

# Rassegna italiana di Linguistica Applicata

ESTRATTO

BULZONI  
EDITORE

The logo for Bulzoni Editore, featuring a stylized 'B' composed of horizontal lines.

Anno XLII

Settembre-Dicembre 2010 / 3

ISSN 0033-9725

## PUBLIC SPEAKING IN ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND NEW DIRECTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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### ***Abstract***

*La dimensione internazionale dell'insegnamento e dell'apprendimento della lingua inglese orale nel mondo dell'economia e della finanza è nota, così come da tempo è attestata l'importanza di comunicazioni d'affari efficienti ed efficaci in pubblico. Obiettivo della riflessione che segue è quello di rilevare la specificità di un percorso di apprendimento mirato allo sviluppo di competenze orali tipiche della comunicazione internazionale d'affari in lingua inglese – con particolare attenzione al settore del 'public speaking' – e di proporre una rivisitazione storica di manuali sull'argomento al fine di individuare una sintesi che costituisca la base per nuovi, aggiornati ed adeguati percorsi didattici peculiari per gli esperti di economia e finanza che dovranno comunicare in inglese in contesti pubblici internazionali.*

Public speaking is re-emerging as a benchmark for testing both the effectiveness and the efficiency of speech communication in English. So much so that the study of rhetoric as applied to public speaking is being reconfirmed (Beebe and Beebe 2009, Davidson 2003, DeVito 2009, German et al. 2004, Grice and Skinner 2007, Johnson 2002, McKerrow 2007, Zanola forthcoming, Zarefsky 2005). Issues such as determining the validity of evidence, assessing the adequacy of proof, deciding when

conclusions are justified in the light of proof and evidence, being effective and efficient in oral production (Blitefield 2002:69), are re-emerging not only as personal or deontological concerns but also as pre-requisites at the heart of any oral production in business communication in English (Antczak et al. 2002).

The main aim of this contribution is to show how the public speaking domain has always been and continues to be one of the specific communication areas in the training of financial and business operators. When it is the case of international public speaking in English, it needs to be taught not only to non native but also to native speakers of English, so as to be effective and persuasive in the domain (Vangelisti, Daly, Friedrich 1999:75; Zanola 2009).

### **1. Why study public speaking?**

It is axiomatic that mastering public speaking helps business professionals acquire skills important to their success in their working lives. With special reference to the American context, Grice and Skinner (2007:2) underscore a general truth for the business world:

(...) thousands of speakers will stand in front of American audiences and deliver speeches. And during those same 24 hours, people will make millions of business presentations. These speakers will express and elaborate their ideas, champion their causes, and promote their ideas and services. Those who are successful will make sales, enlist support, and educate and entertain their listeners. Many will also enhance their reputations as effective speakers.

It follows that public speaking can help the English business speaker become more *knowledgeable*. According to Arnold and McClure (1996:38), we remember “10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, 30 percent of what we see, and 70 percent of what we speak”. Speaking is not only an active process, but it is a crucial test for thinking skills. By learning how to construct effective speeches, learners also become better listeners to all kinds of formal oral discourse – speeches, addresses, oral reports, lectures, etc. Osborn and Osborn carefully classify the ways in which studying and practising public speaking can benefit the individual (2006:4-9):

1. *Personal benefits*. Accomplished public speaking requires practice, but the efforts bring important personal rewards (like confidence, persuasiveness, talking effectively).

2. *Professional benefits.* It has been widely demonstrated that there is a close relationship between communication competence and a successful career in business (National Association of Colleges and Employers 1999:20, quoted in Grice and Skinner 2007:5). In the eighties, a survey made by the American Business Communication Association underlined that “while on-the-job public speaking accounted for only 6 percent of managers’ and technical professionals’ time, it nevertheless ranked as more important to job performance than did time spent reading mail and other documents, dictating letters and writing reports, and talking on the phone” (Mosvick and Nelson 1987:224).
3. *Public benefits.* Public speaking is an important part of daily life, as it gives the opportunity to project personal ideas on to a public domain.

Public speaking builds on the basic communication skills we originally develop as we acquire language and learn how to make conversation. As expanded conversation, public speaking should preserve the natural directness and spontaneity of good conversation. And like conversation, it should be tuned to the reactions of listeners. In a business context, speakers and listeners of this kind of discourse are usually highly motivated business professionals, expecting oral effectiveness and efficiency. In the following paragraphs we will try to define what the specific role of a teacher/trainer in this field should be and which priorities should be given in teaching / learning the basic public speaking skills.

## **2. *English for Business and the business expert***

The importance of the command of business language has been known for centuries. In his *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726), Daniel Defoe was very explicit about the importance of understanding and being able to use the language of business. He wrote:

I therefore recommend it to every young tradesman to take all occasions to converse with mechanics of every kind, and to learn the particular language of their business; not the names of their tools only[...] but the very cant of their trade, for every trade has its nostrums, and its little made words, which they very often pride themselves in, and which yet are useful to them on some occasion or other (Defoe 1726:25-26).

The text is full of advice and insights on business that are just as relevant today as when they were written. Notable too is the fact that Defoe took it for granted there is a separate and specific language of business. Almost four hundred years have passed since Defoe’s acute observations,

while colonisations, wars, emigrations, industry, trade etc. have brought to the development of International English in the business sphere. As an entity, English for International Business (EIB) is however difficult to define and it is even more difficult to define who its ideal users are.

### 2.1. *English for Business teachers*

Teachers of EIB need experience, knowledge, and interest in business matters, though most of them have no first hand experience of the world of business<sup>1</sup>. Useful advice is however available in Goddard (2007:26-28), where EIB teachers are advised to:

- Be sensitive to the expectations that business people may have.
- Keep up to date with research into discourse communities and how they operate.
- Be aware of the research into Business English genres and the attempts to identify the linguistic features that differentiate one genre from another.
- Know how language works in the key communicative events of business (possibly by attending 'real' business events in order to hear how language is used in these key activities).
- Be familiar with management training courses which focus on business communication skills in the learners' native language.

<sup>1</sup> From a survey presented at the 2007 Conference of the Business English Special Interest Group (BESIG, <http://www.besig.org/events/conf2007>) by John Hughes (<http://www.besig.org/events/conf2007/downloads/Hughes.doc>) Business English teachers have many doubts in common, such as:

1. *I don't know much about business so I'm worried I'll be caught out with technical questions.*
2. *I've only learnt to teach general English. Can I use the same approach for business English?*
3. *How can I address individual student's language needs when teaching groups?*
4. *I tend to teach useful phrases. My students don't need grammar and I'm less confident when teaching it anyhow.*
5. *I've taught many fluency lessons but I'm not sure how to do a business simulation.*
6. *My students want presentations on their course but there are 8 in the group – how can I involve them all in the lessons?*
7. *I'm in a bit of a rut and could do with something to motivate me again.*
8. *My students get through case studies really fast – am I missing something?*
9. *My general English students loved grammar – how can I cover this with my business English students so it's relevant?*
10. *I'm not sure how interesting teaching one-to-one would be for me – my teaching experience has been to large groups so far.*



In addition to these considerations, it is worth while recalling how Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) identify the ESP teacher:

1. teacher
2. course designer and material provider
3. collaborator
4. researcher
5. evaluator

These five roles are not enough for EIB teachers, however, because they are no longer ESP teachers, in behaviour, knowledge, skills and teacher-learner relationship. Though the general principles of ESP can usually be applied to teaching of EIB, there are at least four noteworthy differences:

1. The fundamental concern of most international business people is not language learning for its own sake, but how language learning will impact on the company's bottom line and/or salaries.
2. The teacher of EIB is working in a world where most communication is between non-native speakers (NNSs), and the language of communication is English as a world language (EWL).
3. The growth of EIB will increase the need for awareness of cross-cultural issues. It may well be that EIB teachers become consultants and advise on the effectiveness of intercultural communication in global companies.
4. Another area of importance for the EIB teacher is the study of discourse communities and the role of texts within those communities. This may involve the use of specific corpora.

## *2.2. English for Business learners*

EIB is spoken and written in global companies. By 'global' we mean that customers, colleagues, team-members and managers can be located in almost any part of the world. All communication between them is in English, and the English they use is English as a World Language (EWL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) rather than native speakers (NS) of such countries as the US or the UK (Jenkins 2007). International English is about effective communication. Although non-native speakers (NNS) want to communicate effectively, they do not necessarily want to use the NS communication style. Equally, NSs need to be able to use International English, since many aspects of NS English can hinder more than

help when communicating with NNSs. Let's consider some examples from Goddard 2007:24:

... idiomatic expressions which have their roots in British culture (e.g. 'He's on a sticky wicket', or 'In for a penny in for a pound') are unlikely to be understood by non-native speakers. Furthermore, non-native English is littered with first language interferences which, although incorrect, do not necessarily hinder communication. For example, it is very common to hear an Italian or a German using expressions like: 'I am born in 1952', or 'I work in Shanghai since two months'.

At this level, the concept of 'correctness' of any linguistic form becomes necessarily secondary. Bruton (2005) argues that it is inevitable that certain NS varieties will serve as reference points and models. Jenkins (2006) takes up a sensible stance in that she is far from classifying everything linguistically acceptable and 'legitimate' as NS and everything unacceptable and 'illegitimate' as NNS. She collocates International ELF in a 'third space/place/culture' between English as a Native Language and English as a Foreign Language. If we accept this interpretation of English as an International language, in the field of business above all, "we open up the possibility of accepting norms which differ from those of NSs rather than simplistically defining all that differs from NS English as wrong by default" (Jenkins 2006:155).

### 3. *English for Business and Public Speaking*

In Italy, Business English teachers/learners approach public speaking traditionally in academic or non-academic courses of two kinds<sup>2</sup>:

1. *English for Business (oral skills)*. These courses are based on: *Speaking; Oral Presentations; Pronunciation*. The emphasis of these courses is on English speaking skills and presentation skills in English. Attention is paid to a variety of aspects of pronunciation (phonetic symbols, predictable pronunciations and stress and intonation) and to listening skills (note taking, summarizing, listening for information).

<sup>2</sup> The inquiry was carried out in Italy on a sample of 50 academic Business English courses and 55 private non-academic courses. Preliminary results of this research are being developed in an interdepartmental on-going research project (Department of Business Studies, Faculty of Economics, Brescia) under the title: *International Business English teaching in Italy: the state-of-the-art*.

2. *English for Business Communication*. The objective of these courses is to develop students' communication skills in a professional (business) setting. Practical training is given in presentations, negotiations, and job interviews and attention is paid to the language used in these situations. The courses usually deal with business correspondence, too (letter writing, CVs, emails etc.).

As far as our inquiry demonstrates, no special relevance is given to courses on *International Public Speaking in English for Business*. We are not giving here a possible plan for a course of this sort, but we suggest the course be based on: language and techniques of interviews, meetings, speeches, presentations and pronunciation, with special attention paid to language issues and techniques involved in the different forms of public speaking. The aim of such a course should be to train students to speak English in formal settings.

Courses of this sort are by no means new, however. A brief outline of the history of the discipline will recall the importance given to public speaking in the first business English courses in the US.

#### 4. *Elocution studies in Great Britain and the US: the 18th and 19th centuries*

One of the first objections from students of a Public Speaking course about voice and gesture is often the following: if no absolute values can be given to voice or gesture, can there be models for 'good' oral performance and 'proper' gesture?<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, the history of linguistics seems to demonstrate that a 'model' for both was once considered possible (Zanola 2008). As far as the study of oral performance is concerned, examples are scattered back through the centuries. Some sixteenth-century English treatises on punctuation (Hart 1569; Puttenham 1589) made the first steps towards the definition of a written 'transcription' of an oral text. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the study of English intonation and rhythm was furthered with the specific aim of demonstrating the 'Excellency' of the English language (Butler 1634). The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries then saw the flourishing of interest in 'delivery' because speaking opportunities were developing rapidly in par-

<sup>3</sup> This consideration, together with paragraph 6 of this contribution, would never be realized without the active role of students, researchers and colleagues participating in our seminars on Public Speaking 2006-2009 at the Faculty of Economics, University of Brescia (Italy).



liament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and polite conversation, and the demand for a competent expression of ideas increased. The subject was so fashionable that studies on intonation and gesture were published. In 1775 the first impressive study of English intonation by Joshua Steele appeared (Steele 1775), which pioneered a number of important frontiers in prosody. It was followed by John Walker's *The Melody of Speaking* (1787), a markedly pedagogical treatise aimed at giving a guide to those aspiring to read and speak well. Apart from Sheridan (1762), other eighteenth-century elocutionists kept to the traditions established by early English grammarians and elocutionists. The great majority of the 18<sup>th</sup> century writings confined the treatment of oral language to inaccurate generalizations on the motivational power of words, but concentrated on the relationship between language and gesture.

A few decades after the British flourishing of elocutionary studies, American elocutionists made a first attempt to develop a *science of speech*. The American Elocutionary Movement (Barber 1830, Behnke 1897, Bell 1859, Bernstein 1974, Burgh 1761, Chapman 1821, Comstock 1837 and 1844, Mason 1748, Rush 1893) produced manuals which are a valuable source of information about reading and speaking skills (Zanola 2002), speech sounds (isolated or in context), prosodic features, speech defects and speech correction. They were all eclectic in their theories and methods, as they took what they considered best from colleagues and then added ideas of their own. Their common aim was to improve the speaking and reading of the American people; their common interest was to study vocal mechanism and body movements, as the main cues to effectiveness in oral communication in general or to public speaking in particular.

In spite of all the work on elocution, no fixed rules about the proper use of voice and gesture have been established. And yet, what has been clearly stated since the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Hart 1569) is that the listener's *eye and ear* should be harmoniously drawn towards the speaker's *melody of voice and gesture*. The parts of a speech ought to be combined into a suitable and attractive arrangement. Without harmony, the entire effectiveness and efficiency of oral communication may fail.

### ***5. Public speaking in the first English for Business course books***

Rhetorical education in Europe and America was based essentially on the works of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. It is through their writings that scholars became acquainted with the concept of 'delivery', the fifth traditional rhetorical part, later on referred to as 'the Art of Speak-

ing'. In particular, Cicero and Quintilian both recognized 'delivery' and its importance in speeches: although neither of them dealt directly with the relationship between the speaker and the audience, they both noted how speaking may be affected by variations in voice and body movement.

Around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the specialised domain of business English began to emerge, and was soon incorporated in manuals teaching practical business'. References to public speaking in the training of business professionals show the importance attributed to it. In Hotchkiss-Drew 1916, for example, the first chapter, devoted to 'Essentials of the Business', is divided into the following sub-chapters:

1. Substance and Style
2. Clearness in Sentences (through Unity)
3. Clearness in Sentences (through Coherence)
4. Correctness in Sentence Structure
5. Correctness of Diction
6. Force in Sentence Structure
7. Force in Diction
8. The Paragraph

Sub-chapters 2 to 5 are built on the concepts of *clearness* and *correctness*, which take their roots directly from Quintilian's categories, that is: *correctness*, *clarity*, *elegance*, and *appropriateness*. In the same manual we read:

The aim of business English should be to economize the reader's attention to present ideas so that they may be grasped clearly and quickly with the least expenditure of mental effort. Clearness in sentence structure and correctness of syntax are aids to economy, but no less so is the correct use of words. Good diction is the result of clear and correct thinking, and of unceasing care in the selection of words, the symbols of ideas. Use words that are present, reputable, and national (Hotchkiss G.-Drew C. 1916:47).

Effectiveness and efficiency in oral performances in Business English are a priority for other authors of the same period. Webster (1916:75) writes:

Suggestive power in oral or in written composition appeals to the decision of the ear. The choice of words, and the arrangement of words and syllables should be euphonious. Because such an order is more pleasing to the sensitive ear, it is on that account more quickly and easily grasped; therefore, more economical, forcible, and suggestive.

The same author devotes a chapter to the 'Oral Aspects of Business Communications', with particular attention to:

1. The Dictation of Business Letters
2. The Telephone Message
3. Parliamentary Debates
4. After-dinner Speaking
5. Successful Qualities of an After-Dinner Speech
6. Planning an After-Dinner Speech
7. Delivering an After-Dinner Speech.

Paragraphs 4 to 7 underline one of the commonplaces of contemporary Public Speaking courses, that is 'Building speaker confidence', or 'Fear of Public Speaking' (Grice and Skinner 2007:42-49; Osborn and Osborn 2006:29-47):

When it comes to the delivery of your speech, even though you may feel nervous, you must try to appear at ease. A nervous speaker makes an audience nervous. Practice is the big factor in cultivating ease. Be sure you know the gist of your speech and, above all, be able to relate your anecdote tellingly. Try to appear as if every bit of what you said came spontaneously. (Webster 1916:319)

Moreover, all these manuals are concerned with preparation for public speaking at different levels on topics such as:

- adapting to the audience and the situation (Hatfield 1921)
- finding the right topic (Webster 1916)
- researching and studying the topic (Webster 1916)
- supporting one's ideas (Gallagher and Moulton 1918)
- structuring the speech (Hatfield 1921)
- outlining the speech (Hotchkiss and Drew 1916).

The new specialised identity of the Business English speaker is considered in these books, which often wonder whether the learner (in this case, only the native speaker of English) is able to reason in the specific way which his/her profession requires:

What is the difference between description for the sake of its picturing power and description as adapted to the aims of business? Why is careful description essential in business?

How does a story told by a salesman to a customer differ from a story in your selections from literature?

What are the characteristics of argument in business? What is the difference between proof and persuasion?" (Gallagher-Moulton 1918:105)

The portrait of the ideal English speaker seems to emerge clearly from these manuals. According to all the authors, effectiveness and efficiency tend to work in tandem. Plain language and trite content are very easy to produce and receive, but cause boredom and leave little impression behind. By contrast, creative language and bizarre content can elicit a powerful effect, but may become unduly difficult to produce and receive. Hence, the need for appropriateness to achieve the proper balance between the conventional and the unconventional in all situations. Efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness meet in *delivery* (Latin *pronuntiatio*)<sup>4</sup>, voice and gesture merging.

## 6. *Public speaking in an English for Business course*

Convinced of the importance of voice and gesture harmonizing, we tried to put these ideas into practice in a short course entitled *Elements of Effective Presentation*. The lessons were organized as a series of seminars, where the teacher and a small group of students (maximum twelve) discussed the fundamental techniques for an 'effective presentation' in English, to an international public in an international business situation. Some of the students had had previous experience in public speaking, others none at all. The techniques highlighted were as follows:

1. The importance of eye contact in business meetings and with formal presentations.
2. The supporting role of facial expressions.
3. The synchronisation of body language and verbal communication.
4. Voice quality.
5. Persuasive body language.
6. Memorability and persuasiveness in a good presentation.

<sup>4</sup> We interpret here oral communication as a form of *rhetoric*: in fact, it needs the traditional five rhetorical parts to get a point across to the audience effectively. *Invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery* (in Latin, *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio*) are fundamental keys to speech. The last one, *delivery*, particularly influences the effectiveness and efficiency of any oral performance (Kegan and Laskow 2000)

A summary of the results follows:

1. *Eyes*. The starting point of the discussion was that people who do not engage in eye contact are judged less credible than those who do. This was considered logical, but all the students agreed in recognising that it is easier said than done. The answer to the dilemma – how to look at the audience without being distracted – was also discussed.
2. *Face*. The face is capable of a bewildering range of emotional expressions. The best way to improve the students' techniques was to videotape their speech performances. Replaying with the sound turned off made any repetitive mannerism painfully obvious.
3. *Body*. The first need was to reduce random movement. After gaining control over nervous ticks, the next step was to learn a wider range of *deliberate* physical communication. In other words, become more 'animated', but in a 'rational way'.
4. *Voice*. There is a wide range of elements of vocal quality but most speech experts say that we will be 'good speakers' if we are loud enough, and have an adequate and varied rate of speech, clear diction, pleasant pitch, good phrasing as well as use frequent pauses, and make a variety of intonational curves (rising, falling, or neutral).
5. *Memorability and persuasiveness*. Some simple devices were suggested in order to make oral performance memorable and persuasive. Among them, some rhetorical figures were underlined: ellipsis (for example, to leave out the 'and' before the third phrase), asyndeton (the use of sentence fragments to quicken the rhythm), anaphora (when successive sentences are begun with the same word or group of words), balance (a balanced phrase opposes two elements, the first usually spoken with pitch going up, the second with pitch going down), rhetorical questions (to introduce an idea for discussion, to indicate misunderstanding, to make an accusation, etc.), hyperbole, repetition.

Working on these points was very successful in terms of effectiveness of oral performance because students found themselves more at ease with business communication on the whole. They realized the enormous potentialities of the field, approaching Business English as a complex mechanism of communication which is activated in its entirety.

These results have provided the basis for organizing a further series of seminars where specified practice and exercises will be used in order to

improve effective presentation in English. This second series of seminars will include the use of visual aids and recordings of authentic business situations.

## *Conclusion*

Teaching English for Business for budding or expert Italian business people I have found myself necessarily involved in the field of business communication. I have witnessed together with the students how important it is to keep in mind that carrying out business activities in English involves communicating in a language which is no longer a *national* 'langue', but an *international* one. Moreover, we do it in three primary ways: *body language*, *tone of voice*, and *content*. Indeed, in face-to-face contact, body language has the greatest impact, followed (at a significant distance) by tone of voice and then content.

Some principles of past studies both in the field of rhetoric and in the history of business English studies may be adapted easily to improve student performance, as the main cues to *effectiveness* and *efficiency* in international business communication in English. However, much work is still to be done in devoting part of the business English curriculum to the complex and manifold aspects of the art of public speaking.

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