A Review of Literature on Communicative Tasks for Business English Oral Proficiency in an International Context

Sutthirak Sapsirin
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to review the literature on communicative tasks for Business English (BE) oral proficiency of language learners in an international context. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section presents a review of the major frameworks of communicative competence. The second section concerns the aspects of BE oral competency. Finally, the components of BE oral proficiency and BE oral tasks in the global context are discussed.

Part 1: Communicative Competence Frameworks

The search for the definition of language proficiency has been of interest in the fields of languages and linguistics for several decades. Many theoretical frameworks on communicative competence have been proposed in order to describe what it means to know a language. The term "communicative competence" was first introduced by Hymes (1972) in a response to Chomsky's (1965) notion of competence (Brown, 1993). In his theory of transformational-generative grammar, Chomsky stated that it is important to distinguish between competence (the underlying knowledge of a speaker-listener's language) and performance (the actual use of language in a situation). The latter is not a direct reflection of the former because when one applies the knowledge of the language (competence) in actual use, one's natural speech is often affected by such conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest and errors. Since performance was often flawed by these factors, Chomsky proposed that to develop a linguistic theory, it was necessary to study and describe it through idealized abstractions rather than through natural speech.

Chomsky's notion of competence and performance has provoked discussion among several researchers. For instance, Campbell and Wales (1970) stated that he ignored the ability of a speaker to produce or understand utterances in ways that are appropriate to the situational and verbal context in which they are made. Like Campbell and Wales, Hymes (1972) argued

that Chomsky's definition of competence is restricted to knowledge of grammar and omits the social factors which involve the realization of language. He pointed out that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p.278). Hymes then proposed that a speaker's communicative competence includes grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociocultural and de facto knowledge and ability for use. Thus, Chomsky's competence is limited as it consists of the first component, grammaticality, only.

Although Hymes expanded the language user's competence, the framework is still not quite comprehensive as it does not take into account the ability to solve communication problems which occur frequently in natural speech. During a conversation, many speakers may be familiar with not being able to think of a suitable word to express their ideas. However, many are able to keep the conversation going by circumlocution, using gestures, etc. The ability used to repair communication breakdowns, therefore, should be considered one of the constituents of communicative competence as suggested by Canale and Swain (1980).

The theoretical framework for communicative competence proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) is multicomponential. In the modified version described by Canale (1983), the framework consists of four main competencies: (1) grammatical competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, (3) discourse competence, and (4) strategic competence. No competence is more important than the others to the second language learner's successful communication. In the framework, grammatical competence refers to knowledge of vocabulary, and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-

grammar semantics, and phonology. Next, sociolinguistic competence consists of sociocultural rules of use which enables language users to understand and convey proper communicative functions, attitudes and ideas in a verbal and non-verbal form appropriate to a sociolinguistic situation. Further, discourse competence enables us to combine grammatical forms and meanings to produce and understand a unified text by means of cohesion devices and coherence rules. Finally, strategic competence consists of communication strategies, both verbal and nonverbal, used to compensate for communication breakdowns, and it also serves to enhance communication effectiveness.

The framework presented is multicomponential, which gives us a new view of various constituents of communicative competence of a language user. However, it is not quite clear how each element relates to the others. Thus, a more interactive model which can be seen in Bachman (1990) would make us understand the ability to use a language better.

Bachman (1990), whose work has been influenced by Canale and Swain, proposed a theoretical framework of communicative language ability (CLA), which includes both knowledge, or competence, and the ability to implement that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use. Bachman's framework comprises three components: (1) language competence (organizational competence and pragmatic competence), (2) strategic competence, and (3) psychophysiological mechanisms.

In a later work, Bachman and Palmer (1996) have made significant revisions in their model for describing language ability and language use. In their view, it is important to "consider language ability within an interactional framework of

language use" (p. 78). In defining language ability, Bachman and Palmer, adopting the model proposed by Bachman (1990), described that it consists of two components: language knowledge and strategic competence. Language knowledge consists of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. First, organizational competence relates to two components: grammatical competence (the knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology/graphology) and textual competence (the knowledge of how to construct spoken and written discourse which includes cohesion and rhetorical organization). Second, pragmatic competence involves functional knowledge and sociolinguistic competence. Functional knowledge is the knowledge of using language to express various functions and of interpreting the illocutionary force of utterances or the speaker or writer's intentions while sociolinguistic competence enables us to perform language functions appropriately to the context in which they are used.

Strategic competence is "a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities" (p. 70). In carrying out a language as well as non-language activity, these metacognitive strategies act as a mediator among topical knowledge, language knowledge, personal characteristics and affect as well as between these components and the features of language use and setting. They enable us to employ the following strategies: goal setting, assessment and planning.

Bachman and Palmer further described the interactional framework of language use

that language use is involved with the interactions among the components of characteristics of language users i.e., personal characteristics, topical knowledge, their affective schemata and their language ability, on the one hand, and the interactions between these components and the features of language use or test task and setting, on the other. These components are linked by strategic competence, one of the components of language ability.

In short, the framework by Bachman and Palmer includes major constituents of communicative competence and importantly demonstrates how each interacts with one another. This interaction makes us understand the complexity of what makes one know a language better. This framework seems to be the most comprehensive model in explaining how learners acquire the ability to communicate effectively in a second/foreign language.

Part 2: Communicative Competence Frameworks and Business English Oral Proficiency

This section concerns the characteristics of Business English (BE) in an international context, the framework of specific purpose language ability proposed by Douglas (2000), research in BE oral proficiency and my views on to what extent Douglas's framework is applied to BE oral competency.

Characteristics of Business English in International Context

Business English or English for Business Purposes (EBP) has been categorized as English for Occupation Purposes (EOP), which is an area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). The term EOP indicates that BE is not for academic purposes; it

deals mainly with adults, working or preparing to work in a business context. Pickett (1986, in Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) suggests that BE involves both General English and Specific Purpose English. In other words, there are two aspects of business communication: communication with the public which requires the use of general English and communication among business organizations which makes use of specialized language of particular businesses e.g., insurance, pharmaceuticals, etc. However, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) point out that the language of BE is more complicated than that defined by Pickett due to today's wide-ranging business activities. Thus, the choice of the language depends on such factors as the purpose of the interactions, the topic covered and the professional relationships.

Other distinguishing features of BE include a sense of purpose, social aspects and clear communication (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). The aim of BE is to achieve a successful outcome to the business transaction or event as mistakes and misunderstandings could do harm to both users' careers and the organizations they represent. The language is objective rather than subjective and personal. In terms of social aspect, since international businesspeople are likely to contact people whom they have never met before, probably those from different cultures or with different mother tongues, the social contacts are highly ritualized, involve formulaic language and have a polite but short and direct style. Finally, to avoid misunderstandings and to be economical with time, information has to be conveyed clearly and logically. There is a preference for concise words, words indicating the

logical process (e.g., 'as a result', 'in order to') and word clusters expressing familiar concepts (e.g., 'cash with order', 'just in time delivery').

It is undisputed that English is the lingua franca of the business world (Crystal, 1997, Graddol, 1997 in Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). However, since most business communications conducted worldwide are between non-native speakers (NNSs) (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), the English they speak is not English spoken by native speakers (NSs) of English-medium countries. It is characterized as International English, containing features which are not regarded as American English or British English in terms of pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. One factor which contributes to the use of this variety of English is the view of the users on the language. That is, the main purpose of business communication is to achieve satisfactory outcomes. NNSs want to communicate effectively, which does not mean that they have to be exactly like NSs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). As long as they can get their message across, the difference between their English and that of NSs should not be considered a problem.

Further, the language of BE may be affected by the emergence of new varieties of English in certain ways. First, it is likely that English spoken as a second language (by speakers in 'the outer circle' as defined by Kachru, 1985 in Crystal, 1997) will develop in ways which are localized and related to the speakers' cultures and languages (Yano, 2001). This will result in a variety of English which diverges from the variety of American or British English. Thus, it is likely that speakers of the outer circle such as India or Hong Kong will use their localized English when communicating

with businesspeople from other countries. Also, it is believed that international trading in Asian countries will probably increasingly depend on Asian varieties of English. In addition, due to the needs of English as an international language, some nations have developed their own ESP textbooks which demonstrate how English is used in the communities rather than any transnational standard (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1993). Finally, it is predicted that people in the outer circle would outnumber native speakers within a decade or so (Graddol, 1997 in Yano, 2001). As a result, a shift in the center of authority concerning the language would take place.

As long as it is spoken by economically powerful nations, it is very likely that English will continue to be a global language in the international business community. The new varieties of English in the outer circle and the use of International English may not decrease its importance if multi-national businesspeople continue to achieve mutual intelligibility in doing business transactions. An increasing number of people will be required to develop their English language proficiency skills in order to be competitive and successful in world trading as long as English is a medium for effective communication.

To sum up, BE has distinctive features in that it involves both general English and ESP. The language users are professionals who take part in communication with a specific aim in mind, for instance, to get the best deal or to persuade potential clients to buy their products. The users interact in a multinational setting through the use of International English. These aspects of BE probably require the concept of specific purpose language competency to make us

better understand the constituents of BE proficiency.

The Framework of Specific Purpose Language Ability

In the field of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), Douglas (2000) strongly suggests that there is a need to develop a framework of specific purpose language ability since communicative competence in specific purpose context is significantly different from that of general purposes. That is, language performances in specific purpose fields involve the interaction of language ability and knowledge of the field. Therefore, Douglas proposed that background knowledge is one of the components of specific purpose language ability.

In his framework, the specific purpose language ability also includes language knowledge and strategic competence. Based on Bachman and Palmer's formulation of communicative language ability (1996) as discussed in Part 1, language knowledge comprises grammatical knowledge, textual knowledge, functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Strategic competence, a modified formulation of Chapelle and Douglas, 1993 (Douglas, 2000), "mediates between the LSP background knowledge and language knowledge components, on the one hand, and the external features of context which the language user/test taker responds to, on the other" (p. 75). It consists of two areas of strategies: metacognitive strategies and communication strategies. Both include assessment, goal setting, planning and execution. However, they differ in that metacognitive strategies are engaged in performance in situations which do not require language, while communication strategies involve communicative language use.

Douglas's framework seems promising in explaining the communicative language ability for specific purpose language. It can be seen that specific purpose background knowledge is one of the important components in defining the construct of specific purpose language ability such as Business English because the knowledge interacts with language knowledge in performing a communicative task in a business context. To communicate successfully, businesspeople rely on their knowledge in such business disciplines as marketing, finance, and management besides their language ability. A lack of business background knowledge thus would make one an outsider unable to understand and communicate appropriately in a business setting even though one is able to carry out a communicative task in a general situation.

Research in Business English Oral Proficiency

BE is relatively poorly researched compared with other areas of ESP (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). Linguistic analysis is more frequently based on written documents such as correspondence and annual reports. Some types of analysis have been conducted in terms of the language of meetings and discussions. As business is very competitive, information in the actual communication is regarded as confidential. That leads to difficulty in obtaining authentic data; as a result, research in this area has been slow (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1993).

In this part, research findings on needs analysis, cultural aspects of business contact and features of negotiations, one of the most popular tasks businesspeople are engaged in, are presented. To begin with, there is a consensus on the important communicative events businesspeople should be able to do.

According to research on needs analysis of BE and currently published materials (*Longman Business English Series*), there are five communicative tasks in oral language: telephoning, socializing, making presentations, taking part in meetings and negotiating (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

As many businesspeople interact with others from different backgrounds, cultural-specific communication styles may affect their transactions. Ladau-Harjulin (1997) found that in the interactions between Finnish and British business partners, both parties interpret some behaviors differently. This may lead to misinterpretation of the behaviors between the two if they do not recognize the differences in interaction over cultural boundaries. In addition, Lee (1993) reported that culture may impact professional communication. She found the differences in discourse modes for the transmission of directives to subordinates during staff meetings of bank managers in Hong Kong and Australia and suggested that these differences may result from the cultural differences of the subjects.

Regarding negotiations, there have been several research studies on the structure and content of American English negotiations, comparison of strategies the interactants from different cultures prefer and how these strategies affect the outcome of the negotiations. Based on an analysis of the language features, Neu (1986) found that American English negotiations are a 9-stage process: opening, exchange, first price, planning, discussion of products, bargain, prices, preclose and close. The process is cyclical; many stages may reappear. The findings also revealed the model of "distinctive episodes of American English" as follows:

OPENING/EXCHANGE

↓

1ST PRICE

↓

BARGAIN/PRICES

↓

CLOSE

(p. 44)

The analysis of these episodes and profits and satisfaction outcomes shows that four out of nine significantly affected the outcomes: three of the four are non-obligatory (Discuss, Planning, and Preclose) while the other (Bargain) is obligatory.

The underlying constructs of negotiation include five linguistic factors: Information, Interaction, Metatalk, Concession and Agreement. Regarding the first factor, Information, the negotiators give personal information and information about the organization they represent. Interaction enables the speakers to give feedback or request information from another party. Next, Metatalk suggests steps in the negotiation process. Concession refers to conceding to the opponent. Finally, Agreement includes commitment to do something and a positive response to the other speaker's utterances. To conclude, the first two factors, Information and Interaction, can be found in most communicative settings while the last three are common to negotiations.

In terms of the English language patterns used during business negotiations with foreign counterparts, Savangvarorose and Rongsa-ard (1988) found that Thai business negotiators employed the English patterns in agreeing, disagreeing, clarifying, giving opinions, asking for opinions, giving suggestions and changing the subject.

As negotiations involve more than one party, knowing how to contribute to the process would benefit the interactants. Lampi (1993) suggested that second language learners should understand the concept of power so that they can successfully participate in business negotiations. In addition, non-native negotiators should first know their power status and they should learn how to use the negotiation strategy called tactical deference (the deliberate sharing of power) according to their role. In another study regarding the techniques in negotiation process, it was found that Thai businesspeople thought it was not necessary to win in every negotiation. Instead, they were willing to lose if that would lead to success in the next negotiation (Savangvarorose and Rongsa-ard, 1988).

Also, there have been some studies which investigate cross-cultural business negotiations between NNSs and between NSs and NNSs. First, Garcez (1993) found that the difference in the negotiating behavior of Americans and Brazilians produced a negative outcome of the negotiation on the flow of the process and the quality of the relationships among the participants. White (1995 in Gimenez, 2001) also discovered that the differences in bargaining styles between an American and Japanese negotiator caused a prolonged and uneasy negotiating session. However, some cultural differences are overridden by the status-bound behavior of the negotiators (Gimenez, 2001). That is, in terms of the

objectives negotiators brought to the negotiation table and the strategies they used to achieve their goals, most buyers irrespective of their nationality tended to use similar styles. This indicates that the styles are related to the status they have, whether they are buyers or sellers. On the other hand, there were some negotiating behaviors of buyers which differed across cultures: the way they resolved differences on points of view, and the way they approached the issue of benefits. Finally, Savangvarorose and Rongsa-ard (1988) showed quite similar results. Almost 70 % of the Thai business negotiators they investigated considered the opponent's position and status to be important in negotiations while the rest stated that both parties had equal status.

The research findings mentioned above presented interesting aspects of BE oral performance. There are several factors which involve business transactions e.g., the role of participants, the objectives, and the process of conducting certain tasks. The results also point to the importance of culture in carrying out a communicative performance in multi-national trading. Thus, it seems that these features of BE oral tasks will play an important role in BE language ability. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Part 3: Communicative Tasks for Business English Oral Proficiency in an International Context

In this section, the components of BE oral proficiency in a global context are discussed. Also, communicative tasks which BE language learners should be able to perform will be presented.

The constructs of BE language ability refer to language ability, strategic competence, and specific purpose background knowledge

as proposed by Douglas. However, there are a few points that need to be emphasized. To begin with, not only specific purpose background knowledge but also general background knowledge will enable language users to attain effective performance in business. This is because several factors impact the choice of BE language: the purposes of the interactions, the topic, the audience (the public or the business community) and the relationship between the speaker and the listener. The need to rely on the general or business background knowledge depends on the situations in which a speaker is engaged such as in a formal business meeting or in an informal social setting. For instance, it is more likely for business partners to use general English in certain events e.g., socializing and receiving visitors. In such events, they will rely on topical knowledge as termed by Bachman and Palmer to perform a communicative task requiring general language ability. Thus, language users will select the most appropriate background knowledge, either general or specific, which will interact with their linguistic competence to carry out the task successfully.

Furthermore, concerning sociolinguistic knowledge, a proficient speaker of BE should be aware of the varieties of English spoken in the business world. They include those used by NSs, such as American English, British English, and Australian English. Also, it is likely that people who speak English as a second language develop their own varieties of English which are influenced by their linguistic and cultural background. As for speakers who use English as a foreign language, they employ International English. Thus, the sensitivity to these varieties would be necessary in enhancing one's understanding and use of

the language among businesspeople with different linguistic backgrounds. A Japanese seller, for instance, may conduct a negotiation with a Singaporean buyer more efficiently if both parties understand the features of the English variety the other is using.

Finally, cultural competence should be included in BE language ability. Most international transactions take place between NNSs. Therefore, it is likely that businesspeople will bring in their cultural styles when dealing with others across cultural boundaries. These include both linguistic and non-linguistic styles such as negotiating styles and hand gestures in face-to-face communication. Since people from different cultures interpret styles differently, the lack of awareness in how other people express themselves verbally and non-verbally could perhaps cause misunderstanding which may lead to unsatisfactory business outcomes. For instance, the Finns equate seriousness with honesty. However, the British do not share this same cultural view in this aspect. If a British business partner interprets the Finn's seriousness differently, there may be a potential cultural clash in their communication. Also, the styles in giving directives in meetings between an Australian and a Chinese manager are different; the former prefers the telling mode while the latter the selling mode. Thus, a Chinese officer may feel uncomfortable working for an Australian manager if s/he does not understand that in Australian culture superiors prefer this style in organizational meetings. Or in a negotiation between an American and a Brazilian, the negotiation outcome would be positive if both parties were aware of the differences in point-making style. To sum up, cultural competence will enable business people to better understand each other as well as achieve a more effective outcome in a multicultural business community.

In terms of oral tasks, based on the research on needs analysis, businesspeople should be able to carry out the following communicative events: telephoning, socializing, making presentations, taking part in meetings, and negotiating. The aforementioned aspects of the relationship between BE language ability and the nature of BE as an international language should be taken into consideration in determining the teaching and learning processes of these tasks. For instance, class activities should focus on the factors which influence the choice of BE language such as the goal of the interaction and the audience to make learners aware of the proper language they should use in a particular situation. Also, course materials should incorporate cultural aspects of business partners such as body language and negotiation styles so that learners will become culturally sensitive when making contact with those from different backgrounds. This is because the success of the tasks depends not only on linguistic competence but also on the ability to use the language appropriately to the cultural and linguistic features of the interactants in a business setting.

In summary, businesspeople will become proficient in participating in international trading with one another if they understand the distinctive features of BE. This requires them to communicate linguistically and culturally appropriate to the situations they engage in. They should take into account several factors such as the characteristics of the language, the relationships between interactants and the linguistic and cultural background each brings to the business arena.

The Author

Sutthirak Sapsirin is an English instructor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. She graduated with a BA from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University and MA (Education) from the School of Education, University of Kansas. Her areas of interest are ESP and language assessment.

References

Bachman, L. F. (1990). Fundamental considerations in language testing. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bachman, L. F. & Palmer, A.D. (1996). Language testing in practice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, H. D. (1993). Principles of language learning and teaching. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Campbell, R. & R. Wales. (1970). The study of language acquisition. In J. Lyons, (Ed.), New horizons in linguistics (pp. 242-260). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. Richards & S. Richard (Eds.), Language and Communication. (pp. 2-27). London: Longman.

Canale, M. & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. Applied Linguistics 1, 1-47.

Chapelle, C. & Douglas, D. (1993). Interpreting second language performance data. Paper presented at Second Language Research Forum, Pittsburgh, PA, March.

Chomsky, N. (1965). Aspects of the theory of syntax. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Crystal, D. (1997). English as a global language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Douglas, D. (2000). Assessing language for specific purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dudley-Evans, T. & St John, M. J. (1998). Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis M. & Johnson, C. (1994). Teaching business English. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flowerdew, J. & Peacock, M. (Eds.). (2001). Research perspectives on English for academic purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Garcez, P. (1993). Point-making styles in cross-cultural business negotiation: a microethnographic study. English for Specific Purposes, 12, 103-120.

Gimenez, J. C. (2001). Ethnographic observations in cross-cultural business negotiations between non-native speakers of English: An exploratory study. English for Specific Purposes, 20, 169-193.

Graddol, D. (1997). The future of English? London: The British Council.

Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), Sociolinguistics (pp. 269-293). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Johns, A.M. & Dudley-Evans, T. (1993). English for specific purposes: International in scope, specific in purpose. In S. Silberstein (Ed.), State of the art TESOL essays (pp. 115-132). USA: Pantagraph Printing.

Kachru, B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realm: the English language in the outer circle. In R. Qurik & H.G. Widdowson (Eds.), English in the world (pp. 11-30). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Ladau-Harjulin, U. (1997). Some visual differences in interactions between Finnish and British businessmen. In A. C. McLean (Ed.), SIG selections 1997: special interests in ELT (pp. 69-70). Kent: IATEFL.

Lampi, M. (1993). Discourse organization and power: the pragmatics of sales negotiations. In T. Boswood, R. Hoffman & P. Tung (Eds.), Perspectives on English for professional communication (pp. 159-168). Hong Kong: City Polytechnic of Hong Kong.

Lee, L. (1993). Discourse modes for decision-transmission at staff meetings in banks. In T. Boswood, R. Hoffman & P. Tung (Eds.), Perspectives on English for professional communication (pp. 183-202). Hong Kong: City Polytechnic of Hong Kong.

Neu, J. (1986). American English business negotiations: training for non-native speakers. English for Specific Purposes, 5, 41-57.

Pickett, D. (1986). Business English: falling between two stools. Comlon 26:16-21.

Savangvarorose, B. & Rongsa-ard, W. (1988). Patterns of English used in business negotiations and correspondence in Thailand. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

White, R. (1995). Striking a bargain: American-Japaneses sales negotiating. In P. Bruthiaux, T. Boswood, & B. Du-Babcock (Eds.), Explorations in English for professional communication (pp. 245-268). Hong Kong City: University of Hong Kong.

Yano, Y. (2001). World Englishes in 2000 and beyond. World Englishes, 20, 119-131.