

CROSS-CULTURAL TOPICS IN THE BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASS**Elena Ciortescu, PhD Candidate, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

Abstract: It has long been argued that intercultural communication is essentially different from general communication, i.e. it requires techniques meant to enable speakers with different cultural backgrounds to exchange messages in general and in a business context, in particular. In order to do so, students must acquire the ability to cross the linguistic and cultural border. Therefore, in this case, the EFL teacher's role is to facilitate his students' adjustment of attitudes towards other cultures by creating the appropriate ground to discover, compare and interpret other cultures. The aim of this paper is to explore a number of cross-cultural topics able to provide students with the necessary skills to communicate in English in today's intercultural business environment

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Geert Hofstede referred to culture as “the software of the mind” and most people identify it as “the way we do things around here”, whether “here” refers to a country, a region, an ethnic group or an organization. However, culture is most often defined as “a shared system of attitudes, values, meanings, beliefs and behavior.” By far, the most interesting analogy related to culture is the one provided by James R. Chamberlain: understanding culture is like understanding the mechanism by which children learn their first language – instinctively, unconsciously, contingent upon their environment; (...) besides linguistic competence, children acquire communicative competence, i.e. learning to use the appropriate speed and volume of speech, pitch and tone of voice, chuckles, sighs, gasps, etc. to communicate a highly nuanced range of emotions. Besides that, they learn extra-linguistic communication: gestures, mimics, body language, when it is their turn to speak, etc. As they grow, they acquire cultural competence: which groups of people should be shown respect, which type of behavior is acceptable for men and which for women, which food one may eat, in one word, they become social actors. (Utley: 7)

Therefore, we may assume that in order to achieve intercultural skills, learners must make some behavioral adjustments or at least become accustomed to the cultures they are supposed to interact with. As Chamberlain points out, according to Milton J. Bennett, trainers have three main goals: a) cognitive (adding to the learner's stock of knowledge), b) affective (changing the trainee's attitude by developing openness, tolerance, acceptance and awareness) and c) behavioral (trainees learn the dos and don'ts of the new environment). Moreover the content of the learning process should comprise: anecdotes and descriptions related to the facts and figures, rules of address and conduct, historical development of the target culture. (Utley: 8) However, by introducing learners to the dos and don'ts related to functioning successfully in a new culture, the trainer should avoid stereotyping for although the use of a list of the appropriate/ inappropriate things to do may seem extremely appealing, the danger of stereotyping in this case is imminent.

Next to sexism, racism or religious intolerance, stereotyping is a type of prejudice which “occurs when someone claims that members of another culture all share the same, often inferior or offensive characteristics.” (Utley: 41) The most often encountered examples

of nation-related stereotypes are that Germans are arrogant or that British are hypocritical. Whether based on the influence of inherited characteristics, on education, religion or a sense of superiority, stereotyping should be avoided by all means especially when teaching intercultural issues. As Robert Gibson suggests, in order to avoid creating the medium for developing fixed ideas, we may resort to insisting on “generalizations about tendencies in cultures – what most of the people do most of the time.” By so doing, we must ensure that our students acquire the ability to understand, tolerate and adapt to other cultures.

The question which immediately arises is whether this target could possibly be attained since there are (at least in the EU) 28 different national types (if we consider culture in terms of nationality). Whether limiting the sphere to geographical, religion, race, or regional divisions, the above mentioned purpose is still out of reach. Richard Lewis identified a three-group classification of cultures: *linear-active*, *multi-active* and *reactive*. To him, Asians are *reactive* for they would either tend towards the *linear* or *multi-activity* types according to the context: if dealing with Germans, they will be punctual, factual and well-planned (therefore, *linear*); on the contrary, if dealing with Spaniards or Latin Americans they will most likely adopt a more flexible attitude (therefore, *multi-active*). Among the *linear* cultures, Lewis mentions: Protestant Scandinavians, Catholic Swiss, black and white Americans, Semitic Israelis and rich and poor Australians. Therefore, we notice that his categorization crosses racial, religious, philosophical and class borders. *Multi-activity* is to be found with Latins, Slavs and Africans. Lewis concludes that *linear* cultures are task oriented, highly organized and good planners - a set of features which makes interaction difficult between them and the more people oriented, loquacious *multi-active* cultures. Moreover, according to Lewis, unlike the *multi-actives* who have a difficulty (related to time management) in interacting with *reactive* cultures, the *linear* ones' interaction with the *reactive* cultures is quite satisfactory especially due to the latter's introvert, respect-oriented listeners. (Lewis: 8)

It is in this context that we turn towards Martin Gannon's metaphors. By relating them to Lewis's findings, we get an interesting insight into culture. Asians are among Lewis's *reactive* cultures; to Gannon, the metaphor which best describes the Japanese is *the Japanese garden*. The fluidity nature of water illustrates how the Japanese perceive their culture; according to Gannon, “water's composition of tiny, individual droplets that have power only when combined with others parallels the Japanese view of the individual. (...) And the beauty, tranquility and oneness of the garden with nature are illustrative of the Japanese values of harmony and aesthetics. (...) The Japanese believe that it takes a great deal of discipline to achieve harmony with the natural world, but that the individuals have potential to achieve this harmony through self-mastery and discipline of the spirit or *seishin*. (...) The Japanese tend to <flow with the current> over and around small obstacles or differences in opinion which makes them more tolerant to others.” (Gannon: 129, 130-1)

Another eloquent example that Gannon refers to is the German *symphony orchestra*. We may assume that, to Lewis, Germany is among the *linear* cultures (if considered close – historically and geographically - to the Protestant Scandinavians' group). Gannon states that “German culture is represented by the symphony's staying power, its harmonization of individuals and their talents into an intricate and beautiful work of art, and its well-developed organization and complex set of rules. (...) Germans tend to believe that individuals have

tremendous potential (...); however, they also tend to believe that humans are extremely fallible and must constantly strive to avoid failure. (...) The role of individuals is to perform to the best of their ability as a small part of the harmony that is the symphony.” (Gannon: 119, 120).

We have seen so far that the interaction between *linear* and *reactive* cultures can lead, both in Lewis’s and Gannon’s terms, to positive outcomes. However, things are different in the case of interaction between a *linear* or *reactive* culture and a *multi-active* one. When considering Italians (included by Lewis in the *multi-active* category), Gannon compares their culture to the *Italian opera* which includes elements such as: “operatic overture, pageantry and spectacle, voice or lyrical quality, more vowels than consonants, (...) the belief that the individual cannot keep thoughts and emotions to himself/herself. Thoughts and emotions must be expressed, first in the family and then in the piazza, (...) interaction between soloists and the group, and between regional identity (North or South) and national identity.” (Gannon: 67)

Although both Lewis’s and Gannon’s approaches are extremely interesting and undoubtedly useful for the study of culture, bottom line research in the field is provided by Geert Hofstede. His work is focused on the influence of culture on the workplace. He identifies five dimensions of national culture: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism/collectivism*, *masculinity/femininity* and *time orientation*. The *power distance* dimension is very much related to the acceptance of the unequal distribution of power, i.e. the degree to which employees are independent, to the presence of hierarchical structures, accessible bosses and to the idea of progress by evolution or revolution; *uncertainty avoidance* revolves around the degree to which people can take risks, accept conflict and stress and work without rules; the *individualism/collectivism* dimension is centred on the degree to which people work in groups or alone and relate to their task or to their colleagues; finally, the *masculinity/femininity* dimension is about the degree to which people believe in consensus, put work (or, on the contrary, family) at the centre of their lives and expect managers to use intuition. (Utley: 62, 63) *Time orientation*, i.e. the degree to which members of a culture expect long or short term success, is also one of Hofstede’s indices.

Conclusions

We may conclude that the most appropriate activities when dealing with Undergraduate Business students are undoubtedly those based on Lewis’s and Hofstede’s categories, in which case an association to Gannon’s cultural metaphors would prove extremely useful. Whether deliberately or not, Business trainers include cultural elements in their classes for, as Richard Lewis states, “the English language, like any other, cannot exist in a vacuum or be disembodied from its speakers with their innate sense of time, space, authority, appropriacy, morality and sensitivities.” (Lewis: 9)

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