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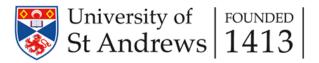
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Thinking Out of the Textbook: Toward Authenticity and Politeness Awareness

Clarice S. C. Chan

Although the use of authentic language has been advocated in English language teaching, it is not uncommon to find contrived dialogues in textbooks. These dialogues, which do not always exhibit the features of authentic interactions, limit learners' exposure to realistic models of discourse (Gilmore, 2004). In business English, a comparison between the language taught for business meetings and the language used in authentic meetings showed that the language taught in textbooks was sometimes unnatural and overexplicit (M. Williams, 1988). This problem was highlighted two decades ago, but many contemporary business English textbooks still include inauthentic language, some of which not only is unnatural but also may be rather inappropriate or even impolite, making it necessary for teachers to adapt and supplement the materials for greater authenticity and awareness of issues of face and politeness (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987).

One way to adapt and supplement these textbook materials is by "thinking out of the textbook." This means that neither teachers nor learners should be confined to the sometimes inauthentic language taught in textbooks; instead, they should try to go beyond the language presented on the page, toward a use of language that is more authentic. To do this, they can treat the textbook as an "object of critical focus," viewing the content as a "proposal," which "may be open to critical examination and evaluation by teachers and learners" (Littlejohn, 1998, pp. 204–205), rather than accepting it without question. But to be able to do this effectively, teachers first need to be aware of the way in which language is used in the situation of interest.

This chapter demonstrates how an awareness of certain features of the language used in business meetings, together with a willingness to think out of the textbook, can help teachers adapt and supplement materials on business meetings for greater authenticity and awareness of politeness issues. I first review some

key features of authentic language in business meetings and then suggest five strategies to adapt and supplement business meeting materials, along with sample activities to illustrate how the strategies may be applied. Because I have tested all of the strategies in my business English classes, I also include some of my observations and the language produced by learners when working on these activities. Although this chapter uses business meeting materials for illustration, the strategies proposed are also applicable to general English and English for specific purposes materials, especially those with a politeness focus.

CONTEXT

The learners in my classes mostly consisted of local university students from Hong Kong whose first language was Cantonese and who had little or no experience working in business. Despite their lack of work experience, they had no difficulty thinking out of the textbook when guided to do so. In this section, I present findings about the language used in the context of business meetings. Based on these findings, textbook materials on business meetings can be adapted and supplemented using different strategies, such as those detailed in the next section.

Lists of Communicative Functions and Language Exponents

In many of today's business English textbooks, the language of meetings is often represented by a set of communicative functions and language exponents (Chan, in press). Functions usually taught for meetings include agreeing, disagreeing, interrupting, giving opinions, and requesting. It is common to see lists of functions and some suggested language exponents for expressing them, such as:

Giving an opinion

- *I think . . .*
- *I have no doubt . . .*
- *I tend to think . . .*
- *In my opinion . . .*
- *It seems to me . . .*
- *There's no alternative to . . .*
- *It's obvious that . . .*
- *Clearly/Obviously . . .*

From a politeness perspective, lists of language exponents such as these are problematic because they rarely differentiate the attitudinal meanings associated with each exponent. For example, learners are not sensitized to the fact

that exponents with hedges (e.g., *It seems to me, I tend to think*) are much more tentative than expressions with intensifiers (e.g., *clearly*, *obviously*). In addition, contextual factors are often ignored in these lists. As Koester (2002) states, these lists "tend to obscure the fact that not all phrases may be appropriate in every situation, depending on such factors as the precise nature of the interaction and the relationship between the speakers" (p. 168).

Explicitness of Language Exponents

Another problem with the language exponents taught in business English textbooks is that, compared to the language used in actual business situations, they are often overexplicit (M. Williams, 1988). Table 1 shows a comparison between my findings of the exponents commonly taught in textbooks published in the last decade and Williams's findings of the language used in authentic meetings:

As the examples in Table 1 show, some functions used in real-life meetings are not always realized explicitly. The exponents presented in textbooks are seen as explicit, probably because they use explicit performatives, such as *agree* and *interrupt*. According to Koester (2002), explicit performatives often occur in "conversations involving problems or conflicts" (e.g., "I don't accept all this"; pp. 171–172). Learners who use expressions with performatives may be considered uncooperative and argumentative. The over-explicitness in the textbook examples is partly due to the fact that they are presented in isolation and out of

Table 1. Exponents Found in Textbooks and in Authentic Meetings

Function	Examples From Contemporary Textbooks	Examples From Real-Life Business Meetings
Agreeing	• *You've got a point there.* • *I totally agree with you.* • *Absolutely./Precisely./Exactly.*	• *Mmm* • implied by the function "accept" (e.g., *yes*) • implied by not disagreeing • nods
Disagreeing	• *That's not right.* • *I don't agree.* • *I don't quite agree with that point because . . .*	• *Well* + comment • *But* • *Yes, but*
Suggesting	• *I suggest that . . .* • *I propose that . . .* • *What about . . . ?*	• *We could . . .* • *So if . . .* • Imperative
Interrupting	• *Sorry to interrupt, but . . .* • *If I may interrupt, could you . . .?* • *Sorry, can I just say something?*	• *Yes, but* • *But* • repetition of overlapping utterance (e.g., "*I got, I got . . .*")

context, whereas in authentic meetings the function being performed is often clear from the context, making explicit performatives unnecessary.

Directness of Requests

Another aspect of relevance to politeness is the way in which requests are made in meetings. Bilbow (1995) investigated how the request function is performed and found that the native-speaking chairperson in his study employed "an extremely broad range of requesting strategies," which included "explicit directness," "conventional indirectness," and "non-conventional indirectness" (pp. 50–51). Table 2 shows some examples of each type of request.

Bilbow (1998) comments that the use of indirectness by the chairperson "contradicts the view that for reasons of authority and legitimacy to make requests and suggestions, chair-talk is universally more direct than participant-talk" (p. 171). In business English textbooks, however, indirect requesting strategies are rarely presented, and the language taught for making requests tends to be rather direct (Chan, in press), for example:

- *I'd like you to go away and work on . . .*

- *Can I leave that one with you?*

- *Can you . . . ?*

The lack of input on indirect requests may reinforce the wrong impression that chairs, because of their authority, tend to be very direct. Learners who use only direct requests learned from textbooks may appear too authoritative and aggressive, which may not be the impression they would like to create.

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS

In this section, I illustrate how the knowledge of authentic interactions may form the basis for adapting and supplementing materials. I propose five strategies that

Table 2. Examples of Different Types of Requests

Type of Directness	Examples From Real-Life Business Meetings
Explicit directness	• *I want to . . .* • *We've gotta . . .* • *You should . . .*
Conventional indirectness	• *Why don't we . . . ?* • *Could you . . . ?* • *It's very very important that you . . .*
Nonconventional indirectness	• *What if I should say to you . . . ?* • *Have you got any travel lined up in the near future?*

Source: Bilbow, 1995, p. 51.

teachers can use to adapt textbooks to increase authenticity and raise learners' awareness of politeness in business interactions. For each suggested strategy, I provide a sample activity.

Strategy 1: Encourage Learners to Analyze the Effects of the Language Presented in the Textbook

Most of the time, the language in the textbook is presented as a good model and accepted as such by teachers and learners alike. However, in scripted dialogues the language can be somewhat unnatural, particularly when the writers are trying to use them as a way of presenting predetermined target language. For example, it is not uncommon to find in textbooks many target exponents packed together into a relatively short dialogue. Figure 1 shows a common pattern.

Apart from being unnatural, dialogues such as the one in Figure 1, especially if given as the only example, probably create the impression that meetings are usually conducted in the way presented in the textbook, and learners may not question the effects of the language presented. To help learners think out of the textbook, instead of teaching the language in the example as a good model, teachers can ask learners to think of the model as a proposal (Littlejohn, 1998) and evaluate its appropriateness using the guiding questions in Activity 1 (Figure 2).

A: What's your view on this?

B: It's obvious that . . .

C: I don't agree with you . . .

A: I agree . . .

C: Exactly, so . . .

B: Sorry to interrupt, but . . .

A: Sure, but . . .

B: Could I just finish what I was saying? We have to . . .

C: But that's beside the point . . .

Figure 1. Transcript 1: Example of a Scripted Meeting

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1. How would you describe the atmosphere of the meeting?

2. What gives you such an impression?

3. Underline any language that gives that impression.

4. How can the atmosphere be improved?

5. How would you change the language to improve the atmosphere of the meeting?

Figure 2. Activity 1: Guiding Questions

Whether learners can give "correct" answers to the guiding questions is not as important as conveying to them that the language presented in the textbook creates a particular effect and should not be treated as the one and only way to use language in business meeting discussions. Asked to evaluate a scripted meeting in a textbook using the guiding questions in Figure 2, the learners in my classes could usually identify several things going wrong, such as a tense atmosphere, colleagues not showing respect for each other, and everybody having a hard time getting a turn to speak. Based on learners' answers to the guiding questions, teachers may sensitize learners to issues of face and politeness in business meetings. As a follow-up activity, teachers may also show learners transcripts of authentic meetings or video clips of authentic discussions for comparison with the scripted dialogue.

Strategy 2: Encourage Learners to Modify Textbook Language to Create a Different Effect

Another way to guide learners to critically evaluate what the textbook teaches them is to encourage them to modify textbook language in order to create a different effect. Using findings from research on authentic interactions, teachers can introduce more authentic alternatives and draw learners' attention to the effects of different ways of performing the same functions. For example, M. Williams (1988) points out that some functions performed by participants in a meeting are often realized by minimal language such as *well*, *yes*, and *but*. Teachers may use this finding to supplement textbook materials. For example, Transcript 1 (Figure 1), which contains rather explicit expressions, may be used as a starting point to introduce more natural alternatives. Activity 2 (Figure 3) shows how to do this.

Figure 4 is an example of what learners in my classes came up with for Activity 2. The text in brackets was inserted to replace the text that is crossed out.

With the textbook exponents replaced, teachers can then ask learners to

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Do you think any of the phrases in bold in the transcript can be replaced by one of the shorter utterances suggested below? You may use other ideas that you can think of.

- *Well . . .*
- *Yes*
- *But*
- *Erm . . .*
- *Yes, but*
- *Mmm . . .*
- *Er . . .*

Figure 3. Activity 2: Replacing Textbook Exponents With More Natural Alternatives

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A:	**What's your view on this?**
B:	**It's obvious that** . . .
C:	~~**I don't agree with you.**~~ [Yes, but] . . .
A:	~~**I agree.**~~ [Yes.] . . .
C:	**Exactly**, so . . .
B:	~~**Sorry to interrupt but**~~ [But] . . .
A:	Sure, but . . .
B:	~~**Could I just finish what I was saying?**~~ [But] We have to . . .
C:	~~**But that's beside the point.**~~ [Well . . .] . . .

Figure 4. Modifying Transcript 1

compare the old and new versions and comment on the effects of the changes. The features of the modified version include more natural turn taking and less confrontational interaction as a result of avoiding exponents with explicit performatives. Teachers may also ask learners to modify the sentences according to contextual factors. For example, if the speaker would like to make a tentative point, expressions such as *It's obvious that* . . . can be changed to *I tend to think that* . . . .

Strategy 3: Encourage Learners to Analyze the Degree of Directness/Politeness

When learners are provided with lists of functions that do not differentiate the effects of the exponents suggested, they may treat them as equivalent without realizing the differences in the degree of directness and politeness. To help learners see that different expressions involve different degrees of directness and are appropriate for different situations, teachers can ask learners to compare the expressions and identify the situations in which the expressions taught in the textbook may be appropriate. They can also provide learners with additional examples from authentic interactions. For example, Activity 3 (Figure 5) draws learners' attention to the directness of different ways of making requests and the effect of contextual factors on the degree of directness.

In my classes, some learners who lacked business experience often wrongly assumed that the chair was "the boss" and could be direct and authoritative in a meeting. Activity 3 (Figure 5) proved to be useful in raising their awareness of the need for even the chair of the meeting to make requests indirectly from time to time. The activity also helped learners see that different expressions involve different degrees of directness and politeness and are not at all equivalent to each other.

1. Below are some ways for a meeting chair to make requests. Are they direct or indirect? Try to think of a few more examples of direct and indirect requests.

   - *Can you . . . ?*
   - *Why don't we . . . ?*
   - *I want to . . .*
   - *It's important that we . . .*
   - *You should . . .*
   - *Could you . . . ?*
   - *We need to . . .*
   - *I think we should . . .*
   - Other examples you can think of:

   Direct   **Indirect**
   - _____   - _____
   - _____   - _____
   - _____   - _____
   - _____   - _____
   - _____   - _____

2. Compare your answers with a partner's. With your partner, try to come up with some situations in which the chair can make direct requests.

3. Compare your answers with a partner's. With your partner, try to come up with some situations in which the chair should make indirect requests.

Figure 5. Activity 3: Analyzing the Degree of Directness of Different Ways of Making a Request

Strategy 4: Guide Learners to Analyze the Appropriateness of the Language Presented in the Textbook

Textbook dialogues are often presented without drawing learners' attention to contextual factors and issues of appropriateness. In scripted business meetings, for example, factors such as the relationship between speakers and the power distance are usually left unexplained despite their importance in the business world. One way to solve this problem is to guide learners to analyze the appropriateness of the language presented in the textbook. For example, in scripted meetings that include examples of requests, teachers can draw learners' attention to such contextual factors as the nature of the relationship between the speakers, the power distance, and how big a favor is being asked. In this case, the guiding questions in Activity 4 (Figure 6) may be used.

These guiding questions can help learners see that textbook examples are appropriate in certain situations, but not all, and that changes in contextual factors require changes in the way that language is used.

1. Underline all the requests in the dialogue.
2. Are the requests direct?
3. Do you think the requests are polite?
4. Are the requests appropriate for the situation? If not, how would you change them?
5. Can you think of situations in which the requests would be considered inappropriate?
6. Would you make the requests differently if you were:
   - talking to your boss?
   - talking to your assistant?
   - talking to a colleague from another department who is not obliged to help?

Figure 6. Activity 4: Guiding Questions

Strategy 5: Compare Textbook Examples With Learner Language and Authentic Language

Some textbooks present the target language of meetings before asking learners to perform role-plays, which are supposed to provide opportunities for learners to use the language that has just been taught. However, most learners at the upper intermediate or advanced level already know enough English to perform the functions commonly used in meetings, which may in fact be at least as good as the language taught in many textbooks, if not better. To build on what learners already know, the sequence can be reversed: Before introducing them to the language taught in textbooks, teachers may use "deep-end" activities (e.g., asking learners to hold a meeting before teaching them the language they may need). These activities can help teachers ascertain what learners already know. Based on this information, teachers can give feedback on the language used by learners and provide additional examples from textbooks to give learners a greater repertoire.

During deep-end activities, either the teacher or other learners can act as observers and write on the observation form for Activity 5 (Table 3) the different ways that the learners doing the activities perform various functions. Depending

Table 3. Activity 5: Observation Form

Function	What They Say or Do
Agree	
Disagree	
Suggest	
Interrupt	
Handle interruptions	
Request	

on what has been written down, the teacher may comment on the naturalness of the language used, the degree of directness, the degree of formality, or the use of nonverbal means to perform the functions.

It is interesting that many learners in my classes, who had never learned business English before and who had little or no work experience, were able to come up with language that was sometimes more natural and closer to authentic language than the language contained in some textbooks. Table 4 shows examples of the language that some of my learners used.

Perhaps of special interest in Table 4 are the items marked with an asterisk (*). These are ideas that are rarely featured in business English textbooks; however, not only are they natural, but they also show an awareness of issues of face and politeness (e.g., disagreeing by saying "Maybe . . . ," making an indirect request for someone to cook for a party by saying "I heard that you're a very good cook"). In fact, learners may already have in their repertoire some appropriate language, and it is important for teachers to acknowledge this and let learners know that they should not necessarily consider textbook ideas to be superior to their own.

Activity 5 may also be used for authentic meetings if teachers can obtain video recordings or transcripts of them. Learners can write down the language used in

Table 4. Examples of Language Used by Learners

Function	What They Say or Do
Agree	*Yes.* *OK.* (Nodding)
Disagree	*But . . .* *Do you think so?* **Maybe . . .*
Suggest	*I think . . .* *Maybe . . .* **Why don't we . . . ?*
Interrupt	*Excuse me . . .* *Maybe we can . . .* **But . . . but . . . but . . . .*
Handle interruptions	*Actually, . . .* *OK . . .* **Yes* + clarifying the idea
Request	*Who can do . . . ?* *Does anyone have a laptop?* **I heard that you're a very good cook.*

Note: Items marked with * are rarely featured in textbooks.

the authentic meetings to perform different functions, which would then supplement what their textbooks contain.

REFLECTIONS

The five strategies proposed in this chapter demonstrate how teachers and learners can think out of the textbook and learn more than what it provides. The strategies can help teachers and learners view language models in textbooks as proposals (Littlejohn, 1998) and see that they need not be confined to the language taught in textbooks.

As shown in this chapter, research findings and learner language may both be used to supplement the language taught in textbooks. But to be able to appraise the authenticity of textbook and learner language, teachers should first be aware of language use in authentic situations. Findings from applied linguistics research could be a major source of information about authentic language (Chan, in press). To be able to make use of research findings, teachers are encouraged to keep abreast of relevant research as part of their professional development. Useful references on authentic workplace language include Hewings and Nickerson (1999), Holmes and Stubbe (2003), and Koester (2004, 2006).

The strategies proposed in this chapter may also be used when teaching other business English topics, such as negotiating, presenting, socializing, and drafting business correspondence. However, these strategies need not be restricted to business English topics; other English for specific purposes and general English topics, especially those with relevance to politeness, may be adapted or supplemented in similar ways.

Although the ideas for adaptation and supplementation help learners realize that there are sometimes better alternatives to the language taught in textbooks, teachers should be mindful of some caveats. First, there is no need to turn most lessons into sessions on finding flaws in the textbook, nor is it recommended that teachers spend too much time asking learners to evaluate every language item taught in the textbook, especially when the lesson has other equally important aims. Second, the strategies and activities suggested in this chapter are intended to serve as a guide for teachers and illustrate how an awareness of authentic language can help enrich learning. Understanding the principle behind the strategies, teachers may adapt the suggested activities to suit their needs without having to follow the whole of each activity in a rigid way. In fact, even asking learners quick questions such as "Which is more polite, to say X or Y?", "Is X an appropriate thing to say in this situation?", and "If you don't say Y in this situation, what else could you say?" can guide learners to analyze what is recommended in the textbook.

The complexities of language use in authentic situations can hardly be covered by the limited space in a textbook. It is therefore necessary for teachers and learners to think out of the textbook and go beyond the language taught on the page

so that learners can communicate more naturally and appropriately outside the classroom. If they are willing to think out of the textbook, teachers will be able to develop flexibility in their use of textbooks and adapt or supplement them further as they learn more about language use in authentic situations.

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Clarice S. C. Chan is currently the coordinator of English courses for business under-graduates at the University of Hong Kong, where she also teaches discourse analysis to postgraduates. In 2007, she received the IATEFL BESIG Award for the Development of Business English Teaching Materials.