

Intercultural Communication Activities and Techniques in Business English Teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims at showing the paramount importance of sensing cultural similarities and differences for understanding and communicating with people belonging to different cultures, especially in a business environment. Teachers have become increasingly aware of the role played by interculturality, intercultural education, cross-cultural communication, the attitude towards prejudice, stereotypes and conflicts. In this respect, certain EU documents have been discussed, anthropologists' opinions have been provided, and a case study has been presented. This case study is based on the idea that the English business teaching process and the students' language skills could also be improved by incorporating intercultural communication elements. Several activities and techniques that could support the insertion of intercultural communication in business English teaching (such as the use of authentic materials, role plays and simulations, project-based learning, and the use of various online tools) are briefly presented for this purpose.

Key words: intercultural education, communication, teaching, business, ESP

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1. Introduction

Intercultural education should represent a key element in the design of business English teaching, as it enhances the student's professional and intercultural abilities. For instance, it promotes diversity, critical thinking, inclusion and open-mindedness; develops intercultural skills; boosts international communication; prepares students for the global labor market; develops learning experiences.

The specialized literature focused on cultural and intercultural education has underlined that certain EU objectives are shaped by the requirements of the current globalized context; in addition, they are outlined in several landmark documents, such as the “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Building a Stronger Europe: The Role of Youth, Education and Culture Policies” (May 22, 2018). This document places in the limelight the important pillars, i.e., education, training and culture, and pinpoints their vital role in the dissemination and promotion of joint values and in the establishment of a climate that harnesses mutual understanding. Furthermore, the aforementioned Communication reinforces the position held by education and culture in the development of the knowledge, understanding and acknowledgement of “Europe's rich shared cultural heritage, history, experiences, convictions and values”, as these elements “unite people across borders, help promote equality between women and men and give us a sense of belonging together. Education, training and culture can help us discover and experience what it means to be European” (for more details, see <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0268>).

A similar provision is encompassed in point 3 of the Rome Declaration (March 25, 2017), which stresses the idea that the European Union should play an important part in providing young people with “the best education and training” and offer them the opportunity to “study and find jobs across the continent”. Furthermore, the aforementioned document highlights the objective of

the European Union to "preserve cultural heritage and promote cultural diversity" (see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_17_767).

The programs and strategies of several EU countries have been tackled by scholars, pinpointing the focus on the cooperation among schools and cultural organizations or institutions; these partnerships with museums, NGOs, local public authorities, parents as educational partners, etc. – that are characterized by transdisciplinary approaches, innovation, creativity, involvement and performance in learning and teaching processes, the capitalization of social, intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, the focus on traditions in education, economic and political discourses – represent the main leverages of cultural education (Ciocan et al., 2016). These scholars further explain that the implementation of partnerships requires curricular and extracurricular activities, as well as teacher training, the improvement of teaching methods, the enhancement of the connection between language learning and cultures.

2. Theoretical background

Anna Virkama (2010, p.41) explains that the social science literature (see Hall, 1959/1981; Hofstede, 1997; Gudykunst and Mody, 2002) identifies two major approaches to culture, i.e., the essentialist and non-essentialist ones. According to this scholar,

"The essentialist view sees cultures – national or smaller units – as containers of culture, each one separate from the other. Within this view, each culture is a set of characteristics that can be studied and used in order to communicate with the people 'belonging' to this culture. Cultures are seen as independently existing patterns". "The non-essentialist view seems to be more accurate in post-migration, hybrid societies" (Virkama, 2010, p. 43).

In addition, the same author explains that migration has increased "the possible references for many people, thereby problematising the adoption of the nation state as a unit of reference for cultural identity" (Virkama, 2010, p. 43).

Moreover, anthropologists explain that culture is one of the powerful forces that shape us; thus, our perceptions and understanding of the world, as well as the ways we express ourselves bear our cultural imprints (Rollwagen, 1986; Henrich, 2001; Kuznar and Sanderson, 2007). Different communication styles, distinct attitudes toward the management of conflicts, various approaches to achieving tasks, different perspectives upon the decision-making process, divergent stances regarding the idea of disclosure, and contrastive outlooks and attitudes to knowing – all are instances of inherent patterns of cultural dissimilarities that should be scrutinized when it comes to the integration of intercultural elements in business English teaching (DuPraw and Axner, 1997).

Since communication contributes to the development of "formally structured relationships between people" (Nadrag, 2023, p. 444) and its styles vary to a great extent in terms of culture, attention should be paid to language usage, more specifically to those words and phrases that are employed in different ways and with various meanings (see Godwin-Jones, 2000; Krumrey-Fulks, 2019). Furthermore, these authors underline the extent of the importance paid to non-verbal communication elements (i.e., facial expressions, gestures, seating arrangements, personal distance, sense of time, etc.), which is also essential, as well as the various rules that apply to the adequate degree of assertiveness during the communication process (see Nadrag, 2021).

The attitude toward conflicts may also vary, as in some cultures conflicts may have a positive connotation, while others see it in a negative way. For instance, DuPraw and Axner (1997) explain that in most cultures, conflicts are perceived as undesirable; according to these scholars, in the American culture, the direct approach of conflicts is usually encouraged (such as face-to-face meeting); on the other hand, open conflicts embarrass many eastern Europeans, who would rather approach them privately.

Different cultures also tackle tasks in distinct manners, as they do not have the same access to resources, their understandings of time and their viewpoints on task completion benefits are divergent, and they often perceive relationship-building processes and task-oriented endeavors in contrastive ways (see Bartosik-Purgat and Rakowska, 2023). Furthermore, as regards productive cooperation and task achievement, people from different cultures may view relationships in distinct manners. In this regard, DuPraw and Axner (1997) explain that Asian and Spanish people tend to establish relationships at the beginning of the collaboration process and focus on task completion

toward the end, while the Europeans and the Americans are more prone to develop relationships as they work on the task and direct their focus on the task itself.

As far as the decision-making style is concerned, the individuals' parts differ in terms of culture (Yates and de Oliveira, 2016). For instance, in some cultures, decisions are delegated, responsibility being assigned to a subordinate (e.g., American culture), while in other cultures it happens the other way around, leaders holding decision-making responsibilities (e.g. Southern European and Latin American countries). Some cultures apply the majority rule (e.g., American culture), while others implement the consensus (e.g., Japanese culture). People's attitude towards disclosure also differs from one culture to another, as far as emotions, personal information or conflict and misunderstanding reasons are concerned (DuPraw and Axner, 1997).

According to Brion (2021), cultures also influence the ways of knowing and learning. In this regard, DuPraw and Axner (1997) profess that in some cultures, such as the European ones, it is considered that knowledge acquired via cognitive means (i.e., counting and measuring) is more valid, while the African ones favor the affective ways of knowing. The aforementioned authors explained that there are also groups that prefer library research in order to understand a certain issue, while others focus more on visiting places and people that experienced the same issues.

Human nature is prone to classify the unknown or the elements that are different or that cannot be understood as abnormal, bizarre or incorrect, entailing prejudice (Avruch and Black, 1993). Anthropologists underline the dangers of prejudice when it permeates organizational structures and the institutions that influence lives and communities (Griffith et al, 2007). Therefore, these scholars underline the utmost importance assigned to the respect of these differences among cultures and to collaboration in order to enhance mutual understanding. Increasing the awareness of cultural differences, identifying their influence on intercultural interactions, and exploring similarities contribute to an efficient intercultural communication process, enhances our understanding and fosters mutual respect. When it comes to business English, the general social approach of an organization has to be taken into consideration, as well as the fact that in such contexts, "communication is focused on sending and receiving messages related to tasks for providing and seeking information and options, organizing ideas and activities, clarifying ideas and plans, making plans and proposals, making and executing decisions" (Nadrag, 2019, p. 480).

It is also noteworthy that special attention should be paid to various communication styles as they mirror deeper cultural philosophies and perspectives, contributing to the delineation of a wider picture of the respective culture (Smith, 2011; Galanti, 2008; Purnell, 2009). Furthermore, this creates learning opportunities, as it questions preconceptions, prejudices and stereotypes, encourages us to take into consideration distinct approaches, and challenges us to envisage new learning possibilities. Therefore, open-mindedness and the openness to new learning opportunities can connect people, establishing new partnerships and bridging the gap between different cultural groups, improving thus the intercultural communication process (see Saaida, 2023).

3. Case study. Activities and techniques for the enhancement of intercultural communication in business English teaching

The courses or seminars focused on the enhancement of intercultural communication competences and skills in business English language teaching and learning should first familiarize students with a field of research whose major objective is to create equal educational opportunities for people belonging to different racial, ethnic, social and cultural groups (see Banks, 2015). The topics addressed by these courses and seminars, and the working techniques should facilitate the understanding and acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for effective functioning in a multicultural and globalized society, characterized by the interaction with people from different groups and backgrounds, for the purpose of establishing and implementing various business partnerships.

For this purpose, the courses and seminars should also support students to improve their knowledge, understanding and adequate use of specific notions of interculturality and intercultural competence; to be able to use concepts in analyses or case studies in an appropriate and informed manner; to explain and interpret some ideas, projects, processes related to their field of study; to explain some phenomena, events with an educational and communicational character by means of

the proposed analysis and interpretation models; to develop cultural analysis skills; to interpret different points of view; to materialize theoretical knowledge in projects or case studies; to make connections between the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired through the study of intercultural education and their application in solving and evaluating problem situations; to promote some cognitive values and attitudes, such as: critical and divergent thinking, self-critical and convergent thinking, availability for dialogue and debate, curiosity and interest in the ethical issues of the intercultural environment, coherence and rigor of thinking; to acquire intercultural teamwork skills.

In order to develop intercultural skills in business English teaching and learning, each teacher should employ a variety of roles when interacting with students during classroom activities. From an intercultural point of view, the teacher focuses more on the students' understanding and interpretations of the language elements s/he teaches and less on accuracy (Mangnejo and Shah, 2021). In other words, the teacher should focus on the students' development of their own opinions and reasoning through questions, rather than giving them answers.

Teachers should also help them connect instances and events to more coherent information through tasks and practices that reinforce the learning process. Thus, Zheng and Gao (2019) explain that in order to increase the degree of learning, the central role of the teacher is to present activities and create opportunities so that students could develop their understanding skills and intercultural competences, through productive interactions with the teacher and their peers.

During intercultural teaching and learning activities in the classroom or elsewhere, the teacher assumes a number of roles, depending on the discourse s/he is addressing (Savu, 2014), such as managing feelings, praising and encouraging, capitalizing on students' ideas, formulating questions, providing information and directions, correcting or ignoring mistakes.

The management of feelings also involves the ability of the teaching staff to understand and manage the students' feelings and experiences that are similar to the discussion topics tackled in courses and seminars (Frenzel and Buric, 2021). An adequate management of this process establishes a uniform interaction between the teacher and his/ her students. Furthermore, Lamping (2021) explains that praise and encouragement take into account the fact that the activities designed by the teacher are focused not only on meeting the seminar/course objectives, but also on motivating students to develop their language skills and intercultural competences. According to the aforementioned scholar, teachers can do this by supporting and encouraging their students with praise, complimenting them on their work and constantly telling them that their ideas and achievements are extremely valuable. Moreover, he stresses that the teaching staff should always pay attention to the contribution of their students, as a sign of appreciation of their work (Lamping, 2021). Therefore, teachers should use, interpret, summarize or even reformulate the students' ideas, expressed during the interactions, acknowledging their contribution to the development of the task or activity.

An important practice in the interaction is represented by the formulation of questions, as a way to stimulate students to honestly express their opinions about a certain subject (DuPrav and Axner, 1997). The questions should be tailored to the course/ seminar topic and to the students' proficiency level and interests (in order to increase motivation) and for the most part they should trigger the flow of ideas and suggest the language elements to be used. Specialists in the field recommend that teachers should comment upon/correct the students' answers in a manner that does not discourage them from providing additional answers or engaging in future interactions. Moreover, the teaching staff can choose not to pay attention to their mistakes, ignoring them, because their needs, from the intercultural perspective, focus on the understanding and interpretations of the target language and not on accuracy.

After having considered all these factors, we are suggesting the following case study which can be based on the experiment and observation method. The hypothesis is as follows: the integration of intercultural communication in the English business courses and seminars will enhance the students' language proficiency skills, with a special focus on their speaking skills, as well as their soft skills, such as teamwork skills, critical thinking and adaptability.

For this purpose, two homogeneous groups of students majoring in International Business are required. The teaching process with the first group (i.e., the control one) will be based on traditional, teacher-centred approaches; the second group (i.e., the experimental/focus one) will be exposed to intercultural communication elements in their English courses and seminars. Both

groups will sit for initial (before a four-week teaching stage) and final tests (after the teaching stage). At the end of the experiment, the test results will be compared, in order to check the validity of the hypothesis.

The integration of intercultural communication in English business courses and seminars can be carried out by means of several strategies and techniques, such as the study of authentic materials, simulation activities, role plays and case studies from international business contexts, projects and presentations related to international business, the integration of cultural comparisons, use of technology, by addressing diversity in the classroom, etc. The respect for cultural diversity and the increase in cultural awareness will contribute to a balanced, open-minded and inclusive atmosphere.

Authentic materials connected to the business world (magazine and newspaper articles, movies, documentaries, etc.) enhance language skills, furnish refreshing perspectives upon different cultural values and mentalities and provide contact with genuine content and language (Peacock, 1997, pp. 144-145). Authentic case studies focused on the business environment can also support the learning process, as they delineate a real background for the use of business vocabulary items and for a better comprehension of cultural differences. In this regard, the literature in the field pinpoints the advantages brought by the integration of authentic materials in a wide variety of teaching contexts (Berardo, 2006, p. 62; Kilickaya, 2004).

Students can also be divided into small groups and required to assume various roles in the simulation of cross-cultural interactions, according to certain scenarios (e.g., business lunch/dinner, receptions, negotiations, management of cross-cultural disputes, business meetings involving businesspersons from different cultures, etc.), which will boost their ESP and intercultural communication skills as well as their interpersonal relationships (Razali and Ismail, 2017, p. 73; Tompkins, 1998).

Teachers can also encourage students to work on projects (see project-based learning, Chmelárová and Pasiar, 2017, p. 34; Čapek, 2019; Markula & Aksela, 2022); they can tackle various cultural elements in connection to communication in the business world (for instance, market strategies adapted to the local culture, dealing with cultural diversity in international teams, the influence of cultural features on business practice, customization of products and services in connection with certain types of markets) or even compare two or more cultures, in terms of business communication. Moreover, teachers can also organize debates or invite native speakers or experts in the students' field of study in order to share their experience and provide them useful pieces of advice and authentic insight.

The wide array of available online platforms, applications and resources can also be capitalized in order to encourage the students' cultural exchanges and entertaining cultural experiences that will develop the students' language skills. By encouraging students to access such tools, the cultural and professional exchange will also trigger incommensurable benefits as far as the improvement of their creativity and language skills are concerned (Boholano et al., 2021, p. 10).

4. Findings

It is expected that the comparison of the two test results (initial and final ones) will validate the research hypothesis, highlighting the advantages of integrating intercultural communication into business English courses and seminars.

The integration of intercultural communication elements in the course and seminar syllabus (by focusing, for instance, on cross-cultural communication, the importance of cultural contexts, the differences in organizational structures in various cultures, etc.) will entail the improvement of the students' intercultural abilities. In addition, enhancing the learning process, fostering positive and qualitative business interactions, shaping efficient global businesspeople, contributing to a better comprehension of the world can be among the many benefits of the exposure to intercultural communication elements.

5. Conclusions

It is noteworthy that the integration of intercultural communication in business English courses and seminars is paramount to the students' future careers in their field of study, as it prepares them – among many others – for successful international business partnerships. These courses and seminars should focus on the promotion of diversity and multicultural education, intercultural abilities, the development of communication skills, in order to shape competent and adaptable businesspeople that perform in an increasingly globalized and multicultural environment.

Active listening, mutual respect and empathy should also be implemented in intercultural interactions in order to better understand the partners' perspectives and ideas and to reach common ground. Although cultural norms shape our identity to great extent, they do not always pertain all behavior patterns, as there are also other elements that influence our personalities, such as education, social environment, family, personal traits, previous life experience, ethnicity, age, etc.

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