The Importance of Developing Intercultural Awareness in the Business English Classroom

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We live in a multicultural world. As a result, we often have to deal with people from a different culture. This is not easy since we may have very different ways of thinking and doing things from the people we meet. What is considered good in our culture may mean opposite somewhere else. The understanding of cultural distinctions is very crucial in the business world. The businessmen/women who have sufficient cultural knowledge are more likely to be successful in building relationship with their business counterparts than those who do not. This is because the ones who possess such precious knowledge tend to be more adept at avoiding misunderstanding and confusion. Considering the significant contribution of understanding cultural differences to successful business endeavor, the teachers of Business English need to equip their students with knowledge and strategies that they can use to cope with cultural diversity. In this paper, the writer discusses some activities that can be used to develop students' intercultural awareness.

Keywords: intercultural awareness, business English

Introduction

Why should culture be integrated with the teaching of language in the business classroom? One important argument presented by Neff and Rucynski (2013) is that merely knowing the language is inadequate to interact successfully with business people from other cultures (p. 12). This is because each culture has its own rules regarding acceptable/unacceptable behavior. Breaking the rules may cause confusion, embarrassment, and huge losses. Therefore, in order to communicate effectively with foreign partners, Business English students need to be equipped with both linguistic and intercultural competence. Blanchard (1997) posited that "Understanding the language and culture of target markets in foreign countries is one of the keys to successful marketing" (p. 210).

Blanchard (1997) gave an example of how a lack of understanding of other cultures can be problematic (p. 212). A detergent company that tried to expand its business in the Middle East had to face the reality that its products were not selling well. The company later found out that the decline in sales was caused by misinterpretation. The advertisement showed the picture of the product located between a pile of dirty clothes on the left, and the clean ones on its right. This made the Middle-East people who are accustomed to read from right to left assumed that the detergent turned their clean clothes into dirty ones. The example proved that it is necessary for the teachers of Business English to develop their students' intercultural awareness in order to avoid costly and fatal mistakes. Businessmen who are aware of cultural distinctions have a higher chance of

growing their business than those who are not.

In some cultures, certain numbers, things, or colors, are associated with death; therefore, it will be better if we avoid giving gifts that bring negative connotations. Le Baur (1998) listed some examples of gifts that may endanger a business relationship because they bring sad or uncomfortable feelings (p. 58). They are as follows:

In some parts of China, avoid giving clocks.

In some parts of Japan, try not to give gifts in group of four.

In some parts of France, chrysanthemum is mostly used for funeral; hence, not suitable to be given as gifts.

Those warnings may prompt us to think that it will be safer for us to avoid presenting gifts. This is not always true since in some cultures, gifts are highly appreciated, and our business counterparts may feel offended if we fail to do so. One of the best ways to deal with this situation is by conducting research (through reading, browsing, or interviewing local people) before we start doing business with our foreign partners. Frendo (2005) suggested that it is necessary for Business English teachers to give their students intercultural trainings so that the learners know how to deal with people who may have different ways of thinking, behaving, and doing things (p. 113).

Activities to Develop Students' Intercultural Awareness

These activities are developed based on Pre-Reading, While-Reading, and Post-Reading sequence of activities. The Pre-Reading activities are used to stimulate the students' interests about the topic; the second set of activities encourage learners to increase their knowledge of the subject; and the last one is the extended production task which is "not to focus on discreet language knowledge but rather on naturalistic language use and, to varying degrees involve performance in the target language" (Neff & Rucynski, 2013, p. 14). I applied these activities to teach Integrated Business Writing Class (Business 3315) at Baylor University when I did my leadership program from August 2015–December 2015. I taught four classes (one session each), each consisting of about 18–20 student. The class session lasted for 75 minutes.

Pre-Reading Activities

T-SS (Teacher-Students) introduction: Ask students to mention his/her nickname and mention one positive quality that he/she has.

Ask students to imagine their future life (job and family), write it down.

Have a reunion party: Students walk around the class and update information about their classmates.

Ask some students to share some interesting things about the people they met.

While Reading Activities

Discussion about cultures/gestures. Imagine your company is going to expand its business overseas. To do that, your company needs somebody who knows a lot about other cultures—Do the quiz (how well you know about other cultures, see Appendix).

Discuss the importance of knowing other cultures. Teacher explains that culture consists of "...product of human interaction, that is, the ideas shared by people in a particular society. It includes language, values, beliefs, rules, institutions and organization" (Applebaum, 1997, p. 64, as cited in Rini, 2005, p. 102).

Ask the students to count 1, 2...1, 2...1, 2. All number 1 students will be Japanese; all number 2 students will be Italian.

The Japanese reads an article about Japan; the Italian reads an article about Italy.

Ask students to close their handout, and partner them (Japanese–Italian).

The Japanese gives five tips (based on the article that he/she reads) to his/her Italian counterpart, and vice versa.

Share.

Watch the clip (Italian hand gesture).

After watching, ask the students to recall the gestures that they just watched.

Teacher explains that the meanings of the gestures can vary from culture to culture.

Distribute the *International Gesture Dictionary* written by Roger Axtell (as cited in Blanchard & Root, 1996, pp. 11-13). The excerpt contains 32 gestures with their meanings. Axtell illustrated that one gesture can have different meanings in different places. For example: (1) Eyebrow Raise: In Tonga, a gesture means “yes” or “I agree”; in Peru, it means “money” or “pay me”; (2) Nose Tap: In Britain, secrecy or confidentiality; in Italy, a friendly warning.

Divide the students into six groups (each group reads the *International Gesture Dictionary*).

Assign the task:

Group 1: Explain and perform gestures No. 1–5;

Group 2: Explain and perform gestures No. 6–10;

Group 3: Explain and perform gestures No. 11–15;

Group 4: Explain and perform gestures No. 16–20;

Group 5: Explain and perform gestures No. 21–26;

Group 6: Explain and perform gestures No. 27–32.

Do the exercise.

Game: Ask each group to send one member in front of the class. The instructor mentions a gesture, and the first person to perform it correctly can sit down.

Follow up activity. Each team makes three questions about cultures/gestures.

e.g., In Thailand, it is considered impolite to...

(1) Shake somebody’s hand;

(2) Pat somebody’s back;

(3) Look at somebody’s eyes;

(4) Touch somebody’s head.

Each group reads the questions; other groups listen and try to answer the questions. The group that can guess correctly wins points (one for each correct answer).

Post-Reading Activities

(1) The students are divided into new groups consisting of 4–5 members.

(2) The teacher explains that the groups will be given a situation, and then they make a performance using the information that they have learned. It is important to note that the students need to extend the conversation by adding their own knowledge or experiences related to culture. Each group receives a card that could look something like this:

You are going to meet some foreign business people for the first time. Be polite, and follow their cultural rules. Since they are going to stay for a few days, explain to them what they should/shouldn’t do in your country.

The performances, then are followed by follow-up discussion. During the discussion, teacher has opportunities to develop students' awareness of cultural differences, and help them to become less ethnocentric. Ethnocentricity refers to "the judging of another culture using one's own standards and beliefs" (Frendo, 2005, p. 117). This attitude, of course, should not exist in intercultural business relationship.

(3) Reflective writing:

(a) What did you learn from today's lesson?

(b) How are you going to apply it in your life?

Conclusion

Understanding cultural distinction is one of the keys for winning in the global marketplace. Business executives who value and respect cultural differences and are willing to behave according to the acceptable norms and behaviors of a country are more likely to be successful in developing long-term business relationships. On the other hand, businessmen who neglect the importance of learning something about the culture of a country before doing business there may not be able to see their business grows and thrives in that particular place.

As we can see, culture plays a very significant role in the business world. Therefore, it is of crucial importance for Business English teacher to develop their students intercultural awareness. This can be done through various activities such as games, role plays, and simulations. Those activities give the students intercultural experiences and since they involve emotions and interpersonal skills, the learners may not easily forget the message and may apply what they have learned in the marketplace.

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Appendix: How Well Do You Know Other Cultures?

(source: *For your information 3*, pp. 201-207)

1. It is better to avoid using triangular shapes in:
 - a. Hong Kong b. Vietnam c. China d. Thailand
2. In Denmark, red is a:
 - a. Positive color b. negative color c. neutral d. magic color
3. Number 7 is considered bad luck in:
 - a. Czech Republic b. Kenya c. Israel d. Myanmar
4. In Bulgaria, a nod means:
 - a. Yes b. I don't know c. no d. Go away
5. It is suggested to get down to business right away in:
 - a. Guatemala b. Greece c. Belgium d. Peru
6. Punctuality is not important for:

- a. Japanese b. Romanians c. Germans d. Brazilians
- 7. The traditional way of greeting in Thailand is called:
 - a. The wai b. bow c. handshake d. The monk
- 8. In France, the “OK” sign means:
 - a. Money b. zero c. something vulgar d. meatball
- 9. Gift-giving is an important part of doing business in:
 - a. Japan b. Germany c. United Kingdom d. Belgium
- 10. Purple flowers are associated with death in:
 - a. Mexico b. Japan c. Belgium d. Korea