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BUSINESS SKILLS

— Next-generation blended language learning product for developing communicative competence at work

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— Structure and design

The purpose of this paper is to describe **Learnship Sprint**, a next-generation blended language learning product for developing communicative competence at work. The paper details the context, design, and structure of the course type.

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Cologne 2020

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— Introduction

Learnship Sprint is a flipped classroom blended learning program that focuses on the most critical business communication skills, as identified in consultation with our global clients over the past ten years. **_Sprint_** is a short course type, delivered in five-unit modules, with each module integrating digital preparation exercises, live classroom sessions, and microlearning homework in a coherent, objective-driven curriculum.

— Corporate skills deficits and Industry 4.0

«Whether a company succeeds or fails in navigating a crisis, completing a merger, avoiding regulatory blunders, or executing everyday operations depends heavily on skillful communication.» Montgomery, 2015

The world is changing rapidly. The Coronavirus outbreak of 2020 has emphasized the critical role of remote working tools and virtual team management as global workplaces are being disrupted literally from one day to another. We have seen how quickly modern business needs to react and how sophisticated communication skills are required even on the part of technical specialists so that corporate functions can continue. The World Economic Forum in 2016 addresses the subject:

« The impact of technological, demographic and socioeconomic disruptions on business models will be felt in transformations to the employment landscape and skills requirements, resulting in substantial challenges for recruiting, training and managing talent… many formerly purely technical occupations are expected to show a new demand for creative and interpersonal skills. »
World Economic Forum, The Future of Jobs Report. Pg 24-26

There is a major training and development need. According to the Deloitte Insights report on the Fourth Industrial Revolution,

«Organizations continue to struggle to ensure that their workforces possess the skills needed to succeed in an Industry 4.0 environment. Only one-fifth of executives completely agreed that their organizations are currently ready.»
Deloitte Insights, 2019

— A communication skills taxonomy

The first stage in the development of **Sprint** included the creation of a three-level taxonomy of outcomes. For the content production and reporting model to work, we needed to map out the specific learner behaviours that would denote success. Crucially, these outcomes go beyond those laid out in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and cover specific aspects of business communication.

Many courses available on the market treat business skills as a binary phenomenon - either a learner can or can't lead a meeting, for example. It was important for us to allow for the nuanced reality of multiple proficiency levels in commmunicative tasks.

We know that corporate learning and development officers integrate language and communication ability into larger competence frameworks and we designed **Sprint** to integrate seamlessly into these projects.

For example: Problem Solving in Business Writing

LOW INTERMEDIATE	Can make basic but clear recommendations, and offer simple advice and suggestions.
HIGH INTERMEDIATE	Can make recommendations and offer advice and suggestions.
ADVANCED	Can make discrete recommendations and offer logically coherent advice and suggestions.

— The Flipped Classroom

The flipped classroom operates by shifting certain curriculum content out of the classroom and into the self-paced zone. For language and communication training, this means allowing learners to study vocabulary, grammar and functional phrases at their own pace via digital tools. By the time they engage with their trainer in the classroom, they are adequately prepared to use that language in context. This allows them to gain time for speaking practice and receiving personal just-in-time feedback from their trainer.

The founders of the flipped classroom, Bergmann and Sams, have found a great deal of support for their concept:

«As we present our flipped classroom model to educators around the world, many have said, 'This is reproducible, scalable, customizable, and easy for teachers to wrap their minds around'.» Bergmann and Sams, 2012

— Next-generation blended learning

It is referenced often in Learning and Development circles, but what exactly is blended learning? American scholar, Dr. Anthony Picciano makes an important point:

There is no generally accepted definition of blended learning. There are many forms of blended learning but a generally accepted taxonomy does not exist. One school's «blended» is another school's «hybrid» or another school's «mixed-mode». Without a clear definition, blended learning is perceived as some nebulous combination of online and face-to-face instruction. Picciano, A. 2014

At Learnship, our concept of next-generation blended learning has four key principles:

Coherent cross-platform curriculum
Next-generation blended learning products follow a clear curriculum that spans technological affordances to create a logical learning path. They are written for a purpose and not a jumbled collection of previously developed digital media resources and unrelated classroom content.

Methodological soundness
Next-generation blended learning products are structured in a principled manner that draws on education theory to create rational sequences of learning challenges. We created **Sprint** based on best practice in instructional design theory, coupled with task-based learning methodology from our classroom background.

Difficulty gradient
Next-generation blended learning products are targeted at a space just beyond the reach of the unaided learner. This is known as the zone of proximal development and ensures that learners are consistently stretched throughout the course. This difficulty gradient must be carefully managed to ensure that engagement is maintained.

Clear objectives
Next-generation blended learning products have clear objectives that are explicit to multiple audiences, whether referring to the trainer, learner, line manager or human resources department. These objectives are clearly linked to business outcomes.

— Communicative competence

Learnship Sprint seeks to develop in learners not only a wider range of linguistic options through a targeted focus on high-frequency functional Business English phrases but crucially, an improved sense of when each option should be used in realtime communication with other people. This is one key area in which **Sprint** can be distinguished from other training courses.

Dell Hymes (1985) established 4 key questions regarding language:

→ Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible
→ Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available
→ Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated
→ Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

This holistic view of language as a set of resources that must be tactically deployed in changing situations is the heart of *Sprint*'s pedagogical approach.

— The Sprint structure

Sprint is a short blended course that consists of five modules, each of which is designed for two hours of learner participation per week. *Sprint* courses are currently available for learners to develop four business skills: Participating in Meetings, Business Writing, Business Negotiations, and Business Presentations. All courses are available at three language proficiency levels, with each learner's proficiency determined by an integrated pre-course assessment.

More skills will be added in the future. A sample module can be seen below:

Skill	Week	Description
Participating in Meetings	— WEEK 1 Casual conversations	Develop the ability to initiate and maintain small talk
	— WEEK 2 Conversation etiquette	Learn to politely get input from your colleagues and to stick to the agenda
	— WEEK 3 Communicating clearly	Work on making the link between cause and effect in meetings situations
	— WEEK 4 Problem solving	Extend your ability to disagree and propose alternatives without causing offence
	— WEEK 5 Review	Integrate the learning outcomes of the four input weeks in the context of authentic business situations

— A streamlined, scalable onboarding experience

Sprint uses a clean, task-based interface to take learners through the steps of registration, level placement and scheduling. FAQs and video are used to support the learner and the platform can be accessed in seven languages. These are English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Brazilian Portuguese, Simplified Chinese and Japanese. Progam managers can monitor the onboarding phase through the dashboard.

— Adaptive Placement test and machine learning

Sprint places learners into one of three bands: Low Intermediate (A2), High Intermediate (B1) or Advanced (B2/C1) using Step + Auto, a sophisticated adaptive online test that asesses grammar, listening, reading and speaking. The speaking module employs machine learning technology, enabling the system to provide results in near realtime.

— Task-based learning and the classroom component

We consciously employed task-based learning as a methodological approach in the classroom. This is because *Sprint* is about developing confidence and fluency in business communication. But what is task-based learning?

«In task-based learning, the central focus of the lesson is the task itself, not a grammar point or a lexical area, and the objective is not to 'learn the structure' but to 'complete the task'. Of course, to complete the task successfully students have to use the right language and communicate their ideas. The language, therefore becomes an instrument of communication, whose purpose is to help complete the task successfully. The students can use any language they need to reach their objective. Usually there is no 'correct answer' for a task outcome. Students decide on their own way of completing it, using the language they see fit.

The advantage of TBL over more traditional methods is that it allows students to focus on real communication before doing any serious language analysis. It focuses on students' needs by putting them into authentic communicative situations and allowing them to use all their language resources to deal with them. This draws the learners' attention to what they know how to do, what they don't know how to do, and what they only half know. It makes learners aware of their needs and encourages them to take (some of the) responsibility for their own learning.» The British Council

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To quote David Nunan (1989),

« a communicative task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.»

A key requirement for task-based lessons to succeed is that the task must be perceived as authentic by the learner. In order to allow for this, we authored the classroom material to include a series of business-school style case studies featuring fictitious companies that are dealing with real-world business problems. For example, our classroom content features German automotive manufacturers dealing with outsourcing problems, Czech IT start-ups facing high churn rates, Indian textile manufacturers embracing digital sales channels and so on.

— Customer success and score weightings

At Learnship, we define customer success as being composed of two crucial elements – engagement and performance. These, therefore, are the two columns of our reporting approach. When we report course scores, we weight performance more heavily. Why? Because ultimately we understand that CEOs and CHROs are interested in unambiguous, tangible results.

Sprint is structured according to a taxonomy of can-do outcomes and we put a premium on robust return on training investment. That being said, we also know that engagement is a critical indicator of learner buy-in. For sustainable success, the learner must be rewarded for their effort in completing exercises and attending classes.

— About the author

Robert Szabó, Learnship's Director of Pedagogy, is based in Cologne, Germany. Robert is a former committee member of the IATEFL Business English Special Interest Group (BESIG). An education manager, writer, and speaker, Robert has presented papers and given talks on Business Language and Communication Training, systemic functional linguistics and communicative competence at IATEFL associate events and corporate functions in Hamburg, Bonn, Karlsruhe, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, Graz, Budapest, Barcelona, Manchester, and Tokyo.
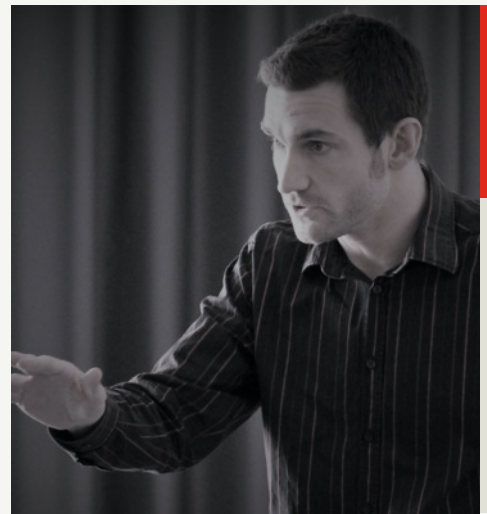
His paper, *Power, Confusion, and Offence: A small-scale systemic-functional analysis of email communication in English within selected German companies* can be found here:
http://espeap.junis.ni.ac.rs/index.php/espeap/article/view/163/94 →

His paper, *From the digital coalface: Building a range of blended English-language communicative competence courses in partnership with corporate learning and development stakeholders* can be found here:
https://horizon-jhssr.com/view-issue.php?id=5 →

He has also written various articles for IATEFL publications, the BELTA Bulletin and recently had an article published in the Paris-based human resources specialist magazine MagRH.
https://www.reconquete-rh.org/MagRH9.pdf →

— About Learnship

Learnship is the world's leading provider of online, face-to-face language and intercultural training, with more than 1,000 language trainers working with 25,000 learners a year at more than 2,000 corporate clients. Learnship's success is built on its ongoing strategy to combine human-centered learning design with transformational technology and progressive pedagogy to create the ultimate language learning experience for learners, trainers, and program managers.

The company's award-winning Virtual Classroom gives learners the personal coaching benefits of traditional on-site training with the convenience, flexibility, and cost-benefits of online learning. Every learner is matched with the trainer best-qualified to meet their individual needs, with personalized training programs available in 14 languages, alongside specialist courses in executive coaching, communication skills, relocation, and intercultural training.

Learnship's highly-qualified trainers are also graduates of the Learnship Academy where they become fluent in the effective online, face-to-face learning methods that the company has refined over the past ten years, building on the experience of tens of thousands of client engagements.

Learnship has also digitally transformed the entire learning management process for program managers in HR, including global deployment, learner assessment, onboarding, process automation, quality assurance, and real-time reporting.

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for your interest.

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about our Sprint training solution