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50 Ways To Improve Your Business English by Ken Taylor

Reviewed by Bill Reed

This is a cheerful self-help book of advice, cartoons, quotations, anecdotes and checklists, and as long as the reader has an adequate grasp of the language it justifies its strapline: '... without too much effort!'

While it assumes that its users already have English as a second language, I think it is also suitable for intermediate-and-upwards learners who still consider English as a foreign language. It is useful to any business English trainer asked to recommend 'further work'. Some of the advice would be helpful to native-speaker business people of any nationality who deal with foreigners.

Here are some sample tips from the Introduction, with which I agree: 'Communicate in an English that can be understood by both Mr. Smith and Mr. Yamamoto.' 'Speak at the speed you want to be spoken to.' 'Don't worry about your accent. It may be noticeable. That's fine as long as it does not interfere with understanding.' 'Aim to build up an active vocabulary of about four thousand words.' 'Keep it short and simple.'

In classic management development style, the book identifies ten key areas for improvement: networking and socialising; telephoning; negotiations; presentations; emails; meetings; reading business texts; listening; business vocabulary; grammar. A quick 20-question self-assessment (importance v. performance) allows readers to identify areas to focus on. Each unit ends with a 'further learning' section of book and website recommendations.

This book gives real-world substance to the 'functional language' which conventional EFL courses treat with detachment. 'Say 'hello' properly.' 'Prepare your call.' 'Use silence.' 'Use the agenda.' 'Open with impact.' 'Be a good listener.' 'Control the conversation.' 'Be proactive.' 'Start with open questions.' 'Seize the initiative and set the level of formality you prefer.' 'Make active small talk.' 'Look for hot buttons.' 'Build up a relationship that is not purely based on the business. In some cultures this is imperative.' 'Three key areas: what we say, how we say it, and how we act.' This breezy why-don't-you-do-it-now style uses active verbs to flag up real issues, and provides an excellent starting point for personal development, and for discussion in a group context. Throughout the book, short exercises encourage the reader to 'have a go'.

As long as readers can cope with conversational English, they will find the content informative and well-judged. For example, in *Presentations*, Taylor avoids the sanitised idealism of some business English courses:

Remember that people ask questions for a variety of reasons, and not only as a genuine request for further information. Often they want to impress the rest of the audience, or their boss, with their own knowledge of your subject. Or they want to test you to see if they can knock you off balance. So what can you do if someone asks you a question and you are not sure what they mean? Or you are not sure of the answer? (p. 46)

The section on *Meetings* deals first with the quality of the agenda, and gives some tips for the Chair. Key words relate to formal meetings, for example an AGM; tactics are suggested to make yourself heard; to summarise; and to 'create a safety net' which allows international teams to work well together.

The *Telephoning* chapter emphasises the need for preparation and good-quality interventions ('be proactive, empathise, use the caller's name, smile') (p. 17); it gives some tactics for dealing with speakers whom you find difficult to understand.

In *Negotiations* there is a good section on questions, with a scale from 'soft issues' to 'hard issues'.

E-mails are a regular task for many people who do not otherwise use English in their work. Advice here includes: 'write with impact; main ideas first; know your readers; be reader-friendly; make the e-mail visually attractive (plenty of white space); use active sentences, make the subject clear; know the conventions' (pp. 58-60).

I lent the book over the weekend to an intermediate-level German, around B2 on the Common European Framework scale, aged about 50, preparing for a new job in international sales. 'Important business subjects, like telephoning, expressed in just a few lines, very compact, good advice, with some humour,' he said. He liked the clear layout. He told me he had spent about two hours reading it, and he was reluctant to give it back: 'How much is it? I want to buy it!'

I was interested to know whether the western-style 'just do it' advice would seem attractive to a Japanese course participant, so I lent it to a thirty-something, on his way up the career ladder, who had completed the first month of a posting to his multinational company's office in London, and was still adapting to life outside Japan. He was B1 to B2 on the CEF scale. He thought it was 'suitable' for his level, but that anyone at a lower level would find it difficult, confirming my view that this book can confidently be recommended to many learners of business English who do not - yet - see English as their second language.

50 Ways does not claim to be a complete self-study course in English for business. Performance improvement in any of the areas covered by the book will require management and evaluation by a trainer. But any learners seriously intent on improving their own abilities beyond an intermediate level should find this book entertaining, challenging, and rewarding.

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