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# Acquiring Business English in a Quasi- Natural Business Environment: A Method of Teaching Business English to Students of Business and Economics

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This article discusses a method of organizing Business English studies for students who learn it as a foreign language at schools of business and universities outside English-speaking countries. Those students typically lack both previous practical experience in business and opportunities to watch business being done in English or to participate themselves in real-life business communication in English. That puts additional obstacles in the way of language acquisition. The suggested method is based on creating a quasi-natural business environment in the classroom where students acquire Business English by modeling the process of doing business in English through continuous simulation. A pilot study indicates that this approach may improve on existing methods.

## Introduction

The purpose of the study reported in this article was to develop a method (and a coursebook corresponding to that method) most suitable and effective for teaching students of Business English in a typical Post-Communist Eastern European country. The students of tertiary-level schools of economics and business were chosen as the target – those students who are already at the intermediate level of their command of General English, but know neither Business English (BE) nor the practical workings of business, which they have just started studying as their major. A new approach to teaching such students is necessitated by the lack of effectiveness in out-of-date methods (and coursebooks) developed in the former USSR. This cannot be remedied by simply adopting the methods (and coursebooks) for BE studies existing in the West since they are not adapted to specific local conditions and needs.

The solution to this problem is an urgent requirement because, for economic and political reasons, BE teaching/learning is rapidly becoming one of the most popular branches of EFL teaching/learning in the Post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe, such as the Ukraine. But this

teaching/learning is different from teaching and learning BE in, for instance, most of the developed countries of Europe. One of the principal differences lies in the fact that in the countries of the former USSR, BE is rarely learned by people who already work in business, know their jobs, and only lack the knowledge of English for professional purposes. In Ukraine, such people mostly rely on translators and interpreters when they are in need of making oral or written contacts requiring the command of BE. (A similar situation may characterize some other countries.)

The body of BE learners in Ukraine consists almost exclusively of students from business schools, colleges, and universities majoring in business and economics who lack more than the knowledge of Business English at the start of their studies. Their ideas of business as a whole are also rather vague, with little or no practical experience in that area. This is further complicated by the fact that Business English is being learned in a non-English-speaking country, where nobody uses English outside the classroom and where the students are deprived of opportunities of watching business being done in English. Having never seen it in reality, most teachers and students have only vague ideas about business communication in English. So in teaching practice that can be observed in Ukrainian tertiary schools, classes of BE mostly focus on language forms used in business communication but not on communication proper. That focus is supported by the existing tradition and BE coursebooks published in the former USSR. As a result, both the students and the teachers concentrate their efforts almost solely on conscious learning with explicit explanations and training in grammar and vocabulary. According to Krashen (1982), this cannot lead to developing communication skills successfully, since they are mostly acquired unconsciously in the process of taking in rich and varied comprehensible input (and, it should be added, in the process of communication in the target language itself).

The existing BE coursebooks support the "conscious learning" approach, as has already been mentioned, and those that are published in the countries of the former USSR are rather obsolete and seem inadequate in view of up-to-date pedagogical approaches. The inadequacies show up in their language, the suggested ways and methods of teaching and learning, the contents, the design, and the structure. That is why both the teachers and the students often, and justifiably, voice their dissatisfaction with them, preferring BE coursebooks published in the West. But Western BE books do not really solve the problem. First, they are not easily accessible in Ukraine and are often too expensive. Second, they don't take into account the local conditions and students' background knowledge. Third, they also support either explicitly or implicitly the conscious learning approach, focusing students' attention not so much on the ways of doing business in English as on the language used for it. Fourth, their design and structure offers nothing that can help the Ukrainian students from business schools and universities feel the practicality of doing business in

English. Authentic materials that are included in those coursebooks are not helpful in that respect. They are psychologically authentic to people already working in business and knowing it, and it is actually for them that the coursebooks under discussion are mostly designed. But they cannot be perceived as such by students who know next to nothing about business and economics - nothing practical at least, just the theory that they were taught in their studies.

It is hardly possible to fill with life the process of doing business in English for students without putting them in a situation of doing it in that language. If that happens, it can replace or, at least, supplement consciously learning BE grammar and vocabulary with unconscious acquisition of communication skills in real-life communication. Doing business in English cannot be achieved in reality in the conditions under consideration, but an attempt can be made to model this process in the classroom. Such an approach requires a specific method of teaching and learning Business English. The following part of the article is devoted to the discussion of the basic characteristics of that method. It should be noted in advance that the method, the practical teaching, and teaching materials developed were elaborated exclusively for students who have already reached the intermediate level in their command of General English since that level was considered to be the required foundation for starting any course of Business English.

#### **Business English Through Continuous Creative Communication (BET 3C): The Basic Characteristics of the Method**

To achieve the ends of making the process of doing business in English relevant and life-like to learners, a number of recent (and not so recent) innovations in BE teaching were incorporated into the method being developed. For instance, the teaching materials were oriented so that students could mostly learn Business English via communication that imitates or models genuine business communication (Ellis & Johnson 1994). Learning was task-based, and learning assignments were mostly different tasks from the area of business that students solved using English as a tool (Prabhu 1987). Learning was content-based, so that everything that was learned about Business English was learned through the content matter from the areas of business, marketing, etc. (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche 1989). It was also theme-based, with activities and information focused on a number of themes that in their entirety covered the selected content-matter (Brinton et al.). Finally, authentic case studies were a regular feature and an integral part of the learning process.

All of the above mentioned features are inherent to quite a number of American and British state-of-the-art BE coursebooks. Yet, as has already

been said, in the Ukraine and for the students under discussion, such coursebooks do not solve the problem of replacing mastering BE through conscious learning of language forms with unconsciously acquiring it in the process of business communication while doing business in English. To ensure that students get practice doing business in English, the BE classroom must offer a quasi-natural business environment. To create such an environment, several specific components of the method were developed that, in their combination, characterize it as something quite distinct from other methods of teaching and learning Business English. The method itself, as a unity of all its characteristics, was called BET 3C – Business English Through Continuous Creative Communication.

Among the six characteristics comprising the method, the driving principle is continuous simulation, which is the foundation for creating the required quasi-natural business environment in which students can acquire Business English, instead of consciously learning it. But the other five characteristics are in no way dispensable since they make a considerable contribution to the creation of that environment and facilitate students' activities in it with the goal of facilitating BE acquisition. The six characteristics are:

1. Continuous simulation (as the driving principle)
2. Project work
3. Learners' autonomy
4. Introduction of fictitious setting
5. Cooperative or team work
6. Integrated-skills approach

#### *Continuous Simulation*

Continuous simulation is, as has already been mentioned, the most important conceptual characteristic, with all the other characteristics supporting it. Continuous simulation is a specific organization of the Business English course whereby learning develops during continuous modeling and enacting of business activities and communication in class. The enactment is done in the framework of the functioning of an imaginary firm or company. Students themselves invent it, "set it up", organize its "functioning", and "work" in that firm or company. It is a kind of play where learners themselves are actors, directors, and playwrights on an on-going basis. Continuous simulation, unlike traditional simulations which are disconnected episodes in the learning process, creates a common meaningful plot for BE learning and communicative activities in the course, from class to class. Students decide what form of business they will organize and what the structure and management hierarchy of their firm will be; they organize the firm, elect or appoint its top executives, and find, interview, and select employees; determine the place that their business can occupy in the economy of the country; and they do market-

ing research, solve financial problems, participate in fairs, sign contracts, etc.

This common plot developing from class to class creates an imaginary life continuum in which students do not need to focus on conscious learning. They get the opportunity to acquire both Business English and business itself by constantly playing it in conditions imitating or modeling the business environment. What is very important is the fact that in continuous simulation, the modeled business environment is created by students themselves, who develop the plot when they play business. That makes students' communication highly creative and imaginative. Learners' creativity and imagination is what the entire approach is based on.

Continuous simulation as a tool in Business English teaching were first presented at IATEFL 1998 Manchester conference (Tarnopolsky 2000). But then they were just an additional activity superimposed on a more traditional Business English course. In the concept of BE studies discussed in this article, continuous simulation has become the leading organizing principle of the whole course. In Appendix A several tasks for students are given exemplifying the use of continuous simulation in that course. The examples are taken from the coursebook *Business Projects* (Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, Bezugla, Degtiarova, & Gibson 2002), which was designed following the BET 3C method (the coursebook itself will be discussed later.)

#### *Project work*

The use of project work (Fried-Booth 1996) naturally follows the use of continuous simulation and the BET 3C approach in general. This is because project tasks are the most natural and the most creativity-oriented means of making students prepare for playing episodes in continuous simulation. For example, if an episode is connected with reporting the results of market research, playing the episode should be preceded by project work. The project task requires students to collect material for their report and write its abstract with the main points before doing the actual presentation. Such writing is done on the basis of learners' discussions in pairs or small groups that are also parts of continuous simulation. In this way, written project tasks not only prepare students for the following episodes but form links between episodes themselves becoming an integral part of continuous simulation.

They also summarize all the continuous simulation activities because after "founding" their firm at the start of the course, the students immediately get the assignment of writing the firm's prospectus - an assignment which they will continue to work on until the end of the course. At the end of every unit, learners write one section of that prospectus in which all the work done in the unit is summarized. For instance, on finishing Unit 2 (Company Structure), the students write the section of the

prospectus where the structure of their firm and its management hierarchy are described. After Unit 5 (Domestic and World Economy), they write a section discussing their firm's place in the economy of the country, and so on from unit to unit. That makes the results of written project tasks the visible material products of everything done in the course. Thus the entire work in the course finds its full expression in the final product - the prospectus of learners' imaginary firm written and prepared for publishing by themselves. Writing and preparing for publishing (typing, formatting, finding or creating illustrative materials for the prospectus, etc.) are very important for the success of continuous simulation. They are one of the principal means of making that simulation seem "real-life" because real material products of the firm's functioning are demonstrated.

The project work is also the leading means of developing students' writing skills in the course. Learners do their written project tasks in the framework of the process-oriented approach (Tribble 1996; White & Arndt 1991; Zamel 1982) since there are both pre-writing and post-writing discussions of what is going to be or has been written, and those discussions serve as a basis for drafting and redrafting the written texts. Besides, since written project tasks cover various and numerous themes related to business activities, different genres (Swales 1990) of business writing are also covered. As a result, the skills developed are somewhat different from those ordinarily set as the goals of teaching writing for business purposes in courses of Business English. They are not so much the skills of writing some standard business documents as the skills of writing creatively on business issues. Developing such skills seems to be more important than teaching students to write several types of standard business letters and other standard business papers. If creative writing skills are developed, developing skills of writing standard business documents may become a comparatively simple task.

What has been said about the use of project work can be summarized, first, by remarking that, thanks to it, writing in the suggested course of Business English becomes as creative and continuous as speaking in continuous simulation. Second, this writing may be considered the focal point of continuous simulation. This is because everything done by the students to get ready for continuous simulation or to demonstrate its results is gathered in students' project work writings. Thus, project work done in writing reflects all the other communicative activities in the course. Speaking has just been mentioned, but this concerns reading and listening as well. They are also done as creative activities because learners read or listen to some information for use in their continuous simulation, i.e., for transforming it creatively in their speaking. But since everything that the students say during continuous simulation is reflected and transformed in their own writing in the process of project work, the information obtained from reading and listening in English passes through no

less than two creative transformations - in the learners' own speaking and in their writing.

Examples of project tasks used in the Business English course can be found in Appendix B. They are again taken from the previously mentioned coursebook *Business Project*, which is the practical embodiment of the suggested BET 3C method.

#### *Learners' Autonomy*

Learners' autonomy (Benson & Voller 1997) is the result of introducing continuous simulation and project work. They would become impossible as creative activities (see the description above) if learners were not autonomous in what they do and say and how they do and say it. But students are autonomous when doing the continuous simulation and/or project tasks, and all the assignments in the developed course are designed to ensure that autonomy. Students discuss different points stating their own opinions and using their background knowledge, they read texts and listen to talks and conversations to find information that they lack for their own discussions and conversations on certain topics, and they write about the results of their discussions to state their own ideas in writing. Thus, they autonomously decide what to do and say and how to do and say it - learning while doing and saying it. The task for the teacher is not so much to teach as to organize learning and facilitate it. It does not mean that in the actual instruction process teacher-dependent and teacher-fronted learning activities are excluded, but they become a kind of starting point, stimulating and initiating further activities in which learners are autonomous or even fully independent. The importance of ensuring learners' autonomy lies in the fact that there is no other way of developing the skills and abilities students require to become truly independent users of Business English.

#### *Introduction of Fictitious Setting*

This supplementary feature of the method is needed to ensure the proper functioning of its three principal tools: continuous simulation, project work, and learners' autonomy. The introduction of fictitious setting means connecting the contents of a lot of materials used in the course (texts, dialogues, case studies, etc.) to an imaginary fictitious country where imaginary fictitious businesses operate. It also means setting learning activities in that fictitious country - for instance, when students found their imaginary firm there.

This feature seems essential enough. To become autonomous in continuous simulation and project work, learners have to feel the psychological freedom to use their imagination and fantasy. This is hardly possible if they are confined by the economic reality in their own country or any

other. They may be limited even by not knowing something of that reality since they will be afraid or at least embarrassed to invent. But establishing one's own business and operating it in a fictitious setting - an imaginary country with imaginary businesses in it - creates a degree of psychological freedom otherwise unattainable. Acting in some fictitious space, students will not feel the need to keep to strict facts of life and economy, and they will not be afraid of speaking or writing about something not fully known to them. This creates an opportunity to use imagination much more broadly and effectively than when the subject of communication is a real country with its real economy, businesses, etc. The result is creating an environment where students will freely and independently (autonomously) play business while doing continuous simulation and project work. It is a free play ground where learners may feel themselves at home because they set its rules and laws. This creates good conditions for enhancement of positive motivation and forming highly positive, anxiety-free attitudes to everything done in the classroom.

#### *Cooperative Learning*

This characteristic serves the same purpose as the previous one - ensuring the proper functioning of continuous simulation, project work, as well as making learners' autonomy possible. The great demands made by continuous simulation and project work, enhanced by the necessity of doing them autonomously, require learners' mutual help. So the focus in the course is on cooperative learning (Kessler 1992) instead of on traditional individual learning. Almost all the principal activities are designed to be done in pairs or small groups. This concerns project work, continuous simulation, all kinds of discussions and brainstorming, etc. When doing such learning tasks, students are required to pool their efforts. Such pooling is aimed at increasing learning in comparison with the assignments done individually - students not only learn themselves but teach each other and learn from each other. In the method under discussion, cooperative learning is fundamental to its organization and is the basis of learning activities, not only in but outside of class.

Cooperative learning also ensures ample practice in using language. If the greater part of activities are done in pairs or small groups, and not as teacher-fronted ones, it means that all students are actively practicing most of the class time. This is impossible in teacher-fronted activities since not more than one student can be genuinely active at any given moment of time - the one directly involved with the teacher (answering the teacher's questions or making a presentation, etc.).

#### *Integrated-Skills Approach*

The use of project work as one of the basic characteristics underlying the method under discussion leads to the emergence of one more feature. It has already been said that students' speaking in continuous simulation depends on their preparatory project work done in written project assignments which, in turn, depend on discussions, brainstorming, etc. The material both for speaking and writing is taken from what students listen to and read. This interconnectedness and interdependence in developing the four basic communication skills (speaking, reading, listening, writing) means those four skills are developed not separately from each other but in unison, so that reading and listening support speaking and writing, while speaking and writing reinforce the language material to be used for further development of reading and listening skills. This is the integrated-skills approach (Oxford 2001), and its systematic implementation as one of the conceptual features of the method is the last distinctive characteristic.

The six characteristics of the method make students' learning quite concrete. Thanks to them, learning Business English happens while students play business in English by way of doing continuous simulation and project work. Playing is mostly done autonomously by students in teams, i.e., in pairs or small groups, for which the efforts of all the members of a team are pooled to reach a common goal. That goal is attained by using different ways of communicating in English (speaking, listening, reading, writing) as interconnected instruments for playing business. Finally, students play business in the fictitious imaginary setting created by themselves. This allows them to use fantasy and imagination quite freely, enhances motivation, and stimulates anxiety-free attitudes. It was believed that the suggested approach used in its entirety could create a quasi-natural business environment which replaced learning of grammar and vocabulary with unconscious acquisition of communication skills and was fun for students. And when working on a foreign language is fun, the work is often successful. But the assumption had to be verified in teaching practice.

Such verification required, first of all, writing a new kind of coursebook of Business English designed in strict accordance with the method developed and its conceptual characteristics. Without such a coursebook, there was no hope for a teacher to use the method as it was meant to be used because of its peculiarities unusual for the standard BE teaching practice (at any rate, in the Ukraine.)

#### **Design and Structure of a BE Coursebook**

The coursebook, by Tarnopolsky et al., titled *Business Projects* was published in 2002. It consists of the Student's Book with the Workbook (for

doing homework assignments) included in it, so that each unit of the Student's Book is followed by a corresponding unit of the Workbook. The set also includes the Teacher's Book, with detailed explanations and instructions for the teacher, and a 90-minute class cassette with the audio materials for the course. The title of the coursebook *Business Projects* was chosen because, as has already been said, project work is the focal point of learners' activities in the course.

The Student's Book is divided into 12 theme-based units, each unit devoted to one theme of business communication, i.e., one area of content in the field of business activities. Every two units are united by a more general theme, which creates a broader section of the coursebook consisting of two units. The themes of units and more general section themes are traditional for coursebooks of Business English. They were selected to cover the most important content matter of business communication. They include:

- I. Starting a Business
  - Unit 1. Forms of Businesses
  - Unit 2. Company Structure
- II. Job Hunting
  - Unit 3. Making Appointments and Applying for a Job
  - Unit 4. Career Profiles. Job Interviews
- III. Business Environment
  - Unit 5. Domestic and World Economy
  - Unit 6. Business Objectives, Strategies, and Competition
- IV. Marketing and Production
  - Unit 7. Marketing
  - Unit 8. Production
- V. Banking and Finance
  - Unit 9. Banking
  - Unit 10. Finance
- VI. Fairs, Exhibitions, Contracts
  - Unit 11. Participation in Fairs and Exhibitions
  - Unit 12. Contracts

Every unit consists of a Lead-in and three or four Steps. Lead-ins are designed to introduce students to the themes of units, to encourage them to understand, guess, and learn as much as possible about the content matter involved in any particular theme before reading special texts devoted to it. So, the activities are mostly directed at (a) eliciting students' background knowledge, (b) making them guess some information and give reasons why real facts should be as they have guessed them, (c) listening to some particular information that permits making conclusions as to more general information behind it, (d) getting students familiarized with the key vocabulary used in the unit, and (e) making students speak as freely and as much as possible on the theme from the point of view of their guesses and anticipation. Some Lead-ins also make learners

write on the basis of their guesses and anticipation, this writing being done in the process of project work. Thus, speaking, listening, and (in some cases) writing are the principal forms of communication in Lead-ins, while reading is used mainly for understanding instructions and assignments. In some Lead-ins, short texts for reading are included which serve to achieve the purposes mentioned above. The activities in Lead-ins embrace different discussions, brainstorming, role-plays, and even continuous simulation activities.

Steps 1, 2, and (in some units) 3 are the central parts of every unit. They are devoted to developing the theme and communication skills required to speak, read, listen, and write using its content matter. A text on some aspect of the theme is the focal point of each of those steps. Reading the text in class is preceded by some problem-solving discussions or brainstorming assignments for students to guess and anticipate its content matter and understand its key vocabulary.

After-reading assignments begin with comprehension check-up activities (answering questions, discussing particular points, summarizing, etc.). Just as in Lead-ins, problem-solving activities, for which students have to generate new information on the basis of information learned from the text, are the principal ones and take a considerable part of class work. One or several listening assignments are also frequently included into such steps. Such assignments are always followed by speaking and/or writing assignments. Role-plays are characteristic of speaking assignments and are usually done in pairs while discussion/brainstorming-type assignments may be done as whole-class, small group, or pair activities only. Reading and listening assignments are done individually, while all the others are done as a team (cooperative learning).

All these activities lead to and prepare students for continuous simulation and project work, which are the most important parts of every step. Continuous simulation is done as a pair, small group, or whole-class activity, and in almost every class one or several continuous simulation episodes are played. Project tasks are mostly out-of-class activities. But before actually doing them out of class, students first discuss and brainstorm them in class. Later, when a particular project task has been done, they present the results to their group-mates in class again followed by a whole-class discussion of those results.

There are two specific activities included into two steps of every unit. One of them contains a Business News section. In this section students listen to business news and do assignments that check understanding and develop speaking skills on the basis of listening. The second specific activity is a case study. It starts with reading (or listening to) an open-ended short text. Several questions accompany the text; to answer them, students have to do one or several problem-solving tasks using their background knowledge or the knowledge obtained from what they have done in that particular unit. The assignments are of a discussion/brain-

storming type and are usually done in small groups or pairs.

The Final Step (3 or 4) in every unit is probably the most important one. It summarizes the work in the unit and contains the most creative activities. As a rule, final steps contain no more than two types of activities: continuous simulation and project work. The project work is mostly discussions of the results of project tasks done out of class. For instance, if the project task was to develop the logo of students' imaginary firm, the logos developed by different teams would be presented to the whole class. Those logos are discussed and evaluated with the aim of choosing the best one.

Continuous simulation makes up the greater part of the Final Step in a unit. It may be organized as different meetings for discussing and making decisions on some issues. It can be, for example, the 'Board meeting' of the students' imaginary firm held to discuss the sales results in the current year and sales targets for the coming year. It can be a meeting devoted to listening to and discussing the report of the "Vice-President for Marketing" on the latest promotion campaign, etc. Continuous simulation in every final step is linked to project work. For instance, the above mentioned discussion of the company's logo would be organized as a meeting of the Marketing Department. In a greater part of the course continuous simulation involves presentations done by students, and those presentations are followed by discussions. Presentations themselves are the result of project work which, in turn, was done on the basis of previous discussions in the preceding episodes of continuous simulation.

The description of the coursebook given above illustrates characteristics of the method such as the use of continuous simulation, project work, and the integrated-skills approach. The other three characteristics are also fully embodied in the coursebook. First of all there is learners' autonomy. Both the nature of tasks and assignments (see above) and the recommendations given to the teacher in the Teacher's Book ensure autonomy. They also ensure cooperative learning because almost all those tasks and assignments are designed to be done in pairs or small groups. Finally, the coursebook introduces fictitious settings because a lot of materials in it (e.g., printed and audio texts) are connected to an imaginary, fictitious country called Bacardia with its imaginary, fictitious economy and businesses. In organizing the continuous simulation and project work at the very start of using the coursebook, the teacher is also instructed to encourage her or his students to locate the firm they are setting up in an imaginary country - for instance, in Bacardia.

One of the most characteristic features of the coursebook (and the course that can be organized on its basis) is that it is not explicitly focused on language forms; it is focused on content and using the content matter in communication, and it is in such communication that the language itself (BE) is acquired.

Since the coursebook is the practical embodiment of the method dis-

cussed in this article, the required verification of the method's practical effectiveness in a pilot study meant trying out the coursebook in teaching practice.

### Testing the Coursebook in Teaching Practice

The objective of the pilot study of the coursebook was to find out whether it really worked better than the existing BE coursebooks published in the countries of the former USSR. It was also important to know how it compared to typical Western coursebooks on Business English.

#### *Organization of the Pilot Study and Selection of Students*

The study was organized in the 2001-2002 academic year with the second year students of the Department of Economics and Finance at Dnipropetrovsk University of Economics and Law. Classes of English there are held three times a week with two hours for every class. Three groups of students were involved. One group of 15 students, henceforth Group A, worked with the coursebook *Business Project* (Tarnopolsky et al. 2002) during the academic year. For a group of eight students, Group B, work during the same period was organized using a typical and methodologically up-to-date, Western coursebook of Business English - *Insights into Business* by Michael Lannon, Graham Tullis, and Tonya Trappe (1996). For Group C, again with eight students, a typical Russian coursebook *English for a Businessman* by O. I. Antonov (Informpechat 1991) was employed. It should be noted that the last coursebook mentioned was the most traditional and even obsolete in its concept, design, and structure, with the greatest attention paid to learning activities focused on language forms and the least concentration on purely communicative activities. This approach is quite characteristic of the BE coursebooks published in the countries of the former USSR.

The three groups were taught by three different teachers of equally high qualifications, each painstakingly following all the requirements of the method embodied in the coursebook that they were using. No changes or deviations from what was recommended in the coursebooks and teacher's books were allowed.

One of the reasons for choosing the two coursebooks for groups B and C, which were to be compared with group A, was the fact that their content matter and language material was similar to those of the *Business Projects* coursebook. Since all the three coursebooks were worked on during exactly the same period (one academic year, six hours of classes per week), the teaching/learning process was consistent in all the three groups: similar themes of units, similar content matter and language material to be learned, the same time of study. Students were approximately the same age (18-20 years of age with nobody younger or older.)

A similar male/female ratio in different groups was maintained as well: 9 females, 6 males in group A, 5 females, 3 males in group B, and 5 females, 3 males in group C (60% females, 40% males in group A, 62.5% females, 37.5% males in groups B and C). Finally, students in three groups had similar initial levels (intermediate) in their command of General English. This level was determined using a pre-test of their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

In the pre-test, the same testing procedure and criteria were used as for testing during and after the course of studies (see the detailed description below.) The principal difference was in the themes of what the students were reading about, listening to, speaking, and writing about (General English, not Business English). For instance, they were asked to speak about their hobbies and interests, write about their future life plans, read a text about environment protection, and listen to a short interview with a British actress.

The mean pre-test scores for every group (in percentage of correct test task completion) are given in Table 1. It can be seen from the table that the mean test scores for all the groups were very close. This suggests that the students (as separate groups) were at a similar initial level in their command of General English. Before entering the university, all the students learned English at their secondary schools only, within the framework of a standard (Ukrainian) secondary school program of English studies, in a six-year course. They knew no other foreign languages, though all of them were bilingual (Ukrainian and Russian).

Therefore, since the pre-test scores, language backgrounds, age and gender ratios were consistent among the three groups, the groups could be considered equal for the practical purposes of a small pilot study. It therefore seemed reasonable to ascribe differences in learning outcomes to the different coursebooks.

*Organization of Testing Procedure*

Testing was divided into three stages. Every stage covered the work done in four consecutive units of the 12-unit *Business Projects* coursebook (one third of the course) and ended with a testing session in all three groups. The progress in the development of students' speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills was tested during every testing session. The division into three stages with tests at the end of every stage permitted observation of the dynamics of that development. Since the tests at every stage were absolutely identical in all the groups, they could reveal the difference in skills development - those differences that depended on the coursebooks and methods used in different groups.

Before describing the testing materials and procedure, it should be said that we made every attempt to create tests which were not biased towards any group or the coursebook used in it. The coursebooks for

groups B and C, were specifically selected because they covered the same or similar themes and the same or similar language material as in group A. Therefore, the degree of test difficulty for students of different groups depended on the method embodied in each particular coursebook, not on its content matter.

**Table 1**  
**Mean Test Scores**

Mean Test Scores <sup>a</sup>	Speaking	Writing	Listening	Reading
Group A	70.5%	65.0%	57.8%	82.1%
Group B	70.0%	63.6%	59.0%	82.5%
Group C	69.3%	66.0%	56.7%	81.0%

<sup>a</sup>In percentage of correct test task completion

In every testing session a speaking test was administered first. Every student had to talk to two independent assessors. He or she had to talk for several minutes (without any preparation) on one suggested topic and then to answer four questions. The topics were within the range of the themes and content matter studied by students of all the groups during each third of the course time after which the test was administered. For instance, the following topics for speaking were used in the first speaking test: If you were to organize your own business, what form of business would you choose and why? If you had to employ a top executive for your company, what personal qualities would you look for and why? What can you say about the management hierarchy in a typical company? If you are applying for a job in a big company, what papers should you submit? How would you try to interest your perspective employers when completing them? What questions should you get ready to answer during a job interview? What departments do most companies have and what are their functions? The questions that followed students' presentations were aimed at clarifying some points in them or could touch upon other topics.

Two independent assessors evaluated every student's speaking using the criterion approach (Cohen 1994). Seven criteria were employed: (a) relevance to the suggested topic and questions asked, content of what was said, (b) fluency, (c) comparative linguistic accuracy (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) (d) logical coherence and cohesion of what was said (e) variety of grammar and vocabulary used by the student when speaking, (f) volume of speaking (not less than 12 sentences



had to be pronounced in the presentation to score top points), and (g) correct aural comprehension of questions asked. A student could score up to 10 points according to every criterion so that the maximum score was 70.

The same criterion approach was used in the writing test. Students were given 30 minutes to write a 180-200-word essay on a suggested topic. For instance, the topic in the third and last, writing test was "What do you know about the types of banks and their different services?" The two independent assessors when reading every students' essay, evaluated it using the following criteria: (a) relevance to the suggested topic, content of what was written in the essay, (b) adequacy of the essay's format and style, (c) linguistic accuracy (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling), (d) logical coherence and cohesion of what was written, (e) variety of grammar and vocabulary used by the student in her/his essay, and (f) volume (not less than 180 words for the student to score top points). A student could score up to 10 points according to every criterion so that the maximum score was 60. Both in the speaking test and in the writing test, the points given by each assessor according to every criterion were added up and divided by two. In this way the final score of every student for every test was calculated (Underhill 1987).

It should be mentioned that the same independent assessors graded all three groups with no replacements allowed because it would have immediately made the assessment results unreliable. Another point that should be mentioned is the fact that the assessors preferred to negotiate their grades between them before final grading, though they were in no way encouraged to do so. That is why their evaluations agreed to a point in most cases. The differences appeared only in disagreements, but those happened very rarely, and the difference practically never exceeded two points (There were only three cases of three points difference and one case of four points difference.)

In the three listening tests, students listened to three five-minute tape-recorded conversations on business matters. The tapescript of the conversation listened to in the first listening test is given as an example in Appendix C (see Sample 1).

After listening, learners had to answer ten comprehension questions in writing: The comprehension questions used in listening test 1 are also given in Appendix C as an example (see Sample 2). Every correct answer gained the student one point, so that the maximum possible score was 10 points.

Finally, in the reading tests the students were given ten minutes to read authentic original texts of about 800-1,000 words each from the area of business and economics. The text used in reading test 2 is given as an example in Appendix C (see Sample 3).

The text was taken away from the students after they finished reading, and they were requested to answer ten comprehension questions in writing. Examples of comprehension questions used in reading test 2 can be

found in Appendix C (see Sample 4). Just as in the listening tests, every correct answer gained the student one point, so that the maximum possible score was 10 points.

## Test Results and Discussion

### Test Results

The results of testing after every stage are shown in Figure 1 (showing the means for every group).

The data in Figure 1 demonstrate that the students from group A performed much better in all the tests and during all three testing sessions than the students from the two other groups. Though this demonstration is the result of a limited pilot study, it gives sufficient grounds for some preliminary conclusions.

Better performance in testing suggests that the students from Group A manifested higher levels in their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. This suggests the advantages of the method introduced and the coursebook *Business Projects* over the more traditional methods and the two other coursebooks embodying them - at least, for the given students and in the given conditions of learning.

This conclusion particularly concerns the group with which a typical BE coursebook published in Russia was used because the results in that group (C) were so much poorer than in Group A (see Table 2). This suggests that the method employed is considerably more effective than the traditional method of teaching Business English which is based on focusing on learning language forms. But if the results of Groups A and B are compared, the comparison also demonstrates greater effectiveness of the method used in Group A. This signifies that the suggested method performed better in the classroom than even the up-to-date method used in a typical Western BE coursebook.

What was said above becomes especially visible when making the intra-group and inter-group comparisons of results from test to test, i.e., from lower to higher stages of learning. Those comparisons can show the dynamics of students' skills development in speaking, writing, listening, reading. The comparative data given in Figure 1 demonstrate that the gap in testing results between group A, on the one hand, and groups B and C, on the other hand, did not become narrower in the course of students' progressing from one stage of learning to another one. The students from groups B and C did not approach the level of group A.

It should also be noted that every following test was naturally more difficult than the preceding one. That was due to the increasing level of language and content difficulty of materials used in each test. That level almost doubled with every test in succession - in full accordance with the level of tasks and teaching materials used at the stage of learning pre-