CROSS-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Teaching English for communication in the business environment today is a big challenge, as it must take into consideration first of all the international context. Contemporary society is defined in terms of postmodernism, postfeminism (although more and more we talk of gender studies, at the intersection between the different positions assumed by men – masculinity studies – and women – women's studies), postsocialism, postcolonialism. "The global village", the new communication era of fast information and IT channels, the global media power and the growth of cross-border systems of rapid knowledge exchange have clearly and definitely changed our teaching, as well.

The new world is the world of multinational companies, of the new transnational forces, of political and military organizations, of global systems of telecommunications. The political decision to unite different states in larger groups (such as the European Union) is concurrent with yet another phenomenon: decentralisation and devolution, the regionalisation of nation-states. Massive movements of population take place in a world of internationalising environmental and health issues. In today's world, the crossing of physical borders (giving birth to economic and political migrants, refugees, immigrants of all kinds) happens at the

same time with the conquest of cultural borders, favouring cultural exchange. All these elements lead to a redefinition of teaching English, and more specifically of teaching English for business communication.

I will refer to the context of teaching English for business communication at the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, at both undergraduate and Master's level. A few questions are the starting point: to what extent is language teaching culture teaching? What language do we teach in business English classes? Which 'English'? Whose culture? How much do the textbooks and materials that we teach take into consideration the cultural/cross-cultural elements that affect international communication? How relevant culturally are the materials that we teach for the Romanian context? How much do our students benefit from them as students and as future professionals?
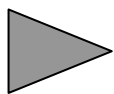
Looking at Romanian culture in the light of major cultural models

I would like to start from the definition of culture, which I take in Williams' words in its 'social' aspect: "a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour". The analysis of culture from this point of view, includes "the clarifications of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture", i.e. an analysis of "intellectual and imaginative works (…) in relation to particular traditions and societies", but also the analysis of elements of a way of life – "the organisation of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express and govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate". This analysis includes the first two ways of looking at culture, the "ideal" and the "documentary" way, discovering and describing elements of culture, and also 'criticising', discovering laws and trends in order to understand it better (Williams in Storey, 1994: 56).

Quite clearly, therefore, in the given context we can speak of several cultures: the one of our students, our own, the culture of the textbooks and materials we use, the larger culture of our country, and also the organisational culture of our institution, but also those of the working places of our students (real or potential).

In the discussion of organisational cultures, Geert Hofstede (1996) refers to five main indexes that define a specific culture. The *power distance* index is the extent to which employees with less power in an organisation or a country expect and accept power to be distributed unequally; it depends on geographical space (superior = small PDI), number of inhabitants (great = great PDI), income (rich countries = small PDI). The second one is *collectivism vs. individualism* ('we' vs. 'I'). The third, *feminine vs. masculine*. A fourth index is *uncertainty avoidance*, which he defines as the way in which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. The last index Hofstede includes is *short-term orientation vs. long-term orientation*.

He then establishes four cultural models at the intersection of these indexes: countries with a small power index and a reduced uncertainty avoidance index are the UK, Ireland, the USA – the village market model. A big power index and a reduced uncertainty avoidance index characterise countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines – the family model. A small distance to power and an intense uncertainty avoidance: Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Israel – the well-oiled machine model. And finally a big distance to power, intense uncertainty avoidance: France, Greece, Spain, Italy – the hierarchical model.

As Romania was not included in this study, I tried to identify, through a series of questionnaires and informal discussions with some of the students of our institution, its place in Hofstede's model. The limitations of such an analysis are clear, bearing in mind its rather informal character and the number of respondents involved. However, the findings show that Romania seems to be placed among the countries with a rather great distance to power index, it is perceived as more collectivistic than individualistic, more feminine than masculine (although many of the female students commented on the patriarchal values still at play in the Romanian society at large), it has an intense uncertainty avoidance and a short-time orientation perspective. These characteristics would place Romania – rather unsurprisingly – next to countries such as France, Greece, Spain or Italy.

Another cultural model is Fons Trompenaars', as exposed in his famous *Riding the Waves of Culture* (1993). Trompenaars arrived at his classification of cultures through a set of questionnaires that he administered in different countries. The seven cultural features he ends up with as a result are:
❑   *universalism* vs. *particularism*;

- *individualism* (a prime orientation of the self) vs. *collectivism* (a prime orientation to common goals and objectives);
- *neutrality* vs. *affectivity*;
- *diffuse* (*high context*: from general to specific) vs. *specific* cultures (*low context*: from specific to general);
- *achieved* (through personal strife, e.g. education) vs. *ascribed* (age, gender, class, etc.) *status*;
- *sequential* attitude to time (seen in a straight line) vs. *synchronic* attitude to time (various activities can be done in parallel, the past, present and future are seen in a continuum);
- *internal* vs. *external-oriented* cultures.

This time, Romania was part of the analysis, but unfortunately only regarding two of the dimensions. Here are the questions and the results for the collectivism/individualism feature and internal/external-oriented cultures respectively:

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* A defect is discovered in one of the installations. It was caused by negligence of one of the members of the team. Responsibility for this mistake can be carried in various ways.

A. The person causing the defect by negligence is the one responsible.

B. Because he or she happens to work in a team the responsibility should be carried by the group.

Which of these two ways of taking responsibility do you think is usually the case in your society?

Individual responsibility: Russia 68%, Poland 66%, Romania 64%, Czechoslovakia 62%, Denmark 61%, Bulgaria 59%; Indonesia 13%, Turkey 23%, Singapore 23%, Finland 26% (USA 40%, UK 36%, Japan 36%).

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*   A. What happens to me is my own doing.

B. Sometimes I feel that I do not have enough control over the direction my life is taking.

A: China 35%, Egypt 48%, Japan 56%; USA 89%, Switzerland 84%, Canada 83% (UK 75%, Romania 69%).

Not surprisingly, in answering the first question, Romania sides with countries of the former communist block in emphasising the need for personal responsibility.

As concerns the second, Romania is quite above the average, the respondents clearly emphasising again the individual's importance in life decisions. So the general conclusion of this analysis is that the Romanian culture and the British and American ones (which we mostly emphasise in our teaching and in the text-books and materials we use) seem to be different. Therefore, the initial questions about whose culture we teach and how relevant it is in the Romanian context seem to be valid ones.
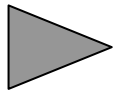
Cultural Identity

One of the central issues to discuss next is one involving identity, our students' and our own. Clearly, by identity we speak of a dynamic process, identities are not fixed images, but a "construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices" (Sarup, 1996: 11). Identity is defined as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash. These writings consist of many quotations from the innumerable centres of culture, ideological state apparatuses and practices: parents, family, schools, the workplace, the media, the political parties, the state." (Sarup, 1996: 25). Identity is represented by a sum of other elements, themselves in a process of definition and redefinition: national and ethnic, gender, occupational, marital status, 'race', belonging to a certain class or social group(s). So in the teaching process a multiplicity of identities are involved, all of them having to be taken into consideration.

In what concerns the materials for teaching, I will focus on a set of textbooks produced in-house and a selection of other materials, primarily British (see the bibliographical list). I would like to emphasise that in all of them the central culture is the British/English and/or American one, our students and in fact ourselves being in the position of taking another identity, presented as the norm in today's world of business. In the more recent materials, this standpoint is made explicit by the introduction of culturally aware or culturally sensitive activities and a reference to the literature of the field; however the speaking position of the authors is the same: British/American.

I would like to exemplify with two activities from *In Company* – Intermediate (Powell: 2000: 40-41), one of the text-books we use in the Academy of Economic Studies. Unit 10 on Small Talk starts with a quiz entitled *How culturally aware are*

you? The students are asked to try a questionnaire, and comments are provided by the author. I would like to exemplify with only three of the five questions.

a. You meet a Spanish business contact you haven't seen for ages who wants to stop and chat, but you're running late for an appointment. *Do you stay or do you make your excuses and go?*

b. A British salesman is giving you a demonstration of a new office product. He seems to like telling a lot of jokes. *Do you join in the joke-telling or wait until he gets to the point?*

e. A Finnish colleague invites you to conduct the final stages of an important meeting in the sauna. *Do you accept or politely decline?*
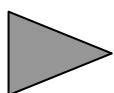
Comments:

a. Business people from Arab and Latin countries tend to have a more flexible, "polychronic" attitude to time than their "monochronic" North American and North European counterparts for whom time really is money. Their "high-context" culture also places greater emphasis on personal relationships than "low-context" Northerners do. The message? Try not to be too busy for Brazilians or Italians and don't mess up Americans' tight schedules.

b. A good sense of humour is an admired quality in many cultures – notably British, American and most Latin countries – though the type of humour may vary from wordplay to sharp sarcasm to innuendo and even the surreal. In other cultures, however – particularly Germanic ones – humour is not usually considered appropriate in a business context. The message? You don't have to be a comedian with the British, but always smile at their attempts at humour. With Germans or Swiss, leave the jokes for the bar after the meeting.

e. Different people have different ideas about where is an appropriate place to do business. For some, talking about golf all morning at the office, and business afternoon on the golf course is quite normal. Others do more business in bars than boardrooms. But these days people are more culturally aware and don't usually expect foreigners to observe their own business customs. The message? A polite refusal to go to a Finnish sauna or a Spanish bullfight will not usually offend.

As it is clear from the activity itself and the comments, the assumed position is that of business persons from the British or American culture that have to deal with "the other", and therefore are given handy advice which could take them out of some

embarassing situations. The norm is set by their context and the cultures they encounter are seen as different, out of the ordinary, to a certain extent strange or even amusing.

Another activity I would like to describe is from Unit 14 <u>Being Heard</u> and is entitled *Meeting Across Cultures*. It is a jigsaw reading, group work activity: working in three separate groups, the students read a different case study and then do a vocabulary exercise. Next they are asked to form new groups and discuss different attitudes to relationship-building, time, hierarchy, power, interruption, delegation, technical matters, as seen in each of the three texts. The three texts describe the experiences of a "British salesman" first in Brazil, then in Germany, and finally in Saudi Arabia. He (this time the assumed position is a gendered one, too) is faced yet again with situations in which he sees the positions and attitudes he is challenged with as different, strange, funny.

From the teaching /learning process point of view we tend to favour a learning centered approach in which the learners totally determine their learning and the teacher is rather a facilitator of this process. Through it the learners internalize their already acquired knowledge and find their motivation and ability to enhance it. A very clear and constantly (re-)negotiated needs-analysis, a course design seen as a dynamic process, a syllabus combining elements of structures, topics, functions and skills and a methodology clearly emphasizing communication – those are all elements of such an approach. The process of ESP teaching/learning raises other questions for discussion: the learners seen perhaps more than in any other situations as clients, and the teachers as providers of services, the process itself with its clear goals closely observed by institutions and participants alike potentially creating some strain, and the obviously lucrative aspect. The British teaching style, closely following the demands and expectations of this type of culture, is followed in the context under discussion.

Conclusions

Having analysed all these elements, we can conclude that, by teaching English for business communication (as our courses aim to do in the Academy of Economic Studies), we also teach culture to a large extent. In fact I could safely say we teach British/English culture mostly through the textbooks and materials that we choose

and through the teaching styles and methodology most of us adopt. We mediate this culture through our Romanian filter and provide our students with instruments they can safely use in this culturally bound context. Arguably, as most of international business is anglicized anyway, we provide them with instruments handy in an international context, as well. However, in the process, I believe we need to acknowledge the differences between the Romanian and the English cultures and to take into account the multiple identities of our students. We need to make this explicit to our students in the English classes. We need to clarify what cultural model(s) we are illustrating. Cultural empathy and sensitivity need to be explained and taught, and we must understand the standpoint we adopt and transmit in the process of teaching/learning the business language skills. Our students seem to be fit to compete in the larger world, as I described it at the beginning of this article, at least from the point of view of their communication in an English language/international environment.

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