

The use of ICT in the development of Intercultural Business Communication

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Abstract

Language learning today gives ample evidence of the changes that have been brought about by technological advances and the increasing globalization of the world. The specificity of language learning and the information revolution have reshaped language courses.

General English courses are playing a minor role in favour of professional English, as the increasing mobility of citizens and the demanding (and tough) work market require an international language (English) for professional and academic disciplines; traditional printed books have evolved into multimedia materials featuring images, video, animation, etc. The interactivity these elements provide is a highly motivational feature for learners. Besides, virtual sessions and virtual courses have been introduced to facilitate and promote language learning.

Since economy is the most visible aspect of globalization, the need to do business in an international context has increased the demand to learn Business English. Nevertheless, the development of intercultural communication has made clear that despite today's globalization, cultural differences persist. Speakers of different languages see the world differently since cultural values are usually transferred to the communicative process. Then, doing business in a global market depends on the ability to successfully communicate in an intercultural context. The emergence of Intercultural Business Communication reflects the concern of global organizations with the cost of doing business. Business students are expected to develop an awareness of the cultural aspects that influence business relations all over the world and to acquire the ability to behave appropriately in different cultural settings.

With such ideas in mind, our paper will summarize the main concepts, processes and factors influencing Intercultural Business Communication. Once the theoretical background has been established, we will move on to the actual teaching/learning practice as we focus on online resources to promote intercultural communicative competence in business settings. With the help of those resources, we will show how we can plan virtual and motivating sessions offering the students the genuine advantages of ICT learning.

KEYWORDS: *Intercultural Communication, Business English, Language Learning and ICT.*

1. Intercultural communication

The linguistic anthropology points at the interdependence between language and culture. A definite language shows a specific understanding of the world. Then, the language that speakers use can influence the communicative process:

Speakers of different languages necessarily construe the world differently and are locked into the world view given to them by the languages they use. (Babcock and Du-Babcock, 2001: 377) [1]

Targowski and Metwalli (2003) [2] also acknowledge that communication is a vehicle for culture. This close link between language and culture implies that cultural differences remain despite globalization.

Byram (1997) [3] establishes an explicit relationship between foreign language courses and the development of intercultural communicative competence. The main goal of foreign language teaching should go beyond linguistic acquisition to make students experience "the otherness" of different cultural backgrounds. In the particular instance of English as a second language, the status of English as a lingua franca specifically requires the development of intercultural competencies as it is likely that the learners will end up communicating with non-native people from different nationalities.

2. Intercultural business communication

As we have already mentioned, to communicate successfully in an international context, we must be aware of the cultural aspects and assumptions underlying communicative interactions.

The global business environment requires an extensive intercultural training since we need to work with people who have different values, beliefs, behavioural norms, and ways of apprehending reality. The growth of Intercultural Business Communication (IBC) is directly related to the increasing globalization of our century.

We understand IBC as "communication within and between businesses that involves people from more than one culture" (Chaney and Martin, 2007:2) [4]. In this environment, individuals who speak different languages and illustrate diverse cultural realities interact in international networks. As the clash of civilizations has an effect on the costs of doing business in international contexts, IBC has attracted more and more interest as an academic domain.

IBC, then, has grown into a complex subject. The areas of communication and culture as contributing disciplines are rich enough and the business dimension adds to the complexity.

2.1 IBC Background

Early literature on this topic identified different cultural components that affect the communication process.

Hall (1959) [5] established a distinction between high and low context cultures; following his ideas, many researchers used contextuality to contrast communication patterns among speakers from high- and low- context cultures.

The work of Hofstede (1980) [6] was highly innovative since it pointed at a close relationship between culture and business. His research analyses how cultural dimensions influence management practices.

Hofstede's studies on national culture made possible the comparison of different cultural communication styles and methods. Nevertheless, his concept of national culture is still a controversial question. Some writers imply that Hofstede mainly studied cultural differences associated with nationality.

Following the trail of intercultural communication, IBC focused on understanding other cultures rather than analysing the effect of one's own culture.

In this line of research, Victor (1992) [7] approached the work on cross-cultural business communication as an ethnographer, closely examining the components of culture. He analysed seven cultural variables that influence business communication.

Some years later, Beamer (1995) [8] designed a model based on schemata. He determined that we can make sense of information thanks to pre-existing mental structures. The problem is that our schemata of other cultures necessarily differ from those cultures. The goal of IBC is to realign both schemata as far as possible modifying then our preexisting images.

Nevertheless, the focus on other cultures is a limited approach. Cultural generalizations are fairly unreliable since there is a high degree of variation among members of the same culture. Broad generalizations can also be dangerous as they lead to stereotyping. In addition, we can provide more insights about our own culture than about others.

Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2003) [9] dwelt on that idea and warned us of the limitations of carrying out one-dimensional analysis, and ignoring individual aspects.

Friedman and Berthoin Antal (2005) [10] propose identifying the cultural components that shape each person (national, professional, etc.) as a mean to understand how culturally complex human beings are.

As IBC was claiming attention to individual identity, Varner and Palmer (2005) [11] and Jameson (2007) [12] incorporated these concerns to their process. Jameson's model of individual cultural identity combines these ideas with the earlier line of research: "including more focus on understanding one's own cultural background does not reduce the need to understand others' cultural backgrounds". (Jameson, 2007: 202).

It is our opinion that future research should follow both approaches for a thorough analysis of IBC.

2.2 Teaching and learning IBC

Though the concept of special languages goes back to the Greek and Roman Empires, the development of English for Specific Purposes can be placed in the second half of the previous century.

Nevertheless, Business English does not rise as a discipline until some years later, when the needs of the labour (and lately) global market have turned Business English into the flagship of ESP.

Starting in the 1990's, professionals have realized that learning English is not enough to do business in the current world. It is necessary to speak the specific language of this occupational field.

With the turn of the century, the technological advances and the increasing global market, the teaching and learning of Business English has evolved to incorporate intercultural aspects and introduce interactive and multimedia materials.

The teaching/ learning of IBC nowadays is "a recognition of the cultural factors influencing behavior in business encounters around the globe" (Planken et. al., 2004: 308) [13].

In an international business environment, cultural intelligence (Triandis, 2006) [14], that is, the ability to identify and conform to appropriate behaviours in diverse intercultural contexts, is seen more and more as a desirable attribute by employers.

From the teaching angle, the serious challenge for Business English instructors is to be able to achieve all the goals: facilitate language acquisition, improve cross-cultural awareness, and encourage the students to start developing a professional identity as specialists who will need to perform in intercultural business settings.

Furthermore, being English a lingua franca, the development of intercultural communicative competence should be promoted within the context of English as an international language. The status



of English as a world language nowadays leaves behind the idea of a standardized native speaker and incorporates local and international contexts.

Lastly, our teaching will also need to address some of the present questions like focusing on the students' own culture and personal identities, analysing the communicative process from a multidisciplinary point of view and replacing notions of cultural stereotypes: "An individual conducting business cannot be assumed to represent a homogenous national culture" (Zachry, 2003: 75) [15].

3. Pedagogic resources

Once the theoretical frame has been laid out, we would like to focus on the teaching practice. At the present time, there is common agreement about the need to teach intercultural communicative competence in business settings, the problem is the training.

The development of information technology has been proved essential. The growth of ICT provides students with multimedia and interactive resources that are strongly motivating. The use of ICT tools also brings flexibility to the learning process and encourages self-learning.

Internet, in particular, is an unlimited source of possibilities for the learning of IBC capabilities. On a cautionary note, we must also stress that this unlimited quality make absolutely necessary a careful selection of resources, purposely designed to fit our goals (and the proficiency level of our students).

For the teaching practice, there are plenty of interculturally-oriented (and free) resources on the Internet that we can use to plan motivating seminars or to design controlled virtual learning sessions. We would like to contribute to the teaching practice introducing the most useful webpages that we can currently find on the Internet. We will comment on the type of resources and content provided and we will point at some interesting activities on each page.

The websites and activities we are introducing are devoted to the development of intercultural skills in the business setting and the acquisition of knowledge and they have been carefully selected according to pedagogic purposes:

<http://www.mislinks.org/topics/icc.htm>

This website offers many links to different types of resources. There are theoretical contributions (articles, journals) and also databases, exercises and simulations. In particular, the links "Multicultural, Cross-cultural & Intercultural Games & Activities" and "Multicultural Experiential Exercises" lead to plenty of multicultural activities and games.

Most of the information and activities are committed to cross-cultural communication in general contexts, but there are still quite a few ties to IBC training, for instance, links to Hofstede's website and games. There we can read stories of cultural differences and learn how to play "The Windmills of our Minds", a business simulation game. Continuing with this author, "Culture Values: Hofstede Rankings for All Countries/Regions" shows the way to an original tool to compare value dimensions among many different countries.

Lastly, we recommend doing the intercultural business quiz on "How Culturally Aware Are You?"

<http://www.eslflow.com/interculturalcommunication.html>

On this site there are culture lessons, cross-cultural lessons and cultural etiquette quizzes. Most of the content is designed to promote intercultural skills in business settings. The business quizzes are attractive and effective; we particularly like the "International cities etiquette" quiz.

The culture and cross-cultural lessons are also worthy to explore since they lead to useful worksheets, Macmillan and Onestopenglish lessons, games, cross-cultural quizzes and many other practical resources. On "Excellent cross-culture quizzes and answers", we propose the quizzes "Read



my lips”, about kinesics, and “Dining, drinking and deal-making”, about business etiquette on meals. The activity “Making a good impression” is suggested to develop cultural awareness when receiving foreign visitors. It is a good exercise to encourage class discussion.

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/culture-vulture.php>

This website is extremely useful for IBC training. Leaving aside the commercial part of the page, we can make use of many tools and resources. If we want to acquire information, there are enlightening articles and news. It is worth clicking on the heading “Intercultural Business Communication”, since it reveals a helpful tool to compare one culture against another following Hofstede’s dimensions.

We can also find practical information for different countries in the free guides to etiquette, customs and protocol. In addition, there are many motivating quizzes on the way to do business in specific countries. However, we prefer the ones related to cultural awareness in business matters, notably “Business Card Etiquette” and “Cross Cultural Quiz - Gift Giving”.

<http://www.businesscommunication.org/resourcesNew/interculturalCommCasesNew.html>

If you are interested in intercultural business communication cases, you can choose from seven different scenarios. They provide lesson plans with all the necessary information for teachers: notes, instructions, additional material, and follow-up questions. Working on these cases, the students are reminded of being aware of and sensitive to cultural differences when engaging in business. “Close Encounters of the British Kind” is very interesting since it focuses on the cultural differences that separate American and British businesspersons (something that is usually taken for granted).

<http://www.businessetiquettearticles.com/>

This page gathers articles about business etiquette: body language, clothing, funerals, etc

<http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/crosscultural.php>

Everythingesl.net is a website for teachers. It provides tips, lesson plans, etc. The link we have put forward belongs to the heading: “ESL teacher as cultural broker”. The activities to download are not business-oriented, however, we decided to mention the page because some exercises deal with proxemics and kinesics and these non-verbal elements are especially relevant in intercultural business communication. “What’s in a gesture” and “Take the elevator” have worked really well in training sessions.

http://www.culturocity.com/online_learning_resources_full.htm

The online resources are less useful, but the articles are quite varied and more appealing.

4. Conclusion

The global phenomenon has changed our world and the needs of our society. The ability to communicate cross-culturally is now a widespread and common (learning) goal. Language courses mirror the transformation and adjust to the demand for technological and specific materials.

Since globalization has promoted mobility and has made the labour market more challenging, ESP learning has replaced the customary concept of general English. Furthermore, being economy the driving force of globalization, Business English has become an attractive and necessary discipline. Doing business in a global world suggest interacting with people from different cultures in international networks. Despite internationalization, cultural differences persist, hence the development of Intercultural Business Communication.

On this paper, we have discussed the contributions of intercultural communication to the subsequent concept of IBC.



Then, we have examined the background and the most relevant studies to approach latest concerns such as the implications of "national cultures", the problems of generalizations and the need to incorporate understanding of one's own culture.

In the last section, we have turned to the teaching practice. We have seen how IBC teaching must prepare students for today's workplace, where intercultural communicative skills are a must. This implies that teachers must be up to the challenge and adapt their teaching practice to the needs of a complex, globalized and multidisciplinary working environment. Bringing into the matter the value of ICT tools, we have stressed their advantages and we have finally focused on Internet resources. Here, we have proposed some useful webpages devoted to promote IBC skills. By describing the pedagogic content of each page and identifying interesting activities, we have very much hoped to help teachers with their IBC teaching practice.

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