

**DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE AND INTERCULTURAL  
COMPETENCE IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC  
PURPOSES**

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**Abstract:** *The article expands upon the need to increase cross-cultural awareness in the field of English for Specific Purposes with main reference to English for Business Purposes. It argues that for learners training to become professionals in this specific domain, intercultural competence, as a branch of the larger concept of communicative competence, is at least as important as developing linguistic competence. In addition, the article sketches certain methods and activities to be used in ESP classes, in order to develop intercultural competence.*

**Key words:** *English for Specific Purposes, Business English, Communicative Approach, Intercultural Competence, Teaching Methods*

It is commonly agreed that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century people have to learn at least one foreign language, in order to be able to communicate effectively in all sorts of contexts amongst which their present or future occupational setting. The vehicular character of English (*lingua franca*) increases its importance for all those who are to communicate with individuals world-wide using General English and very often English for Specific Purposes.

English for Specific Purposes is defined as an approach to language teaching, designed to meet the specific needs of the learners, taking into account particular disciplines, occupations and activities.

Either designed for students or adult learners who are already involved in a professional setting, most ESP classes centre upon domain-specific vocabulary skills and somehow neglect the communicative skills which, in our opinion, are of equal importance.

The *communicative competence* is a concept introduced by Dell Hymes (1972: 279) who operates a distinction between the *linguistic competence* and the repertoire of the communication skills involved in tackling communicative exchanges effectively. This repertoire includes the strategic use of language, directness vs. indirectness, politeness or taking turns in a conversation, appropriacy of language etc.

The *nonverbal* and *paraverbal communication* are also important as they significantly contribute to the recognition of a certain message.

However, language and culture are always interconnected and learners should also become aware of the cultural communicative constraints. Thus, besides the aforementioned concepts, the communication between people of different cultures comprises additional components, reunited under the concept of *intercultural competence* (Byram, Zarate 1997), a concept which is commonly defined as the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures.

Differences between cultures are often experienced as threatening. What is of a great importance in a particular culture may seem irrational and unimportant to an outsider. That is why learners should develop the so-called intercultural awareness. Professionals in a certain domain often find themselves in job-related circumstances in which they have to use English effectively, in order to communicate with other professionals or institutions world-wide and thus inevitably face cross-cultural situations.

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* defines intercultural awareness as being the ‘knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’. [...] Intercultural awareness includes an awareness of regional and social diversity in both worlds. It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learner’s L1 and L2. This wider awareness helps to place both in context. In addition to objective [...]’. It further specifies the fact that ‘The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. Nor is the new competence kept entirely separate from the old. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes *plurilingual* and develops *interculturality*. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how.’(CEFR: 43) According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* intercultural skills and know-how include:

- the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. (CEFR: 104-105).

We shall further present certain aspects to be taken into account when teaching English for Business Purposes, emphasizing the importance of the communicative and intercultural approach.

In 1972, the BBC/OUP coursebook *English for Business* mentioned, for the first time, the necessity of training ‘the skills of communication in English speaking, writing, listening and reading within a business context’ (*Introduction to the Teacher’s Book*). The course starts from the assumption that the learners had already covered the basic grammar of English, but that they need to develop their knowledge in order to handle practical situations effectively. Thus it includes, amongst other skills, the development of dialogue practice and role simulations. Nowadays, English for Special Purposes and the communicative approach are thought to be closely related given the fact that it has been realized that neither vocabulary nor syntax, though necessary, are sufficient for the establishment of communicative abilities in ESP learners.

International business professionals need to make contact with others. In order to minimize the ‘threat’ coming from cultural differences, formulaic language is generally used (in greetings, introductions) and also a certain concise and polite style. There are internationally agreed rules for writing an email in English, a letter or a Curriculum Vitae.

However, there are situations in which speakers confront with cultural issues, especially in face-to-face interactions, as social practices are shaped by the cultural diversity of the participants and by the culture-bound world view. Thus, the development of a cross-cultural awareness has become imperative, given the desire of the business professionals (and not only) to build a good relationship with their business partners.

Developing intercultural competence in ESP classes is not always easy, both from the learner’s and the trainer’s point of view.

Considering that ‘if it isn’t tested it’s not taught’, M. Byram (2000: 8-13) comes with the proposal of assessing intercultural competence in language teaching, as the first step in developing cross-cultural awareness in Upper Secondary and Higher Education. The assessment includes both a record of the learner’s intercultural experience and a self-assessment of his/hers intercultural experience:

**1. A record of the learner’s intercultural experience:**

- in language: (learner inserts language e.g. English)
- place, period of time, age:

A. Feelings

- Ways in which my curiosity and interest were aroused (examples from ordinary daily life, especially when they made me re-consider my own culture)
- Periods when I felt uncomfortable/homesick (what made me feel like this, with particular examples if possible)
- Periods when I felt at home and comfortable (what made me feel like this, with particular examples if possible)

**B. Knowledge**

- The most important things I learnt about family life and/or life at school
- The most important things I have learnt about the country, the nation, the state where I stayed - in the present and in its past
- What I have learnt about customs and conventions of talking with people (topics which interest them, topics to avoid, how to greet people and take leave from them)

**C. Actions**

- Incidents or problems which I resolved by explaining different cultures to people, helping them see the points of view of different cultures and how misunderstandings can happen.
- Examples of times when I have had to ask questions and work out my own answers.

**2. A self-assessment of the learner's intercultural experience**

**A. Interest in other people's way of life**

- I am interested in other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders through the media.  
Example:
- I am also interested in the daily experience of a variety of social groups within a society and not only the dominant culture.  
Example:

**B. Ability to change perspective**

- I have realised that I can understand other cultures by seeing things from a different point of view and by looking at my culture from their perspective.  
Example:

**C. Ability to cope with living in a different culture**

- I am able to cope with a range of reactions I have to living in a different culture (euphoria, homesickness, physical and mental discomfort etc)  
Example:

**D. Knowledge about another country and culture**

- I know some important facts about living in the other culture and about the country, state and people.

Example:

- I know how to engage in conversation with people of the other culture and maintain a conversation

Example:

#### E. Knowledge about intercultural communication

- I know how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture

Example: I know how to discover new information and new aspects of the other culture for myself. (cf. M. Byram, 2000: 8-13).

The charts M. Byram proposes are of course useful but their utility is restricted to those situations in which the learners already have experience outside their own culture. However there are situations in which the trainer may want to prepare the learners for communicating with people from other cultures, especially when they have not travelled much, or have not met many people from outside their own culture. In this case, the selection of the methods used to develop interculturality are generally similar to the specific methods of the communicative approach: case studies, role-plays, simulations etc. We argue that these methods shouldn't be used unless the trainer has a lot of knowledge and experience both in the specific domain and the target culture. First of all the activities are to be related directly with the objectives stated in advance. The selection of the target culture(s) should also be previously agreed. The learners are to be given carefully selected references and encouraged to experience the interaction with people from the target culture.

Given the fact that the social contact in a business interaction context is highly ritualized and that over-familiarity is to be avoided, the first steps in developing intercultural competence should be taken in the direction of assimilating these rituals, both in the target culture and subsequently in comparison with other cultures and with their own culture. Learners should also become aware of the fact that some situations may require more than this, for example keeping a conversation going over lunch. Thus, flexibility in style should double cross-cultural awareness.

As a partial conclusion we argue that the linguistic, the communicative and the intercultural competences should go hand in hand in teaching both General English and English for Specific Purposes. However, for the latter, the awareness of appropriate language and behaviour is of a greater importance, if are to mention communication in a business context, for example. Learners must become aware of the fact that they will operate as professionals in business-related circumstances, in

which the main purpose of the interaction is greatly a persuasive and a transactional one.

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