

# Understanding the Theoretical Strongholds and Future of Business Communication in Management Education Programs

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**Abstract:** Business communication is often perceived as a peripheral subject in MBA programs, limited to etiquette, letter-writing, or presentation skills. This view neglects its theoretical depth and centrality to managerial success. This paper traces the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and explains how English for Business Purposes (EBP) emerged as a vital branch responding to global business needs. Building on Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), it emphasizes the role of Needs Analysis in aligning curricula with learner and workplace demands. The paper discusses key pedagogical approaches like, Communicative Language Teaching, Genre Analysis, Discourse-Pragmatics, Intercultural Communication, and Multimodal Literacy to understand the theoretical framework behind building business communication course. Drawn from the examples of management education pertaining to India, the paper argues for positioning business communication as an integral and core component of MBA curricula.

**Keywords:** Business Communication, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), Needs Analysis, MBA Education, Pedagogical Approaches

## I. Introduction

In the present day management education, business communication occupies a crucial place within MBA curricula. As organizations today operate in an increasingly global and digitally connected environments, the success of managers depends not only on their ability to analyse data or design strategies but also on how effectively they can articulate ideas, negotiate solutions, and inspire confidence. Recognizing these demands, most business schools have incorporated communication courses early in their programs. However, these courses are sometimes approached narrowly, with the focus placed on surface-level skills such as drafting professional emails, preparing resumes, delivering basic presentations or equipping students to face placement interviews. While such skills are deeply valuable, they only capture a fraction of what business communication entails. At its core, the discipline equips future managers with the capacity to connect knowledge with practice—enabling them to influence decisions, build relationships, and lead organizations through language and interaction.

The realities of the corporate world underscore the strategic value of communication. Employers consistently identify it as one of the most important competencies for managerial effectiveness, often ranking it above technical

expertise (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Robles, 2012). A manager may be technically skilled, but with poor communication skills, the manager may find it difficult to make an impact. Be it addressing the team, convincing stakeholders, run effective meetings, or handle cross-cultural negotiations, poor communication skills can impede managerial effectiveness. Beyond the basic that is, exchanging of information, communication in an organization serves as a means of identifying expertise, fostering trust, and achieving goals in addition to supporting managerial action. Given these functionalities, it is essential to situate business communication beyond its limited peripheral understanding of a manual-based course teaching students do's and don'ts. Rather, it should be associated with its broader academic lineage.

Far from being a peripheral or auxiliary subject, business communication as a course is grounded in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which emerged in the mid-twentieth century in response to global professional demands as exponentially mentioned by Hutchinson & Waters (1987). Within this tradition of ESP, English for Business Purposes (EBP) developed as a distinct branch, reflecting the rise of English as the lingua franca of commerce and international management (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Nickerson, 2005). Both ESP and EBP highlight the role of Needs Analysis in ensuring that courses align with the actual communicative tasks learners face in their professional environments. Over the time, with extensive research conducted in the field of business communication, many path-breaking theoretical approaches ranging from Communicative Language Teaching to Genre Analysis, Pragmatics to Intercultural Communication, and Multimodal Literacy have begun to significantly shape the business communication pedagogy thus by making it academically rich.

This present paper attempts to trace the historical emergence of ESP, then examines the rise of EBP and the centrality of Needs Analysis in business communication course. It further proceeds to explore the major theoretical approaches that underpin the teaching and learning of business communication courses in the management programs of India. The paper towards to end draws an outline of the future scope of business communication courses and positions it as a core competency paper within MBA program.

## **II. The Emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**

To understand the place of business communication in management education, it is important first to examine its roots in the broader field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, shaped by a combination of social, economic, and linguistic forces that redefined how language education was conceptualized. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) observed, ESP was not simply a product of educational innovation but a direct response to global developments in trade, technology, and higher education.

One of the most significant drivers of ESP was the increasing dominance of English as the international language of science, commerce, and diplomacy in the post-war period (Strevens, 1988). Engineers, doctors, and business professionals around the world required English not to appreciate literature or poetry but to perform concrete tasks: reading technical manuals, writing research articles, negotiating contracts, or managing international projects. General English courses, with their emphasis on broad grammatical structures or cultural content, no longer sufficed. Learners wanted and needed English tailored to their professional realities.

At the same time, linguistics as a discipline was undergoing a shift. Earlier models of language teaching had focused heavily on grammar and translation, but new approaches emphasized discourse and register analysis, revealing how language varied across fields and contexts (Swales, 1990). Equally important was the growing recognition of the learner's role. Traditional language education was largely teacher-centered, with a fixed syllabus applied to all students. ESP shifted the focus to learners' goals, experiences, and professional contexts. Munby's (1978) model of communicative syllabus design formalized this shift by proposing detailed procedures for analyzing learners' communicative needs and designing curricula accordingly. This development established Needs Analysis as the cornerstone of ESP pedagogy, a principle that continues to guide English for Business Purposes.

The global spread of English as well as consolidation of ESP as a goal-oriented, relevant, and responsive to professional demands course, ESP went on to represent a broader transformation in language education: a recognition that communication is effective only when it is aligned with the real-life purposes of its users. This foundation would later provide the platform for English for Business Purposes to emerge as one of the most significant and widely applied branches of ESP.

### **III. English for Business Purposes (EBP)**

Building on the foundations of ESP, English for Business Purposes (EBP) emerged as one of its most prominent and rapidly expanding branches. As global commerce intensified in the late twentieth century, business became an arena where English was not just useful but indispensable. Multinational corporations, international trade agreements, and the spread of cross-border financial institutions all reinforced English as the lingua franca of business communication (Nickerson, 2005). Within this context, EBP developed to meet the specific communicative demands of the business world.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) described ESP in terms of absolute and variable characteristics. According to them, ESP, and by extension EBP, is defined absolutely by its focus on learners' needs, its attention to specific discourse communities, and its emphasis on language relevant to particular domains. At the same time, it is variable in the sense that the degree of specialization, methodology, and overlap with general English can differ depending on learners' contexts. This flexibility made EBP adaptable to diverse business environments, from corporate boardrooms to entrepreneurial start-ups.

The communicative practices emphasized in EBP extend far beyond grammatical accuracy or professional etiquette. They include writing business reports and proposals, drafting concise and persuasive emails, conducting negotiations, delivering formal and informal presentations, and participating effectively in meetings and conferences (Charles, 2007). Each of these activities requires an awareness of both linguistic form and pragmatic function, knowing not only what to say but also how to say it in a way that achieves desired outcomes.

The growing prominence of EBP can also be linked to the increasing complexity of global workplaces. Research supports the view of EBP as central to professional success. Louhiala-Salminen (2002), in their study of business managers' daily routines, observed that communication occupies a majority of their working time, often

overshadowing purely technical tasks. Likewise, surveys of employers consistently highlight communication competence as critical for employability and career advancement (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Such findings confirm that business communication is not peripheral but central to managerial performance.

In management education, the rise of EBP highlights an important shift: communication is no longer seen merely as a support skill but as a strategic resource. MBA graduates are expected not only to possess domain expertise but also to demonstrate the ability to translate that expertise into persuasive arguments, clear documentation, and effective collaboration. EBP, therefore, represents a crucial link between academic preparation and professional practice, ensuring that managers are not only knowledgeable but also influential communicators in the global business arena.

#### **IV. Needs Analysis: The Cornerstone of ESP and EBP**

A defining feature that distinguishes English for Specific Purposes from general English teaching is its emphasis on Needs Analysis. From its early formulations in the 1970s, ESP scholars argued that language courses should be designed not around abstract grammatical sequences but around the actual communicative demands faced by learners in their professional or academic environments. This principle has become especially central in English for Business Purposes, where communication tasks are highly context-specific and closely tied to workplace success.

The roots of Needs Analysis can be traced to Munby's (1978) influential *Communicative Syllabus Design*, which offered a systematic framework for identifying the target communicative needs of learners and mapping them onto curriculum design. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) further advanced the idea by distinguishing between three interrelated dimensions: Target Situation Analysis (TSA), which identifies what learners will need to do in the language; Present Situation Analysis (PSA), which examines what they can already do; and Learning Needs Analysis (LNA), which considers how learners can most effectively acquire the required skills. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) later refined these models, emphasizing the iterative nature of Needs Analysis and its role throughout course design, material development, and assessment.

The importance of Needs Analysis approach becomes even clearer when considering the employability agenda in management education. Employers often express concern that graduates are technically competent but struggle with practical communication (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Needs-based course design directly addresses this gap by aligning classroom instruction with workplace expectations. For example, if industry feedback suggests that graduates struggle with email etiquette in cross-border correspondence, instructors can incorporate tasks that simulate international email exchanges, focusing on tone, conciseness, and intercultural appropriateness.

Needs Analysis also has the advantage of motivating learners. When MBA students see direct connections between classroom tasks and the demands of recruitment or the workplace, they are more likely to engage actively with the subject. Instead of perceiving business communication as peripheral, they come to view it as immediately relevant to their career trajectories. In this way, Needs Analysis transforms business communication from a

generic skill-based course into a dynamic, learner-centered discipline that bridges education and professional practice.

#### **V. Theoretical Approaches to Business Communication Pedagogy**

While Needs Analysis provides the foundation for course design, the teaching and learning of business communication draws on several complementary theoretical approaches. These frameworks not only offer academic legitimacy but also shape practical methods of instruction, ensuring that courses are dynamic, interactive, and responsive to workplace realities. Among the most influential are Communicative Language Teaching, Genre Analysis, Discourse and Pragmatic approaches, Intercultural Communication, and Multimodal Literacy. Together, they provide a rich theoretical base for preparing MBA graduates to be effective communicators.

#### **VI. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):**

One of the most widely adopted approaches in ESP, CLT emphasizes that language is best learned through meaningful interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Instead of focusing solely on correctness of form, CLT encourages learners to engage in communicative tasks that mirror real-life situations. In the MBA classroom, this might involve simulating a client negotiation, conducting a group meeting, or preparing a persuasive sales pitch. For example, students could role-play as consultants presenting a turnaround strategy to a board of directors, thereby practicing both language use and managerial decision-making. Such activities develop fluency, confidence, and strategic thinking while keeping learning closely tied to workplace contexts.

#### **Genre Analysis:**

Swales (1990) introduced the concept of genre as a recurring communicative event with recognizable structures and purposes. Later, Bhatia (1993) applied genre theory to professional settings, analyzing how business texts such as reports, proposals, and promotional materials are organized. Genre Analysis has been particularly influential in business communication pedagogy because it helps students understand the “moves” and rhetorical strategies common to specific documents. In practical terms, MBA students learn that an investment proposal typically begins with establishing a business need, followed by evidence, solutions, and projected benefits. By studying authentic texts and then reproducing them, students acquire not only linguistic skills but also professional literacy in genres that define corporate communication.

#### **VII. Discourse and Pragmatics:**

While genre analysis explains structure, pragmatics highlights how meaning is shaped by context, relationships, and intention (Thomas, 1995). Business communication often requires managing delicate interpersonal dynamics like, refusing requests without offending, persuading stakeholders without appearing aggressive, or giving feedback without demotivating a team. Pragmatic competence enables students to navigate such situations by choosing words and tones that achieve intended outcomes. In MBA classrooms, this can be developed through activities like drafting emails that balance politeness with urgency or practicing negotiation dialogues where

cultural expectations of directness and indirectness differ. Such training helps students move beyond what is said to how it is interpreted, a crucial distinction in managerial communication.

### **VIII. Intercultural Communication:**

Global business makes intercultural competence indispensable. Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures and Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions framework remain foundational for understanding communication differences. For instance, while American business communication often values directness and clarity, Japanese contexts may prioritize indirectness and harmony. An MBA graduate working with both partners may need to adapt communication styles accordingly. Teaching intercultural frameworks in business communication courses enables students to anticipate and respect such variations, reducing the risk of misunderstanding in global teams. Activities such as analyzing case studies of cross-cultural negotiations or reflecting on one's own communication style in multicultural contexts can deepen this awareness (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

### **IX. Digital and Multimodal Approaches:**

The contemporary workplace is shaped by digital platforms and multimodal communication. Reports are increasingly presented not as lengthy documents but as dashboards or slide decks combining text, visuals, and data. Meetings are often conducted virtually, requiring etiquette for video conferencing and clarity in written chat. Kress (2010) highlights multimodality as the ability to communicate across modes—textual, visual, oral, and digital. For MBA students, this means not only writing a clear report but also designing persuasive slides, interpreting info graphics, and leading online discussions. Business communication pedagogy thus integrates tasks such as preparing PowerPoint presentations, creating info graphics from case data, or simulating virtual team collaborations. These activities prepare graduates for the hybrid and digital workplaces they will inevitably enter.

The above discussed approaches taken together illustrate that business communication pedagogy is multi-dimensional. It is not confined to teaching correct grammar or isolated skills; instead, it is rooted in interaction, professional genres, pragmatic competence, cultural awareness, and digital fluency. For MBA programs, this means communication courses must be designed not as auxiliary training but as comprehensive, theory-backed experiences that build managers' ability to operate effectively in diverse and demanding professional contexts.

### **X. Future Directions of Business Communication in MBA Programs**

As workplaces continue to evolve, the scope of business communication within MBA programs is expanding in new and significant ways. While traditional skills such as writing reports and delivering presentations remain important, emerging trends highlight the need for communication courses that are more integrated, technologically adaptive, and globally relevant.

To begin with, one of the most important directions for business communication is its integration with leadership education. Scholars such as Fairhurst (2011) argue that leadership is enacted primarily through communication: it is through framing, persuasion, and narrative that managers exercise influence. MBA graduates who aspire to

leadership roles must therefore develop not only analytical expertise but also the ability to communicate a compelling vision, motivate teams, and manage crises. Business communication training can support this by incorporating modules on storytelling for leaders, framing strategies in decision-making, and persuasive communication for stakeholder engagement.

A second direction lies in adapting to the rise of digital and artificial intelligence (AI) tools in business communication. Increasingly, managers rely on AI-driven assistants for drafting emails, preparing reports, or analyzing communication patterns. This development does not diminish the importance of human communicators; rather, it creates new demands for critical literacy. MBA graduates must learn how to collaborate with AI, ensuring that machine-generated content is accurate, context-sensitive, and ethically sound (Lan, 2020). At the same time, the dominance of virtual communication platforms requires training in online meeting etiquette, clarity in written chats, and the ability to maintain presence and authority in hybrid settings. Pedagogy that incorporates simulations of virtual meetings, digital storytelling, or AI-assisted drafting will prepare students for this rapidly changing environment.

Equally significant is the need to deepen intercultural competence. As global teams become more common, cultural misunderstandings can easily hinder collaboration and performance. Maznevski and Chudoba's (2000) research on virtual teams, for example, shows how communication breakdowns across cultures and time zones often reduce effectiveness. MBA curricula can address this by embedding intercultural communication training, using case studies of cross-cultural negotiations, and encouraging students to reflect on their own cultural communication styles. For Indian business schools, this is particularly relevant as graduates increasingly work in multinational companies or global start-ups.

Finally, business communication research itself has room to grow. Corpus-based studies of authentic workplace texts can reveal how genres such as ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) reports, sustainability disclosures, or start-up pitch decks are evolving. Longitudinal research can examine how communication skills acquired during MBA programs influence graduates' career progression. In the Indian context, further studies are needed to explore how EBP courses can best serve students from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds, ensuring equity in employability outcomes. Further, a strong connect between the academia and the industry experts would strengthen the business communication syllabi beyond establishing its credibility and need.

In summary, the future of business communication in MBA programs lies in repositioning it as a strategic, interdisciplinary, and future-oriented discipline. Rather than being confined to etiquette or error correction, it must evolve to encompass leadership communication, digital and AI literacy, intercultural competence, and research-driven pedagogy. Such an approach will ensure that MBA graduates are not only skilled in technical domains but also equipped to lead, influence, and innovate in an increasingly complex global business environment.

## **XI. Conclusion**

The journey of business communication courses from ESP to EBP makes it clear that it is not a peripheral skill but a core managerial competence. Grounded in learner-centered principles and enriched by diverse pedagogical

approaches, it equips MBA graduates to transform knowledge into influence, collaboration, and leadership. Repositioning business communication at the heart of management education is therefore not optional but essential for preparing future managers to succeed in an increasingly complex and global business world.

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