REVIEW OF BUSINESS CONNECTIONS ELEMENTARY – PRE-INTERMEDIATE

Title	Business Connections – Lab Workstation Version
Platform	Windows 98, XP, 2000 with Service Pack 2 (or higher) NT 4.0 with Service Pack 5 (or higher) Non-English Windows 2000 systems require the Professional Edition
Minimum hardware requirements	Pentium II processor 400+ MHz 64+ MB RAM (128 MB recommended) 16-bit graphics card Monitor resolution of 800 x 600 or higher Sound card, microphone and speakers Floppy disc drive (for saving student data) 10x CD-ROM drive Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher (5.5 or higher recommended) Macromedia's Flash 5 (or higher) plug-in Shockwave 8 (or higher) plug-in Apple's QuickTime 5 (or higher) plug-in Sun's Java 1.4.1 (or higher) plug-in Adobe Acrobat Reader 4.0 (or higher) software
Publisher	Pearson Longman Website: http://www.longman.com/ae/multimedia/programs/index.htm
Support offered	(1) Website: http://www.longman.com/ae/multimedia/servsupport.htm (2) Email: http://www.longman.com/contactus.html (3) Phone: 1.877.202.4572
Target language	English
Target audience	Elementary – Pre-Intermediate
Price	$211.00 – CD-ROM $5030.00 – Network License
ISBN	0-582-82569-5

Review by Brooke Cashman, Georgetown University

The back cover of *Business Connections - Lab Workstation Version* software promises a "multimedia course that teaches students to communicate effectively in business situations." It goes on to add that "[b]y using authentic business language in real life business settings, this comprehensive course is ideal for learners who want to develop practical business English skills." Teachers who elect to use *Business Connections* as a part of their Elementary level course can expect the product to fulfill this commitment.

The material in *Business Connections* is divided into five modules with themes that closely relate to the business world, but also have wide applicability outside of it, namely, "Talking About Yourself and Your Company," "Giving and Getting Information," "Companies and Problems," "Phone Calls, Tasks, and Procedures," and "Meetings and Schedules." Each module is then further divided into three sub-units, each of which relates to the general theme of the module and centers around a business situation (making fifteen units in all). For example, the situations that learners encounter in Units 1 – 3 in Module 1, which is titled "Talking bout Yourself and Your Company," are "Meeting People," "Talking about Your Job," and "Talking about your Department." Units 13 – 15 in Module 5, "Meetings and Schedules," are titled "Speaking in Meetings," "Checking a Schedule," and "Thanking and Saying

Goodbye." By organizing the modules and units around communicative goals, in a manner that is consistent with communicative language teaching (Brown, 2001), the authors have created a product that is applicable to most learners at the target proficiency level (elementary – pre-intermediate), not only those in the business world. While the interaction may take place in an office setting, even learners who do not envision themselves entering the business world could also benefit from learning how to accomplish all of these very practical communication tasks.

Each of the fifteen units in *Business Connections* follows the same organizational pattern and consists of four sections which address the major language skills, although significantly more time and attention is focused on listening, speaking, and grammar practice than on reading and writing. Section 1 of each unit begins with a short, one to two- minute video, and these videos are, decisively, the strength of the program. The video clips create a cohesive feeling to the program, despite the diverse number of topics and language points, and exhibit a surprising and impressive level of authenticity. The videos follow a team of employees at "World Premiere Solutions" in London as they prepare for an upcoming conference, and these clips introduce the theme of each unit. These videos do not meet Nunan's (1999) standard for authentic texts, which require that the media not be created explicitly for the purposes of language teaching, but instead be organically generated for the purpose of communication. However, this omission does not detract from their value, as the situations that the videos recreate are highly formulaic - such as introducing someone, presenting information about a company, checking a schedule - and it is hard to imagine that a spontaneous introduction would sound or function in an appreciably different manner than that presented in the video. The authors succeed, then, in creating conversations and dialogues that sound spontaneous, genuine and authentic.

An additional benefit of the videos is the international and ethnic diversity of the actors, who provide a variety of native and non-native English speaker accents. The cast includes a native speaking English man, an American woman, and an Indian-English woman, as well as non-native speaking Spanish, French and Japanese men, each of whom provides a different, yet highly comprehensible example of speech in English (see Figure 1 for a screen shot featuring many of the video's cast). This variety of accents serves two important purposes. First, it ensures that even though the fictional company is based in London, students of both British and American English can comfortably use the materials, given that both varieties of English are widely represented. Second, it underscores the important point that there is no "right" way to speak English. The non-native speakers provide the additional benefit of models of successful language learners, with the implicit message that one does not need to be a native-speaker to succeed in an English-speaking workplace (Friedenberg, Kennedy, Lomperis, Martin, & Westerfield, 2003).

Unfortunately, the audio clips that begin Section 2 of each unit do not showcase this same level of authenticity. The language and topics are of comparable quality. For example, in Module 1 "Talking About Yourself and Your Company," the topics include "Welcoming a Visitor," which discusses "Welcoming," "Asking Someone About Their Job," and "Finding Out More About a Team," – but they are delivered at a rate of speech that is exaggeratedly slow. One can only guess that the authors thought this was necessary, given that the learners would have no visual cues aside from a static photograph, but the result is a sample of language that is sadly unrepresentative of how native speakers, or even proficient non-native speakers, would speak.

Following the video and audio clips in Sections 1 and 2 of each unit is a "discovery" phase, in which learners are asked to inductively infer the rule behind a grammar feature that they heard in the previous listening passages. Learners listen again to the video/audio and note where and how the speakers used the target grammar features, which range from "be statements and questions" in the first unit to present perfect simple in Unit 15. Presenting the language first in an authentic context allows learners to use an inductive, top-down approach to grammar, which appeals to certain learning styles, and it is a very effective way to draw the students' attention to the target grammar feature before the explanation (Snow, 1996; van Patten, 2003). Explicit grammar instruction is provided by "Victoria, the Grammar Coach." A

short video of a woman explains a grammar feature while examples of the feature are automatically manipulated and highlighted on the screen (see Figure 2).
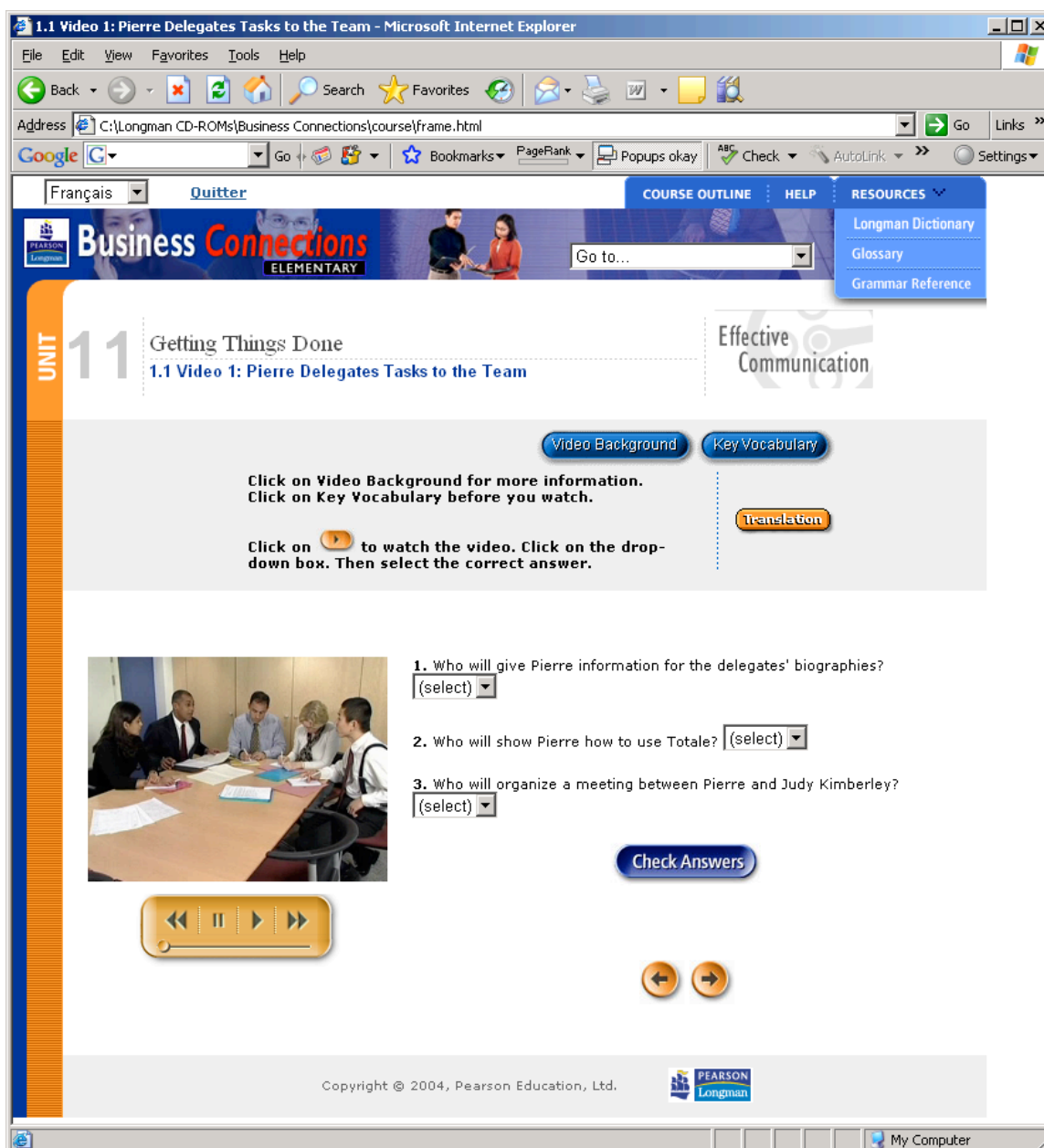

Figure 1. A sample video screen, with a highly diverse cast

The explanations, while precise, effective, and highly contextualized, are also quite brief. In a representative example from Unit 6, "Describing Products," one of the grammar points addressed in this context is comparatives and superlatives. Victoria begins the explanation by telling the learners:

Hello again. Here is some grammar for comparing products. When you want to compare two products, you add **-**er to short adjectives and you put 'more' in front of long adjectives. For example:

'The PC500 is cheaper than the PC1000.'

'The PC1000 is more expensive than the PC500.'

When you have three or more products, you add -est to short adjectives and you put 'the most' in front of long adjectives. For example:

'The PC500 is the most suitable of the three models.'

'The PC1000 is the most efficient of the three models.'

Look at the grammar explanation to learn more.

Figure 2. A sample grammar explanation with "Victoria the Grammar Coach".

While Victoria gives this explanation, students can also click on a "transcript" button and read along with what she is saying (Figure 2). Next, they can click on three buttons which allow them to listen to and watch an explanation of a few related examples. In this unit, the examples that appear on the screen are as follows:

1. When you compare two products, use adjective + -er or 'more' + adjective.
    The PC500 is cheaper than the PC 1000.
    The PC1000 is more expensive than the PC500.
2. When you compare three or more products use adjective + -est or 'most' + adjective.
    The PC200 is the smallest of the three models.
    The PC1000 is the most expensive of the three models.
3. For adjectives of one syllable, and for adjectives of two syllables ending in –y, use -er or -est.
    smallest
    cheapest
    earliest
4. For adjectives of three or more syllables, use 'more' and 'the most'.
    It's more | the most expensive.
    It's more | the most suitable.
    It's more | the most user-friendly.
5. These adjectives are irregular.
    good better the best
    bad worse the worst
    far further the furthest

While precise and highly contextualized within the theme of the unit this explanation may leave some students wondering what to do with two syllable adjectives that *don't* end in –y (is the technology *more modern* or *moderner*?) or why *the* must be added in the superlative form. For this reason, the grammar explanations would likely serve better as a review for students who had already been introduced to the feature in class - or as an initial presentation to be followed up with further class discussion. Even though the level of meta-language is appropriate for the proficiency level of the targeted learners, users will likely still have questions and possibly need more explanation or examples. The program also offers a large number of more traditional grammar exercises, such as matching and fill-in-the-blank, where learners are asked to apply the rules, which allow for deductive, bottom-up processing as well. The sentences that the authors construct for examples and follow-up exercises for each grammar point relate closely to the theme of the unit, and as such, they continue to lend a sense of cohesion to each unit.

Section 3 of each unit again addresses listening and speaking, but focuses on vocabulary building and what the authors call "Facts and Figures," namely, information that includes numbers, such as dates, years, ordinal numbers, telephone numbers, prices, email addresses, and percentages. The vocabulary and "figure" items are well-chosen high-frequency items that are presented in a business context, such as a list of prices for items the team must order, telephone numbers of contacts and important dates for the conference being planned. By choosing such high-frequency and practical items, learners will certainly be able to put their new knowledge directly to use. However, the items are touched on only briefly, in that they are presented and followed by only one or two short exercises that don't provide opportunity for much practice or reinforcement. As such, these sections of the units would likely serve best as additional practice for a point already covered in class, or the teacher might want to supplement these activities with additional tasks in the classroom.

The final section of each unit, Section 4, again begins with a listening exercise, which incorporates more vocabulary learning, and ends with a brief reading and writing activity. The reading and writing activities

are the weak area of the program as a whole. While the authors were effective in choosing authentic sources for reading texts, such as emails, job descriptions, and excerpts from company manuals, there is very little time devoted to each of the texts – often only three or four lower-order multiple choice questions, and typically no explanation of why any given answer is correct or incorrect. Additionally, the reading passages tend to introduce elements that have not been covered in the lesson, so that there is a mismatch between grammar structures. For example, in Unit 1, students learn to use *to be* in statements and in questions and short answers, but the reading task is an email giving directions to a hotel, which primarily uses imperatives. The writing activities, like the reading passages, have highly authentic business contexts, such as taking down a telephone message, writing an email asking for product information, composing a CV/resume and a letter of thanks. Unlike all of the other activities, however, the writing tasks cannot be completed within the confines of the *Business Connections* program itself. Students must either hand-write the tasks or close the program and type them in a separate word-processing program. Given that an Internet connection is listed as one of the requirements for running the program, I had hoped that students would have been able to type into the program and, for example, email it to the teacher.

Figure 3. The Home screen.

Speaking practice is integrated throughout each of the sections (minus the reading and writing sections) in all of the units. In most cases, this takes the form of "Listen and Repeat" style exercises in which learners listen to a short phrase that illustrates a pronunciation item, vocabulary item, or expression from the

chapter, and then record themselves saying the phrase. Learners can listen as many times as they would like to the model and can re-record and listen to their recordings as many times as they would like. The program further provides "free" speaking tasks, in which learners are given a model, some information that is consistent with the theme of the chapter, and are asked to give a brief talk. For example, in Unit 6, "Describing a Product," learners are asked to compare three different types of computers and recommend one to the supervisor to purchase. The limitation of both of these types of exercises is that learners receive no feedback. The program does not allow learners to capture the audio file and give it to the instructor for guidance, nor does the software provide feedback. The "Listen and Repeat" sections could have included visual representation of the learner speech for users to match their language output against a model. Students, thus, have to self-evaluate their performance, but perhaps only learners who can hear and are aware of their mistakes will be able to correct them. For this reason, these activities should be followed up with classroom or language lab tasks that allow the teacher to evaluate learners' progress and provide guidance.

Beyond the content of the *Business Connections* materials, a significant concern for any software program is the "user-friendly" factor. Overall, this software program is transparent and simple to use, and even the targeted students and teachers who have never used learning software before should find it simple to navigate. There are only two possible exceptions, both of which can be easily solved with prior knowledge. The first is the home page of the program (not synonymous with the program menu), which is text heavy and does not make it immediately clear how to proceed to the program (see Figure 3). With experimentation, I discovered that one has to click on "Course Outline," which will then allow users to proceed to the menu or to the first chapter, but this was initially confusing and would be especially confusing to elementary level learners who encounter it in a language lab and may not be able to read and/or understand all of the text.

Once the user actually enters the program, however, he or she can easily navigate the program using the very clear arrows at the bottom of the screen, as well as the pull-down menu at the top (see Figure 4). There is also a "translation" button at the top of the screen, which allows learners to translate the procedural and navigational language into Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, or Chinese, if they are confused about how to proceed in the program.

The other problematic aspect of the program is the need for an "access file." It is necessary to obtain an "access file" from the publisher, which must be installed on the computer before the program will run. This "access file" is not mentioned in the installation instructions, nor is it mentioned on the website for the CD-ROM, and the absence of any specific instruction could lead to confusion. However, to the publisher's credit, the e-support team and the sales representative were very responsive and helped to solve the problem immediately. Anyone purchasing this product, then, can be well-assured that he or she can find technical support in the face of any technological hurdles.
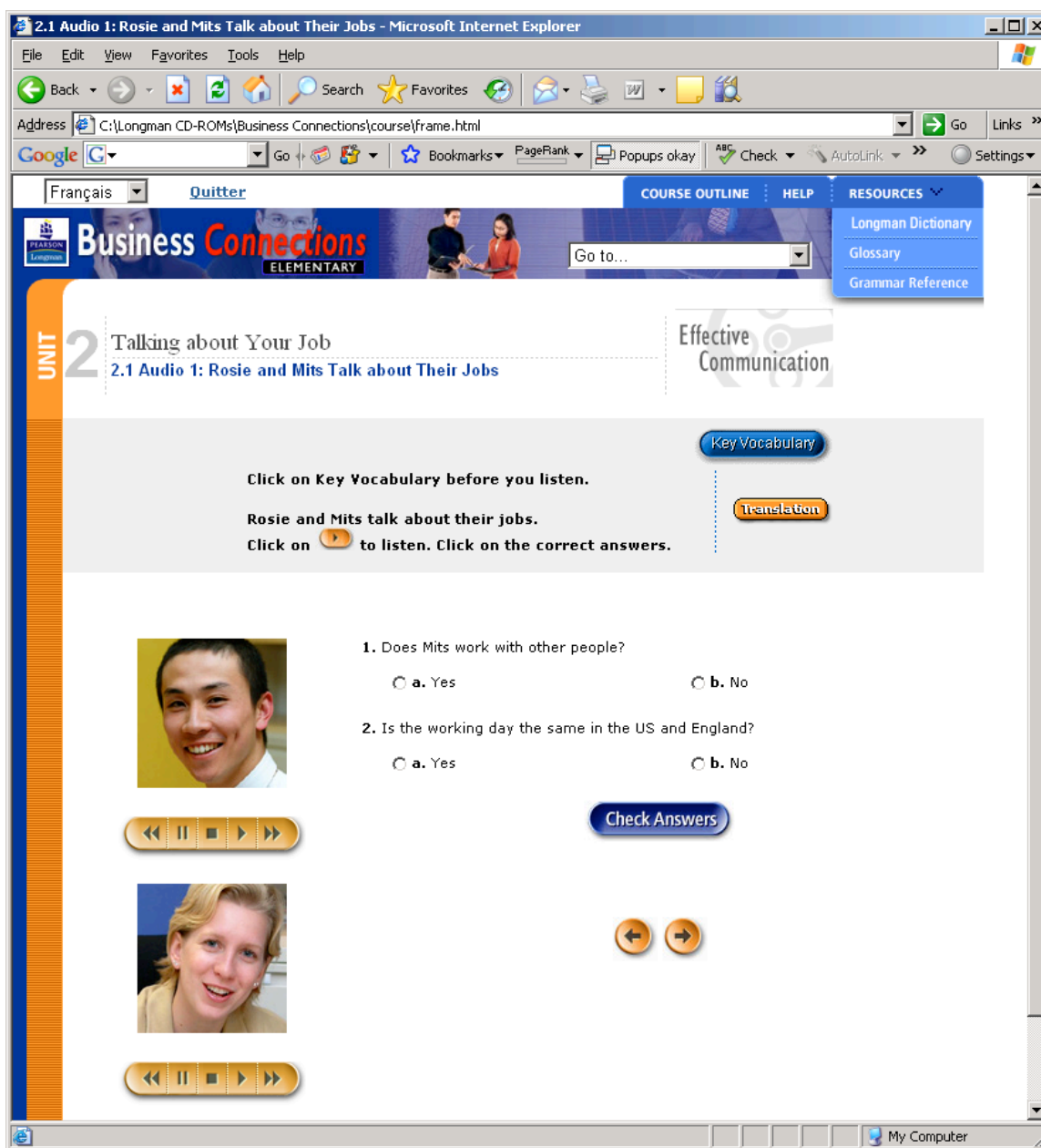
Figure 4. Sample screen with navigation aids.

Business Connections - Lab Workstation Version delivers a high-quality, interactive program that is based on authentic, practical business situations. The strengths of the program are the videos, as well as the grammar and speaking practice, but instructors should plan on supplementing the reading and writing portions of the program with additional exercises that reinforce the target grammar structures and vocabulary, as well as provide a great deal of out-of-class support for items that are explained only briefly in the program, such as the grammar and vocabulary explanations. Teachers and students who select *Business Connections* as part of their elementary – pre-intermediate course of study can expect that it will fulfill its promise to help learners develop practical business English skills.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Brooke Cashman is an instructor at Georgetown University's Center for Language Education and Development, and she is involved in program and curriculum development for the English for Heritage Language Speakers Program. She is a graduate of American University's Masters International Program, and served as a teacher trainer with the US Peace Corps in the Republic of the Philippines.

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