THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Abstract. *Back in 1993, in "Context and culture in language teaching", Claire Kramsch rightfully noted that "every time we speak we perform a cultural act." As Business English trainers, our main purpose is to enhance learners' ability to communicate successfully in various contexts. Consequently, the teaching and learning processes go well beyond language accuracy and vocabulary acquisition. It is therefore quintessential to integrate intercultural skills in the Business English class. The aim of this paper is to discuss the main trends in developing intercultural competence in English by pointing to the main areas that need to be covered in order to enable learners acquire the skills necessary to do business internationally. This may be achieved by understanding and actively using the rules that govern discourse conventions, country specifics, corporate cultures, gender issues, politeness, conflict management, etc. Whether the educational system in our country can provide the appropriate context for acquiring these skills remains to be debated. First, we will provide an overview of the main researchers' work in the field of intercultural communication. Then, we will identify and discuss the key issues which are paramount to successful business communication. Finally, we will focus on how these key issues can be taught to, understood and actively used by undergraduate Business students.*

Keywords*: intercultural communication, education, international business*

Trends in Intercultural Communication – from Geert Hofstede to Bob Dignen and Ian McMaster

Business English teaching relies on both trainers' dedication and interest in the topic and on learners' motivation to acquire the necessary skills which would further enable them to communicate successfully in both various work-related contexts and on social occasions. Jennifer Cope stressed on the fact that a Business English trainer's role is to facilitate his/her learners' adjustment of attitudes towards other cultures by creating the appropriate ground to discover, compare and interpret other cultures (Cope 11, 13).

Geert Hofstede's 1980 cultural dimensions are nowadays familiar to all Business Communication trainers. They nevertheless form the basis of any Intercultural Communication course despite the fact they can no longer be regarded as a valuable source of challenging activities:

The Power Distance Index (PDI): the degree to which people accept the unequal distribution of power, more specifically, the degree to which employees are independent, structures are hierarchical, bosses are accessible, people have rights or privileges, progress is by evolution or by revolution;

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI): the degree to which people can take risks, accept conflict and stress, work without rules;

Individualism/ Collectivism (IDV): the degree to which people work in groups or alone, relate to their task or to their colleagues;

Masculinity/ Femininity (MAS): the degree to which people believe in consensus, put work at the centre of their lives, expect managers to use intuition; the degree to which a national culture tolerates aggressive and materialistic behavior;

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Long-Term Orientation (LTO): the degree to which people have a long or a short term view of their work, to which they persevere with a job, to which they spend or invest (Utley 63).

The study of Hofstede's work would prove limited in the absence of an overview of Edward T. Hall's key concepts related to intercultural communication. An American anthropologist and researcher, Edward T. Hall (1914–2009) mainly explored cultural and social cohesion. According to Hall, in *monochronic* cultures, people do one thing at a time, in sequence; on the contrary, in *polychronic* cultures, people do many things at the same time (Utley 69). In many of his works Hall discusses the way time is used to structure human experience. Understanding various cultures' perception of time proves extremely useful in the process of understanding the way business is conducted in various cultures. In his works, *The Silent Language* and *Understanding Cultural Differences*, Hall identified two pairs of contrasting cultures:

(1) *High Context* cultures – people speak indirectly, show respect and maintain harmony; directness is considered rude;

(2) *Low Context* cultures – people speak directly, avoid unnecessary details, being suspicious of indirect people.

Undoubtedly, Hall's *Beyond Cultures* of 1976 is highly relevant today because politeness is nevertheless an essential factor determining success or lack of it in business interactions. This aspect will be further debated in the following part of this paper.

Another representative researcher in the field of Intercultural Communication is Martin Gannon, a professor of International Management and Strategy, College of Business Administration, California State University, San Marcos. His work is focused on the use of metaphors in understanding and dealing with various cultures in business communication. Although he does consider the danger of stereotyping in intercultural communication, he believes that stereotypes are not necessarily bad if they are "a first best guess, based on data and observation, descriptive rather than evaluative, open to change if new data is encountered". Moreover, a cultural metaphor differs from a stereotype in its being only probabilistic. Nevertheless, to a certain extent, the two overlap (Gannon 62). Gannon also proposes a very interesting exercise for learners of Intercultural Communication: students should be asked to identify the five adjectives that are most representative for a culture (e.g. Americans, Germans, Russians, etc.). He further refers to a famous study published in Newsweek (July 11, 1983, p. 50) that applied this exercise to six nations – the US, France, Japan, Germany, Britain and Brazil. In four of the six, the following adjectives were identified as most representative for Americans: industrious, energetic, inventive and friendly. All six nations felt that the adjective that least described Americans was "lazy". Gannon further suggests that the instructor should compare the class profiles to the results of the survey and discuss the differences if they exist (Gannon 90). Consequently, we may start from the assumption that language does play an essential though not exclusive role in understanding culture.

Martin Gannon's metaphor for the British culture is the traditional British house reflecting the tradition-bound and iconoclastic individualism illustrating British organizational behaviour. Geert Hofstede's dimensions, particularly individualism vs. collectivism, take the form of metaphor which is, undoubtedly, more easily understood and assimilated by Business students. Furthermore, in Gannon's terms, the German culture may be associated to the German symphony due to aspects such as subordinated individualism, subordinating individual goals to group goals, focus on achievement, precision and synchronicity-dominated process; the Italian culture is associated to the Italian opera: individualism, expressing individual thoughts and emotions within the family/ community; the Spanish culture to the Spanish bullfight: proud and self-sufficient individualism, work

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relations are, to a certain extent, similar to the relations within a gang; American culture to American football: competitive individualism, unpredictable outcomes, aggressive attitudes, reward-based planning, ceremonial celebration of perfection; the French culture is compared to wine: rationalistic individualism, etc. (42, 67)

However, one of the most eloquent examples provided by Gannon is that of the German Symphony metaphor. Martin Gannon devises a carefully built plan meant to provide support to the instructor teaching cultural metaphors in which he includes: a description of the metaphor, the country's history and current economic and political situation, cultural dimensions, i.e. perception of the individual, of the world, personal relationships, activity, time, space, religious beliefs, personal and professional lives and relationships.

By identifying and illustrating the main sources of cultural misunderstandings, business communication trainers can introduce learners to some behavioural patterns in intercultural communication. Furthermore, learners can aim to achieve successful communication despite language inaccuracies which are very likely to occur in such contexts. It is thus clear that successful business communication relies on participants' ability to grasp corporate typologies, to build rapport, to manage conflicts, to be polite, to deal with gender issues, to adapt to contexts. On the other hand, Bob Dignen and Ian McMaster (2013) note that since all communication is situational, there are no dos and don'ts in this area for we all need to adapt our message and the way it is communicated to particular situations. They further show that each communication situation comprises three main elements: *culture*, i.e. national, organizational, professional, personal, etc; *person* – understanding individuality is essential in the communication process; *business context* – doing business implies cooperation, conflict, conflict management and resolution (Dignen, McMaster 8-9). They also point to the fact that skills may be categorized as face-to-face skills and virtual skills. According to them, face-to-face skills are directed towards trust-based relationship building, influencing, making decisions, managing conflict, giving and receiving feedback while virtual skills, i.e. email writing, telephoning, video-conferencing, are all directed towards virtual teamworking.

Our Context

Business English Teaching in the current context has become a true challenge for it has clearly moved beyond the limits of a regular job. One of the main reasons for this shift of perspective is due to our students' constantly changing demands. Their status is quite similar to that of clients seeking satisfaction in exchange for their investment. Some of them put in a lot of their time, money, and hope. Their expectations are clear: they wish to find a good job when they graduate. The question which nevertheless arises is whether we, as trainers, are actually helping them to cope with the demands of a job in the increasingly globalized world. They need to acquire the necessary skills which would enable them to succeed in communicating successfully at work, in different contexts. It is due to this reason that interculturality has become an indispensable tool within Business communication.

During their Undergraduate studies, for four semesters, Business students are introduced to functional language in professional contexts (presentations, meetings, negotiations, writing reports, memos, letter writing). However, some difficulties arise with groups which normally gather students from beginner up to advanced levels. The large number of students in a seminar group or lecture series is also an important issue: while, during seminars, we usually teach groups of 30 students whose level of English, as we have already mentioned, is extremely varied, lectures are generally addressed to approximately 120 students.

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Coming to university is undoubtedly an essential stage in their lives. Their expectations are to acquire the necessary information and skills to succeed in their future careers. Therefore, the main aim of any Business English teacher is to use programmes where *content*, *language* and *communication* are combined in order to develop the learners' language knowledge and communication skills. ESP – English for Specific Purposes deals with teaching and learning the specific skills and language required for a particular purpose. Consequently, business communication skills are undoubtedly included within the area of ESP. In developing content-relevant curricula for business students, it is essential to understand the differences between Business and General English teaching, particularly those regarding context importance and skill-acquisition. It has long been argued that fluency is by far more important than accuracy in the Business English teaching and learning processes and the main reason for this resides in the stress on learners' needs.

A relevant study regarding our students' needs and expectations related to intercultural communication skills' acquisition was carried out by Oana Ursu (2018), a lecturer of Business English at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza University" of Iaşi. Starting from Deardorff's definition of intercultural competence as "the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions" (Deardorff quoted by Ursu 211), Oana Ursu shows that Deardorff's intercultural framework comprising three key elements – knowledge, skills and attitudes – could be extremely useful in identifying and describing our students' needs and expectations regarding intercultural competence. The study was carried out on a sample of 150 undergraduate Business students and points to the following findings: in terms of knowledge, students stressed on the idea that getting to know and understand the *other* is essential in building successful intercultural communication; moreover, it was found that, among students, linguistic accuracy is considered less important compared to the overall behaviour and attitudes of the participants in intercultural communication; in terms of skills, students thought that, most often, intercultural misunderstandings derive from the alert rhythm of our lives which leaves little room for attention to cultural details; however, most students felt that critical thinking could nevertheless improve their ability to deal with cultural misunderstandings. Finally, in terms of attitudes, it was concluded that the in-depth study of cultures could not only help us understand others but could provide the opportunity to better understand ourselves, which could consequently contribute to successful intercultural communication. Oana Ursu rightfully concludes that in her (and implicitly, our) students' opinion:

> one of the most important aspects of intercultural communication consists in the fact that it is not absolutely necessary to attempt at solving all problems at once. What really matters is the openness and willingness to try and understand them, one step at a time, irrespective of the time that is needed for such an endeavour. The ultimate result (and reward) will then be not only material (successful business communication and, thus, successful business relations) but also psychological. (Ursu 213)

Consequently, learners' needs define the trainer's choice of syllabus and learning material. Moreover, as perfectly illustrated by CEFR:
"In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favorable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture." (CEFR, 1)

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It is for all these reasons that the Business English class should provide a medium able to familiarize students with the soft skills which can make the difference between a candidate and a successful candidate for a job in international business (Dignen, McMaster 8-9).

Integrating Soft Skills in the Business English Class

Consequently, the main question which arises in the teaching-learning process is related to the content of our lectures and seminars and the extent it manages to meet our learners' intercultural communication needs. The basic idea underlying any attempt to build any type of relationship, either professional or personal, is trust. Modern Intercultural Communication courses focus on the importance of functional language (soft skills) – criticizing, giving/ receiving advice, negotiating, etc. as well as on other discourse features, such as: directness, enthusiasm, formality, assertiveness, self-promotion, gender issues, hierarchy, conflict management and resolution; all these form the core of intercultural training for once acknowledged, they can form the basis of relationship building. Moreover, learners need to become aware of the importance of all these aspects in any type of human interaction and, particularly, in international business. We have identified (among others) three main aspects, which once acknowledged, may enhance successful intercultural communication: *gender issues*, *conflict management* and *politeness*. We believe that by integrating these topics in the business English class, learners are enabled to acquire information related to key aspects of human, in general and business, in particular, interaction.

Understanding *gender issues* may be the key to successful business interaction in certain cases. Students should become aware that, beyond national, regional, organizational culture, people are also defined by gender affiliation. Business communication implies awareness of basic gender characteristics for a lack of understanding may easily lead to misunderstandings. Deborah Tannen, an American linguistics professor has focused her research on identifying the main sources of misunderstanding deriving from gender differences. She identifies four main areas which constitute the ground for gender-based conflict: asking for help – women are likely to ask questions when they need help; men feel that by asking questions, they show a lack of competence; offering support: while men are not comfortable with offers of support, women perceive them as gestures of solidarity; discussing problems – women discuss problems primarily to share feelings while men are focused on identifying solutions; consequently, men cannot understand why women are reluctant to being given advice. Finally, Tannen finds that women generally use personal experience in order to support their opinions while men simply perceive this type of arguments as subjective (Dignen, McMaster 38, 39). Case studies and interviews are highly recommended in Business English classes in order to raise awareness among students regarding gender issues. While Gannon noted that stereotyping is not necessarily bad, we may definitely assume that, in terms of gender, stereotypes nevertheless exist globally in the workplace, particularly in business. Adrian Furnham rightfully shows that "Success at work is usually associated with male traits of aggression. If women show these behaviours, (…) they are often seen as hard, tough and disagreeable. (…) Being demanding and assertive on behalf of others is seen as protective and caring: qualities typically associated with women. (…) Paradoxically, political correctness prevents women (and men) from discussing these problems. Taking an aggressive, feminist position doesn't help much either." (Furnham 77) We believe that by simply raising learners' awareness of how gender issues may affect the outcome of business interactions, significant progress in the field can be achieved. As we have already stated in this paper, one of the best means to convey such input is by providing learners with access to interviews and case studies. Once encouraged to debate on the given

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context, they will undoubtedly become aware of the main issues which need to be considered in dealing with gender aspects in professional contexts. An interview given by Lena Backer (CEO and owner of Rodinia Government Affairs, senior adviser at the W4GS, senior adviser at the Capital Market Council, and president of the European Association of Public Banks Chief Economists Network in Brussels) to Ken Taylor and published in the first issue of Business Spotlight in 2017 is a good example of how interviews can be used as a starting point in class debates meant to raise awareness among students:

> Taylor: There are two interesting elements to your story. The first is not to be afraid to ask for help or support. It's not a sign of weakness. And the second is to communicate assertively when necessary – to speak and act calmly and confidently, but in a friendly manner.
>
> Backer: That's right. As a woman, you don't have to be a man. But you do have to be competent and to show your competence clearly and quickly.
>
> Taylor: Why quickly?
>
> Backer: Because women in business can be met with skepticism. So it is important that your professional skills be immediately apparent. (Ken Taylor, Interview with Lena Backer 50)

In business, *conflict* is inevitable. However, if handled carefully, it may actually turn out productive. It is thus important to be able to grasp the nature of conflict, to indentify its causes and solutions to mitigate it. Students should be enabled to understand the various types of conflict by identifying its sources, and then, after having acquired conflict resolution skills and techniques, they should be provided with the opportunity to practice communication skills leading to conflict resolution. In order to achieve all these, students should become aware and further actively use positive language in business communication. For this, a good level of general English as well as what is generally acknowledged as emotional intelligence is required. Moving from conflict towards agreement must be carried out both linguistically and emotionally by applying the appropriate strategies to identify and solve problems which can otherwise escalate. Students need to acquire the linguistic skills necessary to perform polite rejections – "That will be difficult for us", to show understanding, to move the dialogue forward, to check for agreement - "Will that be ok for you?", to react politely, to ask questions – "Let me see if I understand …", to make suggestions, to use conditional suggestions, and finally, to reach agreement – "Sure, I think we can manage that." Mike Hogan further notes that, in terms of grammar, due to its inherent tentativeness, the use of the continuous aspect can be quite helpful in business negotiations which require conflict management and reaching agreement. (Hogan 46-47).

Despite the fact that its role is sometimes questioned as to the extent it influences relationship building, we believe that *politeness* remains quintessential in both professional and personal settings. Showing respect can but contribute significantly to positive relationship building which is highly desirable in any business interaction. Consequently, the Business English trainer should not only focus on intercultural communication but should also take into account that soft skills (i.e. gender issues, conflict management, politeness, etc) acquisition and use in intercultural contexts is extremely important. The best tool able to familiarize students with aspects related to gender, conflict management and resolution and politeness is the *case study*. First, it provides access to all details of famous cultural clashes (e.g. the BMW-Rover or Daimler-Chrysler merger failure), then, learners can identify and debate on the causes which led to the clash; finally, they can suggest solutions. In this way, they acquire both business knowledge and intercultural skills, i.e. ability to identify and deal

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with gender issues, politeness, conflict management as well as other current issues. Our paper will further deal with politeness and the way it can be taught within a business English class.

Politeness is generally defined as showing good manners towards others in behavior and speech, being often associated with civility and courtesy. While there is a significant amount of research dedicated to politeness dating as far back as the 1970s, due to the fact that the concept becomes interpretable in different cultures, for polite behavior in one culture may be perceived otherwise in another, its study could by no means ever be considered exhaustive. The famous case of the 1992 LA Riots is a representative example illustrating this particular aspect.

Though apparently unrelated to politeness, the high/ low context dimension introduced by Edward T. Hall proves quite relevant in leading students towards understanding the importance of politeness in nowadays international business communication. The first step in familiarizing students with various cultures and the way politeness is regarded according to cultural background is the study of major intercultural theories developed by the above-mentioned researchers: Geert Hofstede, Edward T. Hall, Martin Gannon, Bob Dignen, Ian McMaster, Mike Hogan, etc. By acknowledging their work, we learn that, for example, "Germans need structure to avoid uncertainty, (...) they develop rituals, bureaucracy, planning, order and (...) thorough research" which "leads to a great respect for finding the best solutions through expertise, structures and plans" and consequently "because they have the facts, they believe they have the solutions" (Rottgers quoted by Sussens 43). Nevertheless, in carrying out intercultural communication, differences can definitely be mistaken for rudeness. Examples of cultural misunderstandings as well as of various aspects (e.g. false friends) which can lead to such situations can be easily found in British-German business relations. By identifying and illustrating the main sources of cultural misunderstandings, business communication trainers can introduce learners to some behavioural patterns in business intercultural communication. Furthermore, learners can thus aim to achieve successful communication despite language inaccuracies which are very likely to occur in such contexts. Case studies, as already mentioned, may prove extremely prolific in such cases, for learners are enabled to grasp cultural differences by first hand experiencing the way they can affect business relations. Moreover, they can be encouraged to identify the causes, to analyze the stages which led to conflict and more importantly, to come up with solutions to mitigate conflict.

In one of the latest issues of *Business Issues* (Autumn 2018) published by IATEFL, UK, Kirsten Waechter provides some valuable insight on the importance of Hall's dimensions and points to the fact that politeness can be interpretable and that, quite often, high context speakers can be difficult to understand. She also suggests an activity meant to enable students deal more easily with high/low context ambiguity. Her activity implies the use of cards with versions of statements uttered by both high and low context speakers as well as the neutral, i.e. clear version of the message meant to provide the game resolution. Once students have been explained the high/low context culture concept, they are asked to work in groups of 3 or 4 to organize the statements according to meaning. The author also proposes some follow-up questions. Moreover, she introduces the term *medium context*, which is perhaps highly necessary in nowadays communication, and suggests the use of modal verbs and softening language in order to achieve this form of communication. She encourages the use of sets of cards comprising different versions of the same message: one card states what the high context speaker would say, one that states what the low context speaker understands and finally, one which provides the neutral meaning of the message. Once explained the general characteristics of high/low context communication styles, students are asked to sort the cards out. At the end of the activity, students are provided with

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the answer sheet and are asked to compare it with their own results. The author also proposes some useful follow-up questions, for example: which statement was the most difficult to identify? What would be an appropriate version of the high context speaker's message so as to ensure that neither too direct nor too obscure? These enable learners to acknowledge new information, to cope with the traps which may occur in communication between high context and low context speakers, as well as to develop their own communication strategies. A short version of the activity that Kirsten Waechter devises is given below:

> What high context speakers say: I'm sure it's my fault.
> What high context speakers mean: It's your fault.
> What low context speakers understand: Why do they think it was their fault?
>
> What high context speakers say: I only have a few minor comments...
> What high context speakers mean: Please rewrite completely!
> What low context speakers understand: He has found a few typos.
>
> What high context speakers say: With the greatest respect…
> What high context speakers mean: You are an idiot!
> What low context speakers understand: He is listening to me.
>
> What high context speakers say: Oh, incidentally/ by the way…
> What high context speakers mean: The primary purpose of our discussion is…
> What low context speakers understand: That is not very important.
>
> What high context speakers say: Quite good.
> What high context speakers mean: A bit disappointing.
> What low context speakers understand: Quite good. (Waechter 27)

Undoubtedly, Waecther's activity can and should be used in the Business English class due to multiple reasons: based on a classic intercultural approach, it is nevertheless an updated activity able to provide learners with valuable information regarding current business communication. Once familiarized with how high and low context speakers perceive and transmit messages, they can work on modeling their own discourse by complying with their business partners' expectations.

Conclusions

Culture is nevertheless fluid, i.e. an ongoing experience, continuously modified by personal experience and attitudes. Despite the fact that emotional intelligence and soft skills acquisition have become essential in international communication, linguistic awareness is indispensable due to its intrinsic relation to the act of communication. Consequently, abilities such as language softening techniques including, but not limited to: use of past tense instead of present tense, use of negations followed by positive adjectives and quantifiers, use of introductory phrases to soften a negative or a too direct message, use of modal verbs, use of deflecting sentences to avoid direct refusal, use of question tags, etc., are still essential in building successful communication based on mutual trust and respect. Intercultural theories, as developed by famous researchers – Geert Hofstede, E.T. Hall, Richard Lewis, and others – are still essential in understanding and performing intercultural communication. However, the Business English trainer should also focus on the current literature and practical insights into the field of Business communication provided by professionals such as Bob Dignen, Ian

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McMaster, Marjorie Rosenberg, Patricia de Griese, Kirsten Waechter, and many others who, nevertheless, set the new trends in Business English training by particularly dealing with current aspects of Business communication. Access to their extremely interesting and relevant work is granted by means of IATEFL and BESIG active membership.

Despite local characteristics and difficulties which constantly hinder the educational process, i.e. seminar groups and lecture series with big numbers of students, few lectures and seminars per semester, poor payment, lack of interest and motivation – to mention just a few, we believe that the area of ESP, in general, and Business English, in particular, begins to gain some of the well deserved attention, interest and importance in our country, as well. We may conclude that while metaphor is a basic figure of speech essentially related to literature, in which one thing is described in terms of another, it can be easily used as a learning tool by trainers teaching intercultural communication. Metaphors can thus serve as vehicles of meaning in understanding cultures. For these reasons, Martin Gannon's work provides learners with the opportunity to understand national cultures from a metaphorical perspective. The impressive works of researchers such as Geert Hofstede or Edward T. Hall still form the basis of current trends in Intercultural communication and set new directions in Business English training (see Kirsten Waechter's example). As also pointed out by our students, in a world dominated by conflict, where trust becomes crucial in any human interaction, the importance of Business partners' soft skills clearly outweighs that of their linguistic abilities and therefore our focus, as trainers, should be shifted towards developing a curriculum based on our learners' need to acquire such skills.

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