# BUSINESS TELEPHONING SKILLS AND PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING BUSINESS TELEPHONING IN ENGLISH TO STUDENTS MAJORING IN ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS STUDIES

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**Abstract**

The paper analyzes the issues of teaching business telephoning in English to students from Ukrainian universities majoring in Economics and Business Studies. English business telephoning skills to be developed by students are demonstrated. Six principles are discussed as those that should underlie teaching business telephoning in English to Ukrainian university students.

**Keywords:** Business English, business telephoning, business telephoning skills, principles of teaching business telephoning.

## Introduction

Teaching English for professional communication to students majoring in Economics and Business Studies always presupposes teaching Business English as the international language of economy, business and commerce. But teaching Business English to future specialists in Business and Economics requires preparing students for different types of business communication in English: business negotiations, business presentations, business correspondence, and a number of others. **Business telephoning** is one of the types of business communication most important for today's business people who need distance oral contacts with their partners. However, teaching English telephone communication skills is one of the most neglected areas in teaching Business English to speakers of other languages. Though there are several textbooks (published in the West) devoted to teaching business telephoning in English [2; 3; 4], a lack of theoretical and practical research on how such teaching should be organized is felt. Our study was undertaken to eliminate the existing deficit in theoretical and practical foundations of teaching English business telephoning skills to Ukrainian university students of Business and Economics. The purpose of this paper is to report some results of the study concerning the business telephoning skills that have been selected for teaching and learning and the principles of teaching and learning such skills.

## English Business Telephoning Skills to Be Taught and Learned

We have selected the English business telephoning skills to be taught to Ukrainian students of Business English on the basis of our analysis of 200 business telephone contacts in English. Those sample contacts were collected and recorded in the Netherlands in 2002, as well as taken from the audio materials and tapescripts that can be found in different existing textbooks for teaching business telephoning in English. Classifying such skills, we differentiated them according to the components of communicative competence in business telephoning – those components distinguished in accordance with the data in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [1] and in the monograph by Tarnopolsky and Kozhusko [7]. The skills to be taught to students are integrated in the table below

**English business telephoning skills to be taught to Ukrainian university students majoring in Economics and Business Studies**

| № | Component of communicative competence in English business telephoning | Specific skills of: |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Linguistic competence | • Operating with specific notions, terms, language clichés characteristic of English business telephoning;<br>• Following the stylistic norms of English business telephoning; |

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| | | • Using set grammar and vocabulary structures characteristic of English business telephoning;<br>• Specifying and restating the information heard to confirm it, asking additional questions for such confirmation;<br>• Filling pauses in the conversation with appropriate silence-fillers and specific comments;<br>• Using clichés for explaining technical problems on the telephone line. |
| 2. | Sociolinguistic competence | • Following certain cultural parameters, standards of communicative behavior characteristic of business telephoning in business culture of English-speaking nations;<br>• Finding equivalent linguistic means taking into account intercultural differences and the cultural peculiarities characteristic of business telephoning in business culture of English-speaking nations;<br>• Using indirect forms of expressing disagreement;<br>• Choosing an adequate manner of communication in intercultural environment, adequate styles, and rules of business etiquette characteristic of business telephoning in business culture of English-speaking nations. |
| 3. | Pragmatic competence | • Establishing business contact over the telephone personally or through a secretary;<br>• Inviting to the telephone a person to be talked to;<br>• Answering over the telephone the inquiry about a person to be talked to;<br>• Explaining the reason(s) for a call;<br>• Beginning, maintaining, and finishing a telephone conversation without visual contact;<br>• Listening to and noting down in a special form the messages from the answering machine;<br>• Sending and receiving faxed information in English;<br>• Offering help and advice over the telephone;<br>• Apologizing for mistakes and errors made;<br>• Making and cancelling business appointments and changing their time. |
| 4. | Formal and logical competence | • Planning a telephone call, logically answering an unexpected call;<br>• Arranging the conversation logically, coherently, and cohesively for avoiding ambiguity;<br>• Ensuring the relevance and accuracy of language used - in accordance with the situation;<br>• Accurately writing down the information for transmitting it to some other person(s);<br>• Dictating short, clear, and accurate messages to be recorded on the answering machine;<br>• Following that logical structure of a telephone call and of a message to be recorded on the answering machine. |
| 5. | Content matter competence | • Holding the conversation in the framework of typical telephone communication topics and content matter of business communication in typical situations of such |

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|---|---|---|
| | | communication. |
| 6. | Psychological competence | • Accurate and fast processing, analyzing, and retention of information heard over the telephone;<br>• Speaking fluently with minimal hesitations;<br>• Talking to speakers of English spontaneously, without feeling and demonstrating embarrassment and restraint;<br>• Using the technique of "reflexive listening" distinguished by its active nature and constant feedback in telephone communication;<br>• Being able to understand English speakers with different manners and speeds of speaking, pitches of voice, and other individual peculiarities of speaking;<br>• Evaluating the telephone interlocutor;<br>• Anticipating the telephone interlocutor's reactions and orienting oneself in those reactions. |

The numerous skills to be developed by students when learning how to conduct business telephoning in English necessitates specific teaching principles to be followed for making the teaching/learning process more efficient.

In our study we formulated six of those principles to be further discussed in this paper: the principle of teaching English business telephoning through modeling communicative situations of telephoning, the principle of teaching English business telephoning through role plays and simulations, the principles of speaking priority in teaching English business telephoning, the principle of cliché-based teaching of English business telephoning, the principle of culture-based teaching of English business telephoning, and the principle of concentration in teaching English business telephoning.

**The principle of teaching English business telephoning through modeling communicative situations of telephoning**

This is the most important principle because it ensures activation (and therefore, development) of all the components of communicative competence in English business telephoning. It is so because telephoning is a highly situational communication and, consequently, in its process the linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, formal and logical, content matter, and psychological components (competences) function simultaneously and bear equal responsibility for the success of communication as a whole. The active functioning of communicative competence in the entirety of all its interrelated, interacting, and interdependent components (separate competences) creates the best conditions for the development of all skills listed in Table 1 in cases when situations of business telephone communication in English are faithfully reproduced - just that reproduction serving as a stimulus for communicative competence activation.

Therefore, the principle under consideration determines what typical situations of English business telephoning should be selected for the teaching/learning process. Such situations, in their turn, regulate the selection of all the other learning materials (texts of sample telephone conversations for listening and imitating, vocabulary, grammar, set phrases, clichés, styles, etc.). Selected situations also determine the learning activities to be used for gaining command of specific telephone communication skills.

It is in modeled situations of telephone communications that typical virtual scenarios of genuine business telephone contacts are reproduced (developing the skills connected with the content matter competence); telephone vocabulary, grammar, clichés, and styles are trained (linguistic competence's skills); communicative behavior meeting the social and cultural requirements of the English-speaking communities is acquired (sociolinguistic competence's skills); and psychological barriers and obstacles for telephone communication are overcome by way of developing all the psychological skills that make such communication efficient (psychological competence's skills). Modeled situations also regulate the way of making

telephone communication logical, coherent, and cohesive in accordance with specific situational requirements (formal and logical competence's skills). Finally, every modeled situation requires the use of specific pragmatic competence's skills developing this particular component of communicative competence in English business telephoning.

**The principle of teaching English business telephoning through role plays and simulations**

This second principle provides the way of practical implementation of the first one. Acquiring telephone communication skills requires students' regular and intense practicing, i.e., making and receiving modeled business telephone calls in modeled situations of such calls. The only way of achieving this is organizing students' role plays or simulations in modeled situations. We may speak about simulations [5] in strictly business communication, like discussing the price of a product over the telephone, while role plays [6] involve those modeled situations where the content matter of communication is less professional, e.g., a secretary informing her boss over the telephone about the details of the flight she has booked.

A typical role play task developed following the principle under consideration may be like the following one:

*Student A:*

*You are a receptionist in a family doctor's office. Your partner will call you to make an appointment. The doctor's first available appointment is on Wednesday at 2:15 p.m. She is also available on Thursday at 9:30 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. and Friday at 3:15p.m. Student B:*

*Make an appointment with the doctor for your annual check-up.*

A typical simulation task would be different in its strictly professional content matter as in the example below:

*Student A;*

*You are Peter (or Jane) Smith from ASTRA Hotel and you are calling Bibury Furniture to talk to the Sales Manager about an order for the furniture for your hotel. Specify what furniture you need and how many items, how and when you want it delivered. Ask about the price and the cost of delivery. You are going to pay by check on delivery but pre-payment of 50% is possible. Student B:*

*You are the Sales Manager at Bibury Furniture. Take a telephone order. Ask your caller what furniture he or she needs and how many items. Answer the questions about delivery and its terms (your company ships door-to-door within one week), the cost of delivery and the price of the furniture. Ask how they are going to pay and inform the caller that* a *50% pre-payment by check is required.*

It can be seen that each of the tasks (both a role play and a simulation) develop skills that are required by the five components of the communicative competence in English business telephoning. It is impossible to name even a single skill out of those listed in Table 1 that cannot be developed to a greater or lesser extent by such tasks or the ones similar to them.

**The principle of speaking priority in teaching English business telephoning**

This principle is a complementary one to the two principles above. Certainly, telephone communication consists both of speaking and listening which are equally important for the success of it. But, on the other hand, such communication is somewhat specific in language forms of expression, in style, and in various behavioral patterns used by interlocutors. It is simpler and easier for a student to learn how to understand those forms of expression and behavioral patterns in the speech of his/her interlocutor automatically if he or she is able to use such forms and patterns in his/her own speaking.

The essence of the principle is in focusing attention at the early stages of teaching business telephoning on students' learning to speak using the specific language forms, formulas, styles, and patterns and teach their understanding of those forms in the speech of other people through being able to produce them in their own speech. This principle is complementary to the first two because role playing/simulating in modeled situations of communication is a kind of learning activity also primarily speaking-oriented.

**The principles of cliché-based and culture-based teaching of English business telephoning**

These two principles reflect the linguistic and sociolinguistic/cultural peculiarities of business telephoning in English. Linguistically, telephoning is characterized by numerous clichés: *"Can I help you?", "It's a terrible line. Let me call you back," "Who's calling?" "Speaking!"* and dozens of others. Without acquiring them, it is impossible to hold a normal and successful business telephone talk in English. In the same way, such a talk can be disrupted if an interlocutor does not have a command of sociolinguistic/cultural patterns of holding a business telephone conversation in English - like the patterns of starting a call, answering it, greeting the callers, finishing the conversation politely, politely refusing and disagreeing, etc. The two principles in questions emphasize the necessity of concentrating attention on such peculiarities so that they are fully realized by students, and learners' practicing is aimed at gaining command of them for automatically and subconsciously using such clichés and patterns when speaking in English over the telephone.

**The principle of concentration in teaching English business telephoning**

This principle means that it is better and more efficient to concentrate teaching English business telephoning in the very first months (as our experience shows, the first two months) of teaching Business English and to devote those months to developing students' telephoning skills only. This is the best solution because business telephone communication is closer to General English than any other business communication. This is why learning skills of business telephoning is a perfect transition stage between learning General and Business English, facilitating the acquisition of the latter at later stages.

**Conclusion**

All the principles discussed in this paper were developed for improving and facilitating the process of students' acquisition of English business telephoning skills. They are those skills without acquiring which efficient business telephoning becomes impossible. The principles of teaching English business telephoning through modeling communicative situations of telephoning, of cliche-based teaching of English business telephoning, and of culture-based teaching of English business telephoning regulate the selection of learning content for teaching. The first of them, together with the principle of teaching English business telephoning through role plays and simulations and the principle of speaking priority in teaching English business telephoning, also regulates the method of teaching, while the principle of concentration in teaching English business telephoning regulates the organization of the teaching/learning process. It is these principles that underlie the methodology of teaching and learning the selected English business telephoning skills. Such a methodology has also been developed by us on their basis. Analyzing that practical methodology and its applications is the content matter of our further publications.

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