

## **Towards the Creation of Appropriate Teaching Materials for High Proficiency ESL Learners: The Case of Indian Management Students**

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### **Abstract**

Many of the textbooks used to teach Indian management students are South East Asian editions of U.S. publications. Although these provide a great deal of information on the business world, particularly in a North American context, outside of India, they do not always meet the needs of either the Indian ESL Learner, or of Indian business and industry. This paper seeks to address this imbalance and to identify a number of key areas in which research may usefully contribute to the development of appropriate teaching materials for Indian management students.

### **Introduction**

This paper presents a discussion of what should constitute appropriate management communication training for high proficiency ESL speakers in India, and the research that is needed in order to achieve that. The premise is that such management communication training must sit between English Language training on the one hand and the type of communication training on the other hand that would be similar to that given to native speakers of English. If it is to be effective, then we must also understand how ESL management training is a) different from English language training, and b) similar, but not the same as the training given to native speakers. I first provide a brief overview of the context in which the training takes place, both nationally in India, and professionally, within management education. I then outline my experiences over the past few years as communication faculty teaching on MBA programmes in India, and to make some suggestions as to the research that is needed to inform the development of teaching materials.

### **ESL in India**

India accounts for a large number of the world's ESL speakers. According to Gargesh (2006), 90 million people in India reported in a 1991 census that they used English as a second or third language. This accounts for almost 8% of the Indian population, and places India on a global scale second only to the United States, with the most English

users in any one country (Gargesh, 2006; TESOL-India, 2004-2007). Gargesh also comments that despite official language policies to the contrary designed to promote the use of regional languages in educational contexts, English is in fact "used throughout the length and breadth of the country," it is the "[l]anguage of prestige in higher education" and furthermore that "[c]areers in business and commerce, government positions of high rank (regardless of stated policy), and science and technology (attracting many of the brightest) continue to require fluency in English" (Gargesh, 2006, n.p.). Attitudinal studies such as those by Abbi, Gupta & Gargesh (2000) and by Agnihotri and Khanna (1994) also show that English is viewed positively and as a crucial skill in scientific, technological, and educational progress. Further discussion of the status of English in general in India is beyond the scope of this article, but it seems clear that it plays a major--albeit unofficial--role in the daily lives of very large numbers of people. And tellingly, as Gargesh comments, "The present system of English Language education is unable to meet the growing aspirations of the people in the new globalized contexts" (Gargesh, 2006, n.p.).

### **English in Higher Education and Management Education**

Gargesh (2006) reports that there are around 324 universities in India and around 17,625 Colleges of Engineering, Medical, Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Commerce, Science and Management Education. In addition, Gupta (2008) observes that for management education alone, more than 1,280 management schools were in operation in India in 2007/2008 and a total of 110,000 students are admitted to a post graduate programme in management on an annual basis to study for an MBA degree or Indian MBA equivalent, for example, the Post Graduate Diploma in Management awarded by the government funded Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). Despite these figures, a recent report looking at the IIMs called for further expansion over a very short period of time to meet the acknowledged need of Indian business and industry as the Indian economy continues to expand--an expansion that is likely to be mirrored across the board in management education. Across the country the medium of management education is English, the textbooks prescribed are in English, and in the majority of cases, the students are expected to complete all their spoken and written assignments as well as their formal examinations in English. In addition, most MBA/PGP graduates will enter a workforce in which they will be using English at least part of the time, regardless of the position that they are in, and many will find themselves in situations where they use English almost all of the time in interactions either with other Indian colleagues, with whom they do not share another language, or with colleagues or customers from outside of India.

Many of the management schools in India now include some form of training in management communication or business communication as part of the curriculum, at least in the first year compulsory courses of a two-year MBA programme. For the IIMs, all six include managerial communication in the first year programme and several continue this through in the form of elective courses into the second year, with topics such as advanced negotiation and international business communication. Likewise, within the MBA programmes that are accredited by the traditional

universities and then purchased by private business schools operating in the vicinity of a university, many, if not all, now carry a component in communication, under headings such as *communication skills* (Anna University), *business communication* (Bangalore University) and *business communication and managerial skill development* (Delhi University). The content of these programmes are generally a direct reflection of the textbook on which they are based, and in the majority of cases, these are U.S. textbooks (for example, Lesikar, Pettit & Flatley, 2001; Guffey, 2000; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2007) that are available to Indian students in a South East Asian edition, at a fraction of the original cost. One exception is *Business Communication Strategies* by Matthukutty Monippally, which is an Indian authored textbook designed to meet the needs of Indian management students (Monippally, 2001). Only the Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University in Hyderabad offers what appears to be an (over)emphasis on linguistic competence under the peculiar heading of *Business Communication & Soft Skills Grammar, the Backbone of Communication*, with the following description:

Using correctly the nouns, pronouns, verbs (including tenses, voice) adjectives (degrees of comparison, hyphenated adjectives) adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles and interjections, sentences, punctuation—Adaptation of clear sentences and paragraphs—construction of clear sentences and paragraphs—Writing for Effect.

Managerial communication and business communication courses, at least according to what is available in the information provided by the universities and management school on-line, therefore vary between two extremes; grammar-based courses with little evidence of the development of anything other than linguistic competence, and communication courses designed for the native speaker market, with little evidence that the needs of ESL learners have been taken into account. It is against this background that the need for the development of appropriate management communication training for the high proficiency ESL speakers that populate India's management schools is discussed. I also make a number of suggestions as to the research that could be usefully carried out in order to determine what form that training might take.

What is Business English in India? Business English is a global industry, but as researchers such as Nickerson (2005), Nelson (2000) and St John (1996), have all commented, there is curious disconnect between what is presented in textbooks as business English and what research has shown to be the case in real life business situations. Nelson's work, for instance, shows that business English is distinct from general English when he compared native speaker sources, that is, on the basis of a comparative corpus study of sources of general English compared to British and U.S. business writing, including company brochures, email messages, annual reports, meetings, and negotiations (Nelson, 2000; 2006). In addition, he found that the textbooks he surveyed that were intended to present business English, were in fact presenting language that had little to do with reality when compared to his native speaker business English corpus. If, as Nelson's work suggests, textbooks written by

native English speakers are presenting something other than business English, then the situation becomes only more complex if the realities of global business are taken into consideration. In order to produce appropriate materials for the Indian context, it would first seem necessary to establish what Indian business English is as distinct from U.S. or U.K. business English (or indeed from general Indian English), and then to incorporate this into the development of materials that include authentic examples of Indian business English, alongside examples of other varieties of business English.

The dominant language of international business, English is used by native speakers, ESL speakers, and EFL speakers alike; this has obvious consequences for the nature of communication that takes place. Researchers such as Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) and Rogerson-Revell (2007) have looked at meetings, for instance, where English is used a lingua franca between EFL speakers or by native speakers and EFL speakers, and they have shown that the discourse strategies used by the different parties may vary considerably as a result of the ethnic culture to which they belong, for example, Swedes versus Finns in Louhiala-Salminen et al.'s (2005) study. In the Indian context, English is used in international communication with interactants who come from outside of India's borders, but it is also used in intra-national communication in which Indians choose to speak English rather than another language, either because of the social context, for example, management education in India takes place in English, or for other reasons, for example, when the participants may not share another common Indian language, or they may both be equally proficient in English, but be less well matched in a shared alternative such as Hindi, (for instance, if one person is from the South of India and the other from the North). Understanding the variations in discourse strategies that can occur as a result in common forms of business communication would also be of interest in designing teaching materials.

It is clear that much useful work could be done to establish:

- a. The lexis and discourse strategies that are characteristic of Indian ESL speakers in business and professional contexts
- b. The variation between ESL Indian English and other varieties of English in business contexts
- c. Whether the textbooks that are commonly used in management education in India are actually taking users of Indian business English into account

In other words, what is Indian business English, and how does this differ from native speaker business English, such as that described by Nelson (2000, 2006)? Furthermore how is this difference likely to influence the success or failure of management interactions with other speakers of Indian business English and/or other business English speakers? And does Indian business English compare or contrast with other varieties of Business English?

To my knowledge, although there has been research in the past that has identified the characteristics of Indian English (see, for example, Wells, 1982; Dubey, 1991; Kachru

& MacArthur, 1992), much still needs to be done to investigate the characteristics of the language produced by Indian speakers of English either while doing business with other Indian speakers of English, or with speakers of other languages from outside of India. Furthermore, I know of no corpus-based study that has compared Indian business English with native speaker sources of business English. Nor do I know of any textbook in use in management education that is based on authentic examples of business English as it is used on the Indian sub-continent, or equally, any textbook that identifies the differences between Indian business English and other varieties of business English in an attempt to raise student awareness of these differences and the potential for miscommunication that these may cause. For instance, for a speaker of Indian English, the word *issues* always carries a negative connotation, whereas it may or may not for a speaker of American or British English. As another example, "100,000" is generally referred to as a *lakh* in Indian English, and the word "*correct*" is used as an acknowledgement that something has been understood but not necessarily as an expression of agreement. This means that a U.S. business partner may run the risk of alienating his or her Indian business partner with the phrase "*We have a few issues to discuss,*" if the Indian English speaker is unaware of the wider semantic field used in American English. Similarly, Indian English speakers may confuse any business partner not familiar with India if they refer to *lakhs of rupees*, and they may mistakenly suggest to their business partners that they have agreed with any given proposal through the use of the word *correct*, whereas their intention may simply have been to show that they understood. Although expressions such as these are all used in general Indian English, they are common in business, and it would be useful to incorporate them into teaching materials. My brief survey of the textbooks used by a number of the major universities in India in their business communication courses, as outlined above, would suggest that the English being taught at present in India in the management context has little to do with Indian business English, and very much more to do with American business English.

The recommendations specifically related to Indian business English can be summarized as follows:

- a. A corpus-based study to identify the characteristics of Indian business English and how this compares with native business Englishes, such as British and American business English.
- b. An additional survey of the discourse strategies and lexical items that characterize Indian business English in common business encounters such as meetings, and a study of how these compare with the strategies and lexis used by users of other varieties of business English.
- c. A systematic survey of the textbooks and other lesson materials in use in India in management education and the development of appropriate materials to meet the needs of the Indian business English user.

## Meeting the Needs of Business and Industry

In addition to understanding the nature of Indian business English, it is also necessary to take the needs of Indian business and industry into account in the development of appropriate teaching materials. The explosion of interest in India as a huge consumer market has been well documented, as has the opening up of the Indian economy since the beginning of the 1990s. It seems plausible that the communication needs of Indian business will have changed as rapidly in the past decade as has the social and economic context. A needs analysis survey could establish not only what business people in India have to do, but also the genres, that is, the forms of communication, that are commonly used to achieve this. To my knowledge, a needs analysis survey has yet to be carried out to identify just what is required of India's army of MBA graduates in order to get their work done once they have entered the workforce.

In other ESL and EFL contexts, there are several examples of work that has provided a great deal of useful information that could be used to underpin teaching materials. The comprehensive survey carried out over a number of years in Hong Kong, for instance, collected information from several key stakeholder groups, including management professors, business students, and banking employees. A total of nineteen researchers worked on the project, five different tertiary institutions in Hong Kong collaborated on the project, and a range of different methodologies and information from specialist informants was included (see Bhatia & Candlin, 2001; Jackson, 2005; Chew, 2005). Jackson's contribution to the project, for instance, was a series of twenty interviews held with forty-five professors at five different institutions, across a range of different disciplines all of relevance for management education, including management, marketing, accountancy, law, and international business. Jackson's study revealed:

[A] complex situation in which to provide appropriate teaching materials, not only in the use of Cantonese alongside English in the contexts she investigated, but also in the range of sub-disciplines that students were required to deal with during the course of their studies, each with their own discipline-specific tasks and discourse. (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007)

The Indian context in management education would seem to be similar, in that not only does English co-exist with Hindi and many other regional languages, as does Cantonese in Hong Kong, it seems equally likely that Indian management students are required to complete a variety of different speaking and writing skills during their education for which they may not have sufficient linguistic or discourse competence. In addition to appropriate training to equip them for the working environment once they have completed their studies, it may certainly also be the case that there is a need for (English) communication courses to meet their needs during their education. At the other end of the process in Hong Kong, Chew's study (2005) of new entrants in banks in Hong Kong investigates the English language skills used by entrants to the banking sector, specifically focusing on the communicative tasks they needed to complete at four Hong Kong banks. Chew used a combination of interviews and questionnaires

with 16 new bank employees, and she focused on the amount of time spent communicating in English, the tasks completed, the skills required and the difficulties her respondents faced. As in Jackson's study, the situation was complex, Cantonese co-existed with English, and the respondents reported difficulties with the language demands posed by the tasks they required to complete, especially when they needed to interact with speakers of English as a first language. Again, it would be invaluable to replicate this type of survey in the Indian context, for different sectors and different types of corporations, to establish what new graduates need to do with English, and how competent do they feel at doing so.

In other countries where English is commonly used as an additional language in the business context, studies like Briguglio's examination of the use of English in Malaysian business (Briguglio, 2005) as well as Nair-Venugopal's study of language choice and communication in Malaysian business (Nair-Venugopal, 2001), provide a wealth of information on the complex situations that can arise when English co-exists with regional languages or with other languages spoken as a second language by all those involved in the interaction. In Briguglio's study for instance, Malaysian (rather than a native variety of English) English dominated both spoken and written communication in the multinational corporation she studied, and English was also needed for email communication and for informal internal reports. Similarly in Singapore in the call centre sector, Clark, Rogers, Murfett and Ang (2008) report that customer representatives needed to be able to code-switch between Singaporean English and a more standard variety of English on a moment-to-moment basis in order to complete their work tasks. Also in Singapore, Connor, Rogers and Wong (2005) report on the recent changes made in the communication courses provided for Nanyang Business School in Singapore, where the focus changed from teaching English language proficiency (with reference to a native speaker variety of English) to a focus on communicating effectively in the business arena. Such a paradigm shift is also long overdue in India, where the focus is frequently still on linguistic competence only, with overt reference to either British or American English, the first for obvious historical reasons, the second because of the large number of U.S. textbooks on the market. The studies reviewed here suggest that needs analysis surveys could also be usefully carried out with various groups in India, such as recent graduates from management programmes, alumni who have been working for five to ten years, recruiters representing business and industry who interface directly with the management schools, and placement officers across India who maintain close links with the corporate world to try to create the best opportunities for their graduating students. Such needs analysis surveys should seek to establish both the type of skills in English that are needed horizontally across different sectors, as well as the changing needs that occur vertically within different sectors, from when management graduates join the workforce to when they become more senior. Finally, Jackson's study (2005) and Connor et al.'s (2005) work in academic contexts in Hong Kong and Singapore respectively, would also suggest that much could be done in assessing the needs that management students have *while* they are pursuing their studies, as well as what they need to achieve in English afterwards.

A useful addition to a series of more general needs analysis surveys is to extend these through interviews or corpus analysis to establish what the specific forms of communication, or communicative genres, are, that are needed by business and industry (see Bhatia, 1993; 2004). Over the past decade, several researchers interested in business discourse have found variations across different cultures in many different aspects of genre, including the purpose associated with a business genre that otherwise looks similar in two different cultures, for example, business meetings in Japan are used to exchange ideas whereas business meetings in the U.S.A. are used to make decisions (Yamada, 2002); the form that a business genre takes in two different cultures--for example, Bhatia reports that application letters in India are much less promotional than application letters in Western countries (Bhatia, 1993); the preference for written business genres rather than spoken business genres, or vice versa, for example, Yli-Jokipii (1994) notes that Finns may use the telephone to make an initial business contact whereas the British will always make a first contact in writing. To my knowledge, with the exception of Vijay Bhatia's work on application letters in South East Asia two decades ago, very little is known about the form and content of the communicative genres that management graduates need to be familiar with as they enter the workforce, not only in multinational corporations, but also in Indian corporations.

The recommendations specifically related to meeting the (generic) needs of business and industry can be summarized as follows:

- a. A series of survey-based studies with different stakeholder groups (for example, alumni, placement officers, new graduates, etc.) to identify what management students need to do with English during their studies, what new graduates need to do in English as they enter the workforce, and what they need to do with English as they become more senior.
- b. A series of genre-based studies across different sectors to identify the form and content of the communicative genres in English that are used in business and industry in India, including the set of communicative purposes that these genres have evolved to achieve.

### **What Role Does Culture Play?**

A final potential area of research interest in developing appropriate course materials is to establish the role played by culture in India, particularly in business settings, which sets India apart from Western business cultures. Scollon and Wong Scollon (1995), for instance, have discussed the utilitarian discourse system as characteristic of U.S. business culture, in which clarity, brevity, and sincerity (in writing) are prized. India is an example of what Hall (1976) has referred to as a high context culture, with a corresponding emphasis on spoken rather than written forms of communication; it would be useful to establish to what extent this influences workplace communication, for example, the communication of sales information via the telephone might appeal more to Indian consumers than if the same information were presented on a corporation's web-site.



Information on cultural differences in business in India, as compared to North American or European business culture for instance, would help to inform teaching materials, not only in establishing what needs to be taught for intra-Indian communication, but also to compare and contrast India with business cultures elsewhere. Hall's (1976) work is a good place to start, as it emphasizes characteristics of communication that are of obvious influence in the business arena, for example, a different emphasis placed on the spoken or written word, a different focus on the development of social relationships before business can take place, a different style used in negotiations, and so forth. Other theories of culture may also be referred to in order to help in the design of teaching materials, such as Hofstede's (2001) work on cultural dimensions, where the hierarchical characteristics of Indian culture clearly have an effect on Indian business culture--for example, Indian subordinates are extremely unlikely to disagree with their supervisors in public--as is the importance attached to the group, and to long-term planning. Although there are references to theories such as these in some of the textbooks used in MBA education in India, for example, the textbook by Locker and Kaczmarek (2007) refers to both Hall and to monochronic and polychronic cultures, but the examples given are of a general nature rather than specific to India. It would be of much more relevance if Indian examples were incorporated into teaching materials, including how India might compare on various cultural parameters with other national cultures. Indians entering the workforce after an business degree would benefit from such information specifically related to communication, particularly if they were likely to be dealing with non-Indian nationals either as colleagues in a multinational environment, or as customers.

The following recommendation relating to the role of culture in communication in Indian business can be given: A questionnaire survey to establish those aspects of culture that are relevant to the Indian workplace, including topics such as the negotiation styles in use, the impact of hierarchy, and the emphasis given to long or to short term planning.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, three broad areas that would contribute to our understanding of the needs of high proficiency learners with an ESL background, such as those in management education in India have been presented:

- a. The lexis and discourse strategies used in ESL Business English, and how these compare with other varieties of Business English
- b. The needs of business and industry in completing the required English communication tasks
- c. The role (national or ethnic) culture plays in business, and how this compares to other business cultures.

Indian management education is a vast market, and as yet very little has been done to address its needs and provide appropriate teaching materials. At the time of writing, it

seems clear that management education will continue to expand in order to deliver the vast numbers of management graduates that Indian business requires. This is coupled with the expectation that the Indian economy will also continue to grow at a rapid rate both nationally and internationally, creating an ever-increasing need for graduates that are able to communicate in English both effectively and efficiently. Researchers in applied linguistics, textbook writers, and the developers of other resources such as Open Educational Resources, could pool their resources to meet some of these needs.

Much of what has been presented here would apply equally well to other ESL contexts where English is widely used in business, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, and increasingly so, to those countries within the Asia Pacific region where English has been viewed as a foreign language, for example, Japan, Thailand, Korea, Mainland China, and others. Within the Asia Pacific region in general, the English as the Language of Asian Business group (ELAB) have begun to think seriously about the issues raised here. With representatives across the region in both ESL and EFL environments, the group aims to exchange information on empirical research focusing on English as it is used in business contexts in the Asian-Pacific region. This is done with a view towards understanding its nature and use, in order to be able to meet the needs of business and industry. The work of the group thus far seems to indicate that English is on the increase as an international business language throughout the region, and that this has created a corresponding need for appropriate training in business communication skills in English not only in places like India and Hong Kong, with their historical links to English, but also in countries like Japan and Thailand, where the need for English has expanded in the last decade. The findings of the group would also suggest that much of the communication that takes place in English is between countries located in the Asia-Pacific region rather than outside. As presented for the Indian context, this also suggests that textbooks and teaching materials with an Asian Pacific focus are long overdue.

### **About the Author**

**Catherine Nickerson** has more than twenty years of experience in teaching and research in the field of business communication. She has held senior positions in India and in the Netherlands, and she has also lived and worked in the USA and the UK. She holds degrees from the Universities of Durham (BA) and Birmingham (MA) in the United Kingdom, and a Ph.D. from the Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Dr. Nickerson's work has been published widely and she has edited a number of large-scale publications. Her most recent book, *Business Discourse*, was published in 2007 by Palgrave-Macmillan. Dr. Nickerson is an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Business Communication* and she is also a member of the Editorial Boards for the *English for Specific Purposes Journal* and for *HERMES* (Copenhagen School of Business). Her research interests include the use of English as an international business language and the communication surrounding corporate social responsibility within the global business context.

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