

TEACHING BUSINESS TELEPHONING SKILLS IN ENGLISH: THE SYSTEM OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. *The article analyzes the system of learning activities developed by the authors for teaching business telephoning in English to university students of economic specialties. The suggested system of learning activities consists of two subsystems (for teaching speaking and listening in telephone communication) and two levels of activities: preparatory ones and principal ones. Practical examples of learning activities from both subsystems and both levels are given in the paper.*

Key words: *business telephoning in English, economic higher schools, the system of learning activities, preparatory learning activities, principal learning activities*

1. INTRODUCTION

Practically all works in the area of Business English teaching (Donna, 2000; Ellis & Johnson, 1996; Frendo, 2005) emphasize the necessity of preparing students for business telephoning in English. Telephoning skills are considered to be vital not only for businesspeople but for every newcomer to an English-speaking country and those skills are supposed to be taught as survival ones even at the early stages of language acquisition (Hajer, Kaskens, & Stasiak, 2005). This is why in the USA and the UK teaching business telephoning is paid great attention to (cf., for instance, the works by Glass, 2003; Guffey, 1994; Lowe, 2004). However, in Ukraine, as well as in many other post-Communist countries, there is an obvious lack of research and practical developments in the field of methods of teaching such communication in courses of Business English – methods that would be adapted to the specific conditions of Ukrainian higher schools of economic profile. It is because of this situation that our research was directed at developing all the theoretical and practical aspects of relevant teaching approaches. *The goal of this article* is the analysis and discussion of the system of learning activities developed by us for teaching business telephoning in English (BTE) to future economists studying at Ukrainian higher schools.

We understand *the system of learning activities* as a systematized collection of those activities which are used (while taking into account the processes of developing skills in speaking and listening) in such a sequence and in such sufficient numbers that could ensure a high level of future economists' ability and readiness to communicate over the telephone with representatives of English-speaking *speech communities* (Hymes, 1986).

The developed system of learning activities is supposed to be directed at overcoming the psychological and cultural difficulties and aimed at students' mastering a range of

stereotyped language means specific for genuine communicative acts and for cultural parameters of communicative behavior that is characteristic of English-speaking cultures in the process of business telephoning.

2. THE PRINCIPLES OF DEVELOPING LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING BUSINESS IN ENGLISH AND THE STRUCTURE OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES' SYSTEM

Developing the system of learning activities for teaching BTE, we used three principles as the basis for such development: *the principle of teaching BTE by way of modeling communicative situations; the principle of teaching BTE through role plays and simulations; and the principle of speaking priority.*

The principle of teaching BTE by way of modeling communicative situations ensures practical implementation of speaker and listener's business telephoning communicative competence components: the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic ones (Council of Europe, 2001; Tarnopolsky, 2012). In the system of activities developed by us, this principle is implemented through modeling typical communicative situations of business telephoning in English which makes a basis for developing speech competence in speaking and listening. The modeled communicative situations, which imitate as closely as possible genuine acts of business telephoning in English, serve for acquiring in the teaching/learning process the authentic speech samples of business telephoning and its business inventory.

The next principle influencing the design of learning activities' system is *the principle of teaching BTE through role plays and simulations*. According to the name of the principle, it shows the main way of organizing learning through practical implementation of modeled communicative situations. In this case, the practical use of the imitational, role, and playing components in the system of activities developed by us is connected with the opportunity of properly selecting speech (communicative) situations for doing both *preparatory* and *principal* learning activities that together constitute their entire system. In *preparatory* activities, thanks to their role-playing organization, speech samples and terminology are trained, grammar structures characteristic of business telephoning in English are acquired, and the attentions of communicators (the speaker and the listener) become focused. In *principal* activities the role-playing component becomes sufficiently creative for learners, thereby ensuring the high level of activities' sophistication in what concerns their language and content matter. The creative nature of activities requires students' greater independence or, at least, autonomy in doing their learning tasks. For attaining that, participants in role-playing or simulation-type communication prepare themselves in advance for the telephoning situations to be role played/simulated; they note down the required information in special forms, and select speech samples and equivalents of language means taking into account intercultural differences.

No less important is the fact that, when doing principal learning activities, future specialists prognosticate the content of telephone conversations and act in them as professional communicators, plan joint business activities, produce their own dialogues with a sufficient degree of spontaneity. After staging/role-playing such partially prepared dialogues in the classroom, the results can be discussed in what concerns the communication's successes and failures and the assessment of students' participation in role plays/simulations. Important is the fact that in role plays/simulations during the principal stage of teaching BTE students' attention is focused not on the language forms of utterances but on attaining some professionally oriented communicative goals.

The principle of *speaking priority* complements the two principles discussed above. This principle derives from the mostly productive character of business telephoning. That is why the dominant task of learning activities is developing learners' *productive* English communicative competence. *Receptive skills* (listening) are developed on the basis of production (speaking).

In general, the created system of learning activities can be shown as a scheme (Fig.1).

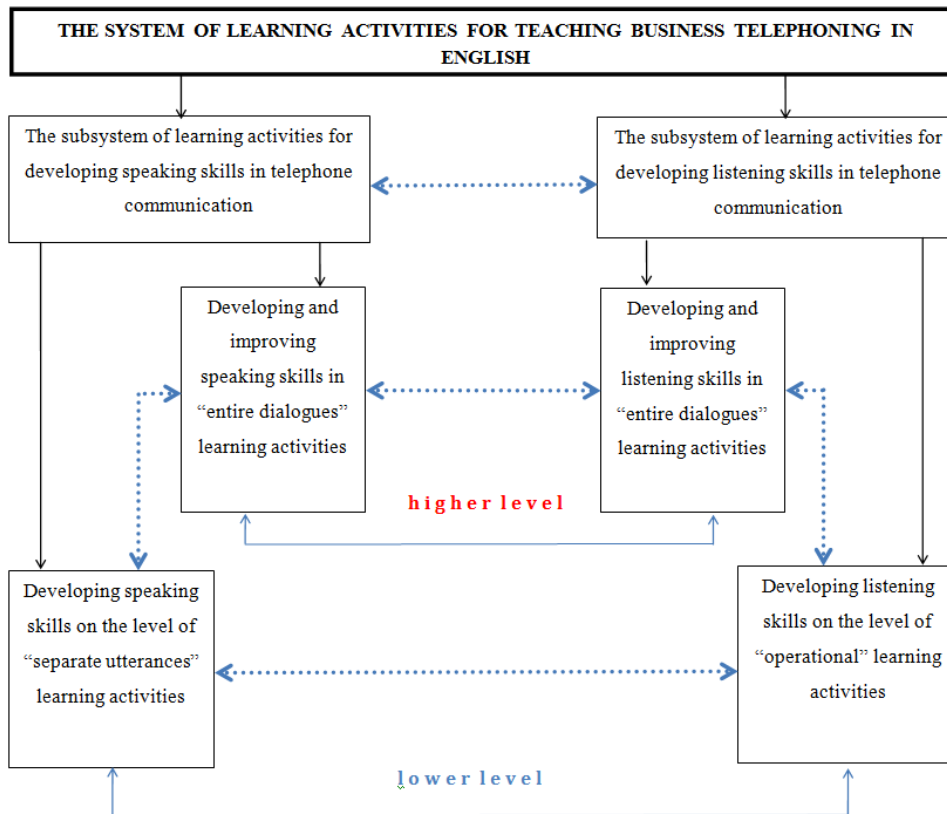


Fig. 1 The system of learning activities for teaching BTE to future economists

The learning activities that refer to the lower scheme's level belong to the *preparatory ones* and are designed for the beginning stage of teaching/learning. The learning activities that refer to the higher scheme's level belong to the *principal ones* and are designed for the advanced (principal) stage of teaching/learning.

The scheme also shows that the system of learning activities elaborated by us is divided into two subsystems: the subsystem of activities for developing speaking skills required for successful telephone communication and the subsystem of activities for developing listening skills required for successful telephone communication. Each of the two subsystems consists of activities of the lower and higher levels. In this way, the *subsystem of activities for developing speaking skills required for successful telephone communication* is divided into *activities for developing those skills on the level of*

separate utterances (preparatory activities) and activities for developing and improving speaking skills on the level of entire dialogues (principal activities). The goal of lower level learning activities is forming such separate skills as establishing a business telephone contact personally or through a secretary, leaving a message on the answer machine, using separate relevant utterances for explaining the reason for the call, reacting quickly to the interlocutor's utterance by using standard language forms for specifying the information received, rephrasing it, confirming the information, etc. Such preparatory learning activities are the dominant ones at the beginning stage of teaching business telephoning (gaining command of the basic speech functions for telephoning), but they can partially be used at the advanced (principal) stage as well for mastering some other functions of dialogic speaking over the telephone.

The goal of using higher level learning activities (*the principal ones for developing and improving speaking skills on the level of entire dialogues*) is integrated training of different and interconnected communicative functions that are involved in telephone conversations with various and often unexpected situations modeled in them. If the activities on the level of separate utterances represent elementary exchanges of information between communicators, in higher level learning activities the attention is focused on discussing information, noting it down for further discussion, etc., i.e., on solving professional issues. Thus, learning activities on the level of separate utterances used at the beginning (preparatory) stage get gradually transformed into role plays/simulations that dominate at the advanced (principal) stage of teaching/learning.

The subsystem of learning activities for developing listening skills required for successful telephone communication is implemented on the level of *preparatory (operational) learning activities* (the lower level) and the *learning activities developing and improving listening skills in entire dialogues* (the higher level).

Preparatory (or operational) learning activities are aimed at forming basic and elementary *listening skills*; they develop the operational aspect of listening as a communicative activity. They help to eliminate pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar difficulties; develop the skills of listening to speech at normal (average) rate, that speech displaying the use of a certain number of telephoning clichés, set phrases, and listening supports. Such learning activities for training language and speech materials are organized on the basis of synthesized dialogues, thus combining this subsystem with the subsystem of learning activities for teaching dialogic speaking, as it is shown in Fig. 1. The goal of preparatory learning activities in the subsystem under discussion is developing the skills of automatically understanding clichéd language means and authentic speech samples when listening in the conditions in which learners have obtained communicative motives, specially created for the purpose. This is why such activities are distinguished by the level of content and language difficulty which is not high, and the content and language material used in them is limited and very carefully selected.

The goal of *principal learning activities, or the activities for developing and improving listening skills in entire dialogues*, is forming listening skills for detailed comprehension of entire telephone talks with taking notes of the information heard. In this case, authentic recorded dialogues make a substantial part of learning materials, so as to ensure professional (business) orientation of developing learners' listening competence. The main characteristic feature of activities for developing and improving listening skills in entire dialogues is organizing listening for subsequent students' activities – their own speaking. That's why the fundamental difference of such learning activities from the operational

ones is that the former activities serve for doing certain actions on the basis of what has been heard.

In what concerns other characteristics of both subsystems of learning activities for teaching BTE, those activities that have been developed by us can be classified according to their *communicativeness level, the degree of control, the orientation of an activity towards reception, reproduction, or production of information, the method of organization, and the necessity of providing different supports*. Such characteristics give an opportunity of distinguishing certain learning activities in the process of teaching business telephoning in English depending on the stages of teaching/learning and on activities' belonging to one of the levels in each of the two activities' subsystems.

For instance, activities for teaching dialogic speaking on the level of separate utterances are mostly partially communicative (because the form and content of speaking are pre-set by instructions, speech samples are limited, fragments of communication, but not its total process, are reproduced, activities have drilling properties); and those ones play the leading role at this stage of teaching/learning. Activities for teaching/learning on the level of entire dialogues (the higher level) can also be partially communicative when the content and form of speaking are prompted by the structure of the talk (e.g., the beginnings or endings of utterances, sentence elements), key stereotyped phrases recommended for use, etc. However, the leading learning activities on this higher level are the communicative ones since they mostly develop skills for communication in entire dialogues (and not in dialogue fragments). *Non-communicative (language-oriented) learning activities* cannot be used at all on both, higher and lower, levels of this subsystem since, unlike teaching language aspects, they are of little use for teaching dialogic communication.

A characteristic feature of lower level activities (the preparatory ones) is mostly using two levels of controlling students' activities/actions (depending on the activity's goal and the stage of teaching/learning): *total or partial control*. Learning activities with *minimal control* characterize the higher level (principal learning activities), though here total or partial control is also possible.

Learning activities aimed at developing listening skills are mostly reception-oriented while those aimed at speaking skills' development are primarily oriented towards reproduction or production, though most often both the activities for teaching listening and for teaching speaking are mixed: receptive-reproductive or receptive-productive.

In what concerns their method of organization, listening activities are individual while speaking is always done in pairs only (like in a natural telephone conversation).

Finally, the lower the level of a learning activity, the more supports students receive for successfully completing it.

The generalized and mostly theoretical description of the developed system of learning activities given above makes it necessary to illustrate such a description with practical examples of activities themselves.

3. EXAMPLES OF THE DEVELOPED LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING BUSINESS TELEPHONING IN ENGLISH

The three examples below demonstrate activities for developing BTE speaking skills on the level of separate utterances (preparatory activities):

Example 1. Many companies have their own guidelines for how employees should answer the phone. For example, an employee may answer the phone by giving just his/her first name, his/her first and last names, or the name of the department or company he or she works for. It often depends on the workplace culture and the size of the company. Here are some examples of typical workplace greetings:

- *Cooper Accounting Services. How can I help you?*
- *Good morning. Economy Movers.*
- *Human Resources. Michael Best speaking.*
- *Hello, Benefits Department.*

With a partner, discuss possible greetings for each of the following situations.

1. *You are an assistant accountant in a large corporation (Billings and Sons Inc.). You do not receive calls from outside clients.*
2. *You are the receptionist at your LINC centre. You receive calls from outside callers requesting information.*
3. *You are responsible for taking orders in a small manufacturing company (Tops Manufacturing). You take calls from customers all day.*
4. *You do the payroll for a small printing company (Major Press). Usually you receive just calls about payroll issues from staff.*
5. *You work in the appliance department of a large department store (Zee's Department Store). You receive calls from other staff at the store as well as customers enquiring about the availability of certain appliances.*

Example 2. Match each greeting with a situation. Then, discuss in pairs in what situations you would not need to identify yourself when making a phone call. Explain why.

Table 1

1. <i>Hi. It's Joan.</i>	<i>a. You say this in when the person you're calling does not know you and you need to introduce yourself.</i>
2. <i>Joan Andrews speaking.</i>	<i>b. You may say this when answering the phone at work.</i>
3. <i>My name is Joan Andrews and I'm calling from ABC company.</i>	<i>c. You say this when answering the phone at work.</i>
4. <i>You have reached Joan Andrews.</i>	<i>d. You say this in a phone call to request information.</i>
5. <i>This is Joan Andrews. We spoke last week at the conference.</i>	<i>e. You say this on your voice mail greeting.</i>
6. <i>Here is Joan Wallis.</i>	<i>f. You say this when the person you're calling knows you very well. It's informal.</i>
7. <i>Hello. I wonder if you could tell me if you have any quarter-inch plywood in stock?</i>	<i>g. You say this in a phone call or in a voice mail message when the person you are calling knows you well enough.</i>
8. <i>Sudsy Carpet Cleaning. How may I help you?</i>	<i>h. We don't use this form on the phone.</i>

Example 3. Identify what you would say to the operator in these situations.

- *You have no change or phone card and you must phone home urgently.*
- *You have tried a number several times and you always get a 'number unobtainable' tone.*
- *You have got through to the wrong number. You need to find the right number.*
- *Your line suffers frequently from interference from other calls.*
- *You would like to know what you dial to reach a subscriber in China.*

All the three activities, like many others of the same type, are partially communicative and receptive-reproductive. They are performed in pairs (therefore, implementing a kind of role playing), with either total or partial control (depending on the learning situation) and contain a number of supports helping students to complete the activities successfully.

The following examples show the principal activities for developing and improving BTE speaking skills on the level of entire dialogues:

Example 4. A partially communicative receptive-reproductive activity performed as a role play in pairs with total control and with a number of supports for students.

Student A:

You want to speak to Mrs. Braun about your account with her company, W&W. If Mrs. Braun isn't in the office, leave the following information:

- *Your name, telephone number: 347-8910 (or use your own).*
- *The reason for your call: changing conditions of your contract with W&W.*
- *You can be reached until 5 o'clock at the above number. If Mrs. Braun calls after 5 o'clock, she should call 458-2416.*

Tips for student A: *Can I speak to..? Could you put me through.., please? The reason I'm calling is...*

Student B:

You are a receptionist at W&W. Student A would like to speak to Mrs. Braun, but she is out of the office. Take a message and make sure you get the following information:

- *Name and telephone number - ask student A to spell her/his surname.*
- *The message student A would like to leave for Mrs. Braun.*
- *How late Mrs. Braun can call student A at the given telephone number.*

Tips for student B: *Sorry, she is not available at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?*

Example 5. A communicative receptive-productive activity performed as a role play in pairs with minimal control and minimal number of supports for students.

Role-play the following telephone calls with your partner and update your calendar below.

Student A:

Your partner will call you to make an appointment for three situations. Answer the phone with an appropriate professional greeting. Then role-play the following:

1. *Take a call from a salesperson who wants to show you his/her new product line. You are available on Monday afternoon, Wednesday morning or any time on Friday.*
2. *You are a receptionist in a family doctor's office. The doctor's first available appointment is on Wednesday at 2:15 p.m. She is also available on Thursday at 9:30 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. and Friday at 3:15 p.m.*
3. *You work at the front desk in a local gym. You can schedule a tour for the client on Monday afternoon, Tuesday any time or Wednesday morning.*

Table 2

<i>Mon. June 8</i>	<i>Tues. June 9</i>	<i>Wed. June 10</i>	<i>Thurs. June 11</i>	<i>Fri. June 12</i>
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Student B.

1. *You are a salesperson. Call and make an appointment with a client to show her/him your new product line.*
2. *Make an appointment with your doctor for your annual check-up.*
3. *You have an appointment to get a tour of a local gym during your lunch hour on Friday. However, your supervisor has asked to meet you. Reschedule your appointment.*

Table 3

	<i>Mon. June 8</i>	<i>Tues. June 9</i>	<i>Wed. June 10</i>	<i>Thurs. June 11</i>	<i>Fri. June 12</i>
<i>Morning</i>	<i>Out on sales calls 9a.m.-12 p.m.</i>			<i>Out on sales calls 9a.m.-5 p.m.</i>	<i>Tour of gym 12.30 p.m.</i>
<i>afternoon</i>	<i>PowerPoint seminar 1-4 p.m.</i>		<i>Marketing meeting 1-3 p.m.</i>		

Example 5. An activity with the same characteristics as the one above.

Work in pairs to make and receive the following calls:

Student A.

You are a General Manager of Horner Chemicals in Montreal, Canada. Your boss is away on holiday, he has left you a list of calls to make, and also a few which you might expect to receive.

1. *Phone Barbara Shell and confirm the participation of your company in the 'Children's Health Project' for Monday, September 5th.*
2. *Phone Mr. Whitford and cancel an appointment on Tuesday, September 6th. Try to reschedule for Wednesday morning (the 7th).*
3. *Receive a call from Margaret Roberts at an advertising agency, concerning a new brochure. Just take a message and tell her that your boss will call back when he returns next week.*

Student B

1. *You work in Barbara Shell's office. She is out of the office. Take a message from Student A, concerning participation in your current project.*
2. *You work for Whitford Company. Mr. Whitford isn't available at the moment. You are not able to make new appointments. Take a detailed message and say you will call back with a new date.*
3. *You work in the creative design department of the advertising agency Margaret & Nancy Roberts. Phone Horner Chemicals to approve the lay-out of a new brochure.*

The three learning activities given as examples below belong to the subsystem of preparatory (operational) learning activities for developing BTE listening skills. They are all partially communicative and either receptive (the first one), receptive-reproductive

(the second one), or receptive-productive. They are performed only individually, with either total or partial control (depending on the learning situation) and contain a number of supports for students to complete them successfully.

Example 7. Listen to the part of a telephone conversation between Tommy Rayne and Barbara Wean. Decide if the following statements are true or false.

Tommy Rayne phoned Sunshine Restaurant to postpone the meeting. T/F

Barbara Wean has been double-booked, because her assistant was confused by the appointments written in her diary. T/F

It wasn't a problem for Barbara to reschedule the meeting for Tuesday at 10am. T/F

Barbara Wean will take her list of proposals to the meeting. T/F

Example 8. Listen to someone leaving a telephone message and complete the outline with the appropriate information:

Table 4

Date:	Time:
Caller (name, company, position):	
Message for:	
Reason for call:	
Action needed:	
Action to be done by:	Will call again
	Will call again
	Urgent
Other:	
Taken by:	

Example 9. Listen to the tape and decide what you would say in response to the following remarks. Record your best responses and be ready to present them to the group.

1. *This is Mr. Brown speaking. I would like to make an appointment with your Sales Manager.*
2. *I'm afraid I'll be tied up tomorrow. Could you suggest another date?*
3. *There's something I'd like to talk to you about. When can we meet?*
4. *Sorry, I've got something scheduled then. Could we arrange something else?*
5. *This is Mr. Hollette's secretary. I'm calling to confirm your appointment with Mr. Hollette for tomorrow at 11am.*
6. *I'm calling to let you know that Mr. Brown will not be able to keep the appointment. He is away from Prague and won't be back until after Wednesday. We are sorry about this.*

The following examples represent principal learning activities for developing and improving BTE listening skills in entire dialogues.

Example 10. A communicative receptive-productive activity performed individually as a role play in which a CD-player is the student's "interlocutor." The control is minimal and a number of supports for students are provided. The activity requires detailed understanding of what was heard.

You work in an office with Bill, Kevin and Nancy. Look at the 'Time out' sheet below, which shows where your colleagues will be during the day.

Listen to the callers who want to speak to your colleagues and respond in the given pauses. The first call is at 11:30am and the second call is at 3:00pm.

Table 5

<i>TIME OUT</i>		<i>Wednesday 5 August</i>	
	<i>Bill</i>	<i>Kevin</i>	<i>Nancy</i>
<i>9-10</i>	<i>may be in late today – has to take car to the garage.</i>		<i>Visiting STOWE, for advertising information. Should be back @ 10:45.</i>
<i>10-11</i>	<i>sales meeting (part 1)</i>	<i>working at home, tel. 567334</i>	<i>will be in warehouse</i>
<i>12-13</i>	<i>lunch</i>		
<i>13-14</i>	<i>sales meeting</i>	<i>afternoon off – do not disturb</i>	<i>lunch</i>

Example 11. A communicative receptive-productive activity performed individually (the first part) and in pairs (the second part). The control is minimal and no specific supports are provided for students.

1. Listen to the first part of the telephone conversation “Faulty goods” between Roger and Flora, try to predict the end of the conversation due to the current companies’ problems. Listen to the second part of the conversation and check whether your guesses were correct. If not explain to the class what was wrong in them.
2. Discuss in small groups what sort of problems you can have when speaking with an angry customer on the line.

The examples given above sufficiently fully represent the entire developed system of learning activities and the specific features of activities from different subsystems and levels in it.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching business telephoning in English at Ukrainian higher schools should be based on the idea that acquiring English telephoning skills requires specific students’ training following specific teaching/learning approaches. One such approach developed by us was embodied in the system of learning activities for teaching English business telephoning to university students of economic specialties. The suggested system of learning activities consisted of two subsystems (for teaching speaking and listening in telephone communication) and two levels of activities: preparatory ones and principal ones.

The developed system was experimentally tested during 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 academic years at Kremenchuk Institute of Alfred Nobel University in courses of Business English taught to 115 students of the second year of studies majoring in Economics and Business. The experimental training convincingly proved that the elaborated system of learning activities was highly efficient for developing learners’ Business English telephoning skills, thus contributing to the solution of the previously unsolved problem of teaching such skills at Ukrainian tertiary schools.

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