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Title:

To Teach Business English?

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Summary:

Mid-career crisis? Have you got what it takes to teach English for business?

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Let me deal...

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Article Body:

Mid-career crisis? Have you got what it takes to teach English for business?

Teachers often ask me what direction they can take after a few years of teaching general English. To continue as an ordinary classroom teacher seems like stagnation, so choices have to be made about how to develop both professionally and personally. Specializing in English for business can be a fruitful move if the teacher is able to transfer existing skills to the business context.

Let me deal with the prospects first. Teaching business people is recognized as a specialist field and the teacher often has to be a program planner and materials developer as well, so salaries are generally higher. The training can take place in dedicated centers, often residential, in-company or as a special program offered at a traditional language school, but wherever it takes place, the teacher will have to be able to deal with the people who are sponsoring the training and is thus answerable to a wider range of stakeholders. But by engaging in the corporate world, the trainer may find many opportunities to widen his or her range of training skills: interpersonal communications, written communications, cross-cultural communications and ultimately consultancy work in the communications field.

However, the prospects will only open out to the kind of teacher who can adapt from the world of pedagogy to the corporate world. The clients are usually highly motivated and work in small groups or as individuals hence the teaching dynamics are quite different. Business people do not wish to go back to the classroom as they already have the professional expertise they need. What they want is someone who can help them communicate effectively in the global business world. The trainer needs to slip into the role of facilitator, working with clients to understand their learning styles, to discover their specific needs and immediate objectives and to help them set achievable targets. I have seen many a hopeful business English trainer fall at this hurdle. They cannot throw off their accustomed teacherly approach.

So who can become a successful business English teacher? It is certainly helpful to have experience in fields other than teaching. However, although it is very useful to have experience of other professional domains, or of the commercial world, it is not essential. On the other hand, it is necessary to be interested in the world of business and to understand how companies are structured and to be familiar with business terminology. Regular reading of the business pages of the daily press can help you build awareness of the field and of the latest developments.

The business English teacher needs to have an international perspective. In dealing with many different nationalities, and with clients who have to operate in the increasingly globalized business field, the teacher needs to be aware of the implications of cross-cultural communications. Clients, who have to use English--which is not their native tongue, to do business with other non-native English speakers in another country--have several layers of cultural information to deal with. First they have to acknowledge that their own national and company culture is not necessarily shared with their foreign counterparts or even understood by them, and secondly that nobody's culture is intrinsically right or wrong, better or worse. The teacher may have to help them understand the nature of cross-cultural interaction.

The qualities needed by a business English teacher are thus different in many ways. They need the confidence to play the role of instructor/trainer/facilitator with people who may occupy senior company positions. They have to be adaptable and not have rigid ideas about how to conduct training sessions and what the content should be. And they need to have an understanding of how English is used internationally as a lingua franca among people who may never meet a native speaker. They need skill in giving feedback and must be robust enough to take feedback themselves. And they need to be clear and precise in describing what they can offer clients and in their post-training debriefing. Clearly, therefore, that this is not a field for someone new to teaching--it demands a certain maturity of approach and confidence both personally and professionally. However, for teachers able to make the transition from classroom to the world of corporate training, the rewards and prospects are excellent.