



EB ENGLISH
FOR BUSINESS

15 Ways to Improve Oral Communication in Business English

by Andrew D. Miles

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Cover photograph by Andrew D. Miles

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1. INTRO PHRASES

Use introductory phrases before your message to catch people's attention, so they are listening before you emit your main point.

This will also let listeners adjust their hearing to your speed, pronunciation and tone of voice.

Therefore, they'll already be used to your phonemes when you display the main idea.



EXAMPLES

*From my point of view,
this idea is wrong.*

*As a matter of fact, this
idea is wrong.*

Andrew's note:

A common mistake is to think people will be listening when you say something important.

In fact, they don't know it's important until you've said it!



1. INTRO PHRASES

- I'd like to remind you that
- From my point of view
- Let me tell you that
- Apparently
- In my opinion
- I believe that
- It seems that
- It appears that
- In fact
- It sounds as if
- Evidently
- Seemingly
- At first sight
- On the face of it
- As a matter of fact
- Essentially
- I'm sure that
- Today I'd like to say that
- According to what I know



2. MEMORISING

Memorise key words – since you will not have time to look for them when needed.

Knowing the meaning of words is not enough. They aren't useful until you've been through the whole learning cycle. This implies that you have to understand the word, know how to use it, memorise it and be able to recall it when needed.

Try to revise vocabulary a week after you've learned it and check if you remember it one month later.

Andrew's note:

Knowing the meaning of expressions is different to being able to apply them automatically. Vocabulary is not useful until it's at the tip of your tongue.



3. ONE-IDEA PHRASES

Use one idea to a sentence and build the sentence around the idea.

English is a language of few, precise words where economy is a plus.

Many listeners are used to short sentences and find it hard to handle several notions in one phrase.

It is better to repeat the same ideas in several formats so people who do not follow your point in one way have the chance to understand it in another.

Andrew's note:

Transmit a concept more effectively by explaining it, then giving an example, showing a graph and if possible also by including it in a story, joke or anecdote.



4. GESTURES

Magnify facial gestures, since they will help to get your message across in case verbal language fails and people don't follow your words.

Remember that body language transmits a lot of information so don't be afraid of gesticulating. Listeners will take non-verbal signs as part of your personality and will not pay conscious attention to your gestures.

Andrew's note:

It's important to use gestures when speaking. However, act out your conversation in front of your teacher and check whether your non-verbal signs are suitable for the culture of the country you are visiting.

As a foreign speaker your weakest area of communication is verbal language, so make up for this lack with stronger non-verbal signs.



5. TOPIC CHANGE

Give clear clues when you change subjects so listeners become aware that you're no longer talking about the same issue.

It's a good idea to remember you must give listeners a map of your speech – people must know exactly where they are standing so they don't get lost.

Listeners might be getting just part of your message, so markers help them to know which subject is now being discussed.

Andrew's note:

Remember that if it's difficult for you to speak, it is also difficult for listeners to understand. Thus, give them lots of clues to help them navigate your speech.



5. TOPIC CHANGE CLUES



SAMPLES

- By the way, now we can talk about
- I'd like to move onto
- Could we now deal with?
- Incidentally, may I mention that?
- I believe this is the right time to
- It has just crossed my mind to
- To bring up another subject
- An alternative point to consider
- Changing subjects, I want to
- While we are on the subject
- Before I forget
- On quite another matter



6. INTERRUPTING

Interrupting is difficult in a language that you don't handle well, because often when your opportunity comes you can't find the right words! Therefore, it's essential to learn how to interrupt with proper expressions.

You will need to use these phrases without any delay when inserting a comment or disagreeing with a statement. Speed is important, as opportunities to say something rarely last for long.

The key to effective interruptions is the right mix of forcefulness and politeness. Also, you'll sometimes need to insist several times until you catch people's attention.



6. INTERRUPTING

+

P
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Er
Sorry
Actually
Excuse me

May I have a word?
Can I make a comment?
May I come in here?
May I interrupt?
Could I say something?

Sorry, that's not right.
What are you trying to say?
What are you getting at?
You're wrong.

Please listen to me.
Can you let me speak?
Won't you let me give an opinion?
Will you shut up for a minute, please?



7. WORD ORDER

English is a language with few inflexions so order is vital to establish sense.

Organise words in your sentences according to rules, because mixing priorities will confuse listeners.

Define a word pattern and try to apply it to all your constructions because even though there are several ways to say a sentence correctly, it's better to play it safe if you are not sure.

Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 1994, New York, Perennial:

English is an "isolating" language, which builds sentences by rearranging immutable word-sized units, like Dog bites man and Man bites dog. Other languages express who did what to whom by modifying nouns with case affixes, or by modifying the verb with affixes that agree with subjects in number, gender, and person. One example is Latin, an "inflecting" language in which each affix contains several pieces of information.



7. WORD ORDER

Classic word order:

Adverb of time ⇒ subject ⇒
auxiliary verb ⇒ frequency adverb
⇒ verb ⇒ direct object ⇔
indirect object ⇒ adverb of
manner ⇒ adverb of place ⇒
adverb of time



SAMPLES

Politicians will sometimes block deals during election times.

Yesterday, our director asked Mary to finish her letter by hand at her own desk.

The lawyer wrote the contracts at his office in the morning.



8. REGARD REGISTER

When you learn a new word, always ask your teacher for the context in which it can be used. Is it formal? Informal? Can I use it with friends? What about writing?

Andrew's note:

Register is the type of language we use in specific situations, such as "speaking in an informal register" or "writing in a scientific register".

Andrew's note:

We can't say at Church all of what we say at the pub!

Do not use slang, ironical expressions or foul language, even if others do. This could confuse listeners because your speech will unexpectedly change register.

9. FILLERS

Resort to fillers for those seconds you spend looking for words you can't find.

Sometimes, you cannot afford to stay quiet while you plan what you're going to say next, so use fillers to gain time.



FILLERS

- Really
- Well
- Of course
- I believe
- Surely
- Clearly
- OK
- Undoubtedly
- Certainly
- Fine



10. PRONUNCIATION

Memorise difficult words and practise them often.

When in doubt with names, ask how to pronounce them correctly.

Don't hide your accent by speaking with your mouth closed or increasing your speed, because people will find it harder to follow you.

Talk slowly, look at listeners and don't try to compete with outside noises. If there's a noise, wait until it subsides.

Andrew's note:

Always ask your teacher how to pronounce key words (for example, terms related to your job).

Do not trust your instinct, because pronunciation is often unpredictable.



10. PRONUNCIATION

Dow Jones	(dou jōnz)
bush	(bōōsh)
Finance	(fə-nāns', fī'nāns')
NYSE	(ĕn) (wī) (ĕs) (ē)
Samuelson	(sām'yōō-əl-sən)
factorage	(fāk'tər-ĭj)
Keynesian	(kān'zē-ən)
leverage	(lĕv'ər-ĭj)
liability	(lī'ə-bĭl'ĭ-tē)

11. QUESTION TAGS

Apply tail phrases on leading questions, since they are a legitimate way to make listeners assert to your proposals.

Question tags ending with negative tail phrases elicit affirmative answers.

Question tags ending with positive tail phrases elicit negative answers.



SAMPLES

This sounds interesting, doesn't it?
(It elicits an affirmative reply.)

You won't let a client escape, will you?
(It elicits a negative reply.)

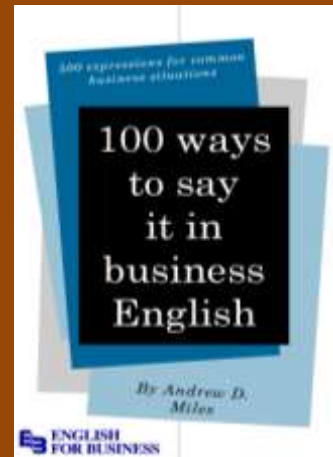


12. FALSE FRIENDS

Be careful with false friends, because many expressions that seem straightforward to you can end up messing up your speech.

Don't assume that terms which look like words in your native tongue mean the same. Sometimes, there are surprises!

Also, some English words that become part of another language's colloquial vocabulary (think of slip in Spanish) lose their original sense and end up meaning something else.



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12. FALSE FRIENDS



FALSE FRIENDS

English Word	Correct Translation	Wrong Translation
affluent	acaudalado	<i>afluente</i>
casual	informal	<i>casual</i>
actual	real	<i>actual</i>
compromise	acuerdo	<i>compromiso</i>
comprehensive	global	<i>comprehensive</i>
familiar	conocido	<i>familiar</i>
apparent	obvio	<i>aparente</i>
sensible	sensato	<i>sensible</i>



COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS

parking	parking lot or place
mister	trainer
basket	basketball
slip	briefs



13. INTONATION

Practise intonation before your speech, as natives grant importance to words based on stress. Remember that every language's cadence is different, so tone variations applied in Spanish are not valid for English. Sometimes listeners will not get the gist of your sentences if you apply the wrong intonation patterns.

Andrew's note:

You need your teacher's help to improve intonation. A good exercise is for you to read and for the tutor to guide your tone while you go through the text.



SAMPLES

- Lawyers help **company** fire victims. (*Here the stress is on **company**, so this sentence means that lawyers help the company to dismiss the employees.*)
- Lawyers help company **fire** victims. (*Here the stress is on **fire**, so it means that lawyers help the victims of a company fire.*)



14. EMULATE NATIVES

Emulate native speakers by listening and then applying their type of language in your phrases, because it is easier to convince people employing their own style of speech.



Dr Harry Alder & Beryl Heather, 1999 sustain in their 1999 NLP textbook that you can create rapport by emulating speakers in body movement, voice tone and speed. Likewise, affinity can be encouraged by following language styles and type of word choice, including the metaphors used.

Andrew's note:

A good way to improve rapport is to listen to the other person's metaphorical language. He compares business to rugby? Use an example from sport. She talks about cars? Think of a story that involves driving...

Politely mimic people by using the same type of language. However, do not copy every word because this could prove offensive.

Don't concentrate so much on your own phrases that you forget to listen to the way others speak!



15. FUNCTIONS

We use language for different functions, such as answering the phone, saying hello or expressing dissatisfaction.

It is better to learn a few phrases for every function than many phrases for a few functions. Therefore, instead of memorising countless ways to ask for coffee use part of that time to practise how to book a room, how to disagree or how to hire a car.

Andrew's
note:

Think of all the situations you could use English for and list the phrases you might need. Then, role-play them with your teacher.

Automate those expressions so you don't have to look for them when you need them.



15. FUNCTIONS

A

Please see below a list of phrases for meetings:

Giving Opinions

I feel that

In my opinion

The way I see things

Asking for Opinions

Heather, can we get your input?

How do you feel about?

What's your opinion, John?

Commenting on Other Opinions

I never thought about it that way before

I get your idea

I see what you mean

Agreeing with Other Opinions

Exactly!

That's just how I feel

I have to agree with James



15. FUNCTIONS

B

Disagreeing with Other Opinions

Up to a point I agree with you, but
I'm afraid I can't see it that way
I don't think so
I've got another point of view

Advising and Suggesting

We ought to
Why don't you?
How about
I suggest we



Clarifying

Have I made that clear?
Do you see what I'm getting at?
Let me put this another way
I'd just like to repeat that

Requesting Information

I'd like you to
Would you mind?
I wonder if you could



15. FUNCTIONS

C

Connecting Cause and Consequence

This means that...

It implies that ...

A results in B.

The measure will cause...

Contrasting

Although A seems fine, B is better because...

In spite of the evidence, I'd like to add that...

We could opt for A. On the other hand...

I like your idea. Nevertheless, I prefer...

Asking for Repetition

Sorry, I didn't catch that

I missed that. Could you repeat it, please?

Could you run that by me again?

Asking for Clarification

I don't quite understand

Could you explain to me how that is going to work?

I don't see what you mean

May we have some more details, please?



15. FUNCTIONS

D

Stating Purpose

I'm here today to...

What I'd like to do is...

My objective is to...

My aim now is to...

Asking for Verification

Do you mean that?

Is it true that?

Are you sure about this?

Are you one hundred percent positive?

Asking for Spelling

Would you mind spelling that for me, please?

Could you spell it, please?

Sorry, how do you spell it?

Is that double *m* double *s*?

Asking for Contributions from Other Participants

What do you think about this proposal?

Would you like to add anything, Cynthia?

Has anyone else got anything to contribute?

Are there any more comments?



15. FUNCTIONS

E

Describing Graphs

I'd like you to see this graph...
Please observe this matrix.
Have a look at this model.
Let me show you a chart.

Correcting Information

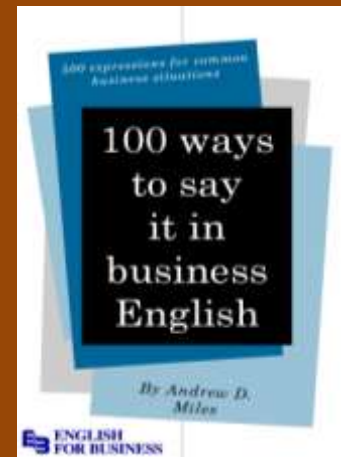
Sorry, that might not be quite right
I'm afraid you don't understand
what I'm saying
That's not what I had in mind
This is different to what I meant

Keeping the Meeting on Track

Well, that's another subject
altogether
I'm afraid we can't discuss that issue today
That's outside the scope of this meeting
Let's get back on track

Finishing the Meeting

Well, that seems to be all the time we have today
Could we make a decision right away?
We'll have to leave that for now
Time to finish!



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