

Intercultural relations in business English

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The teaching of English for Specific Purposes at Slovak universities is undergoing profound changes. Due to the communication needs of specialists in various fields, the university curricula are being renewed and approaches to the teaching of English are being changed. As communication in international business is becoming more and more communication between cultures, Business English teaching and learning is focusing on the intercultural aspect of communication and trying to develop the intercultural competence of university students. One of the ways to achieve this aim is, for example, to introduce new courses which focus on Intercultural Communication in Business English. This article presents a framework of such a course, gives examples of some activities and advocates one of the proposed approaches to the teaching of culture in Business English.

1. Introduction

It is commonly accepted that learning a foreign language without learning about and understanding the culture(s) in which it is used will not enable an individual to communicate effectively with speakers from that cultural setting. Communication with members of other cultures involves both good knowledge of the language and knowledge and understanding of those cultures. As Scarcella and Oxford (1992: 75-80) put it, a competent intercultural communicator will possess four competences: linguistic competence (familiarity with language as a form), sociolinguistic competence (ability to use the language items appropriately in every situation, i.e. to relate form to function), discourse competence (use of the discourse relevant to the particular communication

context) and strategic competence (ability to overcome difficulties and gaps in communication).

According to Byram (1998), Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) and Ramiréz (1995), overall communicative competence should also incorporate cultural awareness or cultural/ intercultural competence, i.e. an interest in other cultures, the ability to explore and understand other cultures, the willingness to accept and tolerate otherness and, at the same time, to take a more objective view of one's own culture (Byram 1998). These were the underlying principles followed by teachers of English at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica when they decided to design a special course entitled *Intercultural Communication in Business Practice*. The course was designed for advanced students of Business /Corporate Management and Tourism Management. It is divided into three semesters. Each semester focuses on different aspects of culture and language, cross-cultural relations and intercultural communication in business. The three parts of the course are as follows:

1. Introduction to the culture of English speaking countries and Slovakia.
2. Intercultural Communication.
3. Business Negotiations.

2. Framework of the Course

2.1. Aim of the Course

The overall aim of the course is to develop in our students a cultural awareness that should enable them to communicate more effectively and reliably in their future professional business environment.

2.2. Objectives of the Course

The objectives of the course are as follows:

- to familiarize students with basic concepts of culture and cultural values,
- to familiarize students with the cultural values of the main English speaking countries and Slovakia,
- to enable students to compare other world cultures with their own culture,
- to allow students to look at their own culture from a different perspective,

- to make students aware of stereotyped thinking and the pitfalls of generalisations about other cultures,
- to offer students some stimuli for exploring other cultures and their own culture,
- to improve students' general and specific English,
- to extend the cross-cultural competence (expertise) of our students in both verbal and non-verbal communication,
- to increase students' knowledge of negotiation theory and develop the business and language skills necessary for negotiations with foreign business partners.

2.3. Content of the Course

In the first part of the course (*Introduction to the Culture of English Speaking Countries and Slovakia*) we deal with what was known up to recent times as "realia" (life and institutions of English speaking countries). But our aim is to avoid the „old“ way of presenting „nly“ factual material concerning English speaking countries, such as geography, history, arts, political and social system, etc. In this course we intend to raise awareness of the notion of culture and various aspects of culture. The syllabus includes such topics as:

The objectives of the course are as follows:

- Culture: definition of culture, attributes and features of a culture, types of culture,
- Cultural values, beliefs, norms: their interpretation, comparisons, differences,
- Cultural diversity,
- American, British and Slovak culture,
- Culture as national self-expression (daily life, customs, habits, holidays),
- Emigration, immigration,
- EU cultural policy,
- Multicultural society,
- Prejudices, generalisations and stereotypes,
- Current issues on culture.

Through the study of American and British cultures (in this case the target cultures) the students should also be able to reflect on their own culture and cultural values and be able to interpret them. Thus, the process of raising cultural awareness is the basic aim of this course.

The syllabus of the second part of the course (*Intercultural Communication in Business*) highlights topics such as:

The objectives of the course are as follows:

- Aspects of culture with a focus on high-context and low-context cultures,
- Roles people play in various cultures,
- Differences in the decision-making process and sharing overall responsibility,
- Different perceptions of time,
- Other aspects of life which characterize a specific business environment,
- Essentials of verbal and non-verbal communication and possible pitfalls,
- Different corporate cultures and possible impacts on the overall success of a company and the quality of its working environment.

Hence, participants in the course become aware of the fact that ignorance of cultural specificities may cause failure in making a favourable business deal.

The content of the third part of the comprehensive course (*Business Negotiations in English*) consists of topics such as

- Basic principles of negotiation, Common negotiating mistakes and how to avoid them,
- Managing the negotiation process (building a relationship, agreeing on procedure, exchanging information, questioning, bidding, bargaining, settling and concluding),
- Negotiating strategies,
- Negotiating within groups, between groups,
- Negotiating among cultures.

3. Our Approach to the Teaching of Culture

Before designing the course the teachers were aware of two different approaches to teaching culture in an ELT/ESP classroom. These approaches have been already defined by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) and Ramírez (1995) and other authors.

The first approach to teaching culture means mediating the cultural knowledge that consists solely of information about the characteristics of our own and other people's cultures. This approach is what in Slovak schools used to be and still is known as teaching *realia*, i.e. facts about the geography, history, political and educational system, arts, etc., of English speaking countries (mostly USA and Great Britain) and Slovakia.

The second approach is based on developing a general cultural awareness. This approach to integrating culture into a language course is strongly advocated by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004). In their view cultural awareness involves perceptions and

“understanding of our own and other people's cultures, a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication” (2004: 8-11).

They argue that providing experiences from which learners can develop cultural awareness not only can help learners to develop cultural sensitivity and empathy but can facilitate their acquisition of language, too. Ramírez (1995, 66-67) observes the differences between these two approaches in terms of learning goals, i.e., between *culture as information* (acquiring knowledge of a set of identifiable facts) and *culture as process* (engaging in different types of performance behaviour).

This is why we included such topics as culture definition, cultural values, generalizations and stereotypes. Teaching in the course is based on student discussion in groups, presenting their views, defending their contributions, but also on reading academic resources, taking notes, giving presentations on chosen topics and learning from them. The teachers do not deliver lectures. They prepare materials, tasks and questions to be answered, and they try to make students curious about discovering other cultures and features of their own culture.

4. Sample Activities from the Course

As the author of this article teaches the *Introduction to Culture* part of the course, some examples of activities from this part will be given. Even if the focus should (for students of English) traditionally be on English speaking countries, we are aware of the fact that English is becoming the means of communication between members of various cultures. Therefore, examples from the cultures of English speaking countries (mainly Great Britain and the

USA, as many students have their personal experience from living in those countries) serve just as a springboard to broader discussions and comparisons with Slovak culture or other world cultures.

In *defining culture* students are asked to discuss in groups and make a list of all the things that they think make a culture. They present them to other groups. Then they are asked to read a list of definitions by well-known anthropologists, sociologists, scholars and communication specialists and compare them with their own definitions. This activity results in much discussion and helps the students shape their own perceptions of culture.

Teaching *cultural values* is based on G. Hofstede's (1991) definition of culture as deep values which are surrounded by more visible practices. By practices he means the behaviour and cultural artefacts we see around us; and these practices are influenced by our attitudes and those deeper values. So, values are the underlying principles and core beliefs that govern our attitudes and behaviour. For students it is important to understand that the values are the hidden part of culture that determines how we behave and what we do in everyday life. The most valuable part of the discussion here seems to be the focus on 'normality', i.e. what is 'normal behaviour' and from whose perspective. Students are asked to discuss similarities and differences between, for example, American, Slovak and other cultural values, such as notions of time, change, mobility, formality, individualism and privacy. The understanding of these cultural categories can lead to a better understanding of other cultures. Comparing and contrasting these values also allows students to reflect on Slovak cultural behaviour and practices.

Dealing with *generalisations and stereotypes* in the course is crucial as all of us tend to generalise about some features of any 'national character'. However, it is best to be cautious about accepting such characterisations too easily and without approaching each individual as a distinct human being. Generalisation can lead to what we call stereotyping. If students can realise that stereotypes are just produced as a result of the uncritical repetition of 'generally accepted truths' about others without any critical questioning or testing their truthfulness, they will better understand how dangerous they are. This insight will also help students to avoid stereotyped thinking in real life encounters.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the overall aim of the course is to raise cultural awareness and develop the cultural competence of the students while at the same time improving their English language knowledge and skills. A most valuable part of the course we consider also is the ability of students to look at their own Slovak culture and see it through the eyes of a foreigner. We hope to open new horizons to students who study the English language as a present and future tool of communication in the business area.

We also hope to hear from other universities and faculties about how they integrate language and culture in ESP, and we welcome possible co-operation within projects focusing on materials design for similar courses or a more thorough research in this area.

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