

Results

For

“Survey on Teaching Business English”

by
Dave Volek, B.Sc.
Inventor
Dave Volek's Business English (DVBE)
www.dvbe.bz

Preamble

In May 2010, I conducted a survey of business English teachers about their attitude towards the DVBE program. The respondents came from two sources.

The first source is an email list of business English teachers who have downloaded some of the free DVBE material over the past two years. This group numbered about 400 and 12 of this group responded.

The second source is the BESIG (Business English Special Interest Group) newsgroup. This group has about 900 members and 12 responded to the survey.

The survey was designed as a multiple choice questionnaire. Occasionally some participants added their comments.

Some respondents were not happy with a single choice and selected two or three answers. In these cases, I awarded ½ point for each dual answer and 1/3 point for triple answer.

The questions and possible choice are in italic fonts. The results are red font. My comments are in regular font.

Geographical Location

1. What country do you teach business English or regular English?

Respondents came from all parts of the globe: Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Chile, China, Czech Republic, Ecuador, France, Germany, Mexico, Portugal, Philippines, Spain (2), Sri

Lanka, Switzerland (2), Thailand, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom (2), Uruguay, & Vietnam. I was quite pleased with this widespread representation on such a small sample.

Although I didn't ask, I estimate about 1/3 of the respondents were native English speakers and 2/3 were non-native speakers.

English Teaching Experience

2. *How many years have been teaching English?*

Average: 19

Standard Deviation: 10

3. *How many years have you been teaching business English?*

Average: 11

Standard Deviation: 9

4. *How many years have been teaching technical English or other forms of ESP?*

Average: 9

Standard Deviation: 8

The survey was able to generate interest from many seasoned professionals. Only one beginner (two years or less) answered the survey.

Preferred Business English Material

5. *Which statement best describes the material you bring into your BE classroom?*

- a) *I don't teach much business English.*
- b) *I prefer the course book approach from well known publishers like Longman or Berlitz.*
- c) *I gather BE lessons from several different publishers, trying to align the material to the needs of the learners. I spend a lot of time photocopying.*
- d) *I / my school / my company have developed custom-built BE material just for internal use.*
- e) *I teach business courses in English.*

Results: a) 4%, b) 10%, c) 52%, d) 28%, e) 6%

To me, the most significant response is the low number for (e). Maybe these teachers do not consider themselves as business English trainers.

Math Abilities and Attitudes

6. Which statement best reflects your mathematical abilities?

- a) *I didn't do very well in high school math.*
- b) *I did OK in high school math.*
- c) *I have taken some math at the university level.*
- d) *I have taken some basic business math courses, such as accounting, finance, or business analysis.*

Results: a) 17%, b) 42%, c) 8%, d) 33%

I asked this question to determine if the business math inherent with the DVBE program is a hindrance for BE teachers. To competently teach DVBE, the instructor should have done reasonably well with high school math and be willing to learn some basic business calculations, lessons which are supplied with the instructor's manuals of each module.

If this survey is indicative of BE instructors, then the math of DVBE should not be an issue for the BE profession.

7. Take a look at the paragraph below:

Charlie has \$100. Fred has \$25 more than Charlie. Charlie increased his money by 20%. Fred increased his money by two percentage points less than Charlie. How much money does Fred have now?

Which statement best reflects how you feel about putting these kinds of problems into a business English classroom?

- a) *I think many learners would like to learn how to translate English into simple math calculations. Doing these kinds of questions would make good conversation as learners compare their calculations.*
- b) *I would not know how to do this kind of calculation, so there is no way I would put this kind of problem into my classroom.*
- c) *This paragraph requires a sophisticated business analysis. Only a few BE learners could actually do this question.*
- d) *It is better for learners to acquire whatever language skills are necessary to do this calculation outside the classroom.*
- e) *Most BE learners at the intermediate English levels already have enough English skills to do this calculation. So there is no point in putting such an activity in a business English classroom.*

For those of you tried this calculation, the correct answer is \$147.50. Did you see how these few words shaped three additions, one subtraction, one multiplication, and one division to get the right answer?

Results: a) 44%, b) 4%, c) 4%, d) 4%, e) 44%

Here we find the profession split. I side with the (a) respondents because I believe numbers English has special vocabulary and grammar that should be taught in the classroom. But this issue could easily be resolved by putting DVBE into a classroom and see how learners respond to doing business calculations in the classroom.

Extra Work for the Teacher

8. Let's assume that some of your current learners request you to facilitate the two free DVBE modules for them, which give you about four hours of classroom activities. You will also need about four hours to prepare for this seminar. You will be charging your regular hourly rate for the classroom time, but not for the extra prep time. What would be your response?

- a) I would refuse their request because the extra prep time is not compensated for.*
- b) I would refuse this request because this could lead to the learners wanting the rest of the DVBE program which is going to be even more prep time with no compensation.*
- c) I would refuse this request because this could lead to the learners wanting the rest of the DVBE program which is too expensive to buy.*
- d) I would refuse their request because I don't have the business skills DVBE seems to require from its instructors.*
- e) I would put the two free modules in my classroom as a trial and see how DVBE works.*
- f) If these learners want some DVBE training, there may be more learners like them. And the second time I present DVBE, I won't have to prepare so much.*

Results: a) 0%, b) 0%, c) 0%, d) 4%, e) 52%, f) 44%

This result was rather interesting to me. It seems if the learners ever start pressuring the teachers to use DVBE in the classroom, the teachers will accept these requests. For the past few years, I have been doing some “push marketing” to convince BE learners to convince their teachers to use DVBE. Even though these efforts have not yet worked, it seems I should continue with this approach.

9. Given that DVBE does require extra skills and prep time than other BE programs, what percentage increase in pay do you think would be appropriate to present the DVBE program?

- a) I would refuse to teach DVBE at any rate of pay.
- b) A 25% increase in my current rate would be appropriate.
- c) A 50% increase in my current rate would be appropriate.
- d) A 100% increase in my current rate would be appropriate.
- e) A 200% increase in my current rate would be appropriate.

Results: a) 13%, b) 42%, c) 33%, d) 8%, e) 4%

The respondent from Germany had written that this question is irrelevant because, from his perspective, BE customers have a set limit as to what they pay for BE training. They will not pay more for a more competent instructor with more effective material as opposed to a mediocre instructor with average material. So getting a raise in pay is not going to happen just because a certain BE seminar is more beneficial to the learner.

Reading between the lines of various BE articles over the years, I would have to say this respondent has a reasonable assessment of the pay situation for BE instructors. BE training is regarded as a commodity, and that customers have difficulties differentiating between mediocre and superior quality.

The extra work of DVBE with no increase in pay might be a good reason why BE instructors are not using it. However, in light of Question 8, instructors can be pushed into DVBE at their current rate if it means not losing students in their classroom.

If I were to redo this survey, this question would be rephrased: "If the extra work of DVBE is a hindrance to putting it into your classroom, what would be the increase in pay required for you to change your mind?"

It would be interesting to learn what learners are willing to pay for business training as opposed to BE training.

10. The free DVBE module "Risk & Reward" requires preparation of four sets of props to play a business game. There is a fair bit of organizing them to ensure this game works well in the classroom. What statement best reflects your opinion on using props in a classroom?

- a) If the activity generates great business English conversation, the props would not discourage me from presenting it. I am good at keeping classroom props organized.
- b) Props are too much of a bother to organize. It's too easy to miss or lose one piece, which then means the class cannot do the activity.

Results: a) 83%, b) 17%

The inspiration for this question was an article in BESIG's journal a few years ago. A BE teacher wrote an admonishment to BE publishers for not developing material with fewer props and less prep time. If this person were indicative of the BE profession, then DVBE has no chance of gaining acceptance because DVBE's pedagogical methods are incongruent with minimal props and prep time.

It was good to see that most BE teachers are willing to put in extra effort for their learners if the learners get more value from their classroom time. The extra work required for DVBE should not be hindrance.

11. One of the props for "Risk & Reward" is a ledger that keeps the record of the investments the learners make in this business game. To use this ledger correctly, the numbers must first be placed in the correct row and column. Then the class must apply the appropriate mathematical calculations. What statement best describes your opinion on using a ledger as part of a business English activity?

- a) Using a ledger is an advanced business skill. Only a few BE learners would be able to understand this ledger.*
- b) I don't have much experience with ledgers, and I have no intention of learning this skill. For this reason, "Risk & Reward" will never be part of my BE syllabus.*
- c) Most business English learners would understand how this ledger works. Most intermediate level BE learners already have the necessary language skills to use a ledger properly. So there is no point in giving them this kind of activity.*
- d) There is actually some special language required to communicate ledger information effectively. Risk & Reward might be a very valuable business English practice for my learners.*

Results: a) 15%, b) 21%, c) 21%, d) 44%

The BE profession seemed divided whether to put this kind activity in a classroom. This question could be easily resolved by teachers actually trying out Risk & Reward in their classrooms and seeing how the learners respond.

12. The free DVBE module "The Grocery Store 1" has a 21-page study guide about the vocabulary and grammar for using numbers in English. At best, the mainstream ELT publishers will only cover about five of these pages, so DVBE obviously goes into greater detail into this part of the English language. What statement best describes your opinion about teaching numbers English at this high detail?

- a) *Business and technical English learners should be given vocabulary and grammar lessons to understand how to communicate numbers effectively.*
- b) *There is no need for formal lessons on this topic.*
- c) *There is no need for formal lessons on this topic, but we teachers should be giving business and technical English learners more exposure with working with numbers in the classroom.*

Results: a) 52%, b) 8%, c) 40%

The profession seems split whether to give formal lessons with numbers English or just let exposure to the language provide training. Rather than get into the continual debate of how much grammar we should be formally teaching, the DVBE program is set up to accommodate everyone. The 21-page “Number English” is available for teachers to base formal lessons on numbers grammar. As well, any ambitious learner can download the study guide for free and go through it on his or her own time. And for those teachers and students who don’t like grammar lessons, the DVBE program certainly gives learners lots of informal exposure to this part of the English language—especially in the “Increase & Decrease” classroom and online activities.

Trends in Business English Training

13. In the past decade, more “international business schools” are offering short business courses in the English language, pulling business English learners away from traditional business English training. Which statement best reflects your opinion on this trend?

- a) *I don’t think this trend is happening. Most learners still prefer the traditional methods of business English training, going through the intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced levels.*
- b) *This trend is good for learners because they will get the vocabulary they are looking for plus they get to interact with an instructor who knows something about business.*
- c) *This trend is not good for the learners because the instructors are often not skilled language teachers.*
- d) *This trend is likely to continue. Traditional BE training at the upper intermediate and advanced levels will become less relevant in time.*

Results: a) 13%, b) 40%, c) 10%, d) 37%

I was expecting the responses to be fairly evenly distributed between these four questions. I will now discuss my hypotheses for the actual response of each question.

The low number of “a” responses suggests the trend is well recognized in the BE profession.

The high number of “b” responses is a paradox. On one hand, educators should be proud when their learners move to more advanced training. But when our learners are making their decision to move away from BE training at intermediate and upper intermediate levels, we should be asking ourselves: “What have we done to retain them?” We should be seeing these business schools as possible competitors, not just as the next logical step in the learners’ progress.

The low number of “c” responses could be a subconscious admittance that the BE profession is of less value to BE learners at the higher levels—when compared to the business schools.

The high number of “d” responses suggests both a knowledge of and an acceptance to the demise of BE training. In a couple of decades, regular ELT teachers can bring English learners to the intermediate levels. Then these learners move into the various schools providing course content in English. According to the respondent from Thailand, this trend is what is happening already in her country. When the language skills bring the learners up to a certain proficiency, then the business schools take over the language training, albeit on a more informal basis.

I’m not sure whether this trend is better for the learner or not. But I think the BE profession should be more introspective of its position within this trend. We should be thinking: “What can we do bring those learners back into our classrooms?” Obviously to continue with what we have done in the past is not going to reverse the trend. And maybe the DVBE program—with its untraditional approach—will provide the connection for the BE profession to remain viable.

Use of Simulations

14. One of DVBE’s principles is to put learners into a business simulation for an hour-long conversation practice to resolve some kind of business challenge. Because the DVBE modules are more complicated than usual BE topics, the first part of the class is a learning curve, with the instructor leading the learners through to a common understanding of the challenge. The second part is actually doing the simulation, which generates lots of spontaneous English conversation. What statement below expresses your opinion on using hour-long business simulations in the classroom?

- a) This kind of activity is too long. Classroom activities should be kept to about 20 minutes.*
- b) This kind of activity is unlikely to work well because such topics would be too difficult for some learners.*
- c) English learners want topics they can easily understand so they can focus on language.*
- d) Doing a complementary online listening activity before the classroom activity should reduce the learners’ learning curve, making the simulation less frustrating and more beneficial for the entire class.*

- e) *The learning curve is actually good English practice, with learners asking questions about the simulation they do not initially understand very well.*
- f) *Most business people should enjoy the business challenge and the English conversation practice the simulation provides.*

Results: a) 6%, b) 8%, c) 4%, d) 14%, e) 18%, f) 50%

We can divide these into answers two groups. The first three answers signify a negative reaction to using the more complex business simulations in the classroom. The last three answers are showing interest in the possibility.

It seems like the BE profession has an interest in the DVBE approach.

Pricing of Online BE Material

15. *What statement best describes your opinion on buying BE material online?*

- a) *I only take internet material if it is free. I do not buy English material of any kind from the internet.*
- b) *If I think it's good material, I will risk spending about \$30. If I like the publisher's material, I will buy more products.*
- c) *If I think my learners will really benefit from certain material—and no other publisher seems to be offering similar material, I will spend more than \$30 to acquire it.*

Results: a) 25%, b) 48%, c) 27%

In my browsing through various ELT and BE websites, there seems to a threshold price online publishers can sell their goods (CDs' workbooks, subscriptions) of around \$30 or €30. These publishers have probably found charging more than this threshold reduces sales. In other words, there seems to be a cultural expectation of pricing for online material—without any regard to the quality or value to the learner.

I am selling the DVBE modules for considerably more than this threshold. From the results of this survey, I am losing sales because my prices are too high. But there seems to enough BE instructors willing to look past this cultural threshold price if they can see value and differentiation.

State of the Business English Learner

16. The eight online DVBE listening activities have shown an interesting trend. The more the activity demands from the learners, the learners are less engaged with that activity. In other words, if an activity does not request much work or effort out of the learner, it is relatively popular. If it requires more concentration and analysis, learners leave the activity rather quickly.

What statement below best describes your opinion of this trend?

- a) *The DVBE website must be attracting learners who are at the lower levels of English or not very serious about business.*
- b) *English learners—and even serious BE learners—don't like to be challenged much when visiting English sites on the internet.*
- c) *The more challenging DVBE listening activities are irrelevant to acquiring language skills for international business.*
- d) *Because the DVBE listening activities are so different from traditional listening activities, learners are having difficulty in seeing the benefit or adjusting to this new style of learning.*
- e) *Engagement with the listening activities will improve when combined with the complementary DVBE classroom activities.*

Results: a) 0%, b) 19%, c) 17%, d) 21%, e) 44%

In theory, the online DVBE activities should be sufficient by themselves; they do not need the classroom support to provide a great listening experience. But they are considerably more challenging than most other BE listening activities.

There has been enough exposure to find any elite business English learners who would be able to overcome the challenge of this new approach to online BE listening. According to website statistics, about 1% of visitors spend about an hour or more with the listening activities, which shows some degree of engagement. But I'm not seeing these visitors returning to finish or recommending the activities to friends and colleagues.

The preponderance of (e) answers signifies that BE teachers are also seeing the unique blended learning possibilities inherent with DVBE.

These results are suggesting that relying on the online activities to have the learners “push” the BE teachers into putting DVBE in the classroom is likely not to work. If the learners are not seeing value from the extra effort required from DVBE listening, it is unlikely they would recommend DVBE to their teachers. To turn this around, it seems the classroom activities are essential to getting good value from the listening activities. Maybe this is a good sign of an excellent blended learning activity.

Raising the Standards of Business English Learning

17. DVBE is taking the business English profession in a new direction. What statement best reflects your opinion about that direction?

- a) *Hour-long simulations, numbers English, and complementary online listening activities are not very useful for the learner.*
- b) *Dave Volek is teaching business, not business English.*
- c) *Dave Volek's ideas have merit, but he is pushing the BE profession too fast.*
- d) *I have to admit that I'm quite comfortable with the material I am currently using. I see no need to learn the new skills required for DVBE.*
- e) *If I had some formal training in the DVBE approach, I would consider it more seriously.*
- f) *I will wait until I see other BE teachers taking on the DVBE program before I will consider Dave's approach more seriously.*
- g) *I will wait until my learners or potential learners request the DVBE program.*
- h) *The two free DVBE modules and eight free online activities provide excellent opportunities for the BE profession to investigate Dave's new ideas.*
- i) *Dave Volek is clearly trying to raise the standards of business English learning. He is expecting more from both the teachers and learners. If his ideas are proven correct, we will have much more effective BE training than we have had in the past.*

Results: a) 0%, b) 4%, c) 4%, d) 4%, e) 2%, f) 0%, g) 8%, h) 40%, i) 38%

I was expecting more response for the c), d), e), f), and g) answers. I don't think the preponderance of (h) and (i) responses are indicative of the BE profession's endorsement of the DVBE approach. Instead, I believe the design of the survey is more conducive to open minded BE teachers. BE teachers indifferent or hostile to the DVBE approach would not have completed this survey.

Instead, the (h) and (i) answers are showing the survey found some potential early adopters for the DVBE program.

Conclusion

From a marketing perspective, this survey was a success. DVBE got a little more exposure. I learned a few things about my potential clientele that will help me in the next two years.

But more importantly, the survey has taught a small group of BE instructors that DVBE has value for learners and is worthy of some classroom trials. As these teachers try out DVBE in the next few months, the BE profession is going to learn something very important to its future.

Speaking of the future, I would like to bring Question #13 up again where 37% of respondents chose an answer that predicted a future unfavorable outcome to the BE profession.

But this survey may have been the first time any BE teachers have been presented with this possibility for the BE profession—which is based on the trends that are already happening. I am wondering if BESIG should devise its own survey to get a better handle on where the BE profession is positioned in both language and corporate training. This survey would be useful to me, as well as many other BE professionals.