



## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT AND MANAGEMENT

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**'SOFT SKILLS'- AN ESSENTIALITY IN TODAY'S BUSINESS ENGLISH****JAYATEE CHAKRABORTY****ASST. PROFESSOR****DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCE****NSHM COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT & TECHNOLOGY****DURGAPUR****ABSTRACT**

*These days, soft skills have become an essential part of today's business communication training for any professional and therefore in the areas of work-related language coaching, it has got a vital role of its own. Today, soft skills form not only a crucial and increasingly important topic in careers and career negotiations, but are also part and parcel of adult language tuition. However a large number of general principles and concrete examples of making Soft Skills 'work' in the class-room are discussed in this particular article. If applied, this will no doubt benefit the students of the Business English Communication in the present day scenario.*

**KEYWORDS**

Business Communication, Professional, Soft Skills, Training, Work-related Language.

**WHOM DO WE CALL SOFT SKILLS?**

Although usually not found on a CV, soft or social skills are those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to fit into a particular structure, such as a project team, a rock group, or a company. These skills include personality traits like emotional maturity, eagerness to learn, and willingness to share and embrace new ideas.

Now-a-days soft skills are fast becoming the deal breaker in many of today's hiring decisions. After all, executives, are rarely measured according to how well they can re-iterate the technical specifications of their products and services, but rather on their ability to motivate an organization, to assess the performance of their staff, to make clear and well-balanced decisions, and, first and foremost, their ability to develop and communicate ideas and visions. Let us have a look at the list of the most crucial skills which are something as the following:

**FIGURE 1: SOFT SKILLS IN FOUR CATEGORIES (1)**

<b>Interaction</b>	<b>Self-Management</b>
1. Attitude awareness	1. Compensation strategies
2. Conflict handling	2. Decision making
3. Co-operation	3. Learning willingness
4. Diversity tolerance	4. Self-assessment
5. Etiquette	5. Self-discipline
6. Interlocutor orientation	6. Self-marketing
7. Teamwork willingness	7. Stress resistance
<b>Communication</b>	<b>Organization</b>
1. Delegating skills	1. Problem solving
2. Listening skills	2. Systems thinking
3. Presentation skills	3. Troubleshooting

Although the total of 20 skills is grouped under four headings they are, of course, all closely interrelated: 'Learning willingness', e.g., is difficult to manifest if our 'time management' does not work. It is also true that soft skills are not exactly 'easy'; if they were, it would be easy to teach everybody to be a Managing Director. Next, I will try to show that soft skills are gaining in importance in two contexts which are relevant to English in Adult Education, in native, but even more in non-native contexts: DOING BUSINESS and DOING BUSINESS ENGLISH both feature soft or social skills as objects, effects, and prerequisites.

The soft skills are of growing importance in a world where business is marked by 'hot' buzzwords such as globalization; decentralization; and lean management. It is a true that in real life soft and hard skills (such as subject competence, resource handling, and market knowledge) go hand in hand. Thus, the selection instrument of an 'Assessment Centre' is gaining in significance especially for high potential recruitment. By means of its exercises in strategy development and strategy implementation, many companies and employment agencies argue, this two- to three-day intensive group performance session brings to light candidates' abilities in 'conflict handling', 'co-operation' and 'stress management'. We all admit that, a traditional job interview or an old-fashioned IQ-test hardly warrants these results.

Hence, though it is certainly helpful to know what technical terms such as benchmarking, 'B2B' vs. 'B2C', business process re-engineering, customization, downsizing, outsourcing, and empowerment stand for, a mere word-list knowledge ignores the complex interpersonal problems these terms carry. If it is required to teach learners of Business English how to deal with these problems interpersonally, soft skills handling is indispensable.

**HOW MUCH SOFT SKILLS CAN BE TAUGHT?**

This skill would be difficult if not impossible to teach 'straightforwardly' in any course; teaching can create contextualized tasks, and thus provide skills-related learning experience. Here actually collateral learning works where one learns more than merely the subject he or she studies at a given time. Since 'attitude awareness' and 'problem solving' are what count in the future, then, ideally, teaching should have a share in attitude formation and comparison.

A framework of soft skills should permit Business English to emphasize the interpersonal forces of language-use in a work-oriented context, and teachers should keep a sharp eye on the function of any language item which they want to highlight. Thus we can say that, they must teach the pragmatic force along with the words, evidenced, by textual (= structure-giving), propositional (= intention-determining) and interpersonal (= status-fixing) functions. Any sort of mismatch in linguistic form and speaker's intention leads to confusion, annoyance and misunderstanding, that is, causes havoc: 'I'm not prepared to show my homework', e.g., can be the signal unwillingness, inability, criticism of unclear homework assignment, simple forgetting, and other things.

Erving Goffman (1955), Social Theorist, made this very clear with his theory of 'FACE' and its twofold workings: Goffman argues, in human interaction, people strive for a positive social value, i.e. the approval of others (= a positive face, PF), while at the same time they also want to avoid other people's impediment (= a negative face, NF). Disapproval of an interlocutor's personality or performance, negative comments and criticism, usually endanger his/her PF; requests, offers and compliments may threaten his/her NF: Often an invitation to golf causes offence (for the inviting party) if refused, debt (for the invited party) if accepted. Therefore, what we normally tend to think of as plain and straightforward communicative exchange, in fact is a very thin layer of ice on which successful skating can be dangerous. So if we take some very ordinary English sentences like the ones in Figure 2, it is apparent that they are not harmless and ordinary at all if we consider what might be implied for the involved people's 'FACES': (2).

FIGURE 2: SENTENCES AS THREATS TO INTERLOCUTORS' 'FACE'

SITUATION	UTTERANCE
1. Pointing at a colleague's desk:	That mouse-pad does look funny!
2. On the way to the company car park:	Do you have your mobile phone with you?
3. On returning to your desk:	I thought I put a cup of tea here.
4. During a business meeting:	Is anybody else here cold?
5. Knocking on a colleague's office door:	Are you busy right now?
6. Asking a colleague in the canteen:	Isn't that Mr Lawson over there?
7. Sitting in a lecture theatre:	Sorry, there's a lot of noise at this end.

However, these sentences turn into downright traps if understood as a demand for action, an allegation of stealing tea, a request for assistance and so on and so forth. Trials should be made to heighten the awareness of the inherent power of relationship, trust and intimacy levels of the interlocutors rather than teaching students only how to construct and employ phrases like these; in short, the sentences' challenges to the category of 'FACE'. Conversely, language coaching, should adapt to the constantly changing 'face' of English, and keep in mind the cognition-based concept of 'KAL' (Knowledge About Language) which Ronald Carter has been promoting since the early 90s. This concept is flexible in character as it is meant to go beyond older ones, such as grammaticality, formal correctness and linguistic awareness. It is Carter who actually wants language learning and teaching to (re-) start from scratch, i.e. to acknowledge insight into the 'new view':

"A view which recognizes Englishes as well as English and which stress variable rules accords with a multilingual, culturally diverse view of society. [...] Critical language pedagogy does not so much aim simply to produce competence in use of a standard language, vitally important though that is, as to enable learners to reflect on the kind of English they use and how far it allows them to express their own personal voice as language users." (Carter. 1997: 9, 226)

The above mentioned notion is closely related to the new standard of "ISSE (International Standard Spoken English)" which David Crystal (2000: 57) forecasts to emerge as the result of the increasing global use of and diversified influence on the language. He was not far from the truth, as it so happens that English is an immensely (and increasingly?) flexible language, crammed with idiom and slang, unusually hospitable to new words. English is not only the language of business and international politics, but also that of travel, sports and science, computer software and the music industry. Today, in times of boundless globalization, the idea of 'FACE' is gaining particular importance in business contexts that involve cross-cultural aspects: In a business world where a German marketing officer is sent to Japan by her employer, a Finnish telecommunication corporate, in order to negotiate joint ventures for the emerging markets of Eastern Europe, it is certainly good to know about the main differences between British and American English, but what this person is very likely to encounter (and to use) herself, corresponds to neither variety.<sup>3</sup> Given these conditions, English tuition should ideally proceed from linguistic competence => linguistic awareness => cultural awareness => cultural competence.

## UNDERSTANDINGS FOR LEARNINGS

Phraseology, lexis and collocation are of primary importance. Here grammatical accuracy is no longer the be-all and end-all. The syllabus will have to pursue complex aims besides those of planting words and structures in students' heads. Thus this will of course remain the precondition of all attempts at soft and social skills. However, whichever way the 'basics' of structural grammar are brought to a learner, the techniques of drill patterning, total immersion or suggestopedia even, will not do when 'handling English aptly' rather than 'using English correctly' is at stake.

Ideologically, learners in the new position do not experience themselves as voiceless, and subject to external authority, not only as passive receivers, but rather as active discoverers, communicators and - most significant - creators of knowledge. Hence, the objectives of this idea of teaching become visible as improving learners' active and passive knowledge of styles, registers and functions of language items (4); furthering their knowledge of the working mechanisms of business; involving them as far as possible in tasks of teacher-guided learning; and encouraging them to set up, implement and realize their individual learning strategies. The objectives, in turn, ask for a learning process that is fundamentally social, interactive, and self-directed - if we want to encourage our learners to take home 'more than Business English' from 'a lesson in Business English', manifest in topics like Negotiating with Foreign Business Partners, Defying the Angry Customer or Serving International Markets, we must select, prepare and set tasks that involve reflective assessment and active training of one or more of the soft skills. Few of the general guidelines to make the upper-intermediate to advanced English class, more learner-orientation will be suggested now.

While venturing on a new topic, teachers might start with a brainstorming session and elicit what students already know. Therefore they will give the students a chance to start from their true personal vantage points; any accompanying material will then be taken not as a spoon- and force-fed medicine, not as the final word, but as one of many possible options. Room-allocation permitting and space, one could also ask students to write upon notice boards, flipcharts or whiteboards those aspects of a topic which they would most like to learn about. Works that are suitable for pairs or groups should tend to be open rather than closed, i.e. they should permit a variety of possible answers or solutions, or in any case, they should provide room for choice. Thus, they transport respect for any student's individual attitude, and ask them to balance rather than venture their arguments. However two short examples might help to outline possible ways of realizing insights from soft skills training in the class-room.

The first and foremost example is from the realm of 'Financial English' and could run like this: For the topic of 'Takeovers and Buy-Outs' we might begin with a list of relevant technical terms, strategies, model cases, pros and cons, etc. However students will only experience the position-dependent forms of emotional involvement (e.g., enthusiasm, greed, pride, low vs. high self-esteem, sense of failure, satisfaction of 'winning'), if we can get them to approximate the atmosphere in which talks about the takeover process are likely to be conducted. Thus any group of four advanced students could be assigned the roles of the CEO of a failed start-up-company under threat (also its founder and main shareholder); the potential buyer (i.e. the representative of the 'bigger fish' trying to 'swallow' the 'smaller' one); the 'white knight' (senior business expert or other company backing the threatened company's case); and, especially in the case of 'leveraged buy-outs', i.e. buy-outs financed by third parties, the bank expert or financial organizer who backs the buyer's interest. Next we could then ask students to prepare and simulate preliminary or final negotiations, arguing their individual cases, taking into account the other, 'hostile' viewpoints all the time.

The next example stems from the very crucial and frequently requested topic of 'The Job Market'/'The Application Process'. Often we find, teachers confront students with real job ads and ask them to sketch an application, a cover letter, or a CV. Although this is certainly good training, it seems a rather lonely task in class, apart from the exchange of technical terms. I think, these, should be pre-taught for a lesson which uses job ads as a trigger for more group-oriented exercises. Often referring to the well-known study *The Human Side of Enterprise* (1960) of American sociologist Douglas McGregor, we might outline his theory of two distinct types of work motivation and work performance: According to McGregor's THEORY X, people are considered 'lazy' by nature, disliking work, and in permanent need of supervision and control through a threats-and-rewards system. THEORY Y, by contrast, treats people as inherently self-motivated, committed to their workplace, willing to take responsibility and to make personal achievements; in short it assumes a psychological disposition to work within a framework of structures. No doubt, THEORY X provides a high degree of certainty and plannability, and is therefore easier to put into practice on the workshop floor, or in mass and largely automated production than THEORY Y. Therefore, it is good for managing staff promotions, salary negotiations, and for effective management. In class, we could then make further sub classifications by conceiving e.g. two representatives of each of McGregor's theories (Y1: 'The entrepreneur'; Y2: 'The leader'; X1: 'The team worker'; X2: 'The backroom worker'). Next, an authentic job ad could be scrutinized as to which of these types - the profiles of which should be established in class or in teams - best fit the job description. (5)

In the same manner, we could use the model which social psychologist Frederick Herzberg puts forward in his study *Work and the Nature of Man*, i.e. the crucial difference between SATISFIERS and MOTIVATORS as determining factors of people's job performance: SATISFIERS, as guards of AVERAGE POTENTIAL,

concern the working conditions and environment, the wages, the benefits, and the degree of job security; whereas MOTIVATORS, as stimulators of HIGH POTENTIAL, comprise challenging and creative tasks, recognition by peers and seniors, personal responsibility, possibilities for promotion, and the subjective feeling of forming part of corporate culture. So it is easy to see that some basic questions such as 'Which type do you think you are?', 'Which type is your boss/your spouse/your best friend?', 'Which type would you (not) hire?' etc., can lead to intense discussions or team listings and, especially, will put all of the soft skills to the test in unforeseen ways.

A model of lesson with the benefit of reducing TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and increasing STT (Student Talking Time) is shown in Figure 3. As we see, a lot has happened in teaching methodology since the days when PPP (Present, Practice, and Produce) was the answer to all questions (6):

#### TRADITIONAL

TEACHER'S ACTIONS	EFFECTS ON LEARNERS
1. Presentation of a pattern	Look, listen, memorize
2. Elicitation of a pattern	Repeat with whole class
3. Controlled practice (slight pattern variations)	Repeat and vary in pairs
4. Free practice (more expanded variations)	Repeat with more variation in groups
5. Written reinforcement	Repeat in writing

#### REVISED

FIGURE 3: TEACHER-CENTERED VS. STUDENT-CENTERED LESSON PLAN

LEARNERS' ACTIONS	EFFECTS ON TEACHER
1. Look, discuss and guess the point	Display pattern, stimulate discussion
2. Receive confirmation or correction	Give solution on board or to groups
3. Repeat, vary, discuss	Guide practice, encourage discussion
4. Invent questions/exercises for other groups	Monitor group work
5. Exchange questions; discuss and write answers	Encourage exchange, monitor writing
6. Discuss as a class with teacher	Guide discussion, summarize findings

#### SOFT SKILLS AND NEW MEDIA

In connection to the 'overkill' of media and new media development directed at the teaching professions, any teaching material's qualities in featuring any number of the soft skills is what should guide our selection, preparation and employment. Certainly it is true that a well-produced CD-ROM can work miracles for the beginner's faltering steps towards listening comprehension, and can make word learning less tedious. Even, e-mail-controlled homework - or even teamwork-tasks - solves a number of logistic and organizational problems. Often but most of the training forms that focus on 'attitude awareness' and 'conflict handling' are probably not really 'cyber worthy', not least because their teachers would not embody these skills themselves if they were only 'cyber-educators'.

Although NEWSWEEK recently painted a glorious picture of the future of online-learning, "[b]y the end of 2000, 75% of all U.S. universities will offer online course work to a logged-on student body of about 5.8 million, in most cases as supportive to personal teaching" (McGinn 2000: 60), I do not fear for the future of print-based and classroom-located teaching, if understood as a common enterprise of both the teaching and learning personalities involved.

In addition to this, if communication theorists are only halfway right in claiming that up to 70% of any information is communicated not via language, but by other systems, such as personal appearance and body language, we are still a long way from the moment when personal teaching can be fully discarded. Only machines can do the drilling and controlling of drilled patterns, but they do not reach beyond that stage. A number of the great benefits of training, after all, are unintentional. We often perform better when we come out of a training program. But is it the training that's critical or the interaction during the training?

Here it might be replied that with the growing significance of 'e-commerce', the use of internet and e-mail will become standard features of business that we cannot afford to ignore when teaching people who will go on to do, or are already using 'e-commerce' in their jobs. The learners in internet-related fields, however, I would like to hold, are in need of communicative, self-managing and problem-solving skills: Say for example, 20 years ago students learned the conventions of business writing through letters and telexes, this may now have changed to faxes and e-mails, yet the obstacles to 'winning' your addressee for your ideas, or the dangers of 'striking a false note' have remained very much the same. Thus, instead of saying: 'Here's a new piece of technology - let's see if we can think of some way of using it', in soft skills teaching we should steer a more relaxed course and begin with: 'Here is an educational need - let's see which technology we can best apply to it'.

#### UNDERSTANDINGS FOR TEACHING

An agenda in Business English which is soft skills-centered has to emphasize the personal, the subjective and the constructivist; it must challenge the expected, the usual, the traditional and the positivist. The authoritarian and teacher-dominated style of teaching will certainly not come to terms with the objective of conveying this armada of extra-linguistic skills through language teaching. But only a co-operative and learner-centered style, it appears, will do justice to the newly-defined roles of both teacher (who becomes more of a facilitator, and less of an instructor) and student (who is upgraded to a discussion partner and ideas generator, and by no means an empty vessel to be filled from outside): "Language is an immensely democratizing institution. To have learned a language is to have rights in it" (Crystal 2000: 56).

Thus it should not be taken to mean that teachers let go of their right and duty to monitor and organize the goings-on in the classroom. In fact, their 'interventions' especially in tasks of an open, multidimensional nature should be a careful, situation-adopted combination of facilitative and authoritative contributions. Rather they must hold the balance between releasing tension, encouraging self-exploration, and providing both challenges and strategies. We need competence and experience to do this job, but we need commitment, enthusiasm, patience and role-consciousness to do it well. In short, we need the soft skills; not only, but quite urgently if you would like to teach us to others. It is therefore to re-iterate the old saying that 'Teachers are the ones who understand, know, and can', is certainly not enough here. We need a healthy ego to teach, but we also need to be strong enough to check it at the door. Teaching 'interpersonal skills' is not about making our self more powerful. It is about making our students more powerful. And we will only earn their trust and respect when we know who we are, convey a strong sense of mission - and when we 'walk or talk' (7).

What actually count in soft-skills-framing, obviously, are the qualities of intellectual and interaction stimulation: Teachers should get students to use reasoning and evidence; they should encourage them to think about old problems in new ways, and to re-think ideas that they had not questioned before. Ideally, teachers are to trigger off conversations even among groups of students who do not normally interact with each other, e.g. in a class on Business Correspondence where future engineers and architects sit next to economists and IT specialists. Hence, teachers should see those patterns which allow innovations and improvements for both the teaching and the learning process.

#### CONCLUSION

The teacher's framework of soft skills confirms the ideas that 'good English teachers will always remain diligent English learners' and also that 'students learn best from what their teachers enjoy teaching'. These two qualities inherent to all of the abovementioned requirements of teachers, i.e. their essential soft skills, are the notion of holistic, situational problem solving, and the willingness to continuously revise one's own sense of meaning.



It is obviously not a closed shop we want to provide access to; it is not a finalized book we have to work through and press home on the learners. We rather should try to do our best in achieving two results simultaneously that are vital in view of the ever-changing 'face' of English: to enhance our students' linguistic competence; and to pave ways towards (inter)cultural competence, i.e. prepare them for the extra-linguistic demands that 'handling language aptly' via soft skills will undoubtedly put on them in their careers.

## NOTES

(1) This is a list comprising those skills that form the focus of a number of relevant recent sources, it is assimilated from Campbell 1996; Conrad 1997; Harrison et alii 1995; Leigh et alii. 1998; Murnane & Levy 1996. In addition, the listed skills are those that are named most often by my own adult students of Business English in Germany.

(2) My argument in this article owes a lot to Hollett (1998: 18), who first brought my intention to the integrability of Goffman's work into the more recent notion of soft skills training.

(3) This also surpasses older notions of a rudimentary and somehow simplified version of English as a means of international communication in business, such as CCE (Common Core English), ESP (English for Specific Purposes), PEL (Polyethnic Englishes), or Working English.

(4) Established frameworks in linguistics might be successfully integrated into these attempts, such as Speech Act Theory (J.L. Austin, J.R. Searle), Discourse Analysis (D. Burton, D. Schiffrin), Pragmatics (G. Brown, G. Leech, S.C. Levinson, G. Yule), or Relevance Theory (D. Blakemore, D. Sperber, D. Wilson).

(5) Some guidelines might be found in these rough, and deliberately stereotyped, characteristics: Y1: adventurous type who enjoys new challenges and is always 'on the go'; looks forward to taking risks, and actively seeks new paths and manners; wants success in fields that rate personal drive and 'congeniality' highly. (Examples: stock market dealing rooms, inventor, software marketing, ecommerce); Y2: confident in personal abilities, prefers to be in charge rather than to take orders and work to rule; sets objectives, develops and decides on strategies to achieve them; enjoys a big audience or 'following'. (Examples: selling, servicing, managerial and organizational work); X1: works well with others but dislikes shouldering responsibility alone; prefers to implement other people's plans rather than his/her own ones; does not bear disagreement easily, but strives for co-operative solutions. (Examples: civil service, clerical and secretarial work, military); X2: a little shy, or even timid, may have difficulty mixing with other people; does not like facing new challenges all too often, but is good at a behind-the-scenes-job marked by routine tasks and regular duties; might be tempted to 'pass the buck' to someone else in case of problems. (Examples: laboratory, research, library).

(6) This is taken, with minor alterations, from Rogers (1998: 29).

(7) Adopting the theory of the American educational psychologist Carl Rogers, we could argue that the teacher's primary tasks in this model would not be to instruct and control, but to permit the students to learn and to feed their curiosity in the subject and in people (Rogers 1983). For an interesting poll on recent images of teachers, ranging from 'actor' to 'sales rep.' and 'sports coach', cf. Weber and Mitchell (1996).

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