

## THE CULTURE OF LEARNING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION: NEW IMPERATIVES FOR ENGINEERING EDUCATION

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*Abstract: The paper is concerned with the new requirements for the technical students due to the changes occurring in our globalizing world. We examine the possibilities, which are actually open to the curriculum of communication in the area of foreign language study as related to culture. Attempts to investigate culture underlying universal cultural processes to promote a universal core in cultural competence (shared cultural skills), and cultural practices (cultural resources/behaviour) are main focus in the present research. The potential for crossing intercultural lines and achieving intercultural communication should be developed in our engineering students to train them for the international labour market and certify their abilities of professional communication.*

*Keywords: globalization, international communication, politeness, cross-cultural skills, intercultural competences*

### Introduction

Research on intercultural communication focuses on features of the shared communication between speakers from different language or cultural backgrounds, and often relates to cultural groups at the level of nations and national languages with their own codified norms (Bowe & Martin, 2007, 3). The language components – vocabulary, grammar, style, inference, politeness – and interpretation of meaning are shaped by sociocultural practices and highlighted in the study of intercultural communication.

The term “culture” has changed in meaning over time (Goddard, 2005, 53). In its earliest English uses, “culture” was a noun of process, referring to the tending of crops or animals. In the sixteenth century “culture” began to be used about “cultivating” the human body through training, and later about “cultivating” the non-physical aspects of a person. In the nineteenth century the meaning was broadened to include the general state of human intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, comparable to “civilisation”. In contemporary times, culture can be understood as a set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, basic assumptions, and values shared by a group of people, and which influence each member’s behaviour and each member’s interpretations of the meanings of other people’s behaviour.

Nowadays, to be effective in international professional communication engineering students should become familiar with intercultural communication that can be affected by different aspects of the context, including cultural expectations, social relations and the purpose of the communication. Thus, it has become “cultural” to prepare students from the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca to understand key concepts related to intercultural communication issues, which is significant, from a pragmatic view, to internationally successful professional achievements.

### **Interconnectedness of global environment**

The most significant forces toward increasing globalization at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the economic and scientific interconnections among countries, and the dramatic advances in information technology. Parker (2005, 5) describes globalization as “a process whereby worldwide interconnections in virtually every sphere of activity are growing. Some of these interconnections lead to integration/unity worldwide; others do not”. This definition underlines the shifts that have taken place in technological, political, and economic spheres.

Thus, economic globalization links countries and organizations in a network of international connections that shape the environment in which engineering graduates and global managers must function, an environment undergoing changes that influence traditional boundaries (including traditional academic education).

The modern manager’s job combines a specialist (professional) and a managerial element, and is characterized by a high degree of interpersonal interaction. Hales (1986) summarized 10 characteristics of managerial work. Notable is the extent to which what managers do involves interactions with other people. According to Hales much managerial activity consists of asking or persuading others to do things, involving the manager in face-to-face verbal communication of limited duration; patterns of communication vary in terms of what the communication is about and with whom the communication is made; managers spend a great deal of time accounting for and explaining what they do, in informal relationships, and in political activity; managerial activities are rife with contradictions, cross-pressures, and conflicts. Much managerial work involves coping with and resolving social and technical conflict, setting the boundaries of and negotiating the work itself.

The roles (interpersonal, informational, decisional) and work behaviours of managers are the result of both the national and organizational contexts, which impose demands and constraints on the choices they make, and are influenced by national culture, indirectly as well as directly. Stewart et al. (1994) found differences in German and British firms that gave rise to specific differences in roles for managers. For example, German organizations placed a greater emphasis on technical as opposed to interpersonal controls than did British firms. German managers involved less concern about gaining cooperation, less awareness of organizational constraints, less direct supervision, more involvement in the technical aspects of tasks, fewer meetings and networking, but more desk work than the jobs of British managers. In these cases, national cultural differences influenced managerial jobs indirectly.

Important aspects of global managers’ roles and their associated behaviours differ around the world. These differences are the result of both a direct effect of culture on behaviour and a more indirect effect of culture on organizational context.

Information technology can become an equalizer in terms of access to knowledge and may also have an effect on work opportunities. Some predictions suggest that in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a computer will be built that exceeds the capacity of the human brain. Today there are hundreds of millions of Internet users and billions of Web pages. The capability of nearly universal language translation, which is already beginning to appear on the Internet, has the potential for a greater exchange of ideas than exists today. It is possible that this exchange will create an increased sense of global identity among the people of the world, yet difficult to predict the long-term impact of such changes for the in-demand jobs 20 years from now.

### Directness and indirectness across cultures

People from some cultures tend to favour directness, while people from other cultures favour less directness. Directness may also vary in relation to social context. For example, in the case where a person wants a favour from another person, the preferred strategy may be to hint and talk about the topic. In another cultural context, it may be more appropriate to ask directly.

Different languages have different ways of marking politeness. Cross-cultural variation of requests, complaints, apologies, acceptances of apologies and compliments illustrates what is often called socially appropriate behaviour or politeness. Politeness may be then defined as doing what is appropriate in a given cultural context.

Many people tend to think of politeness as the use of extremely formal language, but most linguists perceive politeness as a continuum of appropriate communication (Fraser, 1990, 220). A key point is that one should try to avoid upsetting people. This notion of avoiding conflict or confrontation is an integral element of appropriate language usage, finding its way into the language of almost all social groups, generally recognized as politeness.

One of the major approaches to politeness is Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, which consists of three basic notions: face, face-threatening acts and politeness strategies. Face refers to the desire that all people have to maintain and defend their own self-image. Face is something that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and any threat to face must be continually controlled during an interaction. Consequently, language users develop politeness strategies to reduce the face loss that may result from an interaction that is face-threatening. The model assumes that in choosing how to phrase speech acts that may threaten the hearer's positive or negative face, a speaker takes into account the factors of relative power between the speaker and hearer, relative social distance between the speaker and hearer, and the relative degree of the imposition involved. For instance, in regards to the relative power variable, comparing the two requests: a) *Excuse me sir, would it be all right if I smoke?*, and b) *Mind if I smoke?*, Brown and Levinson (1987, 80) suggest that a) might be said by an employee to his boss, while b) might be said by the boss to the employee in the same situation.

The universality of the concept of face claimed by Brown and Levinson seems to be a key principle underlying politeness in all cultures, but not for all individuals of a community; in some cultures individuals can acquire conventionally polite ways of speaking and interacting as a result of social norms of communication. Meier (1995, 353) suggests that the study of politeness requires that we “persist in placing language within its broader social context”.

Further insight on aspects of politeness provides a further perspective from which to study cross-cultural communication. Wierzbicka (2003) applies the term “cultural scripts” to refer to her technique for articulating cultural norms, values and practices using Natural Semantic Metalanguage, contrasting the Western model (cultural script) with the traditional Japanese model.

Wierzbicka suggests that “uninhibited self-assertion” is allowed and encouraged in Anglo-American culture, where one is expected to say clearly and unequivocally what one wants, what one would like, or what one thinks. This is why English has a number of

interrogative-directive devices (“whimperatives”) such as: *Would you do X?*, *Can you do X?*, *Why don't you do X?*. Even though the use of interrogative structures is more limited in Japanese than it is in English, in Japanese it is easier to say “*I want you to do X*” than “*I want to do X*” as it is important to “acknowledge independence on other people, and deference to other people”, using acknowledging devices usually combined with expressions of respect (Wierzbicka, 2003, 78). By contrast, in many other languages, for example Polish, Russian, Hebrew, Italian and Hungarian, the infinitive is used much more freely, and the use of interrogative structures in directives is much more limited.

Within recent approaches of cognitive linguistics, an individual’s knowledge is represented in his/her cognitive schema and, by extension, cultural knowledge is represented using “cultural schema”. Sharifian (2004) argues that such “cultural schemas” are conceptual structures that develop at the cultural level of cognition, rather than the psychological level. These schemas are knowledge templates that are represented across the minds in a cultural group. Cultural schemas are abstracted from social interactions between the members of a cultural group, who “negotiate” and “renegotiate” these schemas across generations. Unfamiliarity with such schemas may lead to discomfort or misunderstanding during the process of intercultural communication.

### **Levels of intercultural competence**

In our effort to prepare students to meet the needs for international communication we – as language teachers/educators - are convinced that engineering students should be instructed today to answer the future professional demands for communication purposes, ranging from acquiring an elementary level of language use (a minimal knowledge of a language for the purpose of simple communication with people of other languages/cultures) to a level of competence for professional interpreting and/or translating.

It has become a constant practice in our work within Technical University of Cluj-Napoca to make students (undergraduate and graduate) aware of the need for sensitivity to cross-cultural differences (in the organization, inclusively) and presentation of spoken and written material designed for international communication. In this sense, we grouped students according to 4 levels of intercultural competence.

a) Elementary language use level for the purpose of simple communication

Relevant tasks would include:

- formulating and answering general enquiries
- assisting others (clients/customers) to read/complete a simple form (e.g. in English)
- assisting persons of non-English-speaking background by giving instructions or directions (in the English/specific language)

b) Paraprofessional language use level for the purpose of general conversations

Relevant tasks would include:

- performing/interpreting in general conversations
- performing/interpreting in situations where specialised terminology or more sophisticated information is not required
- performing/interpreting in situations where a depth of linguistic ability is not required

c) Sub-professional language use level, which represents a level of competence for the purpose of producing a translated version of scientific information

Relevant tasks would include:

- translation of texts, which do not contain highly specialised information/terminology
- simple translation work, where some level of inaccuracy is acceptable

d) Professional language use level, which represents the minimum level of competence for professional interpreting or translating

Relevant tasks would include:

- interpreting/translating within their specialist subject areas, usually involving specialist consultations with other professionals; it may include routine correspondence, reports, standard text material in the general/specialist field
- interpretation/translation work, where a reasonable level of accuracy is required

At this level, students learn to convey the full meaning of the information from the source language and into the target language in the appropriate style and register. Thus, to achieve international communication abilities of high level we train students to equally improve their “bilingual” language skills, interpreting and translating skills as well as to widen background and cross-cultural knowledge.

### **Cross-cultural skills and abilities**

There are factors that influence the way in which people interact with their environment and each other and thereby condition the way they think, i.e. their mental programming. Hofstede (1983) suggests that nationality has a symbolic value to citizens that influences how we perceive ourselves. Therefore, from an international business/education perspective, national culture is probably the most logical level of analysis from which to begin to understand the cultural environment. On the other hand, each individual has unique life experiences that contribute to diversity within the culture.

Interacting effectively with people from other cultures and behaving appropriately in a culturally novel context are indications of the cross-cultural skills and abilities. These skills include a wide range of information, interpersonal and behavioural skills. They largely relate to coping with the stress associated with working/learning in or the ability to adjust to a foreign culture (Black & al., 1991).

Learners in immersion environments, such as study abroad, often report feelings as if those around them may perceive them to be lacking personality or humor. Students, whose knowledge of cultural conventions and communication skills in the new language environment may be novice, can feel confused or embarrassed. The learner experiences “culture shock” when he finds that his problem-solving and coping mechanisms do not work in the new culture. The learner’s self becomes trapped behind the communication barrier that results. Moreover, the cultural frame of the new environment causes the self to be reinterpreted through another filter of meaning. Learners become disadvantaged in their ability to assimilate new information, develop their social networks, and present their self, when their own frame of reference becomes marginalized by the prominent frame of the new culture (Pellegrino, 2005, 14).

Exchange students from our university or other European universities claimed that their initial strategies were to be very modest and polite, to ask questions and to pretend to understand even if they were not satisfied with the response, insisting in checking their understanding by repeating with their interpretation of the message meaning. Activities,

which were routine in their native country, required great energy in the new culture. They found conversation partners responding to them in unexpected ways such as simplifying and slowing their speech excessively or speaking more loudly, as if to compensate for a loss of hearing. This situation may cause stress and anxiety.

The search for a universal skill set is leading to the development of new models that predict intercultural effectiveness. They contain both general and culture-specific elements, which focus on the ability to exhibit appropriate behaviour. Ting-Toomey's (1999) conceptualization of cross-cultural communication and models of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) focus on how culture-specific experiences can be converted into general skills that can then be applied to new cross-cultural structures. These models shift the focus from specific skills to a culture-general meta-skill, where the central component is an analytic ability, called mindfulness or cultural metacognition.

The characteristics of effective intercultural interaction can be summarized (Thomas & Fitzsimmons, 2008) as good personal adjustment (indicated by feelings of contentment and well-being), development and maintenance of good interpersonal relationships with culturally different others, and the effective completion of task-related goals.

### **Final remarks**

To be effective in cross-cultural contexts, it is important to understand both the sources and outcomes of different cultural and social identities, and to adapt to the changing environment. The current trends, which mirror the changes, are a result of the forces of globalization that include the uneven development in the world, the continued influence of information and communication technology, and the growing pressure on the natural environment. However, global accessibility is not necessarily similar to global communication.

Understanding the influence of culture on interpersonal interactions is now a fundamental requirement to effective international communication. The perspective of interpersonal interactions with people/specialists who are culturally different imposes a more increased attention for educators and language teachers to approach (foreign) language courses for professional communication with a re-evaluation of what “communication”, “community” (e.g. discourse/speech community), “culture” and “identity” mean. A special emphasis on directness and indirectness across cultures in terms of verbal and non-verbal behaviours (politeness) different cultures favour, the international professional skills and abilities required for a highly competitive engineer enabled us to establish the levels of intercultural/international communication competence with main level-related tasks students in the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca can be ranked.

Our technical universities nowadays have to face more adequately the new global nature demands of the labour and educational markets and, consequently, train their engineering students in a more effective way for the international professional environment, which seems to become more complex, more dynamic, more uncertain, and more competitive than ever before.

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