create his classroom materials and to decide on the best way to integrate them into the classroom, Evans first carried out an extensive investigation of business email, which is a very important means of communication in business in Hong Kong. His investigation consisted of extensive interviews with Chinese professionals in a number of key industries in Hong Kong, such as financial services, tourism, trading, and logistics, all of whom needed to email in English to get their work done. The interviews were supplemented with a set of case studies that comprised a week-long observation of people's use of email at their workplace, and, finally, the analysis of more than 400 authentic email messages (Data 1.2).

Evans' research provided him with empirical evidence on both the nature of email in business in Hong Kong and how it is used. As a result, he was able to

recreate both of these in his classroom. The research study showed, for instance, that email communication has a very close relationship with spoken communication, and that email users in business contexts often rely on intertextuality, that is, the specific links that are included in a text to signal the relationships between the email a person is creating and other forms of communication that have taken place or that will take place. Researchers interested in intertextuality look in detail at the way in which business people signal the relationships between different types of texts and other forms of spoken communication in their writing (e.g. Warren 2013; Gimenez 2014). Email messages in particular often make numerous connections between other forms spoken and written business communication, such as meetings, telephone conversations, and other email messages. In addition, Evans found that email tends to be short, at around 50 words, that it is often embedded in chains of other emails, and that writers usually complete an email task in five minutes or less. In his business discourse teaching, therefore, he attempted to recreate these characteristics by focusing on email chains in the tasks created for the learners, rather than separate messages, and also by using "a simulation-based approach in which email communication is embedded in a series of interdependent activities that integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing" (Evans 2012: 202). In Chap. 2 we will look at intertextuality in more detail with particular reference to new media and digital technologies.

Evans, S. (2012). Designing email tasks for the business English classroom: Implications from a study of Hong Kong's key industries. *English for Specific Purposes Journal, 3*, 202–212, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2012.03.001

Data 1.2 Example of Written Business Discourse in Evans (2012)

W...

You left me a voicemail in last Friday that this will be done on this Tuesday. However, I have not had any update and this has not been done. Regards, Anthony.

Evans (2012: 209).

The work carried out by Chan and Evans belongs in the area of English for Specific Purposes, where the focus is on the use of English in specific academic or professional contexts, and where the aim of the research is to identify those aspects of a spoken or written text that can facilitate teaching that particular type of text to different groups of learners. English for specific purposes is one of five main areas of research that have shaped business discourse teaching, alongside Genre analysis, Critical discourse analysis, Organizational rhetoric and Multimodal discourse analysis (for further details see Chap. 3). We will discuss these in detail in Chap. 3 of this volume, but we present a short description of each research area here as a brief introduction, together with an example of how they could be applied for teaching purposes using an example of an authentic corporate email message (shown in Data 1.3).

1.3   Approaches to Business Discourse Teaching

Data 1.3 Example of Corporate Email in Nickerson (2000)

NEDCO
MSG FROM: X TO: Y 08–01-2017 16:26:39
To: J. Smith
From: J. Jansen
Nedco, Amsterdam
Internal address: NL 99–83 tel. 7291
Subject: comments on AB and AB985
MOVE 1 IDENTIFIES SUBJECT
John
Please give me asap your reaction on these documents
MOVE II IDENTIFIES ACTION
I want to finalize them this week
MOVE III JUSTIFIES ACTION
With kind regards, Jan Jansen
Nedco, Amsterdam
Comments on AB and AB985
(Reproduced from Nickerson 2000: 164 – slightly adapted)

English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) aims to describe the characteristics of a written text or spoken event that is used within a specific social context, such as a meeting or a negotiation used to come to a pricing decision with a group of suppliers, or an email or advertising text used to communicate with customers to persuade them to buy a product. It developed originally to understand more about academic discourse, but many ESP researchers now also look at the communication that takes place in business and in other professional contexts. The aim of ESP research is not only to know more about how English is used in a specific context; it is also to consider ways of making the teaching of specific varieties of English more effective. It is a useful approach to doing research for people who are interested in knowing more about business English and about teaching business English. It is therefore not surprising that most ESP researchers are also actively involved with ESP teaching.

A recent development in ESP research in business contexts has been to look at how computer-mediated communication is used by different organizations (e.g. Gimenez 2014; Ilie 2014). We will discuss this development in detail in the next chapter when we look at the future of business discourse teaching and ways in which computer-mediated communication can be incorporated into the classroom.

In the example shown in Data 1.3, an ESP researcher would try to identify the parts of the text that are characteristic of an email, such as the abbreviated language represented by *asap* and the intertextual references that refer to other communication, for example, the references to the documents AB and AB985 in the subject line and in the first line of the text when the writer refers to *these documents*, which were perhaps sent with the email message as an attachment. A classroom exercise to use with business learners would be to ask them to describe the characteristics of the text that they believe makes it different from another type of text, for example, a proposal.

Genre Analysis

For written business discourse in particular, the analysis of texts that are used in the same professional context with a shared communicative purpose is often referred to as (ESP) genre analysis. While other schools of genre analysis have been influential on research into business discourse, notably the Australian approach to genre that grew out of systemic functional linguistics and the US approach that grew out of studies in rhetoric, ESP genre analysis is the most useful for business discourse teaching. ESP genre analysis aims to provide information about the structure and context of a specific type of text that can be used in the classroom to help those learners who need to use that text type to achieve their work-related goals. Genre analysis considers the people involved with the communication and what they are trying to achieve, as well as looking at other contextual factors like the situations in which the communication happens and the wider context beyond the communication, such as the type of organization, the languages available to users alongside English, and the different media that the organization uses in order to facilitate communication. A genre analyst will then try to understand what is happening in the text at different levels, for instance, the lexis (vocabulary choices) and grammar, the order of the information in the text, and the content that is included. ESP genre analysis in business contexts has generally focussed on written texts, such as email and sales letters (e.g. Bhatia 1993; Nickerson 2000), but more recently it has also been applied to business meetings (e.g. Handford 2010).

In the example shown in Data 1.3, a genre analyst would consider the relationship between John and Jan in the corporate hierarchy, as well as considering how email is used as a form of communication within Nedco, for example, are there other ways that employees communicate, or do they use email more than anything else. He or she would also consider the same lexico-grammatical features as an ESP researcher, but would extend the analysis to look at the *moves* structure, as shown in the Data 1.3 example, to be able to say something about the content of the email and the writer's intention in each part of the text. They would also consider the order of the information in the text and they would compare the text to other similar email texts to see if that would also help them in identifying the communicative purpose shared across texts like this, for instance, within the same corporation. Some genre analysts would also carry out a period of observation to see how email contributes to the achievement of corporate tasks in combination with other types of communication. Learners at more advanced levels of language proficiency in English, or learners looking at business texts in their own language or culture and comparing them with the target texts in English, will be able to carry out a similar analysis to understand more about how writers communicate with each other in business contexts.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical approaches to business discourse have considered two things. First, they have looked at the way in which the relationship between a writer and a receiver in a text (or spoken event) may be unequal so that one person may have more power than the other. Second, some business discourse researchers have also analysed their own role in carrying out research; that is, they have aimed to keep their work as relevant as possible for the people who create and interact with the discourse rather than becoming removed from the real world (e.g. Pennycook 2004). To date, not many business discourse researchers have used critical ideas in their analysis, with the exception of those with an interest in gender studies and women's leadership language (e.g. Ilie and Schnurr 2017; Baxter 2011). In part two of this book we will look in detail at some of these studies and discuss how their findings could be integrated into the classroom.

In the email text in Data 1.3, a critical discourse analyst would be particularly interested in the relationship between John and Jan, including any power relations between them in the corporate hierarchy, and the possibility that Jan is disempowered because the use of English as an official corporate language

means that he needs to communicate in a language that is not his first language. Like some genre analysts, critical discourse analysts are also likely to incorporate a period of observation at the corporation to find out more about the relationships and power balance between the people involved in the email, their use of English and other languages, and what they aim to achieve in using texts like this one. Critical discourse analysts may also reflect on their own attitudes to the texts they are analysing and the people they are observing to try to ensure that this does not affect their conclusions. Critical discourse may be more difficult to use in the classroom, in comparison to ESP and genre analysis, however, learners may find it useful to think about the relationships between the users of a corporate email, as well as reflecting on their own experience of using a language that is not their own language, either in their workplace or when travelling. It may also be useful to talk to learners about how writers (or speakers) in corporate settings may be part of an unequal power relationship that is inherent in their organization, and to encourage them to consider how this may change the way in which the employees of an organization communicate and the discourse that they choose to include.

Organizational Rhetoric

Researchers with an interest in how business organizations communicate more broadly with their stakeholders have often taken a rhetorical and sometimes critical approach to analysing the discourse because of the persuasive nature of much organizational discourse and the fact that it is sometimes characterized by unequal power relations. Researchers using organizational rhetoric as an approach have looked at various types of corporate discourse, such as the discourse used in crisis communication, advertorials, annual reports, CEO letters to employees, and in the communication surrounding corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g. Livesey 2002; Ilie 2017; Nickerson and Goby 2016). Discourse like this is designed to promote an idea or persuade someone to take a particular course of action.

Researchers interested in organizational rhetoric would look at different types of corporate communication at Nedco to make sense of the email message in Data 1.3. For instance, while organizational rhetoric has generally focussed on external communication, a researcher interested in knowing more about the Nedco message could collect examples of different corporate documents used both internally and externally, to see if the organization has an official corporate language that employees are required to use in their interactions with each other and with people outside of the corporation. Nickerson's

study of Nedco, for instance, showed that all official written documentation at the corporation was required to be in English, even if all of the participants involved spoke Dutch as their first language (Nickerson 2000). This was the case for both internal and external communication, and included written documentation as diverse as internal email (like Data 1.3), internal annual performance reviews, and the annual report that detailed the financial performance and the company's social responsibility record. Although much internal corporate communication is difficult to access as it is considered confidential, external communication is often in the public domain and is easy to find online through the corporate website. In the case study at the end of this chapter we show how it can be useful to work with learners to find out more about a specific corporation, or a specific industry, and about ways in which organizations communicate with their external stakeholders.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodality is a recent development in business discourse research that grew out of the work of the Australian genre analysts (e.g. Kress and Van Leeuwen 2013). Researchers interested in multimodality look not only at the textual or structural choices that writers make, but also at their visual choices, for example, the photos that are included in an annual report or promotional brochure, or the colours that are prominent in advertising texts. It seems likely that multimodality will become of increasing interest in the business discourse classroom, alongside different forms of computer-mediated communication, and we will discuss this in more detail in the next two chapters.

Like researchers interested in organizational rhetoric, researchers with an interest in multimodality commonly look at different forms of external communication rather than internal communication, as these tend to belong to the corporate genres that include visual as well as textual information. Learners could usefully look at the ways in which a corporation portrays its management, employees, and customers in the photographs that are included in the annual general report, for instance, or they could consider one particular sector, for example, banking, airline companies, oil companies, and so on, and then investigate the different logos and other visual materials that are selected by a group of corporations operating within a specific sector. Learners at more advanced levels of proficiency could also look at the relationship between the textual information in external corporate communication, for example, on a corporate website or in an annual report, and the visual elements that are included, or they could compare the visuals used on the corporate websites of organizations operating in different parts of the world.

1.4   Business Discourse Teaching Around the World

The main approaches that have been taken to business discourse teaching have often reflected the geographical location where the researcher-practitioner is based.

Europe

In Europe the field has developed most especially over the course of the past two decades. One of the first areas of business discourse research that has been of influence on business discourse teaching has been the field of language for specific purposes (LSP). Unlike some of the other approaches to research that have influenced teaching that we will discuss in this volume, LSP has not been exclusive to English, but has included the study of other languages such as Dutch, French, German, Spanish, and Danish (e.g. Ehlich and Wagner 1995). In addition, it has also not been exclusive to European research (and teaching) but has also been of interest in other parts of the world, notably in Asia (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini 2011).

LSP began as the close text analysis of specific forms of (business) discourse, such as negotiations (e.g. Ehlich and Wagner 1995; Firth 1995) but evolved into business discourse through the increasing influence of context and the need to understand the influence of that surrounding context on the text (Mautner and Rainer 2017). Although European LSP, unlike English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has been less prominent in published studies of relevance for teaching, the study of languages other than English and the contrastive study of other European languages compared to English have provided useful insights for the teaching of specific business genre. Neumann's work from the 1990s, for instance, investigates Norwegian and German negotiators, speaking German, and shows that Norwegians are more likely to select indirect strategies in making requests (Neumann 1997). Furthermore, Scheuer's (2001) study of Danish job interviews identifies specific features of the communicative styles that are likely to lead to success as an applicant, and Lipovsky's (2006) study of interviews in French indicates that features such as lexis and grammar can influence the outcome of the interview. It is easy to see how this type of analysis that privileges micro-level features in a text may also be useful in helping business people to understand how to be successful in operating within a particular genre, such as a negotiation or a job interview.