Intercultural Business Communication:
theoretical framework and training methods

Ángela María Larrea Espinar

(ff1laesa@uco.es)

UNIVERSIDAD DE CÓRDOBA

Resumen

El desarrollo de la comunicación intercultural en los negocios (IBC) refleja el interés empresarial en las habilidades comunicativas interculturales, pues el éxito de las transacciones comerciales depende, en gran parte, de la competencia y eficacia del proceso comunicativo. Aquí se revisan los estudios más relevantes de esta joven disciplina, se examina el proceso de comunicación intercultural en los negocios y se concluye con un acercamiento al entorno educativo, proponiendo métodos de formación para la práctica docente.

Palabras clave

Comunicación intercultural en los negocios
Comunicación intercultural
Inglés comercial
Formación en IBC
Enseñanza de IBC

Abstract

The emergence of Intercultural Business Communication (IBC) reflects the concern of global organizations with the costs of doing business. Thus, the efficiency of cross-cultural communication processes clearly determines the success of business in international settings. This paper reviews the most relevant research in IBC, examines the needs of the business world and outlines the issues that influence the intercultural communication process, and concludes with an instructional approach identifying key methods for classroom training.

Key words

Intercultural Business Communication
Cross-cultural Communication
Business English
IBC training
IBC teaching

In the 21st century, the increasing globalization of the world has brought about a convergence in life styles and consumer values. However, cultures continue to diverge. The work of Hofstede (2001) seems to imply that cultural shift is not

absolute, and people do not change rapidly their ideas. Since culture is a powerful element that influences communication, the emergence of Intercultural Business Communication (IBC ahead) reflects the concern of global organizations with the costs of doing business; i.e., the efficiency of cross-cultural communication processes (behaviour, practices, etc.) clearly determines the success of business in international settings.

This paper summarizes the most relevant issues related to this young discipline. First, we discuss the concept of IBC and review early literature on the subject as well as previously developed models. Then, we examine the ongoing debate associated to the notion of national culture and analyse the IBC process. Finally, we turn to the educational perspective, focusing on the teaching of IBC and suggesting some methods for classroom training.

IBC

The emergence of IBC as a field of studies has been brought about by the increasing globalization of business in the 21st century. In this environment, individuals who speak different languages and illustrate diverse cultural realities interact in international networks. As the clash of civilizations has an effect on the costs of doing business in international contexts, IBC has attracted more and more interest as an academic domain.

IBC, then, has grown into a complex subject. The areas of communication and culture as contributing disciplines are rich enough and the business dimension adds to the complexity.

Despite the fact that Hofstede's classic work pointed at a close relationship between culture and management practices in 1980, research on IBC at work was scarce until the end of the century.

According to Gudykunst (2002), there are more theoretical studies than empirical research due to North American preferences. Nevertheless, answering to practical needs, European scholars have called for a collaborative perspective between disciplines, academics and professionals to study the business and organizational contexts of intercultural communication.

Being directly related to the subject of Intercultural Communication, IBC has inherited some of the bias of its precedent subject. Thus, most studies gather evidence and analyse data from the Western angle. Other limitations include one-dimensional approaches and the overlooking of individual factors.

Another controversial question is the concept of national culture. As the nature of culture is still an undecided matter, the validity of the notion of national culture developed by Hofstede is an ongoing debate. We will refer to this concern after reviewing some literature on IBC.

IBC STUDIES

Early literature on this topic identified different cultural components that affect the communication process. Hall's high-low context cultures and Hofstede's national culture were highly influential in subsequent works. Then, following Hall (1959), many researchers used contextuality to contrast communication patterns among speakers from high- and low- context cultures. As for Hofstede (1980), his studies on national culture made possible the comparison of different cultural communication styles and methods. Early business-specific intercultural communication research continued this comparative path analysing communication methods. Thus, cultural studies investigated cultural and communication systems in different countries or cultures (Gannon and Associates 1994). Intercultural thinking was also added to negotiation studies (Ting-Toomey 1988). Emotional factors, non-verbal behaviour, and 'face' influencing IBC were thrown in the mix (Ekman and Friesen 1978; Bond 1991). Some years later, the complexity of globalization brought the idea of language proficiency (Babcock and Du-Babcock 1996 and 2001), as we will discuss in the section below.

Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson laid out the approaches to come:

> the internationalisation of IBC requires a re-appraisal of concepts like 'self', 'identity' and 'nation', ideally through the multidisciplinary lens of related disciplines such as organisation and management studies, cultural psychology and linguistic anthropology (2003: 7).

Their views were not wrong, since an emphasis on personal identity together with contributing insights of related disciplines are currently being under consideration.

IBC MODELS

The subsequent formulation of models and frameworks promoted the study of IBC. Victor (1992) analysed seven cultural variables that influence business communication: language, environment/technology, social organization, contexting, authority, nonverbal behaviour, and conceptions of time.

Beamer's model (1992) draws on previous frameworks and deals with developing cultural competence. In 1995 Beamer expands on the previous model and approaches intercultural communication through 'schemata': «preexisting mental structures with organized categories that allow a person to make sense of information (Jameson 2007: 201). Our schemata of other cultures necessarily differ from those cultures, so communicators modify their preexisting images through the communication process.

Varner (2000) makes reference to some factors that affect the IBC process. She identifies three categories: business strategy (11 variables), intercultural strategy (11 variables), and communication strategy (12 variables). Models were also developed taking into account language proficiency. Supporting the idea that language is «the gateway to culture» (2001: 376), Babcock and Du-Babcock suggested and redefined a model that takes into account «varying language proficiencies of speakers using multiple languages and having varying language competencies (2001: 376).

As IBC theories were claiming attention to individual identity, Varner and Palmer (2005) incorporated these concerns to their process. Jameson (2007) is one of the great exponents of this view designing a model of individual cultural identity.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN IBC

As we have already mentioned, Hofstede's studies (1980) discovered the relevance of culture (the 'levels' of culture) in professional contexts and heightened

the interest in national cultures. National culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and assumptions that define a distinct way of life of a group of people and is based on the fundamental concepts imparted in early individual development (Griffith and Harvey 2001: 89).

Some writers, however, imply that Hofstede mainly studied cultural differences associated with nationality. Hence, Jameson states that many scholars, mostly for practical reasons, equate culture with country and warns us about the risks of this equivalence: «limits our understanding of business issues, problems and strategies» (2007: 204).

For these reasons, Asante and Gudykunst (1989) declare that we should not forget the individual variable, since cultural tendencies do not represent participants in the communication process. Along with this thought, Poncini (2003) asserts that we need something else besides the national component, since cultures are not homogenous and the individual may not act as the standardized representative of that culture.

Some years later, Berthoin Antal and Friedman (2008) support this idea. They think that Hofstede's model depicts national culture as a definite behaviour. They continue saying that this type of instruction may be useful, but in specific intercultural interactions we must bear in mind that «individuals are culturally complex beings, not standardized products of a national culture» (2008: 364).

From these views, we can infer that we should turn to the individual nature of each communicative act to avoid miscommunication. In the end, people know less about others' cultural structure than about their own. Also, as useful as the knowledge of national cultures can be, we cannot limit our research to this construct. In business settings there are also other layers that have a great impact on the communication process, such as organizational culture. Culture does matter, but depending on the nature of the communication process, some layers are more salient than others.

Finally, there may be other factors that influence intercultural communication in business contexts. In this case, we would need to analyse theoretical perspectives from other disciplines. Furthermore, participants in the intercultural process may be able to adjust their cultural features and adapt to their conversation partners so that communication is effective. This relates to the notion of 'transactional culture'

developed by Bell (1992) or 'transactional discourse': «the willing suspension of fixed expectations» (Büllow-Møller 2003: 85).

THE IBC PROCESS

Doing business in the global market depends on the ability to successfully communicate in an intercultural context. Due to the complexity of human beings, our cultural values are transferred to the communicative process; in other words, in cross-cultural encounters, each business partner filters the message through some layers of culture. Consequently, this circumstance determines the success of the business endeavour.

Targowski and Metwalli (2003: 53) dwell on previous ideas on the subject and determine that there are seven levels of culture affecting the communication process:

Global Culture
National Culture
Regional Culture
Organizational Culture
Group Culture
Personal Culture
Biological Culture

The first level describes the new layer issuing from globalization. People from different cultures use the same rules and behaviours to make the communication process successful in business contexts. This cultural construct, in which the participants try to adapt to the intercultural situation setting aside their own cultural behaviours, is similar to the notion of transactional culture or transactional discourse (referred to above).

The national culture hints at the traditions, behaviours, feelings, values, etc., that are common to a nation, while the regional culture embodies the variable values that individuals share within a region. The organizational culture is related to corporate culture since it is a management means to control organizational performance. Group culture, in contrast, refers to a group of people «united by a

common relationship (work, profession or family)» (Targowski and Metwalli 2003: 55). The personal layer represents an individual understanding of time, space and reality. The biological culture is responsible for universal reactions to physical needs.

The intricacy of these levels is even more obvious if we take a look at the structure of a culture layer (Targowski and Metwalli 2003):
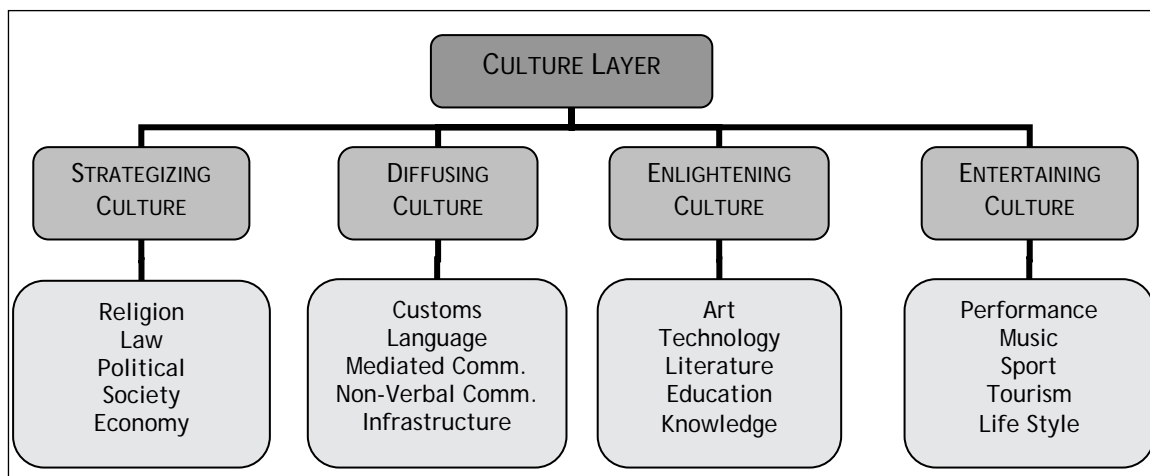

Figure 1. Structure of a culture layer

All these elements should be taken into account at each level; however, they are not equally prominent at the same time.

Targowski and Metwalli's model suggests that there are also other factors that play an important role in the intercultural process. Hence, the communication channel and the climate are equally significant. The former is the medium of the message and the latter influences people's openness to communicate: «Communication climate refers to the atmosphere of prevailing condition which exists within a specific entity» (Targowski and Metwalli 2003: 57).

TEACHING IBC

Without a comprehensive understanding of IBC issues, it is more than likely that our students keep alive worthless stereotypes and fail to succeed in an intercultural marketplace.

Before coming to terms with the intercultural condition, business communication as a formal subject was born in the USA. The initial studies pointed at universal communication principles and processes. Since the communication setting was homogeneous, textbooks and materials were designed for English-speaking American students and specific professional genres were out of sight: «The overall teaching objective in the early years was to teach American students how to communicate effectively and efficiently in American business and commercial environments» (Du-Babcock 2006: 254).

DeVoss *et al.* (2002: 71) mention some shortcomings of the early textbooks on the matter. We would like to quote two of the main problems:

> 1. They assume an entirely US readership and subsequently marginalize international students' experiences.
> 2. They include linear and simple transmission models that do not effectively explain the importance of context in communication situations.

As we can see, they are directly related to the limited perspectives of the early stages of this area.

With economic expansion and globalization, the communication environment has changed. To communicate successfully in what seems to be an intercultural and multidisciplinary setting, we have to attend to linguistic and cultural competencies. Also, as professional genres become more sophisticated and specific, this type of instruction should also be incorporated to our teaching practice. Therefore, textbooks have considerably evolved to include these issues.

The future teaching of IBC will have to take into account the questions mentioned above together with the continuous development of communication technologies.

From a pedagogic point of view, our ultimate teaching goal is to develop intercultural communication competencies among learners by «consistently exposing learners to the potential 'otherness' of foreign language communication in a lingua franca business context» (Planken *et al.* 2004: 309). As educators, we should provide students with linguistic and cultural behaviour that will enable them to be aware of difference, develop strategies to cope with such difference and successfully communicate with others.

The lingua franca reference emphasizes the idea that intercultural communicative competence should be promoted within the context of English as an international language. The status of English as a world language nowadays, leaves behind the idea of a standardized native speaker and incorporates local and international contexts.

Our teaching will also need to address some of the present challenges like focusing on the students' own culture and personal identities, replacing notions of cultural stereotypes and analysing the communication process from a multidisciplinary point of view. In the actual teaching practice, however, we are faced with this duality: «While there is convergence of opinion as to the need to teach intercultural awareness, there is no such agreement about the means to teach it» (Aronson *et al.* 2005: 17).

Most authors agree on the enormous value of experiential learning activities, since students learn through experience (Gordon and Newburry 2007). There are many different ways of promoting and adjusting the learning of IBC. Our next section, then, will analyse some methods to promote communication in intercultural settings.

METHODS FOR IBC TEACHING

There are some factors that we should consider when choosing methods for our sessions: the desired outcome (acquisition of knowledge, developing skills or modifying attitudes), participants (needs, preferences, culture) and situation (time, location, budget). Once we have examined and set these issues, we can turn to IBC training.

Fowler and Blohm (2004: 37-84) introduce the following typology regarding methodology:

1. Cognitive methods
2. Active methods
3. Intercultural methods

Cognitive methods focus on knowledge acquisition; active methods engage learners in active learning; intercultural approaches are devoted to intercultural learning.

These authors work on an extensive classification. We have drawn on their analysis to introduce a more succinct categorization of methods that can be useful for IBC training:

COGNITIVE	ACTIVE	INTERCULTURAL
▪ Lectures ▪ Written Materials ▪ Computer-based Materials ▪ Films ▪ Case Studies and Critical Incidents	▪ Role-plays ▪ Simulation Games ▪ Intercultural Exercises	▪ Contrast Culture Training ▪ Cross-cultural analysis and dialogues ▪ Area Studies

Table 1. Methods for IBC training

Cognitive methods

If acquisition of knowledge is the most important goal, we can use the following methods:

Lectures: it is a common and recurrent method. The trained person can present information, clarify ideas, introduce new topics, etc.

Written Materials: they are commonly used in training sessions to transmit facts, ideas and concepts. The materials can be as diverse as readings, textbooks, articles, workbooks, letters, etc. These written texts are used to illustrate issues about different cultures.

Computer-based Materials: although they are frequently used to acquire conceptual information, we can also find materials that develop skills and /or modify attitudes. The training takes place by means of CDs, DVDs, online programs and web sites. A few web pages that can be appropriate for this type of intercultural learning are: Kwintessential (2009), Business Etiquette Articles (s. a.), World Business Culture (s. a.) and eslflow.com (s. a.). On these web pages, we can find information about

different countries and diverse cultures, together with quizzes, cultural profiles, intercultural business tests, business articles, forums, etc.

Films: educational films or commercial films are a motivating material to transmit knowledge and provide scenarios for cultural debates. In our area of studies, the film *Gung Ho* (Howard 1986) has been used for educational purposes to make students aware of the different business practices between Japan and the U.S.A.

Case Studies: pose a situation and students must work on assessing the problems entailed and finding possible solutions. Some cases are based on real-world dilemmas so the students get the opportunity to deal with concrete situations and specific cultural problems. This method is highly productive to train business executives. The ABC. Association for Business Communication (2009) web page offers some «Intercultural Communication Cases» that can be helpful for classroom practice.

Critical Incidents: are shorter than case studies and refer to cross-cultural misunderstandings, problems and clashes. The incidents do not illustrate the cultural differences of the interacting parties; rather these are discovered as the activity is carried out. The use of critical incidents can bring about students' understanding of their own personal and cultural identity.

Active methods

These methods involve learners in active tasks to build up specific skills. Students learn by doing.

Role plays: role playing puts information and skills into practice in a safe context and can be focused on content or processes. Participants have the opportunity to rehearse diverse roles in real-life situations for a specific purpose.

Simulation games: they are highly motivating and versatile. Educational and entertaining elements combine to build knowledge and develop skills. For instance, the game *Markhall* (Blohm 1995) shows two companies based on two different corporate models, the American and the Japanese.

Intercultural exercises: these activities usually combine two or more techniques (physical response, discussion, or written assignments) and involve

learners in content while providing practice. Intercultural exercises are commonly used to raise awareness about cultural differences and develop strategies to adapt to diverse working environments. As an example of intercultural exercise, *The Cocktail Party* (Blohm 1997) puts in action non-verbal behaviours unusual to North-American culture.

Intercultural methods

The aim of these activities is to develop cultural self-awareness, promote intercultural competencies and achieve effectiveness.

Constrast culture training: this method has been widely used in the U.S.A. It turns to an experienced actor as the foreigner *Mr. Khan* to point at cultural differences and elicit a reflection on the learners' own culture.

Cross-cultural analysis: is an experiential exercise similar to the previous method but it is not dependent on an actor. Students deal with cultural analysis from their own cultural perspective and from the point of view of one or more target cultures. The discussions also involve a person from the target culture so the participants take note of contrasting dimensions from a member of this target culture. In business, dimensions incorporate differences in management and organization.

Cross-cultural dialogues: are short conversations between two people of different cultures. Each dialogue shows the speakers' values, attitudes and points of view and includes a subtle mistaken assumption in the conversation. Dialogues focused on business and the workplace can provide further practice to our students.

Area studies: most commonly called culture-specific training, these studies build expertise about a specific country. They are highly appropriate for people who plan to live or work in the target country providing an excellent resource for understanding and interacting with people from that culture. Most of these studies have been carried out (and financed) by governments and multinational corporations.

CONCLUSION

In our global world, the ability to communicate cross-culturally is a common aim. Moreover, from a professional point of view: «the ability to recognize and adapt appropriate behaviors in differing cultural settings is increasingly being viewed as a desirable employee characteristic» (Gordon and Newburry 2007: 244). This means that business schools need to be up to the challenge and prepare students for the present-day workplace. Teachers, then, must adjust their syllabuses and teaching methods to fit the needs of a complex, globalized and multidisciplinary working environment.

IBC studies draw on different disciplines to examine the needs of the business world and identify the issues that influence the intercultural communication process. An understanding of how to communicate successfully among diverse cultures will «minimize conflicts, increase international trade and investment, and facilitate the development of the global economy» (Targowski and Metwalli 2003: 50).

Evidence suggested by new lines of research shows that the future of this field lays in incorporating theoretical dimensions from related disciplines. Only a multidisciplinary approach can help identify all the layers of this partially explored process.

As for the IBC teaching perspective, we should adjust our materials and teaching practice to the changing needs of the communication environment. Engaging in IBC research proves to be the best way of keeping our teaching updated.

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