How to... conduct business meetings in English

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Aim: To introduce and practice the language and etiquette used in formal business meetings

Level: Mid / upper intermediate (used for public course, so may be very mixed ability)

The learners are ideally working people, but they can also be students. Even though they may have had informal Thai language meetings, there may come a time when they need to use English, e.g. in an international workplace. They may also need to be aware of international business etiquette.

Procedure

1. T asks learners if they have had meetings, either at work or elsewhere. Learners discuss and share their experiences.

2. T poses the question: what makes a good / bad meeting? A table is drawn up and learners decide how to fill it after discussion. This task should hopefully bring up some meeting issues and vocabulary e.g. keeping to time, following the agenda. Any unknown meeting vocabulary is elicited and pre-taught, e.g. by means of a diagram showing the various participants/items in a meeting and their function. T can test the learners on their knowledge by pointing at different parts of the diagram and asking why we need these people/items.

3. T shows some sample meeting agendas, stressing that each item tends to be a phrase rather than a sentence. Learners get into groups and design their own agenda. They are told that they are going to have a meeting based on this agenda. For more advanced learners, there could also be some coverage of how to write minutes of a meeting (depending on the relevance for them).

4. The class brainstorms how the meeting might start in order to prepare to watch a video. T plays a video of a meeting (from Australia Network’s ‘The Business of English’) after handing out the dialogue to help weaker students, who can then follow the script and listen. The video contains useful expressions in addition to those shown in the main script. Learners are encouraged to listen and repeat these phrases.

5. T highlights the main language covered in the script, adding some more examples in the form of substitution tables. Learners then practise using the language to formulate a start to their own meeting, each group member taking turns to be the chair.
6. For each item on the agenda, a decision must be reached after discussion. If learners are unsure how to approach this, they can be shown how to do so in the following way: T can draw up a table to discuss, for example, open plan offices. Arguments for: friendlier, encourage sharing, more space. Arguments against: no privacy, means of control. T elicits how to construct opinion sentences using substitution tables. Learners are also given a handout showing different polite ways of agreeing and disagreeing, with video backup if necessary showing appropriate and inappropriate ways. If necessary, learners can practise agreeing and disagreeing on one of the points of the agenda.

7. T elicits responses from the learners as to the procedure of how to close a meeting. They are shown a video showing the process and highlighting the language. Learners then practise closing their own meetings.

8. With everything in place, the learners can now run their own meetings and reach decisions for each item on the agenda. One person is chosen to be the chair of each group. For more advanced groups, one person could be charged to take notes of the meeting, then write minutes. These minutes could be submitted to the teacher for correction. Teacher monitors each group’s meeting, helping with language, noting mistakes and encouraging discussion.

9. A representative from each group reports back to the class on what was discussed in the meeting and the decisions made.

10. If desired, any language errors noted during the group meetings are written up on the board and discussed as a class.
Examples of worksheets used in this lesson:

**Starting a meeting**

**DENISE:** Has everybody got a copy of the agenda?

Would you mind taking minutes John?

**JOHN:** Not at all.

**DENISE:** Good. Well, then let’s get started.

First of all, thank you everyone for attending at short notice. As you know, the objective of this meeting of the Capital Works Committee is to discuss a proposal for some urgent building work at our Southside plant. As we’ve got to reach a decision which may involve spending, we’ll run it as a formal meeting. Now, you’ve read the proposal, so without further ado, I’d like to open it up for discussion. Perhaps if we can start with you Tan – what’s your view?

**TAN:** Well, I’m not convinced that the work is as urgent as this report suggests, so perhaps we should…

**Finishing a meeting**

**DENISE:** So, to sum up – I think we are all aware that some urgent work does need to be done, and we will need to work on a longer term plan for a major refit.

Well, if there’s no more discussion – we’ll put it to a vote. We’re recommending that tenders be called for the urgent work needed. All those in favour?

All those against?

Then that’s agreed.. Any other business?

Then we’ll close the meeting. Thank you everyone. The next meeting will be in two weeks, at the same time…

**Worksheet 1:** Language used in starting and finishing a formal business meeting (adapted from Australia Network’s ‘The Business of English’:

[http://australianetwork.com/businessenglish](http://australianetwork.com/businessenglish)

**Figure 1:** Sample agenda used to illustrate format of a meeting and topics discussed

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**Agenda for the board meeting of ABC Products, March 15, 2010, at 9.00 hrs, New York office**

1. Opening/Welcome
2. Launch of new products
3. New parking policy
4. Any other business
5. Closure