

Forging a link between research and pedagogy: A holistic framework for evaluating business English materials

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Abstract

In the last two decades, a great deal of applied linguistics research has been conducted in different areas of business English. However, despite many highly relevant research findings, the interface between research and pedagogy remains weak. One reason behind this lack of interface is that research findings from different studies are rarely brought together in an accessible manner for use by business English practitioners. The present paper proposes a model for linking research and pedagogy in business English, whereby applied linguistics research findings are channelled to pedagogical practice through a holistic framework for evaluating teaching materials. This evaluative framework entails research findings related to both pedagogical considerations and the discourse of the business English topic of interest. Using business meetings as an example, the paper demonstrates how a two-part checklist for evaluating materials on the topic can be developed by using the framework. In addition, through an evaluation of textbook materials on meetings by means of the checklist, the paper illustrates the sort of gap which might not have been obvious had traditional checklists been used. It is suggested that checklists incorporating research findings should be developed for other business English topics to strengthen the link between research and the evaluation, development and use of materials.

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, a great deal of applied linguistics research has been conducted in different areas of business English. The findings from such research have provided insights into the way in which language is used in authentic business situations. However, despite the multitude of applied linguistics research findings accumulated over the last two decades, the interface between research and pedagogy remains weak. In fact, two recent brief surveys of hundreds of published teaching materials in business English and business communication show that, with only a handful of exceptions, the materials do not draw on empirical research (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007; Nickerson, 2005). Due to the mismatch between research and materials development, business English teachers, especially those without much business experience, often

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have to rely on materials which contain inauthentic or inappropriate language and skills. Business English researchers, equally, have found limited ways to channel their findings to pedagogical practice.

One reason behind the lack of interface between research and pedagogy is that applied linguistics research findings from different studies are rarely brought together for easy access by business English practitioners. One way in which the applicability of research findings can be broadened is to combine them to develop criteria for materials evaluation which reflect the current understanding of the language of business and the associated pedagogical issues. Although there are some books and articles which give guidelines to teachers on choosing suitable teaching materials, they are often rather general. Checklists for evaluating general English materials (e.g. [Cunningsworth, 1995](#); [Sheldon, 1988](#); [Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara, & Rubdy, 2001](#)), ESP materials (e.g. [Cunningsworth, 1995](#), p. 135; [Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998](#), p. 173) and even business English materials (e.g. [Ellis & Johnson, 1994](#), pp. 128–129; [Flinders, 2005](#)), while all providing a good starting point for teachers who seek to evaluate business English materials in a consistent manner, lack the level of detail needed to help teachers, especially those with little or no business experience, to assess the suitability, authenticity and credibility of the materials. This shortcoming arises because the evaluation criteria tend to centre on practical considerations, such as cost and availability, and other general pedagogical concerns, such as the kind of learner being targeted and the topic areas covered, but not on the linguistic aspects of the materials. Indeed, some recent materials evaluation projects are still based on “impressionistic” observations on the part of the evaluator, as [Flinders \(2005\)](#) describes his.

To forge a link between research and pedagogy and to make the materials evaluation process more rigorous, a holistic evaluative framework is necessary, one which also addresses research findings showing “how language and skills are used in the target situation” ([Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998](#), p. 125). Most importantly, the findings should be transformed into *accessible* checklists for business English practitioners, including teachers, teacher trainers and materials writers. In addition, since different types of business interaction (e.g. meetings, negotiating, socializing) involve different language and strategies, it is necessary to identify the relevant research findings in each case and develop different evaluation criteria for different topics, rather than using a generic checklist for all topics.

This paper proposes a model for linking research and pedagogy in business English, whereby applied linguistics research findings are channelled to pedagogical practice through a holistic framework for evaluating teaching materials. The framework entails research findings related to both pedagogical considerations and the discourse of the topic of interest. This paper first presents the model and explains how it is underpinned by the holistic evaluative framework. Using business meetings as an example, this paper then demonstrates the process of developing a topic-specific checklist on the basis of the framework. Finally, an evaluation of some textbook units on business meetings using the checklist is presented to illustrate the value of the framework in helping business English practitioners identify gaps which might not otherwise have been obvious.

2. Linking research and pedagogy through materials evaluation

To channel applied linguistics research findings to business English pedagogy through the process of materials evaluation, it is proposed that topic-specific checklists should be developed and used according to the six-step model in [Fig. 1](#).

The key to the model is that applied linguistics research findings should be consulted and utilized throughout the process. As shown in [Fig. 1](#), topic-specific checklists are developed by first reviewing the relevant research and then organizing the findings. To serve the purpose of linking research and pedagogy, these steps for developing checklists should be supported by a holistic framework as depicted in [Fig. 2](#).

As shown in [Fig. 2](#), two types of research findings form the basis of the criteria for evaluating materials – findings from research relevant to the pedagogical aspects of the topic at hand, and those related to the discourse features of the topic. With reference to these, a two-part checklist can be developed. Evaluating materials using this kind of checklist can help business English practitioners identify gaps related to not only the pedagogical but also linguistic aspects of the materials.

Since it is not likely that a single set of materials can meet all the criteria, adaptation and supplementation is usually necessary to deal with the gaps in the materials. To do this, teachers can refer to the evaluation criteria when adapting and supplementing the materials ([Chan, in press](#)). Gaps in currently available materials may

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