Teaching Business Communication in English : Programs at GIBA, Bangkok, Thailand

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This paper first introduces the programs taught by the Center for Business Communication in English (CEBCE) at the Graduate Institute of Business Administration (GIBA), Chulalongkorn University. It then goes on to take up a number of theoretical issues that have arisen in the preparation of these programs and the materials.

1. Introduction

In May 1983 GIBA opened its classes to 33 full-time MBA students. The two year program is taught by staff of the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Northwestern University, and the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania on a rotation basis. In June this year GIBA will start a Master of Management (MM) program taught at weekends by the same staff. After an initial two year period, Chulalongkorn University academic staff will take progressively greater responsibilities for teaching all the programs.

Both the MBA and MM programs include programs in Business Communication. These are organized and taught by staff of the Center for Business Communication in English (CEBCE).

The programs for which CEBCE is responsible are as follows :

1. A study skills program (3 intensive weeks of 75 hours) taught to MBA students and MM students before their program of academic instruction begins.

2. Written communication (extensive) taught to MBA and MM students.

3. Oral communication (extensive) taught to MBA and MM students.

4. Tutorial programs (by arrangement) for MBA and MM students.

5. Evening programs (extensive over 10 weeks for 70 hours) taught to external students. Evening programs offered in 1984 are

    i) Business English

    ii) General Business Communication.

    iii) Advanced Spoken Skills in Business Communication.

6. Programs contracted by companies. (Two sets of programs have been contracted for 1984 ; one, taught extensively for 80 hours to 45 managers with essentially occupational needs, and the second, taught extensively and intensively for approximately 150 hours to 35 managers in preparation for academic training at MBA levels.)

CEBCE will eventually take on responsibilities for conducting research into the use of English as a medium for doing business in Thailand, and for teaching academic seminars and courses in the use of business English. These, however, lie in the future, and are beyond the scope of this paper which is limited to the programs that we will be teaching in the calendar year 1984.

2. Needs Analysis

In this and subsequent sections we are primarily concerned with the MBA study skills program, and the evening program in General Business Communication which was derived from it. References to other programs are presented explicitly.

For both practical and theoretical reasons, the MBA study skills program was developed from a bare minimum of functional needs analysis. The initial program design was significantly constrained by a lack of time. The entire team first came together under workshop conditions for three days in early March 1983 -- that is, less than three months before the program was to be taught. The information then available on the students was scanty. The following points were established:

a. The 33 students would study an essentially American MBA, taught by native Americans; that is, their needs were for language skills to study graduate academic business in the medium of English.

b. Most students had achieved a score of at least 500 in TOEFL. Eight had taken first degrees in the United States, United Kingdom or Australia. Almost all students were ethnic Thai or Chinese Thai. The

four who did not fall into this category included two Indians (first generation Thai), a Chinese Malaysian, and an American. Ages ranged from 21 to 34.

c. All students were graduates and were equally divided between those with and without professional experience. Twenty six had either graduated in business-related studies or had some professional experience.

d. An MBA reading list, examples of case study materials, and a bank of casette recordings made by the American staff of their lectures, reinforced our inferences about the students' linguistic needs.

The lack of time and of access to either the future student body or the American staff (who usually arrive only the weekend before beginning to teach their five week modules) prevented our supplementing this rudimentary profile of our students and their needs with a more detailed needs analysis. Experience showed, however, that this was not a disadvantage. Strong theoretical reasons existed for not needing to pursue our initial needs analysis further. One of us (Mead 1982) has looked at functional needs analysis in greater detail elsewhere, so it is only necessary here to summarize the argument. Functional needs analysis assumes that the parameters designed by sociolinguists for *describing* the functions of language within a specific context (e.g. Hymes, 1972) may be applied to a set of realization rules, and hence to a statement of prescription. In other words, that the relationship between the social constraints on the use of the target variety and the range of functionally appropriate utterances can be predicted sufficiently accurately to generate a syllabus. A number of problems arise. The system for describing the social constraints has to be specified and restricted both in terms of the number of categories and the relationships between categories. A formula must be found for systematically weighing the relative values of these categories and their exponents. All of this leads to the central problem of applying this descriptive model of social constraints to the prediction of a language syllabus.

To take an example. Functional needs analysis of social constraints generates specifications such as 'the student needs English to listen to a lecture under conditions when the lecturer is a native American/teaching at a graduate level/teaching organizational behaviour/adopting a semi-formal role/allowing content questions between topics/asking occasional questions to check understanding/making jokes... and so on. It soon becomes obvious that a full list of all possible qualifications to the head 'the student needs English to listen to a lecture' is, to all intents and purposes, infinite. Unfortunately, however detailed the specification, the rules for translating this information into a *linguistic* model remain out of reach.

The category 'semi-formal', for instance, may be of value when describing a piece of real discourse and provides the syllabus writer with a very general notion of appropriacy. But the jump from a check-list of social categories to the specification of the language items by which these categories will be realised has to be made intuitively. We simply cannot specify with any reliability how a notion such as 'semi-formal' is realised in lecture monologue *unless* we do an analysis of examples of the target monologue. And at this stage it becomes clear that an analysis of target linguistic data definitely has more immediate relevance to the specification of a language syllabus than has analysis of the social constraints on the production of that data which becomes largely redundant.

This is not to argue for an end to needs analysis of social constraints, of course. Even the most elementary level of linguistic analysis, the selection of data, presupposes some knowledge of the social context from which the data were derived, some knowledge (or at least shrewd intuition) of' the students' target social context, and some notion of the typicality of the data context as measured against the target context. The point is to find a balance between social and linguistic data.

A final point about functional needs analysis (at least, as it has been practised to data) is that it tends to ignore the student's own perception of his language needs and learning experience. He may not be the best judge in all respects, but his expectations and attitudes to the teaching programs will have an important influence on its success. This is particularly true for adult learners who may associate the acquisition of English with social values outside the immediate experience of the native-speaking analyst. For example, we discovered that some evening students for our first business communication program had expected more work on grammatical form, even though they enjoyed the emphasis on communicative skills. As a result, the staff registering students for the second General Business Communication program were instructed to explain the focus to all applicants, with this point further reinforced in the first class taught to the new group. The questionnaire completed at the end of this second program demonstrated considerably greater satisfaction. This suggests that if the student's expectations are modified, his evaluation of the program will similarly change. Secondly, we have tended to treat the final evaluation made by one group as having some correspondence to the expectations of the next. Moreover, we have based revisions not only on the teacher's own experience of using the materials, but also on the student's comments and proposals. The point is that we have partially adopted a 'marketing approach' to materials design. The expert who relies entirely on his own evaluation of his students' needs bears too much resemblance to Henry Ford telling Americans they could have their Model Ts in any colour they wished, as long as they were black.

From the limited information available on the needs of the MBA students, we made a number of inferences :

 a. The students were highly motivated.

 b. The great majority already had some grasp of business concepts.

 c. They had an adequate grasp of formal linguistic skills.

 d. The majority (those who had studied in Thailand) lacked experience of using English for academic purposes and of studying in English and, consequently, lacked confidence in using English with native English speakers.

 e. The American staff would place greater emphasis on an ability to communicate than on a mastery of grammar. (Or so we hoped based on an interview with a member of the Kellogg faculty shortly before the academic program started.)

We will now look at a number of the principles that governed the organization of the program.

3. Principles Governing the MBA Study Skills Program

First, the program was intended to teach study skills which we understood as follows. Study skills teaching is not, primarily, a form of English teaching. It aims to provide students with technical expertise in their temporary occupation of 'being students'. Study skills courses may be taught in any language and, in an increasing number of American and British universities, may be taught to native speakers. As such, they are not an alternative to teaching General English or English for Specific Purposes. There seems no more point in teaching English study skills programs to students who will not need to study in English than in teaching typing skills to car mechanics. This principle implies, first, that study skills materials have to be heavily goal-oriented. And secondly, where study skills are taught to students who will be studying in English, that the students are already sufficiently competent in the language. To make an anology; if we teach water polo we assume that our students already know how to swim. We do not teach water polo to non-swimmers in the vague hope that they will somehow pick up swimming skills before drowning. It is true that in the real world students may sometimes be accepted into English-medium academic programs for which they do not possess the essential language qualifications. In such circumstances, it may be necessary to combine General English or ESP with study skills teaching. But this was not our problem. Because of our students' English competence as measured by TOEFL and their previous work experience, they could be treated as advanced learners and some as equivalent to native speakers. (A tutorial system provides more detailed language training to those students who need it.)

Second, we worked from the principle that information is never (or very seldom) given for its own intrinsic value. If a stranger comes up to me in the street and says 'I am out of work. My wife is sick and our six children are hungry' I deduce that he is giving me this information in order to persuade me to finance him. But if the stranger says 'I am employed, prosperous and the wife and children are fine', I cannot made this deduction, and I do not know how to respond. Is this intended as an example of the benefits of fruitful toil? Does he wish to cheer me up? If the context does not allow me to make an interpretation of this intrinsically no less interesting information, then I conclude it serves no purpose and that my informant is mad.

The general implications of the above for a business study skills course are that the exploitation made of material should be purposive and not merely limited to comprehension of details. The students should be encouraged to think why the writer or speaker wishes to communicate information, what can be inferred from it, and how this information can be made to serve the reader's or listener's interests.

Third, and closely related to the second, is that in the real world communication skills cannot be neatly parcelled off into listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. For instance, a businessman receives a letter, ordering a consignment of goods by a certain date : 'Please send me X quantity of Y.' He phones his sales department to check that the order can be met. The information given in the letter letter now has to be re-edited in order to serve new functional purposes : 'Do we have a sufficient supply of Y? Are we able to transport this quantity by date Z? And what will be the costs of transport?' He then writes or dictates a reply to the letter, and circulates internal correspondence reporting what action he has taken. Similarly, the business student reads a text in order to understand a lecture or to answer and ask questions. Next he applies his new understanding to a case study which perhaps he will have to present verbally to the class. Thus it can be seen that information given in study skills materials can be made purposive by activities which oblige the students to rework it in different channels.

Fourth, and a methodological principle, we intended that all study skills materials should, so far as possible, be student rather than teacher centred. The students needed to build their experience and confidence both in using English with American teachers and, perhaps more important, using English in front of each other. Because of the students' qualifications and needs, we could scarcely avoid introducing business content which, in many cases, lay within their immediate experience and outside that of the study skills instructors. Activities involved groups of students in agreeing on opinions and recommendations rather than right/wrong or

yes/no answers and thus served both to introduce a measure of peer teaching as well as to restrict the language teachers' ultimate responsibility to their own area of expertise.

4. Application of the Needs Analysis and Principles

We will now see how the needs analysis and principles were applied in practise.

A small team of Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) instructors, including Sinhaneti and Pas, assembled a bank of draft material and audio recordings. Between 1 May, when Mead joined the team on a full time basis, and 28 May, when the program began to be taught, this draft material was edited into eight units, each taking 10 classroom hours or two days, and was taught in the following sequence :

1. Introduction to Study Skills
2. The Condominium
3. The Manager
4. Advertising
5. Consumer Market : I
6. Motivation
7. Influence, Power and Leadership
8. Consumer Market : II

The function of unit 1 is self explanatory. Unit 2 was intended to practise the first unit skills within the context of a concrete topic. The topics dealt with in Units 3-8 introduced and applied theoretical topics which the students were expected to illustrate with concrete examples from their own experience.

The 1983 study skills program was conceived from the outset as a pilot program. We expected to make revisions both in order to serve further classes of incoming MBA and MM students, and to serve groups of management trainees selected by contracting companies for study skills training before embarking on an academic program similar to the GIBA MBA. We therefore intentionally designed the program so that it would provide us with the means of making a retrospective analysis of needs. Such retrospective 'trial and error' needs analysis is perfectly feasible where temporal and logistical constraints permit experimental testing of an entire syllabus, or even a small part of a syllabus, and where a system can be constructed for obtaining feedback. For formal feedback, we depended on a questionnaire given to students on the last day of the course. This asked for an assessment of, for instance, the interest value of the units taught, their relevance, and suggestions for changes. At the same time, a continuing day-to-day discussion with the students provided invaluable informal feedback. Our analysis of the responses to this questionnaire prompted us to drop the initial two units and to

make a number of changes. After two further revisions, the derived evening program consists of six units taught in the following sequence :

1. Budgeting
2. Motivation
3. The Consumer
4. Advertising
5. Leadership
6. The Manager

Two further units on short term finance and personnel management will be added to the 1984 study skills program.

One further point about retrospective needs analysis. Responses to questionnaires and informal feedback has not only influenced the organisation and content of the programs, but also has influenced the strategy adopted for marketing the evening programs. The major emphases which we placed on providing contexts within which to develop communicative skills, as well as our plans for research into business communication, were reflected in the title we chose for the GIBA Language Center, the Center for Business Communication in English (CEBCE). Our choice of name was intended to signal to the target market that we were not primarily interested in teaching the grammatical organization of business English at an elementary–intermediate level, for which a host of private schools already catered quite adequately.

Responses to the questionnaire indicated that students, accustomed to years of very teacher–centred English teaching, most valued the opportunity to use the language communicatively in student–centred activities in order to build up their confidence. A further response, which we certainly had not planned and probably could not have obtained from a functional needs analysis, was that evening program students, mostly in middle–level management, valued the opportunities that the program provided to make business contacts among their peers. These two attributes of the program, confidence boosting and making contacts, have now been exploited in our current publicity.

'*Perhaps you already know how to make a simple business telephone call, or to write a short business letter.*

But do you have the confidence to negotiate an important deal, or to present a report to a conference?

CEBCE Communication Programs teach the professional communication skills that you will need to use in business situations. They build up your confidence to achieve your business goals, and give you the opportunity to make business contacts among your fellow trainees.

The emphasis on study skills and on information used purposively also determined the selection and form of exercise type. The very notion of teaching study skills presupposes that the skills should be within the teacher's competence. Using a computer is a skill for business students but few language teachers have any expertise in the subject. Similarly, exploiting library facilities is best handled by a professional librarian. Secondly, it presupposes that the skills should be necessary to the students' target competence. To take an example. Skim reading is often included in study skills programs as a matter of course, even though it may not always be relevant. Mathematicians and engineers, to take fairly extreme instances, seldom need to skim read.

Skim reading is a matter of selecting what to read, and what not to read. Skim reading allows the reader to jump backwards and forwards in the text–to make a hypothesis and then to jump forward to see whether his hypothesis is justified, as well as to look back and pick up substantiating detail. In this sense it is no different from any other form of reading, for instance, reading a newspaper. No one reads all of a newspaper, or reads all of page 1 before going on to page 2. The newspaper reader makes his decision about what to read on the basis of his interests, the headlines, and a number of other factors. One of the values of teaching skim reading is to get the student to recognize that what he does in any reading activity can often be applied to his studies. Studying may be a peculiar activity in many respects, but is not totally divorced from other cognitive activities.

The student's specific academic purposes determine how he skim reads. These purposes might include the following :

    a) To identify the general area of content; i.e. he comes to the text with no preconception about its content.
    b) To find out whether the text is about a particular area of content.
    c) To find out what the text says about a particular area of content.
    d) To find out whether the text provides answers to specific questions.
    e) To check information remembered from a previous reading.

Skimming is like all other reading skills in that it involves a dialogue between the reader and the text. The reader brings a particular set of questions to the text which depend on his interests, his field of study, and his level of study. Since it is the practice in most teaching programs that the teacher gives a reading list, the question posed by a) above has already been answered, and probably also b) As a result, the questions which our MBA students are most likely to ask the text are posed by c), d), and e).

In order to apply this analysis of our learner's needs for skim reading, we need to be more particular about what he is going to do with the information once he has found it. To take notes perhaps, but notes for what? He may need

to prepare for a lecture, which might entail that he ask further, inferential questions. For example, 'the writer says X but is this compatible with Y?' When he needs to prepare a case to be argued in a seminar, he will look for both that evidence which supports his position and that which seemingly rebuffs it. He may need to write notes as preparation for written work. And so on.

The implication is that the items constituting our target list of study skills (e.g. reading texts, listening to and comprehending lectures, writing extended texts, taking notes, participating in seminar discussions and giving oral presentations) be specified in greater detail before they can be interpreted in the form of materials and in terms of their relationships to other activities. The possible range includes:

1. a. reading text as input to listening to and comprehending lectures.
   b. reading text as input to writing extended text.
   c. reading text as input to taking notes.
   d. reading text as input to participating in seminar discussions.
   e. reading text as input to giving oral presentations.

2. a. reading text as output from listening to and comprehending lectures.
   b. reading text as output from writing extended text.
   c. reading text as output from taking notes.
   d. reading text as output from participating in seminar discussions.
   e. reading text as output from giving oral presentations.

3. a. listening to and comprehending lectures as input to reading texts.
   b. listening to and comprehending lectures as input to writing extended texts.
   and so on

A full list of permutations can thus provide a check list from which the syllabus writer selects those skills that are appropriate to his target situation. Concepts such as 'skim reading', 'reading for detail', 'taking brief notes', 'taking extended notes' can now be defined in terms of the purposes to which the skills are directed, with extrinsic rather than intrinsic value.

The principle of making learning student, rather than teacher, centred is applied by first breaking down the traditional class-teacher relationship. Some activities are worked in pairs, some in groups of 3, 4, and up. Where there are no right/wrong answers, the students are forced to make decisions, to contribute and to justify their own opinions. Students at this level of language competence and motivation are usually prepared to follow the rule that they stick to English. They have sufficient grammatical knowledge to correct some of their colleagues more glaring errors, and to offer alternative forms of expression. The greater their self-confidence, the happier they are to accept and give peer evaluation. Second, the

teacher's role is changed from that of an information feeder to a classroom manager. He sets up the activity and makes sure the pairs or groups understand how to perform it. He monitors progress, is on hand to answer question, gives corrections of obvious performance errors that can be quickly corrected, and makes notes of errors which he wishes to take up with the class as a whole when the activity is completed. When giving feedback he leads the class to consider alternative solutions and inferences. In actual practice, one of his most difficult jobs is to decide how long an activity should be continued. Some groups may wish to continue arguing a point when others have finished, in which case he may need to provide the latter with additional data or a summary exercise. Obviously he hopes neither to cut the activity off prematurely or to prolong it when the majority of students have exhausted the topic.

The above points made on applying the study skills principles may be demonstrated by a fragment from a study skills unit titled 'Influence, Power, and Leadership'.

Exercise 1.   **This exercise gives practice in developing arguments and writing a report.**

All 'A' students and All 'B' students	Your company, which manufactures plastic furniture, has a vacancy for a skilled production foreman. There are two applicants, Khun X and Khun Y. Both have experience working for other plastics companies, but differences in the manufacturing processes adopted by these companies means that the applicants' productivity record cannot be fairly compared. Your personnel officer has interviewed the applicants and has sent you reports on their different attitudes toward their responsibilities. On the basis of these reports, you must decide which applicant to appoint.

Task 1.

Pairs : (2 'A' students)	Read the report below on Khun X and decide whether he should be considered for the post. Khun X believes that he must force his production workers to work. If he does not watch over them constantly they will stop working. For instance...(Report continues).

Task 2.

Pairs : (2 'B' students)	Read the report below on Khun Y and decide whether he should be considered for the post. Khun Y believes in managing his workers by being easy with them. He believes...(Report continues).

Task 3.

pairs :
(1 'A' student
and
1 'B' student)

a. 'A' student : explain whether you think Khun X should be appointed, and why you think this.

b. 'B' student : explain whether you think Khun Y should be appointed, and why you think this.

c. Decide which applicant should be appointed.

Task 4.

Pairs :
(As for Task 3)

a. Complete the following :

i. Which applicant do you expect to achieve higher productivity?

_____

ii. Which applicant do you wish to appoint?

_____

iii. Why do you wish to appoint this applicant?

_____

iv. Why do you not wish to appoint the other applicant?

_____

_____

_____