Designing tasks for the Business English classroom

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This article suggests ways in which materials writers can incorporate key characteristics of workplace communication into the design of tasks for Business English courses for adult learners. These suggestions are based on findings from a multifaceted study of communication in Hong Kong's globalized business world, which includes 'week-in-the-life' case studies of senior professionals. These findings point to the need for a simulation-based approach in which students with clearly defined and differentiated roles work quickly and collaboratively to investigate and resolve problems. They work towards this objective by processing and producing interdependent text types, such as emails and reports, and by participating in speech events, such as meetings and telephone conversations, that are stimulated by English language texts. In essence, this approach represents the 'strong' version of task-based language teaching and thus contrasts with the exercise-based approach found in many general-purpose Business English textbooks.

Introduction

One of the major consequences of the current phase of economic globalization has been the emergence of English as the leading *lingua franca* of international business (Ku and Zussman 2010), and this in turn has intensified demand for courses of various kinds in Business English (BE). While the precise nature and purposes of such courses vary according to factors such as the participants' age, proficiency, and context, they share essentially the same objective: to develop students' ability to use English effectively in the increasingly globalized world of work. This fundamental aim is reflected (for example) in promotional materials disseminated by private language training institutes, in curriculum documents developed by university language centres and, most conspicuously, in the prefaces and blurbs that appear in the ever-expanding array of textbooks and study guides produced by commercial publishers.

The volume and variety of the latter works are reflected in Reed's periodic reviews of BE publications for this Journal (see, for example, Reed 2011). Publishers are understandably keen to accentuate the relevance of their materials to the 'real world' of business and the 'authenticity' of the input and activities they provide, and yet Reed's (ibid.) analysis of recent BE publications suggests that such claims

may be unduly bold. In his article, Reed highlights a characteristic that is shared by 'most' of the publications under review, namely, that they are 'packed' with exercises, 'from gap-fills to match-the-phrases, from multiple choice to true/false, from repeat-after-me to correcting mistakes' (op.cit.: 326). Such exercises, in Reed's view, 'represent a large part of the ELT materials industry, in Business English as elsewhere' (op.cit.).

Publishers might justify the apparent conservatism of their materials by pointing out that it is impossible to meet the manifold needs of English-using professionals worldwide and that, in any case, such practitioners acquire their professional communicative competence by using the language in the office rather than by learning it in the classroom. Given these difficulties and uncertainties, it could be argued that the eclectic, exercise-based approach adopted in many BE textbooks is entirely justified. This approach seeks to develop learners' language proficiency and skills via conventional EFL teaching techniques, thereby laying the foundation they will need when they enter or return to the workplace.

While BE materials and activities will never be able to replicate the complexities of the contemporary business world, given Reed's (op.cit.) observation about the prevalence of traditional exercise types, there would nevertheless appear to be some scope for narrowing the gulf that inevitably separates the office and the classroom.

One way of accomplishing this is to form a deeper understanding of the types of task that professionals are required to perform in English and how these tasks flow and interrelate in the course of their work.

In this regard, it is worth recalling St John's (1996: 15) observation in her survey of the 'booming' BE scene in the 1990s that BE was a 'materials-led' rather than a 'research-led' enterprise, implying that the design of materials owed more to intuition and introspection than to investigation. Such an approach appears to be borne out by research into textbook language and task design. For example, Cheng and Cheng's (2010: 461) corpus-based study revealed 'major differences' between speech acts in naturally occurring business discourse and textbook models in terms of functions, structural patterns, strategies, and linguistic realizations. In a similar vein, Bremner's (2010: 129) analysis of tasks in business communication textbooks led him to believe that the activities they inspired 'would not resemble very closely the kinds of activity seen in the workplace'. Bremner's (2010) claim was not, however, informed by evidence about what English-using professionals actually do in real-world workplaces.

While survey-based research has begun to identify the text types and speech events that professionals encounter in the globalized workplace, our knowledge of how these written and spoken activities unfold and interact is still rather limited. The research that has been conducted along these lines, such as Louhiala-Salminen's (2002) 'day-in-the-life' study of a manager's discourse activities, often lacks specific recommendations for BE task design. The present study, in contrast, has an essentially practical purpose: to suggest ways in which materials

writers can incorporate key characteristics of workplace communication into the design of tasks for general-purpose BE courses for adult learners at intermediate level or above. These ideas are derived from a multifaceted study of workplace communication in a quintessential business city: Hong Kong.

The study[1]
Background

One of the objectives of the study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the communication tasks that the city's mainly Cantonese speaking professionals are required to perform at work. To accomplish this aim, three methods of data collection were employed: 'week-in-the-life' case studies, interviews, and a survey. This article draws mainly on the case studies as these provide pedagogically useful information about the flow and interconnection of workplace text and talk. However, given their inevitably limited generalizability, the case study findings are complemented by data from a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews. All the participants were employed in Hong Kong's four main industries: financial services, trading and logistics, tourism, and professional services.

Case studies

The participants in the case studies—one from each industry—were asked to record their business-related activities on each day of a typical working week. They logged these activities at half-hourly intervals on a specially designed form, which required them to specify the nature, language, and duration of their communication activities together with the number and background of the participants involved. Before the week in question, the participants were briefed on the purpose of the investigation, the point of the 'week-in-the-life' exercise, and the procedure for completing the form. After the data had been collected, they were interviewed at length about the activities in their logs.

The data in the completed forms, supplemented by information and insights from the interviews, were subsequently used to track flows of written and spoken discourses and the interplay between the English and Chinese languages. This article presents data from two of the case study participants: a banker (Don) (Figures 1 and 2) and an accountant (Alan) (Figure 4 and Table 1, below). Like the other subjects, Don and Alan participated voluntarily and completed a consent form assuring them of confidentiality (through the use of pseudonyms) if their experiences were subsequently reported.

Questionnaire survey

The questionnaire asked the participants how often they were required to read and write certain text types and to participate in certain speech events in English at work. They did this by indicating an appropriate number on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day). This article categorizes the participants' responses on the basis of company ownership and reports only the four most frequent text types and speech events (Figure 3, below). The questionnaire was completed by 1,478 professionals working in the private sector, of whom 60 per cent worked for Hong Kong-owned companies, 36 per cent were employed by foreign firms, and 4 per cent worked for Chinese enterprises.
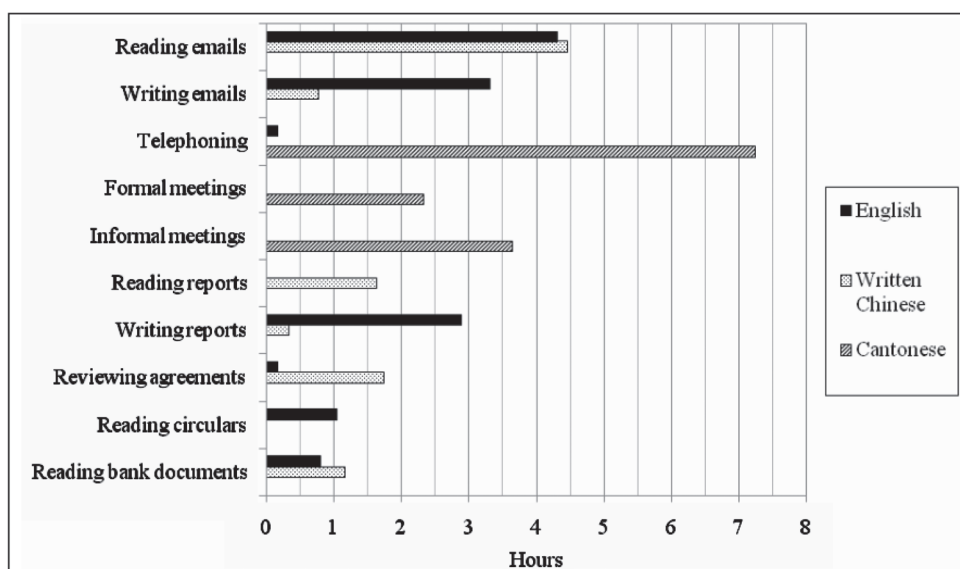
FIGURE 1
Major activities in the
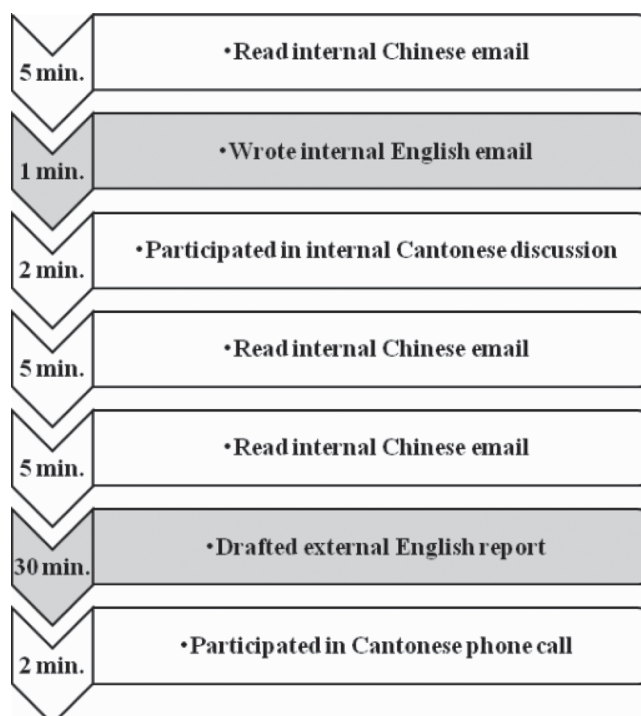working week of a banker

FIGURE 2
Activities undertaken by
a banker from
9.30 am–10.30 am

Semi-structured
interviews

The interviews elicited insider perspectives on the various tasks that
professionals perform at work. The participants (16 males, 15 females)
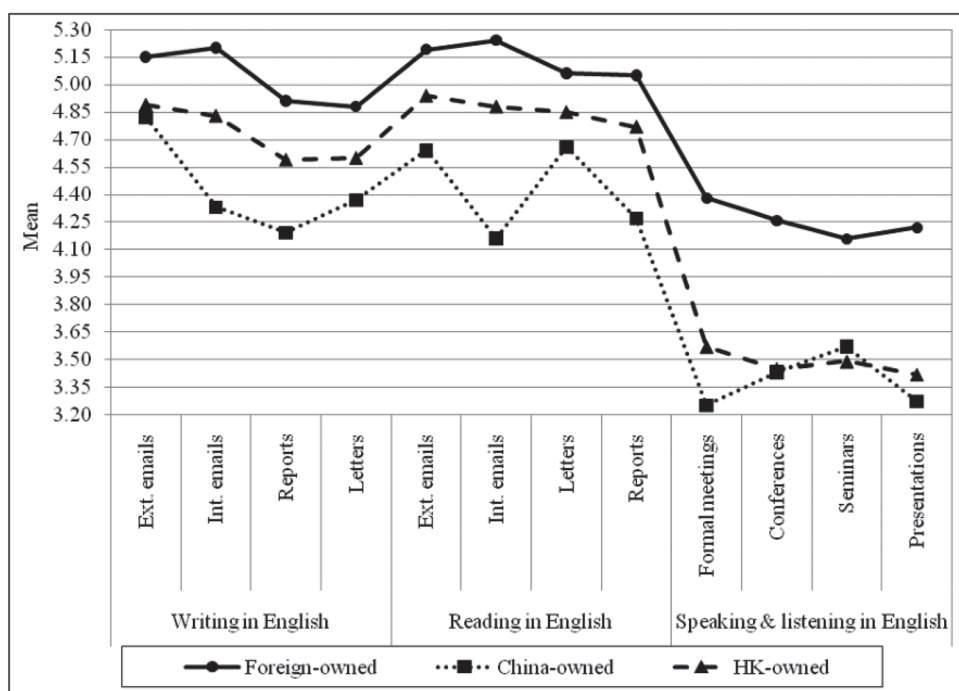were employed in various capacities in the four industries. They mainly

Scale: 1 = never, 6 = almost every day. Analysis of variance results showed that there are significant differences in the frequency of English use between the types of company

worked for Hong Kong (14) or foreign companies (12) and were fairly experienced in that they occupied senior (10) or middle-ranking (13) positions in their organizations. The interviews, each lasting 60–80 minutes, were based on an interview guide and, in line with participant preferences, conducted in Cantonese. The interview guide centred on issues relating to the text types and speech events in the questionnaire and the challenges posed by using English as a business *lingua franca*. The audio recordings were subsequently translated into English for detailed analysis, which initially involved annotating the translations with comments and observations and then grouping these notes into categories and subcategories that captured recurring patterns in the data.

Findings
Text and talk in the life of a banker

If we wish to design tasks that reflect in some measure real-world business activities, it is necessary, in the first instance, to determine the nature and relative importance of the written and spoken activities that professionals routinely undertake at work. This provides a basis for making principled decisions about the types of text and talk that students might be asked to process and produce in class. If we take the working week of a banker (Don) as an example (Figure 1), we can see that two types of text (emails, reports) and talk (meetings, telephoning) occupied most of the 36 hours he devoted to work-related communication. Don possesses a doctorate in Business Administration, has over 30 years of professional experience, and is currently the Compliance Manager of a Chinese-owned bank.

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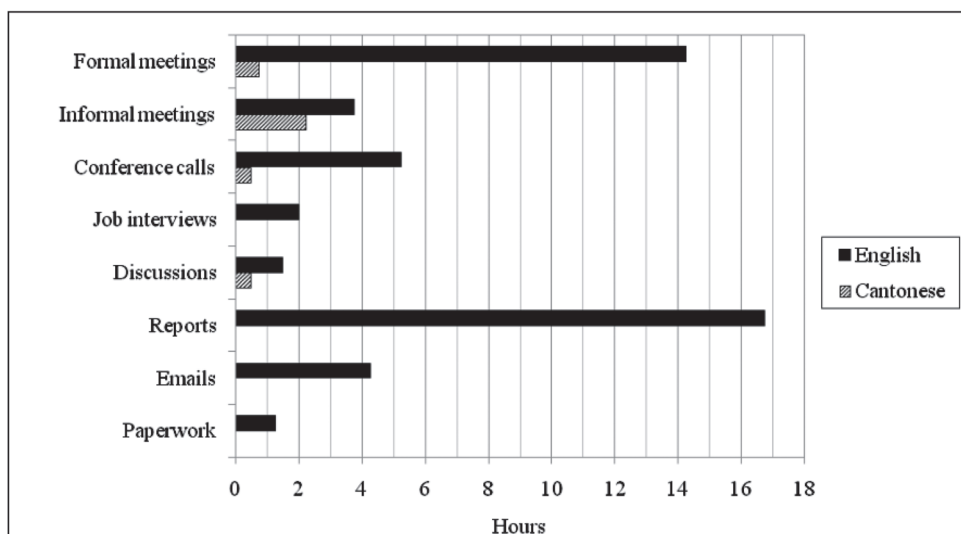
FIGURE 4
Major activities in the
working week of an
accountant

From a task design perspective, three points seem to be worthy of note
when considering Don's experiences. First, the business world is far from
being an English-only zone: as in Europe (Ehrenreich 2010), English
is part of a constellation of written and spoken codes that professionals
encounter and employ in the multilingual workplace. As Figure 1
illustrates, virtually all Don's talk was conducted in Cantonese, while
a significant segment of the text he processed was in Chinese. In fact,
the only time he communicated orally in English was in a ten-minute
telephone conversation on Thursday afternoon. In contrast, most of the
text he produced, in the form of emails and case reports, was in English.

Second, what this language-based breakdown fails to reveal is the
perpetual interplay between the English and Chinese languages, and
particularly the interdependence of Cantonese-mediated telephoning
and English-based emailing in business communication among
Chinese-literate professionals. The significance of the phone/email
nexus was noted by a number of the interviewees, who pointed out
that emails often serve to confirm details and decisions agreed over the
phone or in meetings. Thus, a key skill that Hong Kong professionals
need to acquire, and one that is difficult to develop in a classroom
setting, is the ability to capture the essence of a Cantonese-mediated
interaction in a precisely and concisely written English email.

Third, the need for precision and concision is dictated in part by the
rapid and relentless tempo of life in the city's 'time-is-money' business
world. This is illustrated by a short, randomly selected section of Don's
activity log (commencing at 9.30 am), which reveals a swift and perhaps
disconcerting succession of mostly unrelated written and spoken
activities for around 20 minutes, followed by a more concentrated
period of English report writing (Figure 2). The internal email he sent
at around 9.36 am was one of his shorter messages, because on average

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Flow	Time	Activity	Written language	Spoken language	No. of participants	No. and duration of follow-ups during week
1	2.00–2.45	Reviewed and discussed June financial statements and drafted commentaries on monthly operations report	English	Cantonese	5	3 (1 hr 45 min)
	2.45–3.00	Drafted emails to overseas financial controllers to request supplementary information on June reports	English	None	Self	
	3.00–3.30	Reviewed Head Office statements and revised commentaries	English	Cantonese	3	
2	3.30–3.45	Reviewed payments and approved cheques	English	None	Self	3 (1 hr)
3	3.45–4.45	Reviewed and discussed July–December consolidated forecast and draft commentaries	English	English	4	3 (2 hr 45 min)
4	4.45–5.00	Reviewed payroll system daily issues log	English	None	Self	9 (9 hr 15 min)
	5.00–6.00	Participated in conference call to discuss system, problems, and possible solutions	English	English	13	

TABLE 1
Work undertaken by an accountant from 2.00 pm–6.00 pm

he spent around three-and-a-half minutes composing internal emails in English (his external messages taking around four minutes).

The need for haste and brevity in modern business helps to explain why communicating 'precisely and concisely' was the fourth most prominent theme to emerge from the interviews, with 104 comments of varying lengths about this key characteristic of effective business writing. The implication here, then, is that tasks could be designed so that they reflect in some measure the pace, pressure, and unpredictability of the business world, thereby compelling students to communicate with speed and spontaneity, as well as precision

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and concision, in order to accomplish their objectives. This could be achieved by imposing strict time limits for task completion and by introducing new information at judiciously selected stages in an unfolding, real-time simulation.

Key text types and speech events in Hong Kong's business world

The necessarily sketchy portrait of Don's working week painted above offers one perspective on life in the contemporary office in Hong Kong, but, like any case study, its wider applicability is inevitably limited. It therefore needs to be complemented by more representative kinds of data, such as the broad-brush landscape that may be depicted by a survey. One reason for the prominence of written Chinese in Don's working life is that he works for a Chinese-owned organization. Evidence from the survey suggests that his experience may be typical of employees of mainland enterprises, for as Figure 3 indicates, such professionals use English less frequently than their counterparts in Hong Kong and foreign companies.

Figure 3 presents the 'top four' text types and speech events in Hong Kong's business world in terms of frequency of English use. These findings, which point to the centrality of English in emailing and report writing and its relative importance in meetings and presentations, are corroborated by the analysis of the interview translations, which indicated that email communication (395 comments), meetings (131), reports (127), and presentations (78) were—along with precision and concision—the most discussed topics. The lower means for speaking and listening in Figure 3 reflect the fact that oral communication is generally conducted in Cantonese, the first language of around 90 per cent of Hong Kong professionals.

Two points are worth making here. First, while surveys can generate conveniently itemized information about the text types and speech events that might usefully be incorporated into BE courses, unlike case studies they are unable to capture and illuminate the ways in which text and talk flow and intertwine. The working weeks of Don and Alan indicate that emails, reports, and meetings are not disconnected activities, as they can sometimes appear in BE materials, but are in fact tightly interwoven in an evolving process of problem solving:

■ meetings review and resolve problems;
■ written and oral reports are the inputs to and outcomes of these discussions and negotiations; and
■ emails (and their attachments and attendant telephone conversations) are the threads that bind these activities together.

Second, emails are not the one-off, memo-style messages that tend to appear as models or exercises in textbooks, but rather are chains of pithy, purposeful messages that connect and expedite flows of business activities. One of the limitations of such models and exercises is that the messages are often the first and/or second links in the chain (i.e. the initiator and/or the first—and only—response). While learners clearly need opportunities to write such texts, they also need to practise writing the 'key' message in the chain, which is often the terminator or the

penultimate link, since this is where one of the participants resolves the problem or makes the decision about the matter that has inspired the chain. Such practice could involve studying earlier links in a chain and, on the basis of their content and language, writing a strategically astute and stylistically attuned message to settle the issue. Alternatively, it could entail students, with clearly differentiated roles and possibly divergent input, engaging in a real-time email exchange via laptops, tablets, or smartphones stimulated by a problem-posing chain initiator.

Flows of text and talk in an accountant's working week

As noted above, the survey findings indicate that professionals who work for Hong Kong-owned companies tend to make greater use of English than their counterparts in Chinese firms. This tendency stems in part from the linguistic legacy of British rule (1842–1997) and the city's long-standing participation in global networks and flows of economic activity. It is, therefore, instructive to examine a week in the life of a professional (Alan) employed by an internationally oriented Hong Kong company, and particularly to track flows of text and talk over the five days. Given Alan's profession (accountancy), his company's ownership, and its field of operations (hotels), it is perhaps not surprising that his week differed markedly from Don's in terms of language use. As illustrated in Figure 4, English was the sole language of written communication and the main medium of spoken communication; and, to underline the symbiosis between Cantonese and written English, all four hours of Cantonese-mediated interactions were based on English documents.

While it would be reasonable to surmise that the dominant text types (reports) and speech events (meetings) were linked in some way, the extent of this relationship becomes apparent only when we analyse a segment of his activity log. Table 1 summarizes the nature, medium, and duration of Alan's activities on Monday afternoon as well as the number of participants in each episode. An analysis of the five-day log reveals that the seven activities in Table 1 were constituents of four separate flows of work undertaken during the week (which altogether had 14 flows).

The first three activities (2.00 pm–3.30 pm) were part of one flow of work. As the final column indicates, this topic engaged Alan and his colleagues at three other points during the week. For example, he made further revisions to the commentaries the following day (Tuesday, 9.45 am–10.30 am), having received the information he had requested in emails written on Monday morning (12.00–12.30 pm) and afternoon (2.45 pm–3.00 pm). The last two activities on Monday afternoon (4.45 pm–6.00 pm)—a brief period of individual preparation followed by a conference call—were part of a flow of work that occupied a substantial portion of his working week. This flow included three other conference calls (an excerpt from one of which appears below).

These findings have at least three implications for task design. First, they highlight the centrality of intertextuality in real-world business communication, that is, 'the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts' (Bazerman 2004: 86). The various texts that Alan produced during the week, in the form of reports and emails, did not emerge from a vacuum

but were linked to and shaped by information and ideas in a succession of earlier texts and their associated discussions. While the importance of intertextuality has been noted in previous studies (Warren 2013), as Bremner (2008) discovered, business communication textbooks generally neglect it in their explanations, models, and activities.

Second, the findings also highlight the collaborative nature of the business writing process. While Alan spent a good deal of his week working individually on reports and emails (for example Table 1, 12.45 pm–3.00 pm), these texts were invariably stimulated by meetings and discussions of various kinds (for example 2.00 pm–2.45 pm), some of which involved collaboration with a sizeable number of participants (for example 5.00 pm–6.00 pm). As with intertextuality, this key characteristic of the modern workplace tends to be overlooked in business communication textbooks (Bremner 2010). While the value of group work has long been acknowledged in ELT, it may be the case that collaborative activities in BE materials focus too much on cooperation rather than on the contestation and conflict that inevitably occur at times in the workplace. This adversarial aspect of business communication is illustrated in the following excerpt (transcribed verbatim) from a conference call on Friday afternoon, which is part of Flow 4 in Table 1:

Excerpt from a conference call

Alan: Ben, you have your programmer problem but we have the programming problem.

Ben: I understand Alan . . .

Alan: And you know in my mind payroll is something need to be done on time and accurately.

Ben: I . . .

Alan: You are putting well I mean the the the system bug or your programmers' problem er putting huge amount of pressure on my team . . .

This harder edge could be injected into some (obviously not all) group-based tasks by ensuring that participants play clearly defined and differentiated roles and possess incompatible and therefore interaction-inducing sets of data.

Third, the tasks that preoccupied Alan and his colleagues were so specialized and context specific that only the most zealous devotee of authentic materials would consider replicating them in a general-purpose BE class. The excerpt above is one of the more accessible sequences in the conference call, but most of it would be impenetrable to outsiders and thus, like much authentic discourse (Richards 2006), pedagogically worthless. Even if the call was judged to be useful (for example in a specific-purpose BE course), and even in the highly unlikely event that the company was prepared to make available such a sensitive discussion, it would need to be rerecorded and carefully edited (thereby diminishing its authenticity).

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Conclusion

This article has examined the types of tasks that professionals in a major international business centre are required to perform in English and the ways in which these activities flow and interrelate in the course of their day-to-day work. The evidence presented in the article was derived from 'week-in-the-life' case studies of two senior professionals together with a large-scale survey of and in-depth interviews with professionals working in Hong Kong's major industries.

The investigation was motivated by the desire to narrow the gulf that inevitably separates the office and the classroom. In this regard, the study has identified a number of key characteristics of real-world business communication that ELT professionals might wish to consider when designing materials for general-purpose BE courses for adult learners at intermediate or advanced levels. These features include

- its pace, pressure, and unpredictability;
- its emphasis on problem posing and solving;
- the centrality of intertextuality and collaboration;
- the interplay between written and spoken discourses and between different languages; and
- the importance of precision and concision in written communication.

The study points to the need for a simulation-based approach in which students with clearly defined and differentiated roles in a particular business context work quickly and collaboratively to investigate and resolve problems. They would work towards this objective by processing and producing interdependent text types, such as emails and reports, and by participating in speech events, such as meetings and telephone conversations, that are stimulated by English language texts.

Such an approach essentially corresponds to the 'strong' version of task-based language teaching (TBLT), as exemplified by the kinds of activities that Littlewood (2004: 322) categorizes as 'authentic communication' on his focus-on-forms to focus-on-meaning continuum; that is, 'using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable' (for example creative role play, complex problem solving). Indeed, TBLT, with its emphasis on purposeful communication and skill integration, seems especially well suited to the teaching of BE, since the tasks performed by English-using professionals in real-world workplaces are somewhat easier to identify and model than those encountered by school-age learners of General English. In fact, the idea that classroom activities should reflect real-world language use is included in most definitions of 'task' in studies of TBLT (for example Ellis 2003: 16; Shehadeh 2005: 18–19), and has indeed been a recurring theme in the ELT literature since the advent of the communicative approach in the 1970s.

However, on the evidence of Reed's (op.cit.: 326) recent review, BE publications tend to be 'packed' with activities at the focus-on-forms end of Littlewood's (op.cit.) continuum rather than, as might be expected, the types of tasks that 'mirror very closely the way our learners will be going on to use the language in the real world' (Willis and Willis 2007: 136). As noted in the introduction, the predominance

of staple EFL activities might be justified on the grounds that business people acquire their communicative competence by using English (and other languages) at work rather than by studying it in the formal setting of the classroom. Indeed, this notion of developing language skills and (especially critical) strategic competence at work was one of the themes that emerged from the interviews: some participants, in fact, dismissed the idea that BE courses could prepare them for life in Hong Kong's frenetic, unforgiving business world. It could be argued, therefore, that BE courses should seek primarily to develop students' language proficiency and skills (for example through traditional exercise types), which they can apply and further enhance and refine when they enter or return to the workplace.

And yet, most consumers of BE courses are students at senior secondary or tertiary level or white-collar workers and are, therefore, likely to have studied General English for many years at school. Thus, the potential disadvantage of employing time-honoured EFL methodologies in BE courses is that it might be perceived as being essentially 'more of the same' but with a veneer of business to give the appearance of real-world relevance. Rather than revisit the exercise types they encountered in General English courses, BE students might benefit more by engaging in the kinds of activities at the focus-on-meaning end of Littlewood's (op.cit.) continuum. While such activities will never be able to replicate the conditions and complexities of the contemporary workplace, they would nevertheless help to close the office/classroom divide and thus provide students with a more practical and engaging learning experience.

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Note

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