

## Business Corner

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Business English Corner. This is a new feature we're introducing to **ELT News**. The Business English Corner is going to contain articles written by YOU featuring aspects of Business English. If this is your field and you would like to contribute, please send your articles to us – see the contributor's guidelines at the back of this edition.

What's new in the area of business English? Firstly, there are many new materials coming out on the market which will be available for volunteers to review for **ELT News** and secondly the IATEFL/BESIG conference will have taken place in Vienna in November. Reports on the conference will feature in the next edition.

We hope you enjoy the articles in the Business English Corner and are inspired to write your own for us!

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### An interview with Vicki Hollett by Rebecca Chapman



Vicki Hollett is a teacher and freelance author. She's written a number of Oxford University Press ELT books and videos, including the prize winning *Business Objectives*, and *Business Opportunities* courses and *In at the Deep End*.

Vicki has taught English in Algeria, Japan, and the UK and run workshops for teachers in many countries in Europe, South America and Asia, including training teachers for the LCCI's Diploma in English for Business. As well as business English, Vicki's special interests are pragmatics and cross cultural issues. British by birth, she's currently based in the USA where she's writing more courses, teaching at the University of Pennsylvania and learning to speak American.

Rebecca spent time collecting Vicki's views about business English and its future, as well as learning a bit about her background and how she got into the world of material writing.

B: Becky

V: Vicki:

**B:** You were co-author of one of the first business English books available on the market – the well-loved *In at the Deep End* - how did you get into writing materials for business English & in particular this style of book?

**V:** Ah, it dates back to an insane job I once had in a business English school in the UK. We had a wildly successful marketing department, which was hurling more and more students through our doors. (Oh, for those times again, eh?) As well as teaching, I was supposed to ensure there were enough teachers sitting on seats in front of the students every Monday morning – tricky because very few people taught business English back then.

But as luck would have it, there were lots of really good general English teachers who just needed to acquire a business frame on things. And our students loved talking. They invariably said 'speaking' was what they wanted to improve most. The quickest way to help everyone seemed to be to distribute materials that would draw on the students' knowledge - let the students talk and train their teachers, in



effect.

I started photocopying stuff I'd written and sticking it in some filing cabinets and some other friends and colleagues contributed too. I walked by the cabinets for years thinking, 'There's a book in there – must do something about it'. Then one holiday I stuck it together, made copies and sent it off to publishers. Most said 'Thanks but no thanks', but luckily Oxford University Press (OUP) was willing to take a gamble.

**B:** What sort of teaching did you do prior to being a materials writer?

**V:** Absolutely none! I was a trainee manager in a retail store and I wanted to see more of the world so I answered an ad for an English teaching job in Japan. I started writing as soon as I started teaching. I didn't know how to use a course book, so I was very handicapped. Each lesson I'd whiz my poor students through too many units of 'First Things First', and then I still wouldn't know what to do for the last half hour. I got around it by writing activities.

**B:** You previously worked as a teacher trainer on various business English certificate and diploma courses – what do you enjoy about teacher training?

**V:** I appreciate the intellectual challenge. I have to do my homework before a course starts. That's not my favourite bit, but I know it's good for me. Then once the course is going, it's very stimulating. You know how you can sometimes pick up great teaching tips around the coffee pot in a staffroom? Well, teacher training feels like a big long coffee break. You get to work with enthusiastic and committed teachers with stacks of knowledge and experience. A bonus I didn't anticipate when I started is that many would become cherished, long-term friends.

**B:** There are very few qualifications available to business English teachers once they have completed their initial teacher training and then gained teaching experience – what are your views on this?

**V:** Yes, we've had diplomas briefly, but there hasn't been enough demand to sustain them. Certificate

courses have endured better. They're often just two weeks long and designed for general English teachers who want to add business English to their quiver. They can attract very experienced teachers too, just because they are the only courses available. We do need more options.

I think the problem might solve itself as business English grows. Accreditation bodies will want to accommodate us and I suspect it only requires a change in emphasis and a little flexibility. If you look at the DELTA syllabus, for example, much of it is actually very pertinent to business English teaching. Currently 'point one' is language awareness and students' needs come under 'point two'. But flip them around and we'd be well on the way.

**B:** Tell us about your move from Cambridge, England to the USA – was this a difficult decision to make? What are your experiences of being a Brit in the US?

**V:** Truth is, as a Brit I'm treated very kindly, but I'm not sure I'd ever decide to live here permanently. I do miss radio 4 and the north east of Brazil is very tempting. The move was very easy. A school I'd worked at in England had a sister school here so I could teach and trial the materials I was writing and I had friends and colleagues to help me with the practical stuff. Learning to drive was certainly a challenge and getting a green card turned out to be way more complicated than I'd bargained for. But hey, I speak the language – well sort of!

As with all places, there are downsides: the president being an obvious one. But there are lots of things I appreciate too. Interestingly though, I've experienced more culture shock here than I ever did living in Algeria or Japan. I've tended to presume things will be the same as the UK, when of course they are not.

The linguistic differences are a constant frustration and delight. I joke that I'm learning to speak 'merican, but there's a serious side to it as well. The lexis is one part of it, but mostly it's about the way ideas are structured, related to the different values our cultures place on things like:

- simplicity and complexity
- closure and open-endedness
- being up beat and being modest
- positivity and understatement
- compliments and self deprecation
- positive face and negative face

To give you an example, if I wanted to talk about this with a British person, I might start by saying, 'These differences are pretty complex...' But with an American, I might say, 'These differences are very simple...' Then I'd go on to say exactly the same things to them both!

**B:** Your latest material is the *Tech Talk* series – what made you focus on this area?

**V:** I was so lucky to get that opportunity! In the past technical English had often been a bit dry and specialized and we wanted to find a way to produce something with more general appeal. I was delighted when OUP offered me the project - but surprised too, because I'm actually a bit technically-challenged. It turned out they were reasoning that that could work to our advantage. They wanted to be sure non-techie teachers would feel comfortable using the course. So that's really how I got the job. Luckily, I was the biggest technical dummy they knew!

We toured France and Germany for a week, talking to lots of teachers and trying to work out what shape the courses might take. There was clearly a gap in the market but for what? It looks pretty obvious now, but most of that week we were scratching our heads. Then while I was writing, I kept going back to Europe to teach it in classes. So it took a good while, but I'm so glad we did it. I don't mean to sound pretentious because it's largely a course of pictures, games and jokes. But there were moments when I thought, 'Hey, this language could save digits, limbs and even lives'.

**B:** In your opinion, what direction is business English heading in?

**V:** Bigger in terms of size, higher in terms of level and better in terms of quality.

### 1. Bigger

There's always been an inescapable logic to the rise of business English. Of course, there are people who learn English for fun or intellectual satisfaction or whatever, but the vast majority ultimately have work or career related motives. We're seeing General English going into demise in many adult markets now. RIP General English. Long live the new king: Business English. And I understand that this must send shivers down some people's spines. But please understand there is very positive slant to this as well. Business English is much more student-centred than General English has ever been. It's focused on needs. This can and should be the whole student needs – all their interests, all their ideas, and all their dreams. So don't stop talking about this folks, because we need to strive for education here rather than just training.

### 2. Higher

Austria has had high attainment levels for many years, of course. But in most parts of the world there's a marked difference in level between 20 year olds who are better than 30 year olds and 40 year olds who are better than 50 year olds etc. The standards of English are constantly rising. With English being introduced at primary level in most national school curricula, we can expect this upward trend to continue. Globally this means lower level classes will gradually disappear. Almost everyone we meet will be intermediate and advanced in level by the time they leave school,

### 3. Better

Perhaps America is rubbing off on me because this must sound crazily upbeat, but here's what I think: In the past, when we were able to introduce real companies and business people into our teaching materials, it was a very small innovation, but it was nevertheless valuable. But that innovation was absolutely nothing compared to the quantum leap that's coming next. Via the net, we have access to all kinds of real examples of English to inform us – both native speaker English and International English / English as a lingua franca. We can identify the ways people negotiate meaning, engage in active listening, clarify, reformulate, repair etc and exemplify them in ways



we've never done before. Informed by conversational analysis and pragmatics, we're much closer to being able to model the language we teach on the language people really need.

So I think Business English is going to shoot forward like a rocket. Hold on to your seats....

**B:** Thank you very much Vicki, that was really interesting & has certainly given our readers food for thought.

We'd like to thank Vicki for her time and for sharing her experiences and thoughts with us.