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Intercultural Communication and English Language Education in the Global Context

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Introduction – 'Product' and 'Process' in English Language Education and Intercultural Training

Developments in language teaching and learning methodology over the last four decades have largely been based on the premise that providing learners with language 'knowledge' is not in itself sufficient for learners to develop language skills or 'competences'. There has, as a result, been a gradual move away from a deductive, rule-governed and 'product' - focused methodology, and towards an inductive, contextualized and 'process'-focused methodology which emphasizes 'skills' and 'competences' rather than simply 'knowledge'. What is more, the call for greater attention to be paid to the context of learning and the cultural identities of learners by the teacher, textbook writer or curriculum designer has grown ever louder (e.g. Kramsch 1993; Canagarajah 1999; Norton 2000; Holliday 2005).

Yet it remains the case, in my experience, that many 'cultural' components of courses and materials that are designed to aid the development of Business English, (which often draw on the field of intercultural training), continue to perpetuate a rule –governed and 'product-focused' approach to 'culture' and communication in which individuals are encouraged to 'fit' their own and others' behaviour and communicative practices into cultural 'templates'. Off-the-peg definitions prevent a consideration of the complexities of intercultural communication and prevent us approaching intercultural communication as a dynamic and interactive process. This approach also tends to embrace, or at least to reflect, the view that what an individual needs to acquire is 'cultural awareness' or 'cultural knowledge'; the result is that culture –specific examples are presented of how people in this or that 'culture' (in the sense of 'nation') communicate or behave in this or that way, the implication being that this 'awareness' or 'knowledge' will somehow result in intercultural communication 'skills' or 'competences'.

Intercultural Training – A Limited and Ethnocentric Field?

The field of intercultural communication to which many English language teachers, curriculum designers and materials writers look for inspiration and ideas, remains, for the most part, a field dominated by 'intercultural experts' from the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. For Hannerz (1999) These 'experts' 'try to teach sensitivity towards cultural diversity ...through lectures, simulation games, videos, practical handbooks ' but are 'inclined towards stereotyping' and 'occasionally given to exaggerating cultural differences as perhaps as a way of positioning ... themselves as an indispensable profession' (p. 394). In the worst examples of such an approach, 'culture' is equated with 'nationality' or 'ethnicity'; 'nationality' or 'ethnicity' is taken as the primary determining factor in an individual's identity; national or ethnic 'cultures' are represented as monolithic with no possibility of change, variation or diversity; national or ethnic 'cultures' are represented as sealed units with no possibility for cross-over with other 'cultures'; how a person communicates and behaves is explained by the stereotypical 'national' or 'ethnic' 'culture' that an individual belongs to; there is no consideration of factors within the micro-context in which the communication and behaviour take place.

A more serious charge has been laid at the door of such intercultural 'experts', and this is that not only are cultural differences exaggerated, and modules of 'culture', 'identity', communication and behaviour, but that the field of intercultural communication is not only 'ethnocentric', but is also 'somewhat oblivious to its ethnocentrism' (Kim 2002 p 40), a view shared by Kumaravadivelu (2008) who writes that there has been a tendency to treat 'western', Anglo-centric or Euro-centric 'patterns of social and corporate communication styles as the norms against which those of other cultures were studied, analyzed, described, and judged', which leads to 'a solely Western interpretation of Eastern cultures' and fails to account for the possibility that 'intercultural communication is a complex, ongoing process that cannot be reduced to expedient labels and convenient dichotomies' (p. 216).

The result is vividly described by the Malaysian academic Shanta Nair-Venugopal (in Bargiela-Chiappini 2007), who talks of 'western management mahagurus' who have flown into countries in Asia to deliver training with the result that:

'many workplaces in the so called Far East, South-East Asia and South Asia have assumed the same mantle or at least veneer of sameness as in western sites mainly due to the global influence of western liberal capitalism in calling the shots, as it were, and in the rush to serve international markets. The signs are everywhere – from normative western styles of power dressing in the workplace (witness the suit for both men and women or the jacket for men, in sweltering South-East Asian temperatures, for instance), to English as the prevailing normative language choice, to after-work socializing and interaction styles and western management and business communication styles in the workplace' (p. 147).

Nair-Venugopal proceeds to outline the cultural inappropriacy of the training techniques the 'western management mahagurus' employ, such as asking Malaysians to hug each other or join hands while singing the company song. Once the 'mahagurus' disappear, however, it is:

'time for reflection and introspection and invariably back to business as usual in responding to cultural and socio-political specificities; whether injunctions governing social interaction between superiors and peers, or the pervasive use of religious icons and cultural markings even in modern offices as in Thailand, or the observance of dietary restrictions at company functions in Malaysia, or the culture-specific manners and kinesics of interpersonal communication between colleagues and between clients everywhere in Asia' (pp. 147-8)

Within 'Asia', 'the East', and 'the West' there are of course, wide variations in 'patterns of social and corporate communication styles'. Philip Riley (2007) provides a telling description of how even in cases in which both parties are 'western', conflict can arise through the imposition of communication styles:

'In a factory in France owned and managed by foreigners, a poster was displayed and used in training sessions in which the French were described as 'Cartesian', 'Abstract', 'Individualistic', 'Rethorical' (*sic*) and 'Preferring words to actions', whilst people of the employers' nationality were stated to be 'Practical', 'Pragmatic', 'Team players' who 'preferred actions to words' (pp. 231-2)

What is more, 'the international company had decreed English as the sole working language for the enterprise', which had been thought by the management to be a 'neutral' language and would 'create a level playing-field for management-workforce relations'. As well as the fact that the

managers' English was much more fluent than that of the French workforce, Riley states that 'an additional problem was the fact that each side spoke an English which was rooted in their own cultural values and communicative practices...' and describes how the lack of awareness of variations in 'cultural values and communicative practices' had led to some 'very troubled waters' on which he was invited to 'pour some oil':

'...the management saw work meetings as an occasion for reporting on work that had been done, decisions and plans that had been made, and projects that had been carried out. Work-meetings, they believed, should last no longer than thirty to forty minutes and should consist of a series of reports from both sides, with little or no discussion. For the French, however, a work-meeting was seen as a meeting where the work would actually be done, the plans made, the decisions taken. It would, therefore, involve full discussion of policy and detail, and could be expected to last two to three hours. The management saw the French attitude as 'coming to the meeting with empty hands', 'laziness' and 'inefficiency', wasting in time lengthy and pointless discussions of 'things they should have thought about earlier'. The workforce saw the management as a group of authoritarian control-freaks who did not respect their expertise and whose old-fashioned methods were hasty and inefficient'. (p. 232)

A Contextualised and Discursive Approach to Business Communication

The most striking aspect of the scenario described by Riley is the assumption that English is 'neutral' and that to learn English is all one needs to do in order to become an effective communicator in a multicultural workforce in which English is the lingua franca. This assumption is all too common; Bargiela- Chiappini (in Bargiela – Chiappini et al., 2003) writes that 'the fallacy of an exclusive reliance on competence in a lingua franca, or for that matter, in the language(s) of other parties, has meant that the concept of a business deals continues to survive within a very narrow understanding of the intercultural encounter' (p.74).

We need to move away from the notion that developing linguistic skills in English (or indeed, any other language) is, on its own, enough for an individual to succeed in the global business environment. In a world in which every year more and more individuals find themselves working in contexts which are increasingly multicultural, it is vital to take a broader approach to the intercultural encounter and to consider factors within the micro-context in which the communication and behaviour take place. A 'process'-focused methodology in teaching business English, which takes such an approach, has started to emerge in the last decade. This involves a critical stance towards pre-packaged templates of culture and is based on a recognition that the development of awareness of how people might differ in their communication and behaviour must be accompanied by a developing set of skills or competences which enable individuals to vary their communication and behaviour so as to successfully interact with other individuals in and from a variety of cultural contexts. It takes as its starting point the *processes* of communication and focuses on *micro-contexts* in which the communication and behaviour take place.

This more sophisticated and nuanced 'process' – focused methodology has largely come about through applying the principles of 'discourse studies' to business communication. It is possible to identify two broad perspectives in discourse studies; first, a purely linguistic perspective which focuses on way language is used (by focusing on such features as patterns of individual contributions, turn taking, forms of address, silence, directness / indirectness, formality/informality) and, second a perspective focuses on 'how language is used "on site" to enact activity and identities' (Gee 1999 pp.7-8). The second perspective, sees 'discourse' as more than just language, and considers how language intersects with other means of communication and cannot be divorced from cultural identity; to fully understand any instance of communication,

consideration must be given not only to the various factors in the immediate context, but also to the cultural factors relating to the wider social context and the cultural identities of those involved. Such a perspective sees using language as:

'an *active* matter of *assembling* the situated meanings that you need for action in the world. This assembly is always relative to your socioculturally-defined experiences in the world and, *more or less*, routinised ('normed') through cultural models and various social practices of the sociocultural groups to which you belong.' (Gee 1999 p 49).

An important consequence of taking such a perspective is that it is not enough to consider any example of communicative interaction as reflecting merely what interactants bring to the interaction, because any interaction is dynamic; discourse 'both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices' and 'both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practices' (Candlin 1999 p ix).

Within the field of management and business studies, a number of researchers have begun to apply findings from discourse studies (e.g. Bargiela- Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken 2007; Claes 2009). The implication of taking a 'discourse' approach to communication in the global business environment is a move away from 'explaining misunderstanding based on different cultural systems towards an attempt to reconstruct how mutual understanding is being achieved in discourse'. In this new discourse approach:

'it is assumed that interaction with people from a different culture is dynamic, that the actors will be influenced by this inter-cultural interaction. Instead of using a deductive approach from cultural differences to communication, researchers analyse the interaction inductively in order to discover whether actors orient to group differences at all and if so in what terms these groups and their boundaries are defined' (Claes 2009 p.71).

A related concept is what Jameson (2007) refers to as the creation of a 'third culture' in business communication (which bears echoes of what Kramsch (1993) calls a 'third culture' that can be created in the English language classroom). Jameson claims that when:

'...people with substantially different cultural identities interact, they can create a new cultural context: a hybrid that synthesizes components of each person's cultural background. For instance, collaborators on a global corporate project may develop a work culture that incorporates some of each member's cultural practices, values, and traditions. On a larger scale, an organization can have a hybrid culture that combines elements of its home headquarters, its local operating company, its affiliates, and its clients' (p. 230).

The discursive turn in management and business studies has had a marked influence on intercultural training. As outlined by Earley, Ang, and Tan (2006), for example, the Center for Cultural Intelligence at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, has been running a training programme on 'cultural intelligence' since 2003 in which the aim is for managers and executives from around the world 'to develop strategies for interacting, communicating, and collaborating with people from different cultures, as well as to assess their effectiveness in cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation' (p. 210). An important principle of this training is a culture-general, rather than a country- or culture-specific approach since the latter approach 'fails to capture the complexities facing the modern global manager' (p 212). Earley, Ang and Tan outline three general factors in their model of cultural intelligence (CQ): *cultural strategic thinking* ('How and why do people do what they do here?'); *motivation* ('Am I motivated to do something here?');

behavior ('Can I do the right thing?'). Behavioral cultural intelligence, which is seen as the most difficult aspect of cultural intelligence to develop, 'refers to your ability to observe, recognize, regulate, adapt, and act appropriately in intercultural meetings'. A person with a high behavioral cultural intelligence 'possesses a wide repertoire of expressions, both verbal and non-verbal' (p 83). Others have used different terminology but essentially point to the same skills; Antal & Friedman (2008), for example, use the term 'intercultural competence' and write that:

'Effectiveness in this global environment requires a core intercultural competence that we call "negotiating reality"—a process whereby people become aware of their culturally shaped interpretations to a given situation, openly inquire into the interpretations of others, jointly test their interpretations, and design action strategies that make sense to all parties' (p. 364).

Applying a Contextualised and Discursive Approach in Teaching Business English and in Intercultural Training

The key question, of course, is how the teacher of Business English, or intercultural trainer, can develop this 'behavioral cultural intelligence' or 'intercultural competence'? My own experience as teacher of Business English, and more recently, as a teacher of intercultural communication to students from a variety of national and linguistic backgrounds, including British students, has led me to believe that for the professional in today's global workplace to develop the 'behavioral cultural intelligence' or 'intercultural competence' the starting point is a focus is on the self on understanding how one's own cultural identity impacts on one's perceptions, communication practices and behaviour. This involves creating the opportunities in a course for individuals to see their identities, behaviour, and communicative practices as others might see them, as different, 'strange' and 'exotic'. One technique at the beginning of a course is to ask participants to analyse their own cultural identities and how these identities impact on their communicative practices. This can be done by asking participants to draw their own 'culture stars' (Singer 1999) which identify the different 'small cultures' that an individual belongs to, so that 'each band in the star is one in which the individual is potentially recognized by others, and recognized by themselves as a competent member of a group, i.e. one in which there are perceived norms of behaviour and values and beliefs that the individual recognizes and uses as a member of the group'(Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2010 p.229). Having drawn their own 'cultural stars', participants are asked to complete a task which requires them to consider how their behaviour and communication is affected by membership of different groups they belong (see Table1). After this participants are asked to consider communication as a card game in which different aspects of their own identity are individual cards (see Table 2).

When you have drawn your culture star, compare your star with someone else's.

What are the similarities and differences between your star and the other person's?

How does each of the cultural groups that you have written in your star influence how you behave and communicate?

Table 1 – Culture Star (adapted from Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2010 p 230)

Interacting may be seen as a game which you play with the cards at your disposal. Some of these cards may be powerful, socially advantageous ones, whereas others may be less so..... It is also possible that what may be a weak card in one particular context may be a strong one in another.....At certain times you may emphasize the cards you feel you have in common with the other people you're interacting with; at other times you may downplay or play up a culture card that you feel is opposed to or promotes your interests and goals in the communicative context in

which you find yourself. Which cards you play thus depends upon a strategic consideration of which ones you can draw on and which ones you want to draw on in a particular context and upon the goals you have. The same, of course, is true of the people you interact with.

Table 2 – Culture Cards (from Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2010 p 232)

Another activity that has been found to be particularly effective is to ask course participants to keep a record of their own communication over a particular period of time (see Table 3). The observation of self and of other people in different communicative contexts can be a particularly valuable way of developing intercultural competence. Such an activity draws on insights from ethnographic research, which is based on the premise that 'The complexity of social life requires that the ordinary participant exclude much from conscious awareness' (Spradley 1980 p.41). Ethnographic research involves 'data gathering by means of participation in the daily life of the informants in their natural setting: watching, observing and talking to them in order to discover their interpretations, social meanings and activities' (Brewer 2000 p.67). Earley, Ang and Tan (ibid.) provide an example of ethnographic research that managers and executives on the Nanyang course undertook, and this was to visit Little India in Singapore, where in dyads they were asked to take photographs of and to try to make sense of different cultural activities. They write that even though a number of course participants were from India, they noticed 'subtle and nuanced differences' from India and 'realized that they had to activate their cultural strategic thinking to deal with the task, as did the non-Indian participants' (p 210). In my own teaching, students have done both short-term and long-term ethnographic research in airports, supermarkets, shops, offices, tourist information offices, coffee bars, pubs, nightclubs, railway stations, and in the street. The key to making sure that ethnographic research is a valuable tool is to ensure that participants are adequately prepared to look below surface communication and behaviour and to engage in 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) by trying to explain 'the multiplicity of conceptual structures' operating on the ground, 'many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit' (p 10).

Keep a record of how you actually manage your identity over 24 hours with people you encounter in different contexts.

Once you have done this, consider the following questions:

- Do you catch yourself representing different versions of yourself?
- Are you aware of how you manipulate the different possibilities available to you at the time?
- Are there times when your interlocutor has already decided who you are and restricted the possibility for you to represent a particular version of your identity?
- How does this make you feel? What do you do if this is the case?

Table 3 – Recording your identity (adapted from Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2010 p 230)

Interviewing individuals of different cultural backgrounds is also a particularly valuable learning technique if it is set up well and if ethical guidelines are followed. Such a technique draws on insights from narrative research:

'Researchers in the field have shown that by telling stories, narrators are able not only to represent social worlds and to evaluate them, but also to establish themselves as members of particular groups through interactional, linguistic, rhetorical and stylistic choices' (De Fina 2006 p.352)

On courses I have been involved with, participants investigate through semi-structured or unstructured interviews how the different aspects of individuals' identities influence their values, beliefs, and lifestyles, the ways they express themselves both verbally and non-verbally, and the

ways they relate to and communicate with other people. The most successful interviews are unstructured and allow space for interviewees to narrate and reflect on their experiences

Although analyses and observations of one's own and other peoples' cultural identities, behaviour and communication practices, are extremely valuable, they are not enough, in my view, to fully develop 'behavioral cultural intelligence' or 'intercultural competence', since they do create opportunities for necessarily transforming a growing competence into actual communicative practice. Techniques that can be employed include: role plays (preferably video-recorded for later close analysis); simulations in which unfamiliar cultural contexts are artificially created in the classroom and the course participants often find that their own frames of references and communicative practices are inadequate. A number of published simulations can be employed or adapted for such purposes and a key element is to encourage self-analysis and reflection (see for example Boyacilliger et al. 2003).

Translation and contrastive analysis have generally been frowned upon in recent language teaching methodology, but can have many merits since they mean that the starting point is 'how people communicate' rather than 'how people communicate in English according to the cultural norms of communication exemplified by the elite of the English-speaking world' and raise awareness of similarities and differences in how individuals communicate in different linguistic and cultural business contexts. Doing so also challenges the 'fallacy' of an exclusive reliance on competence in English as a lingua franca which 'has meant that the concept of a business deals continues to survive within a very narrow understanding of the intercultural encounter' (Bargiela- Chiappini et al. 2003 p. 74). Charles (2007) takes this idea further and suggests the promotion of 'BELF' (Business English Lingua Franca), which differs from a business English 'based on native-like language use and linguistic competence' and instead takes account of 'the diversity of the globalised business community' and is aimed at increasing 'understanding of the different Englishes and discourses used to conduct global business, and encourage the development of situationally appropriate communication skills' (p 266). She argues that:

'...for businesses, heightening awareness of communicative and cultural diversity and working on ways to increase mutual understanding of the Englishes (or other shared languages) used globally—whether NS (native speaker) or NNS (non native speaker)—is of vital importance' (2007 p 279)

Conclusion

Ironically, of course, if Business English courses and materials do embrace the ideas and techniques set out in this paper, there is no greater chance of preventing the kinds of breakdowns in communication that Riley describes in the French organization (ibid.). This is because however sophisticated a 'behavioral cultural intelligence' or 'intercultural competence' learners of business English acquire (and apply in the globalised workplace), this will only be of value if it is matched by the acquisition of such 'intelligence' or 'competence' by individuals who are 'native speakers' of English and who would not see the need to attend courses in Business English. The implication is that intercultural training courses designed for 'native speakers' of English need themselves to be characterised by a sophisticated and nuanced 'process' – focused methodology as described in this paper. If they do not, then the charge that intercultural training is 'ethnocentric' will be difficult to retort. What is more, important and far-reaching questions will remain regarding the ethics of taking norms of communication of the 'native speaker' of English, and the cultural values that underlie these norms, as the model for communication in global business contexts in which English is used as a lingua franca.

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