Developing business skills through real recorded meetings

Almut Koester, BESIG 2012
Cambridge English

Language *about* vs. language *doing*

Nelson (2000):

- **Language *about* business:**
  - language used (e.g. by business experts, journalists) to talk about business

- **Language *doing* business:**
  - language used to perform business and workplace activities (problem-solving, planning, briefing, training etc.)
The Gap between research and practice

• Recent business textbooks only include authentic language about business:
  – business texts
  – interviews with business experts
Handford (2010):
Survey of over 20 best-selling business textbooks found no lessons based around real spoken business interactions (e.g. telephone conversations, meetings)
Cheng and Warren (2006) compared ‘opine markers’ (expressing an opinion) in HKCSE-bus* with EFL textbooks in Hong Kong:

Top 4 in corpus:
- I think/don’t think …
- It’s … (a sad thing)
- I know/don’t know …
- I + say, e.g. I would say …

Only I think occurred in the textbooks.

*business sub-corpus of the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English
Corpus research

What is a corpus?
• A collection of texts

In Applied Linguistics Research:
• A database of authentic written or spoken ‘texts’ which can be analysed for word frequency, collocations and phraseology using special software.
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Corpus research

- **CANBEC** (Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus)
  1 million words spoken data
  Meetings: 912,734 words
  64 meetings from 26 companies

- Part of the **Cambridge English Corpus** (CEC) - 1.8 billion words
Vague Language (Being Vague)

Frequent ‘chunks’ in CANBEC

• the other thing
• sort of thing
• kind of thing
• et cetera
• things like that
• a lot of
• and this that and the other
Vague Language (Hedging)

Frequent ‘chunks’ in CANBEC

• I think
• sort of
• kind of
• a bit (of a)
• I don’t know
• I don’t think
**Cambridge English**

What about lingua franca speakers?

Hong Kong Business Corpus (HKCSE-bus)
Frequency per 10,000 words (Cheng 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vague Item</th>
<th>Hong Kong Chinese</th>
<th>Native English Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>about</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>things</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kind (of)</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bit</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>all VL</strong></td>
<td><strong>187.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>185.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why be vague in business?

1. Because you are uncertain about something

Rob: Oh the NC- the NCOA stuff won’t be back until next week or something?
Tom: Right. Until… Wednesday or Thursday earliest

(from Corpus of American and British Office Talk – ABOT)
2. Because it is not necessary to be more explicit (shared knowledge)

Chris: Did it also include by the way... uh those **things** that we talked about, that I- that I just called you up about?

Mike: Yeah, the monthly **thing**

(from ABOT)
Why be vague in business?

3. To create a sense of shared knowledge (collaboration, informality)

So we take all the funny sizes... an’ all the- you know the- odd... bits an’ pieces an’ things

→ Collaborative Strategy
Why be vague in business?

4. To be indirect (polite or strategic use)

I heard you did a deal with HPC, didn’t you, to- take a lot of board in **an’ things**

(from ABOT)

→ Competitive Strategy (bargaining technique)
Business Advantage Intermediate Briefing (5.3)

Why do Paul and Daniel use **vague language**?

Paul = manager

So this week, you need to **sort of erm**... find out who's who. Erm... Who haven't you met? Who have you met?

Daniel = employee

As I understand it, there's - there's a fair **amount**... of sort of business to be getting on with.

(adapted from CANBEC)
9.3 Skills: Briefing

Learning outcomes
- Explain, check and clarify information.
- Use language describing a range of job activities.
- Brief somebody and actively respond to a briefing.

Introduction
1. Look at the dictionary definition of the verb to brief from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, then discuss the questions below.

- brief (GIVE INSTRUCTIONS) /baɪər/ verb (T) FORMAL to give someone instructions or information about what they should do or say: We had already been briefed about what the job would entail.

1. What information does the dictionary give you about how to pronounce and use the word?
2. What do you think brief means?
3. Can you think of situations which involve briefing (e.g. telling a new employee what the main duties of the job are)?

2. In a briefing situation, there are two roles:
- the role of the person who does the briefing
- the role of the person being briefed.

How are these roles different? What things are important for each person to do for the briefing to be successful? Discuss and write your ideas in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The person who does the briefing</th>
<th>The person being briefed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ease understanding ...</td>
<td>Listen carefully ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listening: Informing a colleague

1. You are going to hear a conversation from the Sales Department of an Internet Service Provider. Paul is the division manager and Daniel is his boss. Daniel is the new senior accounts manager. Paul is briefing Daniel about the department and his new job.

1. How long do you think Daniel has worked for the company? How do you know?
2. What kind of work will his job involve?
3. Listen again and answer these questions.
   1. Has Daniel met everybody in the department?
   2. What does Daniel do this week?
   3. Is Daniel worried that the work will be too difficult? How do you know?
   4. How many companies should Daniel contact?
      a. 300  b. 150  c. 30!
      What reasons does Paul give?
   5. How many action points should he get from his calls?

Language focus 1: Briefing and being briefed

When you are briefing someone or are being briefed, you often react to:
- explain things
- check or clarify information
- show enthusiasm
- be an active listener to show you understand, for example by saying yes, OK
- use vague language when you are unsure of information or because you want to be polite.

1. Look at the following phrases for doing each of the things above. Which of the expressions do Paul or Daniel use? Listen again and tick (√) the ones that you hear.

Business Advantage
Intermediate Student’s Book
Language focus 1: Briefing and being briefed

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Explaining organisational structure and procedures</th>
<th>Checking and clarifying</th>
<th>Showing enthusiasm</th>
<th>Active listening</th>
<th>Vague language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You need to … So what you're doing this week is finding out … You should go into … I will go through that with you …</td>
<td>Have you had a tour …? What I'm not sure about at the moment is … Do you want me to …?</td>
<td>I'd like to get going as soon as possible.</td>
<td>Sure. Yeah. Great.</td>
<td>a bit of kind of and so forth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Vague language

Business Advantage
Intermediate Student’s Book
2 Notice that Paul uses all the language for explaining, but that both speakers check and clarify things. Why do you think this is?

3 What about the other language: showing enthusiasm, active listening, vague language?

1 Which are used by just one speaker? Why?
2 Which are used by both? Why?

When answering the questions, think again about the roles each of the speakers plays in this situation.
Vague expressions... are extremely frequent in business conversations.

Sometimes people use vague expressions because they are unsure of something, as Daniel does:

• As I understand it, there's – there's a fair amount... of sort of business to be getting on with.
Sometimes people use vague language to be polite, for example if they don’t want to sound like they are giving orders, as Paul does:

• Paul: So this week, you need to sort of erm… find out who’s who. Erm… Who haven't you met? Who have you met?
Listen to a pay negotiation between a trainee business advisor, Sophie, and her boss (Leroy)

– What vague language does Sophie use?

*and all that kind of thing*

*we had these sort of early conversations*

*were certainly paid probably more than double*

*It’s not a huge issue but it may become one*
1) Being deliberately vague can be very useful in a negotiation, both as a way of showing you share understanding (collaborative strategy), and as a bargaining technique (competitive strategy).
A. Showing shared knowledge (collaborative strategy)
• *We talked about pricing and things like that.*

B. Not showing your true position (competitive strategy)
• *We might be able to do it.*
• *It will probably cost about 40 a unit.*
Does Sophie use vague language as a collaborative or competitive strategy?

You know, like having to be approachable and flexible and having to meet clients earlier in the morning or having to meet them after the working day or having to work through lunch and all that kind of thing.

→ Collaborative Strategy
Does Sophie use vague language as a collaborative or competitive strategy?

And I was equal to some of the business advisors that were also in the room who were certainly paid probably more than double.

→ Competitive Strategy
Read through the audio script about negotiating for more money on pages 150-1. and find the following phrases. Are they collaborative or competitive in style?

1. and all that kind of thing
2. probably more than double
3. I would be able to get a job as a business advisor
4. It’s not a huge issue, but it may become one
5. allowances and everything else
6. and that kind of thing
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Business Advantage

Theory

Practice

Skills

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Quiz Question

What is the most frequent vague expression in CANBEC?

– a bit of
– sort of
– I think
– I don’t know
What is the most frequent vague expression in CANBEC?

– I think (2,765)
– sort of (912)
– I don’t know (578)
– a bit of (220)
Conclusion

- Real business conversations show the language, skills and strategies used in key business tasks, e.g. briefing, negotiating, decision making.
- Using real business conversations in teaching prepares learners to interact in real business situations.
Cambridge English

Handford (2010)
Questions?