

Online Business English: Enrichment components for elective university classes

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Abstract:

This paper proposes a number of reasons that selected elements of English for online business should be included in instruction for elective university classes in Japan. Such elements include web presence and social media. Each element is discussed briefly before examples are given as to how the enrichment component can be incorporated into a number of elective classes.

Keywords: Business English; Social Media; Enrichment; Elective university classes

Images that come to mind when one considers the term “Business English” include suit-wearing people interacting in meetings or presenting information to clients, sitting at desks writing invoices, or answering complaints at a service desk. Images in popular Business English texts reflect the mainstream ones listed above. However, these images largely illustrate the reality of large-scale business situations. Considering that the vast majority of businesses are small in scale, the images, scope, methodology, and implementation of Business English instruction at university may perhaps need to be revised.

Additionally, given the growing importance of maintaining an online presence for both brick-and-mortar and exclusively online business models, as well as the possible financial rewards of communicating with, literally, a world of potential consumers, familiarity with online representation of businesses through websites, social media, blogs, and video will increasingly become a necessary aspect of digital literacy. McHaney, Warkentin, Sachs, Pope, & Ormond (2015) deplore the fact that, despite the growth of, and opportunities presented by, online business models that include social media, “few business schools have integrated [it] into programs of study” (p. 40). They note that “Causal[sic] and recreational social media use has developed into a venue for transforming an audience into customers and for transforming customers into loyal advocates” (p. 41).

Moreover, the Abe government’s strategies to “boost economic growth through bold structural reforms” including increasing female employment rates and creating an entrepreneur-friendly environment, “deepening Japan’s integration in the world economy,” and encouraging a more robust SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) sector (OECD, 2015, pp. 14-22) imply that such courses may benefit the nation.

Since English departments may already offer courses in Business English for students wishing to pursue employment in the corporate world, the addition of a course aimed at teaching Business English for use in smaller companies is likely untenable. However, introducing students to language, genres, and technologies that would support them to seek employment in a small company, to establish and support their own business, or to understand the power and practices of online marketing, will result in a growing confidence and competence in the use of English and the Internet

Online Business English: Enrichment components for elective university classes for employment, business, and life.

An alternative to setting up discrete courses is to add a Business English component to relevant existing elective classes, referred to by McHaney, et.al (2015) as “enrichment.” Depending on course content, the focus and tasks will differ, but the overall approach is similar. Examples of this approach to incorporating such a component into an existing course design are outlined later in the paper. Even if a student encounters such components in multiple elective courses, content will differ, providing students with practice within a number of different contexts.

Elements

The following examples of online business elements selected for instruction are suggestions only and will change over time. All of these can be synthesized for use in a foreign language classroom, and do not require the actual setting up of services or publishing of content.

Website

A website is a business’s main face to the world, and has a number of pages accessible via the menu bar. The homepage should welcome the potential customer and give general information about the products or services on offer. In addition to the homepage, the website often has an “about” page, one or more pages with information about specific types of products or services, a contact page, and, often, a blog. There may also be links to an online store or shopping cart, feedback pages, and more. For most businesses, the website is generally rather static, with the majority of interaction with potential customers achieved via social media or email.

Social media

Social media postings achieve two things. The first is that people interested in a commodity or service can follow, inquire, or comment about the item or service in question, and the provider can respond. The second is that the greater number of social media posts a company or corporation has made, the greater the chance that they will be high on the Google search engine rankings. The following social media sites have been selected due to both popularity and the differences among them, but also because they have features that cross over to other sites. For example, in addition to being less popular, Google+ has features similar to both Facebook and Twitter, so it has not been selected for further discussion here.

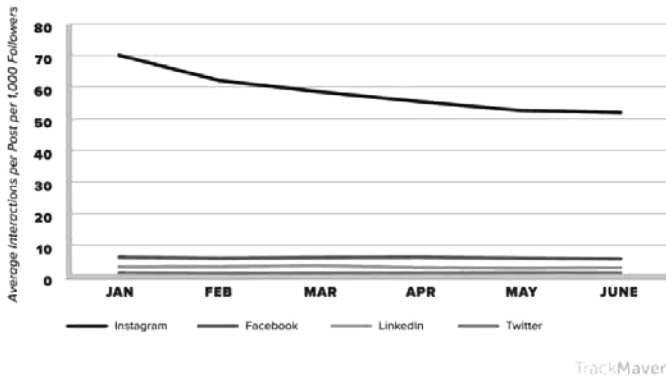
Facebook

Probably the most famous of social media sites, Facebook offers an enormous global audience for small business to connect with potential customers. Active Facebook users topped 1.7 billion in 2016 (statistica.com, n.d.), and more than one million small or medium-sized businesses use Facebook for advertising purposes (Sareah, 2015). Facebook posts may feature company news, information on products, and reposts of other relevant content.

Instagram

Members can post pictures and text. Members can search and follow other members of interest, either companies or private. Posts use hashtags for ease of searching content. Although Instagram does not rank very highly in terms of number of users, it has, by far, the largest number of interactions per post (Chaffey, 2016), making it increasingly attractive for business owners.

Average Interactions Per Post per 1,000 Followers on Social Networks
January 2016 - June 2016



Graph 1. “Average Interactions Per Post per 1,000 Followers on Social Networks January 2016-June 2016.” From: Chaffey (2016).

Twitter

The most popular social media platform in Japan, Twitter is a micro-blogging service allowing tweets of up to 140 characters. Due to the immediacy and volume of tweets, Helmrich (2016) notes that Twitter is an excellent platform for targeting customer service and sharing updates about products and services.

Pinterest

Pinterest is organized using the metaphor of a corkboard. On Pinterest, members can sort through images posted by themselves or others and organise the ones they would like to share or keep onto “boards.” These images can link back to a website, so those interested in the image can follow that image back to source, or, if the user is interested in the company or person pinning the image, they can visit the profile page. Creating a prominent Pinterest account is excellent advertising for a company.

Blogging

Blogs can be considered to be short articles created by the business. Blog posts can then be posted on social media to increase readership. There are a number of reasons for businesses to write blog posts. The first is that blog articles inform customers or potential customers of upcoming events, updates, new products or services, or other matters of interest. The second is that it can funnel potential clients back to the website to discover more about the products or services on offer, make a purchase, or contact the company if there is a question. The third is that the greater the number of blog posts of at least 300 words (with appropriate search engine optimization), the higher the website is displayed in search rankings.

Vlogs and Video

Vlogs (video blogs) and videos are a popular way to increase interest in the products and services of a business. Videos can be made easily using the video or camera function of a mobile phone, edited using mobile phone apps, computer software, or an online service, and hosted on YouTube. Videos also direct potential customers to a website, advertise products or services, and improve search engine rankings.

Example courses:

These are some of the elective courses that are currently offered at Kyoto Women's University. Enrichment components will be incorporated from the 2017 academic year.

Approaches

The activities suggested in the example courses below use a number of

Online Business English: Enrichment components for elective university classes approaches for instruction, including collaboration, problem-solving, case-study analysis, genre-based instruction, task-based instruction, active learning, and focus on both fluency and form. Since the courses as presented here are not social media or business courses *per se*, the activities conform only to the first three stages of social media instruction envisaged in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy, appearing in McHaney, et.al. (2015).

Table 1: Social media enrichment activities in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy. From McHaney, et al (2015, p. 54).

Stage	Key Activities	Key Social Media Technologies
<i>Stage 1: Enhancing social media for business knowledge</i>	Learning required background.	Online resources; Textbooks; Websites; Wikipedia; PowerPoint; Online Lectures; E-Flashcards; E-Books
<i>Stage 2: Developing skills for social media for business</i>	Using social media tools.	Twitter; Facebook; LinkedIn; Blogs; Websites; Instagram; YouTube; Other social media sites
<i>Stage 3: Improving abilities to use social media for business</i>	Integrating and using social media for business purposes.	Social media campaigns consisting of combinations of tools such as Blogs, Facebook Business Pages; LinkedIn Business Features; Review Sites; Media Sites
<i>Stage 4: Maintaining an ongoing ability to acquire and create new knowledge and skills relating to social media for business</i>	Learning how to acquire social media skills as tools change, and how to create online artifacts.	Online learning resources; MOOCs; Tutorials; Klout; mention.net; New apps
<i>Stage 5: Extending knowledge as intelligent nodes while community expertise is acquired with regard to social media and Web 2.0 for business</i>	Learning how to become an active part of the growing information infrastructure.	Flickr; DocStoc; SlideShare; Animoto; GoAnimate; Camtasia; Other tools that permit sharing of resources

Examples

English for travel, tourism, and hospitality

Working in pairs or groups, students may choose a small local business OR create a brief outline of their own business within the travel, tourism, and hospitality industries. Businesses may include, for example, a restaurant or coffee shop, a potential tourist site, a local craft or other store of potential interest to tourists, etc. After reviewing a number of existing sites, students create a sample website; write a list of possible blog post topics; write one blog post; write supporting posts for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest; and, optionally, create a supporting video.

Learning Internet English

In learning about “Working on the Internet,” students first consider case studies of online businesses and then think of an online company they might like to set up or work for in the future. After reviewing a number of similar existing sites, they create a website, blogs, social media posts, and (optionally) video, as above.

English for Fashion & Design

Working in pairs or groups, students choose a local fashion, textile, or other designer, or imagine themselves as designers. After reviewing a number of existing sites, they create a website, blogs, social media posts, and video, as above.

Manga & Animation

After creating a short manga in pairs or groups and reviewing a number of existing sites, students make a website, blogs, social media posts, and (optionally) video, as above.

Conclusion

The inclusion of some aspects of developing contemporary Business English genres and platforms to enrich existing, or new, university elective English courses is a response designed to prepare students for participation in the work force, whether employed by a large corporation or a small or medium enterprise, or self-employed. It will also enable the development of an awareness of online marketing tools and approaches, necessary as businesses expend more resources to use the Internet and social media platforms for advertising goods and services.

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