THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
THE FACULTY OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS
2nd International Conference: Synergies in Communication
RETHINKING EDUCATION - RESHAPING THE WORLD.
LANGUAGES, BUSINESS AND COMMUNITIES
Bucharest, 28-29 November 2013

DO BUSINESS ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS FOSTER
SPEECH ACT TEACHING, LEARNING AND USE?

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Abstract

Textbooks are essential components of the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. The present paper is an attempt to evaluate six Business English textbooks published in the UK, currently used by teachers of the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication from a pragmatic point of view. It is an exploratory study of one of the core components of pragmatic competence – speech acts – and more precisely how speech acts are presented in these textbooks, with a focus on those speech acts which are dealt with explicitly and also on the amount of metapragmatic information accompanying the presentation of the speech acts, including discussion of illocutionary force, politeness, appropriateness and usage.

This article is intended to make Business English teachers aware of the methodological strengths and weaknesses these textbooks have in relation to the development of pragmatic competence, to help them realize to what extent they can rely on textbooks' approach to teaching speech acts in their daily teaching practice and hopefully to determine them to focus more on pragmatics in order to better equip students with the necessary language tools to function in today's business world.

Keywords: speech acts, pragmatic competence, textbook evaluation

Introduction

I would like to start by mentioning what has been said time and again over the past years, that our goal as teachers of a foreign language is to help our students become competent communicators, and even more so when the foreign language is English, the lingua franca of today's world, and more specifically of today's business world. A new acronym was in fact coined by the Finnish researchers Louhiala, Salminen, Charles and Kankaanraanta (2005, p. 403) [1] to describe this phenomenon: BELF - Business English as a lingua franca.

These researchers consider that « *the traditional native - nonnative dichotomy becomes obsolete"* and further remark that "*by definition, BELF interaction has no 'native speakers'; neither does it have 'learners'. It merely has business communicators going about their every day jobs*" (2005 p. 417)[2]

Some of the business communicators of BELF, however, were at some point during their studies, language learners of BELF and that is the stage where they come across teachers of BELF.

Therefore, "*language instruction is expected to focus*" not only "*on communicative use of the target language*" [3] but on professional communication.

Teachers have the difficult task and responsibility to equip students not only with the structural aspects of the language but with pragmatics as well: more simply, the right words to say at the proper time in the appropriate context and taking into consideration the target language cultural norms.

"*Language pedagogy, therefore, should promote language learners' pragmatic awareness and competence, which has at its core, as one of the significant pragmatic features, speech acts. It should strive to accomplish that through adequate pedagogical practices that need to take into consideration on the one hand, the fact that languages have various lexico-syntactic means to realize speech acts, and consequently conventional forms for performing them in a polite, acceptable manner poses serious problems for EFL learners*" [4]

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[1] as cited by A. Wolfartsberger, p.1
[2] as cited by idem, p.2
[3] A. Moradi, A. Karbalaei, S. Afraz, p.324
[4] idem p.324

The reason why increasing pedagogical attention has been paid to speech acts and pragmatic competence in the second-language classroom, is due to the fact that, as Thomas points out, "*formal linguistic errors by a non-native speaker cause little, if any, impediment to conversation, while pragmatic failure will have dire consequences*" (96–97). *In particular, Thomas states that grammatical errors may be irritating and impede communication, but at least, as a rule, they are apparent in the surface structure, so that H[earer] is aware that an error has occurred. Once alerted to the fact that S[peaker] is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in allowing for it. Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e. is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person. Misunderstandings of this nature are almost certainly at the root of unhelpful and offensive national stereotyping*"[5]

"*Even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value*"[6] . Speech acts are regarded as "*one of the most compelling notions*" [7]in pragmatics.

I consider pragmatic failure to have even more drastic consequences in the context of intercultural professional business relationships, and this is precisely the context we should prepare our students for.

Many studies have been conducted on speech act theory in recent years and for the issues under discussion in this paper it is worth mentioning those within the domain of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) which draws on two different disciplines, second language acquisition (SLA)

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[5] Thomas, Jenny. "Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure." *Applied Linguistics* 4 (1983): 91-112., as cited by Frank Nuessel, p.3
[6] Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 10 as cited by
[7] Eslami-Rasekh, 1993, p. 86 as cited in A. Moradi, A. Karbalaei, S. Afraz, p.325

and pragmatics, and has been defined as "*the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language (L2)*"[8].

What most of these studies prove is that learners' pragmatic competence depends on the instruction and input they receive, which has led to yet another direction of research which focuses on the evaluation of the teaching materials to find out whether they include the required pragmatic issues, specifically speech acts.

According to Riazi, 2003, p. 52[9], "*Textbooks play a very crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning and are considered the next important factor in the second/foreign language classroom after the teacher*" and have always been thought of as the main sources of input for the learners.

As a result, course books and textbooks, as "*the visible heart of any ELT program*" (Kırkgöz, 2009*) have been investigated in various studies, and – despite their importance as the basis for a large part of the language input learners are exposed to in the classroom (O'Neill, 1982)- have been found not to include all the necessary input, at least in terms of authenticity and coverage of important aspects of speech acts (Bouton, 1996; Salazar Campillo, 2007; Uso-Juan, 2007; Vellenga, 2004)*[10].

A valuable study that represented a source of inspiration for the present paper was conducted by Vellenga (2004) who compared EFL and ESL textbooks.
She argues that learners hardly acquire pragmatic competence due to the lack of information in textbooks. She concluded that EFL/ESL textbooks did not provide enough metalinguistic and explicit meta-pragmatics information. In spite of this shortage, the comparison shows that majority of EFL texts enjoy pragmatic information.

For all the reasons mentioned above by various researchers and because of my long-term interest in pragmatics and pragmatic competence and on ways in which teachers can raise students' awareness as to its importance, I have thought of this paper as the first of a series focusing on the evaluation of some of the Business English textbooks that my colleagues and I use on a regular basis in class.

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[8] Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Kasper, 1996 as cited by Soo Jung Youn
[9] as cited by Zahra Poupari & Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri, p. 73
[10] Minoo Alemi , Azadi Street, p. 200

Research questions:

What are the strategies of presentation of speech acts?

Is the treatment of speech acts in the chosen textbooks pragmatically adequate?

- Are students given models – audio recordings, printed dialogues, examples?
- Do the chosen textbooks provide explicit metapragmatic discussion in relation to three important areas: 1) politeness 2) appropriateness and illocutionary force 3) cultural and extralinguistic contextual information?

Can the chosen textbooks be considered as appropriate or useful materials in order to teach/learn speech acts?

Terminology

In order to investigate the speech acts that were identified as being treated explicitly, I will use several taxonomies: Austin, Searle and Trosborg's request strategies, Hinkel and Alcon and Safont's advice strategies (2001) as introduced by Alicia Martinez Flor p.144, Jiang's (2006) taxonomy of suggestions as it appears in Reza Pishghadam and Maryam Sharafadini's article.

Methodology

Textbook selection and analysis

For the present paper I have chosen only a limited selection of Business English textbooks, the ones that most of my colleagues use: The Business intermediate and upper-intermediate published by Macmillan, Market Leader intermediate and upper-intermediate and Intelligent Business, Coursebook and Skills Book intermediate and upper-intermediate, published by Longman.

Investigation of speech acts in each of the eight books focused on their explicit mention and presentation and metapragmatic description along three areas: 1) politeness, 2) appropriateness and illocutionary force, and 3) cultural and extralinguistic contextual information through performing a page-by-page analysis of the books. I have also considered the

teachers' books as I wanted to see whether they provide guidelines that non-native teachers might find useful, especially in relation to teaching speech acts that are so cultural and contextual-sensitive.

Results and discussion

All the textbooks that were analyzed contain sections - Skills (Market Leader), Career skills (Intelligent Business), Speaking (The Business) that are meant to "develop essential business communication skills such as making presentations, taking part in meetings, negotiating, telephoning and using English in social situations" (the introductory part to Market Leader) as well as other skills that are considered vital in professional life such as handling conflict, persuading, motivating, dealing with people at work, setting goals, building relationships, giving reasons in interviews, couching, counseling, dealing with objections, getting things done, etc.

All these professional, business communication skills imply not only good command of language but also refined and appropriate use of language – which has to do with pragmatic competence and good command of a variety of speech acts.

In fact, by examining the way speech acts are dealt with in the selected textbooks I would like to say that all of them favor the inductive approach – students are expected to develop an understanding of the language functions and speech acts that the respective skills imply through listening-based tasks followed by role-plays, introducing however, lists with functions and their realization patterns. No explicit discussion of the multitude of speech acts involved can be found in the textbooks or in the teacher's books. And little, if any metapragmatic discussion is provided in relation to politeness, appropriateness and illocutionary force.
In a way, it can be argued that most tasks in the analyzed books take for granted prior knowledge of a wide range of speech acts.

Allow me to bring some examples:

In the case of negotiations, students are given phrases for the stages of a negotiation: present an offer, refuse an offer, impose conditions, make counter-proposal, reach agreement, postpone decision, offer compromise, and reject compromise. Briefing involves using phrases in order to outline objectives, describe methods, assign roles, and use visual aids to clarify points.

Dealing with people at work involves phrases that can help one find common goals, be as positive as possible

As a matter of fact, I have found out that only a limited range of speech acts are explicitly mentioned and presented in all six textbooks, and most of them belong, within Searle's taxonomy of speech acts, to the category of directives: advice, requests, suggestions, recommendations, asking questions (different types of questions), and also greetings and introductions.

One observation is that for two of the chosen series (The Business and Intelligent Business) the intermediate level contains more speech acts dealt with explicitly than the upper-intermediate one. Also, the amount of metapragmatic information differs from one series to the other, and is very scarce.

Another observation is that all textbooks include a concept dear to traditional conversationalists -that of minimal pairs in conversations, made up of initiative act and reactive moves: requests and suggestions and how to respond to them, advice and agreement/disagreement responses, and questions and how to respond.

I would like to draw the attention to questions, which deserve special treatment in a subsequent paper, given the many types of questions that are dealt with in these textbooks having in mind that "*The oft-noted terminological multifunctionality of the term 'question' (e.g. Groenendijk and Stokhof 1997, Higginbotham 1996) has been explicated as referring to three distinct kinds of entities: a) a grammatical one (where grammar encompasses both syntax and phonology), i.e. sentences of interrogative form; b) a semantic one, i.e. a semantic object distinct from propositions which is the 'content/sense' of a question, and c) a pragmatic one, identified with the speech act of question.*" [11]

The Business series:
The approach of this series can be characterized as synergetic - the speech acts are introduced in the grammar section of the books (supplemented by a Grammar and practice section at the back of the book, where there are explanations as to the various structures that can be used in order to carry out a certain speech act) followed by further practice through matching activities, listening

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[11] Marina Terkourafi, Aline Villavicencio, p.1

to conversations and filling in printed dialogues with blanks, and by role-plays which provide contextual information as to the situation and also further expressions that students might use.

The speech acts are further on recycled in the Speaking section of the books where they are used within the context of professional situations. Two versions of business conversations are usually provided, one pragmatically inappropriate – students are required to notice the failures of the characters due to inappropriate use of language - meant to help them become aware of the importance of appropriate use of language and an improved version – students are again asked to notice the difference and to fill in extracts based on the listening. The section ends with a role-play that recycles the structures practiced in the two sections.

The teacher's books do provide guidelines and further practice to enhance the students' pragmatic competence with respect to the use of speech acts.

The Business intermediate

➢   **give advice** and **replies to advice** (agreement and disagreement)

According to the taxonomies discussed in Alicia Martinez Flor's article, out of the various strategies possible to give advice, we could identify the following ones:

Direct strategy - declarative: You ought/should/shouldn't

Conventionally indirect strategy - specific formula - Why don't you/Have you thought of/Have you tried/ Have you considered/ How about/It's important/It's a good idea/ It's unwise

Metapragmatic piece of information: students are asked to decide whether the sentences represent strong recommendations or friendly suggestions, which is supposed to sensitize students to degrees of **illocutionary force**. No other pieces of information related to politeness or appropriateness. The role-play instructions contain information regarding the relationship between participants and also boxes with language for students to use not only to give advice but to ask for advice and respond to it, but no discussion as to the appropriateness or illocutionary force of the disagreement strategies.

In the teacher's book an extension activity is provided so that teachers will elicit from students situations when strong recommendations or friendly suggestions might be used.

In the Speaking section – metapragmatic information related to diplomatic advice.

➢ **make requests and respond to requests**

According to Trosborg's taxonomy, we identified:

Conventionally indirect strategy - hearer-oriented, through expressions of ability – Can you/Could you, willingness - Would you/Will you/I would be really grateful if/ I'd really appreciate it if.. /I was wondering if

Metapragmatic information: Students are told that direct strategy through imperatives is too direct.

➢ **give instructions**

The issue is introduced in the grammar section through a listening-based discovery task – the teacher's book also indicates that students can solve the activities in the grammar section related to modal verbs – no metapragmatic discussion as to politeness/appropriateness/illocutionary force.

Then, the Speaking section deals with this speech act in relation to the professional skill of dealing with problems by telephone, where due to the two-version approach; students are sensitized to politeness/impoliteness.

➢ **ask questions** – in relation to counseling skills, job interviews

Metapragmatic information – nothing in relation to politeness, appropriateness or illocutionary force, as far as cultural and extralinguistic contextual information – counselling skills are introduced in relation to problems that interns or employees experience when working abroad – no explicit discussion as to various cultures, however, the role-plays instructions introduce cultural and contextual information.

The teacher's book does not provide any guidelines in terms of metapragmatic discussion.

➢ **make recommendations and asking for recommendations:**

Direct strategy: use of performatives - I suggest/recommend/advise

No metapragmatic information

The Business upper-intermediate:

➢ **questions** - for persuading

No metapragmatic information

➢ **requests and dealing with requests**

As compared to the previous level of the series, here the focus is placed on ways to deal with requests and more specifically on their appropriateness, no metapragmatic explanations though.

Intelligent Business series

The strategy used in Intelligent Business Coursebooks, in the section entitled Career skills – the introductory part presents the "phrases", i.e. various structures through which the speech acts are carried out, followed by activities that are meant to draw students' attention as to the functions and use of the phrases, by listening-based tasks and by a role-play. No discussion as to the form of the "phrases" is provided. There is also a box called Culture at work that provides information about cultures with different approaches in relation to human relationships, to business practices, and in which several metapragmatic explanations can be found.

Intelligent Business Skillsbooks are meant to develop the skills introduced in the coursebooks, and they provide more listening-based tasks, more situations for students to role-play, more information about cultures and also more language-focused activities, accompanied by indications as to the grammar issues that students could study in order to better understand the phrases that are discussed.

No discussion in relation to extralinguistic contextual information such as status of participants, relationships that appear in the descriptions of the role-plays, no guidelines in the teachers' books either.

Intelligent Business Coursebook intermediate:

- ➤ **softening direct orders** – thus becoming **requests**

Metapragmatic discussion: politeness issues in relation to cultures, illocutionary force - the teacher's book explains what a tentative request is and it provides a Language focus box with requests ranging from more direct to less direct/more tentative that teachers can use to supplement the phrases in the Coursebook.

- ➤ **making suggestions**

Using the taxonomy introduced in Reza Pishghadam and Maryam Sharafadini's article, we could identify the following strategies: Wh- questions – How about/Why don't we/What if; conditionals – If I were….performatives – I suggest, question form and modal verbs – Couldn't we, modal verbs and suggestory formulae – I think we should/I don't suppose we could/Perhaps we could.

In the Coursebook there are indications such as "depending on the context" "appropriate language" and the instructions in the teacher's book draw on students' experience with

suggestions and advice in English, but no metapragmatic explanations are included – left to the teachers to provide and/or students to consider.

> **responding to suggestions**

No metapragmatic discussion

Intelligent Business Skillsbook intermediate:

> **greetings** & **introductions**

> **requests**:

A set of phrases are introduced and a suggestion for teachers/students to find out more about the structures used by going to the Grammar reference about modal verbs

Metapragmatic discussion is provided, in relation to direct and indirect cultures and politeness and impoliteness; and how requests can be phrased according to the type of culture; finally a set of requests is provided from very direct to very indirect

According to Austin and Searle's taxonomy as used by researcher Blum-Kulka, we could identify the most direct request as belonging to the direct strategy based on mood derivable – the imperative "Get me those figures", and to the conventionally indirect strategy, hearer-oriented proposed by Trosborg – ability, question form with modal verbs - Can you/Could you; willingness – Would you and suggestory formulae – I don't suppose you could/I'd really appreciate it/It'd be a great help if you could.

The teacher's book provides further information about direct/indirect cultures and emphasizes that "The language used to make requests may vary according to three factors: culture, relationship, and situation" without any other indications.

> **suggestions**

Metapragmatic information – tentativeness related to politeness and extralinguistic information. The concept of "tentative" is once more stressed in the teacher's book and the students are asked to identify tentative suggestions, the teacher's book provides a Language Focus box that teachers can use in order to teach students the relationship between tentativeness and past form or Conditional 2

> **responding to suggestions** – as metapragmatic information, the notion of neutral is discussed, however no explanations as to illocutionary force and appropriateness or to cultural/extralinguistic contextual information

Intelligent Business Coursebook upper-intermediate:

> **questions and responding to questions**

An observation is important, the Questioning techniques in Careeer skills follows the Language check section which is about question forms, so we notice a concern for integrating linguistic forms and professional skills.

Some metapragmatic information is provided – in reference to embedded questions, the book mentions that they are "more indirect and polite".

Intelligent Business Skills book upper-intermediate:

> **ask questions**

- in relation to small talk
- in relation to prospective supplier/buyer
- in relation to problem-solving

The book directs students to the grammar reference section related to question forms, however no metapragmatic explanations are present.

Turning towards **Market Leader series**, the approach in the Skills section is an inductive one. It starts from a brainstorming activity that elicits the expressions that students would use in certain situations or from a listening task, firstly directed towards content and then focusing on the expressions used and carrying out several types of activities: completing extracts, matching and it concludes with a role-play.

Speech acts and language functions are listed in a Useful language box containing the name of the speech act/language function and a number of structures.

Among the speech acts that are introduced in relation to several of the professional skills under focus: questions - asking for repetition/clarification/help/information/opinions/details/rhetorical questions/feedback/, open/closed questions, promise action, make excuses, give opinions, agree, disagree, make suggestions, reject suggestions, introductions, responding to introductions, give advice, apologize, complain, deal with complaints etc

No discussion related to the grammatical forms used to achieve the speech acts is provided.

As far as the metapragmatic discussion of the various speech acts and language functions in the Useful language box is concerned, it is extremely scarce.

In Market leader intermediate: at page 11 students are asked to decide whether the conversations in the listening task are "appropriate", at page 35, whether the sentences in the Useful language box are "formal" or "informal", students are asked about politeness for a successful conversation at page 107 and about being diplomatic at page 123 but no explanations are provided and no cultural or extralinguistic contextual information, such as relationship between participants, status, age, etc.

In Market Leader intermediate the teacher's book, the main guidelines refer to the approach teachers can use to introduce the language in the Skills section - eliciting expressions from students for the various language functions, while keeping their books closed. The only other tips related to metapragmatic discussion of the speech acts and/or language functions could be found in Unit four, dealing with presentations, where the concepts of formal and informal are very briefly described and in Unit 15, in which teachers are told to elicit from students ideas for the concept of "softening phrases" as to what formal and informal language is.

However, by analyzing the books page-by-page I noticed that in the Language review section of the books, the following grammatical topics under discussion – conditions, and modals are introduced in relation to speech acts and language functions and practiced in types of activities that develop professional skills (for example Conditions – with a focus on the expression of condition and concession – are related to negotiating skills), and other categories such as passives and questions are accompanied by some metapragmatic information as to politeness, formality.

In **Market Leader upper-intermediate**, at page 97, the Skills section, Asking and answering difficult questions, students are asked to decide whether the questions/answers are "neutral, polite, forceful, aggressive" – as part of the inductive, self-discovery approach and no explicit metapragmatic discussion as to the degrees of force – illocutionary force - some speech acts have.

In the teacher's book, the only metapragmatic information teachers are advised to share with students – no explanations provided – unit 2 "You could ask them whether they (i.e. the

expressions) are tentative, neutral or strong" and unit 9, some forms such as "could", "if I may ask" are softeners.

Conclusion

I am well aware of the limitations of my study – the number of textbooks analyzed, the lack of frequency counts of the various speech acts and others, I have but scratched the tip of the iceberg, but my intentions were humble to begin with. I merely observed how materials that we use deal with such a complex issue as speech acts.

Nevertheless, I would like my observations to draw my fellow colleagues' attention to the pragmatic side of the textbooks they use, not necessarily the ones chosen for the present analysis, to critically assess how materials present speech acts, whether it is enough to foster learning and use of speech acts.

"*The textbook is a tool in the hands of the teacher who must know not only how to use it, but also how useful it can be. To that purpose, we as teachers need to use material evaluation to question and develop our own ideas as to what is required, to identify strengths and weaknesses so that optimum use can be made of strong points, and weaker points can be adapted or substituted from other works*" [12] .

I personally consider that the explicit teaching of language functions and speech acts together with more detailed metapragmatic discussions in relation to politeness, appropriateness and force, to cultural and extralinguistic contextual information such as status, relationships, age, could be a solution for teachers to the pitfalls of textbooks in this area.

On-line resources

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