Intercultural Communication in Business English. Issues and Solutions

Lavinia Nădrag
"Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania
Lnadrag28@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper is a meta-analysis which tackles issues relating to intercommunication, such as: definitions, characteristics, issues, solutions and recommendations. The idea is that students, specialists, managers and leaders, decision-makers must be aware of and understand the importance of communication and culture similarities and differences in an intercultural environment, the challenges posed and the solutions to be found. Thus, communication skills along with other social and digital skills can be the key to success in today's age of fast changes and globalization. Considering that businesspeople and decision-makers need to engage with partners and customers from around the world, this process requires relevant, impressive skills to manage intercultural perspectives and contexts.

1. Introduction

In order to be successful in a cross-cultural environment, the people doing international business via the English language need to understand and overcome major challenges, to adapt to new cultures' needs, demands and particularities, to ensure that their business stays competitive in the market. Using their knowledge of English, their resources to the fullest and the latest technologies, businesspeople and enterprises can avoid ineffective communication and improve their performance efficiency. According to Buzarna-Tihenea (2020, p. 306), the implementation of intercultural elements in English language teaching should take into account "both learners and teachers as key actors that employ language to solve a variety of tasks, to make connections and compare source and target languages and cultures". Moreover, to master their English, and their communication skills in English, lots of terms, collocations and idioms must be learnt and practised.

2. Literature review

One must become aware that it is essential to go beyond the descriptivist and traditional perspective of defining culture as "the totality of material and spiritual values created by mankind and the institutions necessary for the communication of these values" (DEX). Moreover, in Nieto's (1992) view, culture is a complex concept that includes elements such as: the content/product (what culture is), the process (how culture is created and transformed) and the agents of culture (who is responsible for creating and changing it). Moreover, the same researcher states that culture cannot be reduced to celebrations, food or dances, even if these are elements of culture (Nieto, 1992).

In her turn, Nedelcu (2008, pp. 18-27) refers to several UNESCO reports (from 1982 and 1995) specifying a set of defining indicators for the clarification of cultural dimensions in relation to projects of development (the relationship with the temporal dimension, with the environment, the relationship of the individual with the social group, the relation to hierarchy and power, to economic life and to innovation), to cultural models and explains the transition from cultural competence to intercultural competence. In the author's opinion, the term "intercultural competence", inspired by Geertz's semiotic vision of culture, emerged at the end of the 80s as an

attempt to define new objectives for learning foreign languages (based on the idea that it was important to master the rules of grammar and vocabulary, but also to acquire a new skill to easily manage cultural differences between environments) (Nedelcu, 2008, p. 25).

In the Preface to the book entitled "Inter/Cultural Communication. Representation and Construction of Culture" (2013, pp. XX-XXI), the editor Anastacia Kurylo introduces readers to unique approaches to topics relating to this domain through an "inclusive understanding of culture", the definition of culture provided by the author being: "inclusive of gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, geographic location, generational identity, and so forth". The focus should be on learning about underrepresented cultural groups through narratives, case studies, and examples provided throughout the text. The impact of interpersonal topics, interpersonally oriented intercultural communication topics (verbal and nonverbal communication) must also be emphasized. Research is explained through case studies based on specific methods, while current topics in inter/cultural communication are discussed by well-known and emerging scholars in the field.

According to Kurylo (2013), the learning goals for students should include the examination of fundamental concepts, theories and approaches connected to inter/cultural communication. This would enable students to explore communication in terms of its literal and figurative cultural borders. Furthermore, it would provide an insight into cultural influences but not the elements predetermining the behavior patterns of its members. This would also allow students to discuss the connections between culture and communication and it would encourage their involvement in the collaborative co-construction of culture. In addition, according to the same author, their self-awareness about the development and preservation of cultural identities could enhance, by acquiring knowledge of the experiences, behavior patterns, and insights of their own and other cultural groups. Communication is "a vital instrument in a wide array of business contexts" (Buzarna-Tihenea, 2023a, p. 279). Furthermore, successful business communication involves – among many others – the mastery of speaking skills, negotiation abilities and knowledge of verbal and nonverbal elements (Buzarna-Tihenea 2023b, p. 191). Acquiring greater intercultural communication abilities in an intricate social world, thinking critically about the dynamics of cultural and intercultural relationships, better assessing the part played by media and technology as cultural agents on local and global scales, implementing text concepts in daily practical situations, comprehending ethical issues connected to inter/cultural communication are other learning objectives pursued by those who want to get acquainted with this area of knowledge (Kurylo, 2013, XXI-XXII).

As teachers of English (Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Teaching English for Specific Purposes - ESP), we are particularly interested in English language business communication. Thus, the specialized literature has shown to us that interculturality is the basis of "intercultural teaching and learning", as a new and challenging field in the education system, strongly influenced by globalization (Ogay and Edelmann, 2016, pp. 388-400). The main aim of this field, in relation to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom, is to move from traditional ways of teaching a foreign language (with an emphasis on language structures and vocabulary) to teaching cultural elements, promoting the students' intercultural awareness and contributing to the development of their intercultural communication skills (Planken et al., 2004).

By relying on the specialized literature (see Patel et al.; 2011; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Liddicoat, 2004; Kohler, 2015), we can distinguish five principles that emphasize the interconnections between culture and language: active construction (the involvement of learners and of teachers in the language learning process); making connections and comparing source and target languages and cultures; social interactions (operating with personal, cultural and linguistic values, goals and preferences); reflection (understanding cultural differences and interculturality when reflecting on "social processes and their outcomes"; responsibility (Byram, 1997, p. 19).

3. Research methodology

The methodology of this study is based on the analysis of various bibliographical sources, on our long-time experience as teachers of English, and our business encounters, challenges and struggles. In order to discuss intercommunication issues, one needs to differentiate between stereotyping (when people expect all cultural group members to have the same characteristics and engage in the same behaviors), prejudice (a "hostile attitude" toward members of a cultural group because the person is a member of that group and is assumed to have qualities stereotypically associated with that group – see Allport, 1954/1979, p. 7), discrimination (the extension of prejudice into behavior), diversity (a variety of cultural groups/groupings).

Kurylo (2013, p. 7) warns us about the dangers incurred by the generalizations about a culture and the damage to the communication process, as stereotypes can emerge from erroneous perceptions. These distorted perceptions are triggered by the expectations that the members belonging to the same cultural group share the same features and display identical behavior patterns. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned scholar underlines the idea that individuals are unique, and irrespective of their membership to a certain cultural group, they also display considerable intracultural variety, as they also identify themselves with multiple cultures; each person is a map where different cultural identities intermingle in a unique pattern, triggering distinct behavior types.

Stereotypes are dangerous as they cancel individual differences and entail damaging consequences, such as prejudice. Stereotypes can also entail discrimination, seen as the materialization of prejudice into behavior patterns, and consisting of different, undesirable, and consequential attitudes towards a person belonging to the stereotyped group. One of the solutions to this issue, suggested by the experts in the field is to accept diversity and suppress stereotypes (Kurylo 2013, p. 8). This would enhance the efficiency of the communication process at intercultural level and would also contribute to the increase in one's awareness of their culture and of the ways it influences others.

4. Findings

During our research, we have noticed certain major issues that should be considered in intercultural communication. Firstly, the vocabulary used in a business environment. Besides everyday English and specific terminology, businesspeople need to be familiar with collocations such as: business associate/ dealing/ incubator/ partner; types of business (consulting/ contracting/ day-to-day/ diversified/ ailing or failing/ family-owned/ family-run/ flourishing/ for-profit/ high-tech/ home-based/ legitimate/ local/ lucrative/ medium-size/ medium-sized/ profit-making/ regulated/ reputable/ retail/ risky/ shady/ shrewd/ small-scale/ sordid/ successful/ thriving/ tricky/ wholesale – see https://dictionary.cambridge.org/collocation/english/business). Kenneth Beare (2020) refers to collocations with the verbs "to do" (accounts/ business/ deals/ due diligence/ paperwork/ research; "to make" an appointment/ a calculation/ cutbacks/ a deal/ an investment/ a loan/ money/ a profit; "to manage" a business or factory/ expectations/ a project or a team; "to operate" or "to run" an airline/ a facility/ a service; the noun "deal" to cut a deal/ do a deal/ to give someone a deal/ to close a deal/ to work on a deal; the noun "contract" to write/ draw up a contract/ to sign a contract/ to negotiate a contract/ to offer someone a contract/ to bid on, etc.

Secondly, lack of clarity/ ambiguity might occur (for more details see Pop-Flanja & Gâz, 2015). Since cultures furnish people with various ways of thinking, perceiving and interpreting the world, the same words can engulf distinct meanings to people from different cultures, even when they use the "same" language. When languages differ, and translation has to be employed to communicate, the risk for misunderstandings enhances because each culture bears the imprints of its unique background; it has been shaped according to a certain value system and it is permeated by a specific communication style. The lack of an appropriate comprehension of these elements (that are associated to the cultures of the actors involved in the communication process and that are often triggered by culturally embedded presuppositions, lack of awareness of the value system of the other culture and differences in communication styles) entails ambiguity; this hinders the communication process, as the listener loses part of the message and develops an incorrect viewpoint about the conveyed pieces of information.

Thirdly, the inflexible attitude is concerned. When entering different cultural backgrounds, some people avoid consciously or unconsciously the exposure or experience of the respective cultures, triggering introvert behavior patterns, closed mindset, and the impression that the visitor rejects the host culture. These people miss out on the opportunities to learn and adapt to the new culture, which undermines team spirit and weakens business relationships. Therefore, people should pay more attention to the cultural foundations of their behavior patterns, perceptions, beliefs, and values in order to perceive their interactions from a cultural viewpoint.

Fourthly, ethnocentrism – i.e., the idea that one's culture is correct, etic, and rational, and that others are inferior – can also trigger serious consequences. It can be considered as a barrier to communication (see Jandt, 2007). This behavior (that often occurs unconsciously) is difficult to prevent because individuals usually judge different cultures in connection to their own standards, and do not assess other cultures from the host country's perspective. This behavior also consists of selective listening and value judgement, negatively affecting the quality of the communication process.

The development of the right competencies, such as tolerance for ambiguity, cultural flexibility, and reduced ethnocentrism is paramount to the enhancement of the intercultural communication process. These competencies are supported by exposure to foreign cultures, active feedback, and personal features such as receptiveness, amiability, cordiality, extraversion, uprightness, dignity, etc., playing an important part in the establishment of efficient communication and global leadership. Thus, business leaders would be able to assess and harness the differences among various cultures in order to boost the quality of the business communication process with persons belonging to different cultures, on the globalized market.

The efficiency of intercultural communication is also influenced by the individuals' understanding of the communication styles associated to the cultures they interact with. For instance, some cultures are "high context", as communication depends to a great extent on the physical context and on the information transmitted by it rather by written or spoken lexemes (see the Japanese culture, for example), while others are "low context", as the communication process is direct, precise, open and feeling-based (e.g., Australian, German, US cultures) (for more information on this topic see https://www.crossculture.com/the-lewis-model-dimensions-of-behaviour/).

The British cross-cultural communication expert Richard D. Lewis (1999) greatly contributed to the research in this field and to the improvement of the interaction between various cultures by designing a model focused on the definition and simplification of inter-cultural analysis. In addition, this scholar explained a taxonomy of cultures whose comprehension could assist business leaders in attaining efficient cross-cultural communication, i.e., "linear-active" (calm, factual and decisive), "reactive" (gentle, considerate, hospitable, and good listeners), and "multi-active" (warm, amiable and sensitive; talking in an indirect way; desire to do many things at once).

The specialized literature highlights several steps that enhance intercultural communication skills. First of all, preparation is very important in order to become acquainted with the culture of the persons involved in the communication process (cultural norms, social customs, etc.). Learning the language is also extremely useful as it reveals one's effort to create connections, which will be highly appreciated and respected. Observing the behavior of the persons belonging to different cultures, listening to them carefully, paying attention to the ways in which they react during various interactions, searching for common cultural elements also play an essential part in intercultural communication. Qualities such as open-mindedness and self-awareness should be taken into consideration; cultural assumptions and preconceived ideas should be put aside as each individual is unique and has his/her own preferences irrespective of his/her cultural identity. Open dialogue is also a vital element when it comes to the interaction between people belonging to different cultures as it diminishes the risk of misunderstandings and embarrassing situations. Asking for support in order to learn more about the culture of future communication partners will facilitate these interactions (see "Intercultural Communication in Business" EHLION Language Consultancy", at https://ehlion.com/magazine/intercultural-communication/).

Prisca Valentino (2018) refers to one major reason for ineffective intercultural communication (i.e., cultural differences) and explains several ways for improving it: Be aware of your own culture; Be curious; Experience different cultures regularly; Listen and observe; Learn to 'read' body language and understand non-verbal cues; Be aware of cultural differences and individual cultures; Simplicity is key.

5. Conclusions

Living in this contemporary globalized world imposes a permanent need for communication and brings into contact more and more people who speak different languages and belong to different cultures. Language is embedded in society and culture, and thus learning a foreign language also involves learning at least a part of its culture. The literature in this field has always pinpointed to the inherent interfingering of language and culture in foreign language teaching and learning activities. Grounded in the prominence of communication in a multilingual environment, the teaching of specialist languages should focus not only on grammatical structures and vocabulary, as this does not help learners to use the specialist language in the real world. The main purpose of learning everyday English and specialized English is represented by the need for communication. Pupils/students need to acquire those skills that help them understand others and understand each other, both from the point of view of action and identity. Given the rise of globalization and the (increasingly) multicultural work, the need to develop interculturality has become an urgent issue, as intercultural competence requires a good understanding and operation in the cultural and intercultural environment, online and offline. In terms of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching, the intercultural approach can transform pupils/students from foreign language users into intercultural speakers, stimulating their curiosity and improving their cultural knowledge and language skills.

6. References

- Allport, W. G. 1954/1979. *The nature of prejudice.* Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., Reading, Mass.
- Beare, K. 2020. Using Proper Business English Collocations Can Ease Commercial Dealing. *ThoughtCo*. [online] Available at: thoughtco.com/business-english-collocations-1210155 [Accessed 10 June 2024]
- Byram, M. (ed.) 1997. *Face to Face. Learning Language and Culture through Visits and Exchanges*. London: CILT.
- Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza), A. 2020. Intercultural Teaching in the ESP Classroom: Case Study Outline. *Ovidius University Annals, Economic Sciences Series*, XX(1): 306-313
- Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza), A. 2023a. Interviews in Business Communication. *Ovidius University Annals, Economic Sciences Series* XXIII(1): 276-282. https://doi.org/10.61801/OUAESS.2023.1.35
- Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza), A. 2023b. Developing Speaking Skills through Debates. Case Study Proposal in Business English. *Ovidius University Annals, Economic Sciences Series* XXIII(2): 190-197. https://doi.org/10.61801/OUAESS.2023.2.243
- Jandt, F. 2007. *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication. Identities in a Global Community*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kohler, M. 2015. *Teachers as Mediators in the Foreign Language Classroom.* New York: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783093076
- Kurylo, Anastacia (Ed.). 2013. *Inter/Cultural Communication. Representation and Construction of Culture*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publication Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544304106
- Lewis, D. R. 1999. *Cross Cultural Communication - A Visual Approach.* London: Axis Europe Limited.
- Liddicoat, A.J., Scarino, A., Papademetre, L. and Kohler, M. 2003. *Report on Intercultural Language Learning*. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Liddicoat, A. 2004. Intercultural language teaching: principles for practice. *New Zealand Language Teacher,* 30, p. 17-24
- Nedelcu, A. 2008. *Fundamentele educației interculturale [The foundations of intercultural education].* Bucharest: Polirom Publishing House.

- Nieto, S. 2008. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, pp.127-142. [online] Available at: https://www.academia.edu/26476828/chapter_9_Culture_and_Education_1 [Accessed 15 June 2024] https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-7984.2008.00137.x
- Ogay, T., Edelmann, D. 2016. 'Taking culture seriously': implications for intercultural education and training. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(3), pp. 388-400. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2016.1157160
- Patel, F., Mingsheng L., Sooknanan, P. 2011. *Intercultural communication: Building a global community*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270318
- Planken, B., Van hooft, A., Korzilius, H. 2004. Promoting intercultural communicative competence through foreign language courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 67(3), p.308.-315. https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569904268095
- Pop-Flanja, D., Gâz, R.M. 2015. "Ambiguity in Intercultural Communication". In *International Conference RCIC'15. Redefining Community in Intercultural Context*, Air Force Academy, Brasov, pp. 145-149.
- Romanian Academy, "Iorgu Iordan" Institute of Linguistics, 2016. *DEX [Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române] [The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language]*, 3rd ed.. Bucharest: Gold Enciclopedic Universe.
- Valentino, P. 2018. "7 Ways to Improve your Intercultural Communication Skills". [online] Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/7-ways-improve-your-intercultural-communication-skills-valentino> [Accessed 15 June 2024]
- "What Is Intercultural Communication?", *EHLION Language Consultancy* [online] Available at https://ehlion.com/magazine/intercultural-communication/ [Accessed 15 June 2024]