

INTEGRATING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY

Luiza CARAIVAN

Tibiscus University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: Intercultural competence and diversity are two essential themes that should be integrated in foreign language teaching when designing a professional English course. The paper explores how intercultural competence can be transferred to university students who are studying Business English. In this respect, the present study introduces some definitions of the intercultural competence, focusing on modalities the latter can be integrated in education and in the Business English curricula.

Keywords: Business English; diversity; intercultural competence.

1. Introduction

Interculturalism has been a salient issue since countries all around the world have become aware of the fact that interconnection is a key factor for the 21st century education and workplace. The intersections of nationalities and ethnicities and the relations between “concepts that appear to be unrelated [and are] actually are related” (Johansson, 2006: 21) have determined scholars and politicians to declare the end of multiculturalism and to mark the beginning of interculturalism:

“Much like other irritating subjects of the times – postmodernism, globalization, terrorism, among others – the very idea of multiculturalism, the ideology, disturbs out of proportion to what in fact it may be. The reality is that the world in which many people suppose they are living is actually plural.” (Elliott and Lemert, 2006: 137)

In 2010, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, declared that “the approach [to build] a multicultural [society] and to live side-by-side and to enjoy each other... has failed, utterly failed” (Merkel, 2010), a statement that led to the rise of interculturalism, a concept introduced by American scholars in the late 1950s. The concept of interculturalism is meant not only to replace the concept of multiculturalism but also to question the solutions that multicultural supporters provided so that multi-ethnic communities could function. In this respect, the present study introduces some definitions of the intercultural competence, focusing on modalities the latter can be integrated in education and in the Business English curricula. The second part of this study examines the use of Business English courses where the teacher caters for the needs of students who have different cultural backgrounds and who are the main beneficiary in the process of integrating the intercultural competence into language courses.

Nowadays, intercultural competence is a requirement in fields such as literature, arts, health care, education, business, or politics – especially for human resources and

governmental agencies. One of the most circulated definitions of intercultural competence refers to the “ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings” (Byram, 2002). Martin and Vaughn (2007: 31) define it as “the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures” or with different social and economic backgrounds. Intercultural competence develops during a process that usually lasts for some years and language courses are essential in transferring this competence to students who learn to transpose theoretical information into practice. Moreover, language courses provide students with hands-on approaches that simulate the workplace environment so that they have the necessary background which can be applied when individuals move to or work with a cross-cultural community.

However, intercultural competence refers not only to an individual’s ability to interact respectfully with diverse communities but also to their ability to recognize diversity, to understand and appreciate differences. Although communities are biased, efforts should be made to implement the idea that no culture is superior to another. The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, one of the first scholars who wrote studies on the impact of culture on communication between different communities stated in 1959 that “culture is communication and communication is culture” (Hall, 1959: 218). Hall also explains that the complexity of culture is due to the numerous interrelated elements that should be understood and taken into consideration when individuals understand their own culture before trying to understand other cultures. Hall also argues that individuals should look beyond the noticeable, obvious elements of culture (e.g., architecture, works of art or traditions of a community) and observe the unconscious elements (e.g., norms and values).

“Developments in the intercultural field have to do with research directed toward bringing informal patterns to awareness. In many ways this work is the most meticulous, painstaking, and difficult of all. Even the best of informants can never describe informal patterns though he has been born and raised in a culture and has all his wits about him.” (Hall, 1959: 153)

In the early 2000s, Darla K. Deardorff (2006: 241) underlined the fact that there was a “lack of specificity in defining intercultural competence” which was related to “the difficulty of identifying the specific components of this complex concept”. Deardorff also mentions the fact that education providers have not established any procedures to help identify the needs of students as far as intercultural competence is concerned. Her pyramid model of intercultural competence structures perhaps the most complex definition provided so far which can also be applied to Business English curricula. Thus, the purpose of a course that integrates the intercultural competence should include “requisite attitudes: respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity), openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment), curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty)” (Deardorff, 2006: 254). The skills that students should practice during the course include listening, observing and analysing while evaluating and relating to different behaviours and norms. Deardorff also focuses on the desired external and internal outcomes that students should reach and on external behaviours that students should display. The external behaviour should be the result of internal processes that take place during a course that focuses on intercultural competence:

“The desired external outcome is behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to achieve one’s goals to some degree [while] the desired internal outcome [includes] adaptability (to different communication styles and behaviors; adjustment to new cultural environments); flexibility (selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors; cognitive flexibility); ethnorelative view; empathy.” (Deardorff, 2006:254)

The fact that the intercultural competence has been described by numerous scholars in a variety of definitions, using various concepts and frameworks can be explained by the diversity of cultures within a community and the variety of domains that require this type of competence. North American countries have been using this concept since the 1950s, whereas Western European countries have focused upon multiculturalism or interculturalism in the late 1960s. However, Eastern European countries have only been interested in this component since the beginning of the 21st century. In Romania, some steps have been made towards introducing intercultural competence in education, health care and business sectors starting with the year 1991 when several waves of refugees coming from countries at war have entered the Romanian communities. Unfortunately, there have been numerous cases of discrimination and isolation of certain ethnical and culturally diverse groups.

As the diversity of students in universities is continually on the rise, it has become mandatory to understand and integrate the intercultural competence into the curriculum.

2. The Relevance of Intercultural Competence in Teaching Business English

The present study is based on the definitions provided by the review of the literature on intercultural competence (e.g., Hall, 1959; Byram, 2002; Deardorff, 2006; Martin and Vaughn, 2007; Longoria and Rangarajan, 2015) that point to the fact that there are four dimensions which lead to the desired internal and external outcomes: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviour.

In summary, my approach to the construction of the Business English course that provides students with the intercultural competence consists of selecting four dimensions (intercultural awareness; intercultural knowledge; intercultural skills; intercultural behaviour) that could lead to the desired outcomes which are modified into relevant items for that particular group of students. After the selection of the items and development of the course, the following conceptual components have been established:

- (1) Intercultural awareness refers to an individual’s position within a certain community and how this affects the individual’s values, beliefs, assumptions and behaviours towards the others. It also implies understanding how an individual’s point of view may result in a type of behaviour that affects the others. Awareness can be defined as the ability to understand differences and to behave according to the norms of a certain community. It is connected to openness and adaptability and to the individual’s capacity to search for facts and details when they are presented with new information.
- (2) The intercultural knowledge component refers to learning specific information about different cultures, about (in)equality, exclusion or inclusion.
- (3) The intercultural skills component is defined as the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally with people from different cultures. This component is based on the ability to identify and discuss differences, to collect relevant data and make accurate use of the information obtained.

- (4) The intercultural attitude component is defined as the individual's orientation towards cultural aspects and their willingness to train for communicating with the cultural other, in order to reconsider and redefine pre-established values and behaviours.

These four components of the intercultural competence should be integrated across curricula so that students acquire the knowledge and the skills to recognise otherness and manifest a positive attitude towards the different cultural other.

In my case study, I have taken into consideration how students perceive the intercultural competence and its usefulness, and I have focused on implementing the intercultural competence in the Business English course that a particular group of students has attended for six months.

I have also used Edward Hall's iceberg model of culture (Hall 1976), who states that in diverse communities, the observer first sees the external part of culture, which represents the tip of the iceberg. Usually, it includes external behaviours and beliefs which are presented in the manifestation of traditions and are perceived objectively. On this level, topics such as food, music, clothing, language, arts and crafts, celebrations, literature, or games can be included in language courses to introduce intercultural competence. The part of the iceberg which is hidden under water represents the internal part of culture, and it is not easily noticed. It includes beliefs and values that underlie behaviour in a community and are perceived subjectively. This part can include topics such as contextual conversational patterns, courtesy, body language and non-verbal communication, eye-contact, relationship with the environment, taboo topics (death, insanity, religion, sexuality, etc), to mention just a few.

3. Case Study

In 2017, I taught a group of students who studied for their master's degree in Tourism Management, a group formed of 12 persons (7 female students and 5 male students), aged between 21 and 25, with an intermediate English level (B1-B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Eight students from the group have had at least one job before enrolling in the master's degree programme which includes the Business English course where I have integrated the intercultural competence. Nine students were Romanian, two students were Serbian natives, and one student was Hungarian.

The Business course was formed of twelve different topics related to:

- (1) Staff development and training.
- (2) Establishing relationships and negotiating.
- (3) Setting up a business in a new location (in Romania and abroad).
- (4) Promoting products in Romania and abroad.
- (5) Organizing and attending business conferences.
- (6) Networking during a conference.
- (7) Communicating with clients.
- (8) Dealing with customers' complaints.

Taking into consideration the fact that the group was formed of a Romanian majority and three students who belonged to two different ethnic groups, I designed the course so that intercultural competence referred both to English-speaking communities and to Romanian, Serbian and Hungarian communities. Although at first, I used materials that I found in various handbooks or on various websites, after the first two weeks decided

to ask for help from two English teachers from Szeged (Hungary) and Novi Sad (Serbia) to design the study materials. The reason behind this decision was the course on staff development and training where I designed an activity that asked students to simulate a team-building event. During this event I brought pictures of traditional Hungarian, Serbian, Romanian and English dishes food, including them in a listening activity. The Hungarian student complained that the pictures of the Hungarian dishes were not presenting the reality while the Serbian students complained that the descriptions of the dishes were not accurate. For that particular activity I asked them to present their traditional recipes and to search for photos that could match the descriptions they provided or to cook the dishes at home and either take a photo or bring a sample to class. Thus, I have used the tip of the iceberg from Hall's model of culture in order to raise awareness about the differences that might appear during a team-building event. Moreover, differences appeared inside the same group, due to the fact that students had different cultural backgrounds and came from various parts of Romania, which meant that even traditional Romanian dishes were debatable. For the rest of the course, I asked for advice from Hungarian and Serbian teachers of English, and I also asked the students to contribute with information about cultural differences, so that intercultural knowledge was based not only on the education provider but also on the students' personal experience.

A second course that I used to introduce the intercultural competence into a Business English topic was related to how to establish relationships and to negotiate in an English-speaking community. The course introduced facts about the handshake in various cultures, including a history of the handshake and different ways of greeting people across cultures that students were not familiar with. Bumping fists and touching elbows was mentioned at the time as being preferred, especially by students who had previously met American clients. However, the students provided some useful details about personal space in Hungary, Serbia and Romania, with the Serbian students insisting on the fact that it is extremely polite to know that Serbians kiss each other on the cheeks three times. Thus, students managed to communicate verbally and non-verbally with people from different cultures, acquiring the intercultural skills that provided them with the opportunity to identify and discuss differences, to collect relevant data and make accurate use of the knowledge they gained. Moreover, students' orientation towards cultural aspects and their willingness to train for communicating with the cultural other, led them to display the intercultural attitude that allowed them to reconsider and redefine pre-established values and behaviours.

4. Conclusion

As Longoria and Rangarajan (2015: 37) observe "it is important to note that there are no benchmarks of what constitutes an acceptable level of cultural competence". From my point of view, intercultural studies should not be a separate course, but it should be included in different other courses, especially when students have a diverse background. English has the advantage of encouraging communities to overcome any language barrier and students can share their experience of intercultural communities leaving behind any biased opinions.

In addition, Business English teachers have the possibility of connecting relevant Business topics to intercultural competence and of teaching knowledge, social customs, habits and behaviours that are related both to British and American culture and to

students' personal backgrounds. Educating students and providing them with the intercultural competence implies that the teacher verifies that students understand correctly cultural diversity, that they are able to overcome any national or racial attitudes. The aim is that diverse cultures are treated objectively so that students acquire intercultural communication skills.

Intercultural competence is one of the key abilities for the 21st century workplace and students should be offered the opportunity to simulate an intercultural workplace before they search for a job. Intercultural competence enables students to develop critical awareness and intercultural skills needed not only at a diverse workplace but also in their own community. The four components of intercultural competence: awareness, knowledge, skills and attitude are essential in an intercultural community that should be able to manage diversity in a positive way.

References

1. Byram, M., Gribkova, B. and H. Starkey. 2002. *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching. A Practical Introduction for Teachers*, available at <http://rc.cornell.edu/director/intercultural.pdf> [accessed May 2021].
2. Deardorff, D.K. 2006. "Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization" in *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10(3), pp. 241-266.
3. Elliott A. and C. Lemert. 2006. *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*. London: Routledge.
4. Hall, E.T. 1959. *The Silent Language*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
5. Hall, E. 1976. *Beyond Culture*. New York City: Doubleday.
6. Johansson, F. 2006. *The Medici Effect: What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us about Innovation*. Harvard Business School Press: Boston.
7. Longoria, T. and N. Rangarajan. 2015. "Measuring Public Manager Cultural Competence: The Influence of Public Service Values". In *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*: Vol. 21:1, available at <http://digitalscholarship.tsu.edu/jpmssp/vol21/iss1/3> [accessed May 2009].
8. Martin, M. and B.E. Vaughn. 2007. "Cultural competence: The nuts and bolts of diversity and inclusion" in *Strategic Diversity & Inclusion Management Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1.
9. Merkel, A., 2010. "Merkel says German multicultural society has failed", BBC News, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11559451> [accessed March 2021].
10. Thole, K., 1997. "Exploring the Possibility of Primitive Life on Mars" in *Undergraduate Engineering Review*, available at <http://tc.engr.wisc.edu/tcweb/uer/uer97/thole.html> [accessed May 2009].