

BUSINESS ENGLISH IDIOMS VS. BUSINESS TERMS

FRAZEOLOGIZMY V OBCHODNEJ ANGLIČTINE VS. ODBORNÁ TERMINOLÓGIA

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Abstract

The globalisation tendency and increasingly growing e-business have stressed the need for English as the universal language of business communication worldwide. Business English is especially related to international trade. When one is involved in international business he/she often communicates with native speakers and continuously encounters business terms and idioms. Native speakers often use idioms in business communication because they do not modify their vocabulary to help their business partner. Non-native speakers must master business terms and idioms in order not to be at a disadvantage. The main aim of the paper is to focus on business vocabulary, to develop a keen awareness of style – formality vs. informality and the cultural context of language use.

Keywords: *business term, idiom, style, communication*

Abstrakt

Tendencia globalizácie a vzrastajúci elektronický obchod kladie dôraz na nevyhnutnosť angličtiny ako univerzálneho jazyka v obchodnej komunikácii na celom svete. Obchodná angličtina súvisí najmä s medzinárodným obchodom. Keď sa niekto angažuje v medzinárodnom obchode, často komunikuje s rodenými hovoriacimi a neustále naráža na odbornú terminológiu a idiomatické výrazy. Rodení hovoriaci často používajú idiomy v obchodnej komunikácii, pretože nemenia svoju slovnú zásobu, aby pomohli svojim obchodným partnerom. Nerodení hovoriaci si musia osvojiť obchodnú terminológiu a idiomy, aby neboli znevýhodnení. Hlavným cieľom tohto príspevku je zamerať sa obchodnú slovnú zásobu a rozvíjať intenzívne povedomie o formálnom a neformálnom štýle a kultúrnom kontexte používania jazyka.

Kľúčové slová: *odborný termín, idiomatický výraz, štýl, komunikácia*

Introduction

Due to globalisation, Business English courses are offered by many universities all over the world. Generally, the first-year student of the University of Economics in Bratislava has to enrol in three Business English courses, if he/she studied English as a first foreign language in secondary school. *Market Leader Upper Intermediate Business English Course Book* (Cotton, Falvey, Kent, 2011) is intended for use by the student preparing for a career in business. The book was developed in association with the *Financial Times*, one of the world's leading sources of professional information, to ensure maximum range and authenticity of international business content (Mascull, 2011). Apart from business terms, the book presents a large number of idioms.

In the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995) a *term* is described as a word or expression that has a particular meaning, especially in technical or scientific subject. The language studied in a Business English course often means a high technical content, with frequent use of common business terms. In order to function effectively in business communication, one needs to acquire business terms, their synonyms or antonyms (often idiomatic ones), words associated with business terms as well as idioms. An *idiom* is a combination of two or more words whose structure is firmly fixed and whose meaning is

difficult to determine. According to Fernando (1996), ideational idioms „*convey impressionistic representations of aspects of the physical, social, and emotional worlds of a language community*“ (2, 1996, p. 252). They contribute to the subject matter and enable the language user to talk about the world in an impressionistic way and in imagist, metaphorical terms. Typically, they are realized by units smaller than the clause, i.e. *nominals, verbals, adjectivals adverbials, and clauses* themselves.

The paper is part of the Project KEGA entitled *Idioms in Business Communication* which is subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The main aim of the project is to examine current phraseology in the realms of economics, diplomacy and law. The project is focused on developing reading literacy and social skills, namely communication, using a self-help book, the Internet, online journals, magazines and newspapers as well as Moodle – a free and open-source learning management system.

Acquiring business terms

Verbal and non-verbal communication is very important not only in privacy but also in professional life. „*Communication can be understood as the practice of producing meanings, and the ways in which systems of meaning are negotiated by participants in a culture*“ (3, 2000, p. 1). Communication is vital to organisations. It fulfils three main functions, i. e. transmitting information, coordinating effort as well as sharing emotions and feelings. Effective communication helps interlocutors grasp issues, build rapport with co-workers and achieve consensus.

To be able to function effectively internationally, i.e. without hesitations and mistakes, one needs to do a course in Business English. Donna (2000) states that Business English has much in common with General English as a Foreign Language, but in many ways is very different since the goals of a course may be radically different from those of a General English course. Teaching Business English involves teaching English to adults preparing to work in the field of business. The businesses could be large multinationals, small private companies or even state-run concerns involved with providing products and services. The purpose of a Business English course is to fulfil students' work-related needs. These are usually specific and cover a wide range of language. If students have part-time jobs with multinational corporations, their prime will probably be to be able to use the phone, report to foreign managers, reply to or write faxes and e-mail messages, read periodicals on their subject area and perform other tasks associated with the workplace. If students do business with companies abroad, their main need might be to survive on business trips, communicate on the phone or by fax and negotiate contracts. Students who work in an industry whose language is English will need to be able to digest large quantities of reading matter in English; they may also need to be able to give presentations or discuss their work in English.

The English language has a rich vocabulary based on a mixture of Latin, French, Germanic and Scandinavian languages with a seasoning of words from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Taylor (2006) suggests tips that will help one on the way to building a basic business vocabulary. With the right words, students can make excellent presentations in English, chair meetings, negotiate, write clearly, and deal with difficult telephone calls.

Market Leader Upper Intermediate Business English Course Book (Cotton, Falvey, Kent, 2011) includes twelve units within which students develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Essential business vocabulary is presented and practised through a wide variety of exercises. Students learn new words, phrases and collocations and are given tasks which help to activate the vocabulary they already know or have just learnt.

Although *Ideational Idioms in Business English Communication* (Hrdličková, 2016) presents the same units, students do not only acquire idioms but also widen knowledge from these topics: 1 Communication: Communication process, Forms of communication and Communication in business settings, 2 International marketing: Global environment and

Expanding internationally, 3 Building relationships: Business-to-business relationships and Companies and company governance, 4 Success: Successful people, Successful products, Successful companies and Successful countries, 5 Job satisfaction: The Hierarchy-of-Needs Theory, The Two Factor Theory, Theory X, Theory y, and Theory Z; 6 Risk: Types of risk and Risk transfer, 7 Management styles: Different types of managers, Behavioural approaches to leadership and A contemporary approach to leadership, 8 Team building: Different types of teams, The Tuckman's Model of Group, The Team Performance Model, 9 Raising finance: A business plan, Getting the money, Looking for private investors, Going public, and Financing the ongoing company, 10 Customer service: Customer satisfaction strategy, Complaint management strategy, Customer complaint handling process, Loyalty management, Customer relationship management and digital technology, 11 Crisis management: Plans for contingencies and crises, Damaging company's reputation, and A reputation recovery process, and finally 12 Mergers and acquisitions: Legal forms of ownership, and Mergers and acquisitions.

Acquiring idioms

Sinclair (1987) identifies two principles at work in the language: a) the *open-choice principle*, which works on the assumption that language users have a relatively free choice in composing phrases and sentences where words are concerned, constrained only by grammaticality, and b) the *idiom principle*, which works on the assumption that language users have available to them a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices. Idioms have the potential of appearing anywhere and everywhere, and are marked as occurring in mature written or spoken discourse. The abundance of such expressions in English makes the recognition of the idiom principle, strongly realized in idioms, weakly in collocations, very useful as an explanation of the way an important part of vocabulary works (Fernando, 1996).

Experienced teachers of English have long recognized the importance of the idiom in introducing colour and adding grace and precision to speech and writing. Those who study English as a foreign language do not find it easy to use idiomatic expressions fluently. And if they steer clear of idiomatic usage, their speech and writing tend to become formal and stilted (Whitford, Dixon, 1953).

For better or worse, American workplace is full of idioms. American English idioms come from many different sources. The business-focused idioms often originate from military speak and from the world of sports. This provides some insight into the way Americans think about business, like war and sports (Gillett, 2010). However, in the language of business, idioms and metaphors are also frequently used with reference to the domains of race, battle, gambling, time, journey and many others, for instance:

- a) „I don't know the exact price, but \$500 is a good ballpark figure“ (1, 2011, p. 146).
- b) „Everything needs to be finished by Friday, so we're in a race against time“ (4, 2002, p. 29).
- c) „She's up in arms about the lack of safety procedures“ (1, 2011, p. 146).
- d) „They're paying over the odds for the site, but it's a prime location“ (1, 2011, p. 146).
- e) „There's no prospect of promotion. I'm in a dead-end job“ (4, 2002, p. 19).

Students who do a course in Business English often want to know how idioms they have just learnt are actually used. To meet this situation the author offers a self-help book *Ideational Idioms in Business English Communication* (Hrdličková, 2016) for the independent user (B2) – the proficient user (C2) which covers idiomatic usage of the British, American and Australian language. The corpus of 319 idiomatic phrases and constructions of the mentioned language is here included.

The spread of idioms dealt with here is considerable. The most common patterns are:

- a) traditional idioms (e.g. *get the picture, tie the knot*),
- b) idiomatic compounds (e.g. *a glass ceiling, the smart money, hard and fast*),
- c) prepositional idioms (e.g. *at the end of the day, from scratch*),
- d) comparisons (e.g. *be like talking to a brick wall*),
- e) exclamations and sayings (e.g. *You must be joking!, Practice makes perfect.*), and
- f) clichés (e.g. *a golden handshake, when the going gets tough, the tough get going*).

The book can be used with *Market Leader Upper Intermediate Business English Course Book* as it contains the same units. It is divided into twelve chapters; each of them is composed of three sections: a) an introductory text explaining basic business terms, b) texts from book or online sources demonstrating the current use of idioms in Business English contexts, and c) examples of current British, American and Australian idioms from six Business English course books.

No effort has been spared to make the book as practical as possible. Thus, particular stress has been given to the explanation of the meaning and use of idioms in a following way: a) an idiom in an immediate context; b) lexical meaning of an idiom and its origin, where appropriate, to help understanding; c) a systemic equivalent, and d) a core and near synonym. The book also contains a set of exercises with a key where the learner can test himself/herself how much knowledge they have gained. Finally, particular attention is also given to the lexical meanings and systemic equivalents of idioms from introductory (academic) and popular texts.

Research methodology

The main goal of the research is to list Business English idioms the students participating in the Project KEGA will have to acquire. *Ideational Idioms in Business English Communication* (Hrdličková, 2016) presents the corpus of 319 idioms. However, this research shows the corpus of 359 idioms as the new idioms have still been added since the book was published. The investigated material for idioms comprises: *Market Leader Upper Intermediate Business English Course Book* (Cotton, Falvey, Kent, 2011), *Market Leader Upper Intermediate Business English Practice File* (Rogers, 2011), *Market Leader Intermediate Business English Course Book* (Cotton, Falvey, Kent, 2005), *First Insights into Business* (Robbins, 2004), *English for Business Studies* (MacKenzie, 2010), and *Business Result Upper Intermediate Student's Book* (Duckworth, Turner, 2008).

For the research, Fernando's (1996) classification of idioms has been chosen. On the basis of the above presented information, both quantitative and qualitative analyses will be carried out. The aim of the quantitative analysis will be to establish the frequency of occurrence of ideational idioms. Subsequently, the qualitative analysis will identify frequently used phrase patterns, clause patterns and clauses themselves.

Research findings and discussion

In order to identify idioms, these idiomatic dictionaries were used: *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (Cowie, Mackin, McCaig, 1993), *English Idioms in Use Advanced* (McCarthy, O'Dell, 2002), *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (CUP, 2006), and *Prekladový Anglicko-slovenský frazeologický slovník* (Kvetko, 2014).

The following tables show the structural variety of ideational idioms presented in *Ideational Idioms in Business English Communication* (Hrdličková, 2016).

Table 1 Nominals

| Nominals in Business English course books | Total: 45 |
|---|-----------|
| a ballpark figure, a buzz word, the carrot and stick, a cat and mouse game, cold cash, common sense, a course of action, a dead end, deep pockets, doom and gloom, easy money, esprit de corps, a fall from grace, a fat cat, a feather in <i>one's</i> cap, fringe benefits, | |

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| give and take, a golden handshake, the golden rule, hard cash, the hard sell, hustle and bustle (+ of), a high-flyer, the last straw, a level playing field, the lion's share (+ of), a lucky break, no hard and fast rules, the nouveau riche, the nuts and bolts, the other side of the coin, peace and quiet, the pros and cons (+ of), a quick fix, a rat race, red tape, a rip-off, a running battle (+ with), a loan shark, small talk, a spin doctor, a sticking point, (the) team spirit, a tête à tête, a turning point |
| Nominals in academic and popular texts Total: 28 |
| a battle cry, a big gun, the big picture, the bottom line, a bright spark, a call to arms, a change for the better, a clean slate, common ground, common sense, a course of action, the end of the world, an ice-breaker; lock, stock, and barrel; the movers and shakers, the new kid on the block, part and parcel of <i>sth</i> , a pipe dream, a play on words, the pros and cons (+ of), a quick fix, a quid pro quo, the rank and file, the rose-tinted glasses, seed money, a shining example, small talk, the status quo |

Table 2 Adjectivals

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| Adjectivals in Business English course books Total: 13 |
| bread-and-butter, cutting-edge, eye-catching, face-to-face, fast-track, hands-on, hard and fast, laissez-faire, soft-sell, state-of-the-art, tailor-made (+ for), top-of-the-range, tried-and-trusted |
| Adjectivals in academic and popular texts Total: 18 |
| bottom-line, crystal clear, day-to-day, down-to-earth, face-to-face, fly-by-night, half-hearted, hands-on, long-term, in question, laissez-faire, one-to-one, a priori, roller-coaster, short-term, spur-of-the-moment, tit-for-tat, word-of-mouth |

Table 3 Adverbials

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| Adverbials in Business English course books Total: 34 |
| all the same, as a matter of fact, at cross purposes, at all costs, at length, at long last, back and forth, big time, by and large, by trial and error, by word of mouth, (the) chances are (that), face to face, for one reason or another, for the sake of <i>sth</i> , from time to time, a great deal (+ of <i>sth</i>), in black and white, in excess of <i>sth</i> , in the long run, in the long term, in the wake of <i>sth</i> , no matter what, off the top of <i>one's</i> head, on no account, on the one hand ... on the other hand, on <i>one's</i> own, round the clock, straight from the horse's mouth, to the letter, to no avail, under <i>one's</i> breath, under <i>one's</i> nose, with a view to doing <i>sth</i> |
| Adverbials in academic and popular texts Total: 20 |
| and so forth, and so on, at the end of the day, at <i>one's</i> fingertips, at large, down the road, first and foremost, for the sake of <i>sth</i> , a great deal (+ of <i>sth</i>), here and now, in other words, in <i>one's</i> own backyard, in <i>one's</i> own right, in vain, on the other hand, on top of <i>sth</i> , once upon a time, per capita, to name a few, whether <i>one</i> likes it or not |

Table 4 Verbals

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| Verbals in Business English course books Total: 132 |
| air <i>one's</i> views, be a dab hand, be all talk (and no action), be at a loss for words, not be the end of the world, be half the battle (won), be in the black, be in the doldrums, be in the know, be in the red, be like talking to a brick wall, be on the ball, be on the blink, be on the line, be on the same wavelength, be on the warpath, be out for blood, be out of line (+ with <i>sth</i>), be out of the picture, be out of the question, be plain sailing, be thin on the ground, be touch-and-go (+ whether), be up in arms (+ about), be up to <i>sth</i> , bear |

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|---|------------------|
| fruit, bear the brunt of <i>sth</i> , bear <i>sth</i> in mind, beat about the bush, break bread with <i>one</i> , bring out the best in <i>one</i> , can't make head or tail of <i>sth</i> , change <i>one's</i> mind, come to mind, come up trumps, cook up a storm, count the cost, do battle (+ with <i>one</i> about <i>sth</i>), draw the line, drop a hint, the end justifies the means, fall short of <i>sth</i> , fight a losing battle, find <i>one's</i> feet, get down to business, get hold of, get a kick out of <i>sth</i> , get on <i>one's</i> nerves, get on top of <i>one</i> , get the picture, get straight to the point, get there, get to the bottom of <i>sth</i> , get to grips with <i>sth</i> , get the wrong end of the stick, give <i>one</i> a buzz, give <i>one</i> carte blanche, give <i>one</i> the low-down, not give <i>sth</i> a second thought, go bust, go the distance, go the extra mile, go head to head (+ with), go over <i>one's</i> head, go sour, have a finger in every pie, have a say, have an open mind (+ about), have <i>sth</i> in mind, have <i>sth</i> on <i>one's</i> hands, have <i>sth</i> on <i>one's</i> mind, have second thoughts (+ about), have (got)/with a will of <i>one's</i> own, hear <i>sth</i> on the grapevine (+ that), hedge <i>one's</i> bets, it makes no odds, keep an eye on <i>one</i> , keep an open mind, keep <i>one</i> at arm's length, keep in touch (+ with), keep/have <i>one's</i> ear to the ground, keep <i>one's</i> head down, keep <i>one</i> in the loop, keep <i>sth</i> in mind, keep <i>one</i> posted, keep <i>one</i> up to date, keep track of <i>sth</i> , keep <i>oneself</i> to <i>oneself</i> , kiss goodbye to <i>sth</i> , know a thing or two (+ about), know <i>sth</i> inside out, learn <i>one's</i> lesson, lose face, lose sight of <i>sth</i> , make the best use of <i>sth</i> , make a go of <i>sth</i> , make a point of, make <i>one's</i> fortune, make <i>one's</i> mark, make <i>one's</i> point, make up <i>one's</i> mind, move the goalposts, the odds are stacked against <i>one</i> , pass the buck, pave the way for <i>sth</i> , pay lip service to <i>sth</i> , pay over the odds, play a practical joke, play <i>one's</i> cards right, pull <i>one's</i> weight, put it in a nutshell, put <i>one's</i> cards on the table, put <i>one</i> back on track, put <i>one</i> in the picture, put <i>sth</i> on hold, put <i>oneself</i> into <i>one's</i> shoes, slip <i>one's</i> mind, speak <i>one's</i> mind, spring to mind, stand on <i>one's</i> own feet, stick to <i>one's</i> guns, take a back seat (+ to <i>sth</i>), take <i>one's</i> point, take their toll, talk business, think outside the box, throw good money after bad, tie the knot, tread on <i>one's</i> toes, turn the page, when the going gets tough, wine and dine <i>one</i> | |
| Verbals in academic and popular texts | Total: 45 |
| be at odds, be in a tight spot, be on the line, bear fruit, call the shots, the chances are, come in all shapes and sizes, come <i>one's</i> way, come to mind, fall foul of <i>sth</i> , fall short (of <i>sth</i>), fly in the face of <i>sth</i> , get <i>sth</i> off the ground, get <i>sth</i> right, get there, get <i>sth</i> wrong, go overboard, gum up the works, <i>one's</i> hands are tied, keep <i>one's</i> eye on the balls, keep <i>sth</i> under wraps, keep <i>one</i> up to date, lay eyes on <i>one</i> , learn the hard way, make it <i>one's</i> business to do <i>sth</i> , make a move, make a point of, make a quick buck, move the goalposts, paint a clear/rosy picture of <i>sth</i> , play games, pop the question, rub elbows with <i>one</i> , run the gamut from <i>sth</i> , run the risk (of <i>sth</i>), second-guess <i>one</i> , sink or swim, stack the deck, start from scratch, turn the tables on <i>one</i> , take risks, take steps (to do <i>sth</i>), take <i>sth</i> with a grain of salt, throw <i>one</i> in at the deep end, wreak havoc | |

Table 5 Clauses

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| Clauses in Business English course books | Total: 16 |
| Beggars can't be choosers., Better luck next time!, The customer is always right., Don't put all your eggs in one basket., Good heavens!, He who pays the piper calls the tune., I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine., It's a small world., Lend your money and lose a friend., Money is (no) object., Money talks., Practice makes perfect., Prevention is better than cure., Time will tell., When in Rome, do as the Romans do., You must be joking! | |
| Clauses in academic and popular texts | Total: 8 |
| The customer is always right., Don't put all your eggs in one basket., From the frying pan into the fire., The grass is not always greener., Look before you leap., Practice makes perfect., There is no room for doubt., When in Rome, do as the Romans do. | |

Table 6 Overall results

| Type of idiom | Idioms in Business English course books | Idioms in academic and popular texts |
|---------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Nominal | 45 | 28 |
| Adjectival | 13 | 18 |
| Adverbial | 34 | 20 |
| Verbal | 132 | 45 |
| Clause | 16 | 8 |
| Total | 240 | 119 |

From the tables, it can be seen that some idioms occur in academic as well as popular texts. Naturally, it was done on purpose because the aim was to prove that idioms occurring in the Business English course books are frequently used in texts of both formal and informal styles.

Conclusion

University students have to distinguish, at least, between academic and journalistic styles and their genres. Everyday language is not appropriate in academic writing or speaking contexts. Users of English should switch between different ways of speaking and writing and choose the right words depending on whether the context is formal or informal.

The intention at all times has been to make the book a working manual and a self-help book for advanced students of British English. Compiled from a wide range of text sources, it allows students participating in the Project KEGA as well as teachers rapid access to clear, straightforward definitions of the latest international business terminology and business idioms. Acquiring formal and informal business vocabulary would give them more confidence and make them more effective in international business situations. It is hoped that it will serve well all those who need to be able to talk about these topics fluently and will want to improve their Business English communication skills.

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Use this list of business jargon to learn the most common English idioms heard in the workplace. But while most English courses focus on fundamental grammar and vocabulary, very few account for the jargon an expat could hear in the workplace. Here are the 50 most common American English idioms you might stumble upon, and how to use them:

1. Cut corners Meaning: to do something the easiest or quickest way How to use it: "Cutting corners on case studies will result in careless errors."
2. It's not rocket science Meaning: something is not complicated to understand How to use it: "Just look up the answer online; it's not rocket science."

Business Expressions and Idioms for Making Decisions | Business Idioms Image 1

Come to Terms With (Something): Feel acceptance toward something bad that has happened. Draw a Line in the Sand: Issue an ultimatum; specify an absolute limit in a conflict. Drive a Hard Bargain: To negotiate effectively. Drive a Wedge Between: Try to split factions of a united group by introducing an issue on which they disagree. Give and Take: Negotiations, the process of compromise. Stand One's Ground: Refuse to back down; insist on one's position. Sweeten the Deal: Add something to an offer during a negotiation. Our best compilation of business English idioms and phrases to become more fluent and confident in the workplace. Check them out!

Discovering new English idioms and expressions can be a lot of fun. It can also be frustrating, especially when you hear them for the first time in a setting where you want to make the best impression. Most idioms and expressions you'll come across in office environments are throwaway lines that are not industry specific.