

Addressing intercultural competence in BELF (English as a lingua franca in business) contexts

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APA: Toprak Yıldız, T. E. (2019). Kültürlerarası yeterliliğin İngilizcenin ortak dil olarak kullanıldığı iş bağlamlarına yönelik öğrenimi ve öğretimi. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (14), 429-438. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.541075

Abstract

In line with the new definition of competent language user, the 21st-century second/foreign language learners are expected to acquire and develop not only linguistic competence but also intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is assumed to enable foreign/second language learners to communicate effectively in the modern era which increasingly calls for engaging in intercultural communication. Thus, within the last few decades, the notion of intercultural competent language learner has gained considerable attention particularly in English as a lingua franca in business (BELF) contexts where individuals and organizations establish and maintain international communication. Although fundamental linguistic and work-related features of BELF have been scrutinized in the relevant literature, the notion of intercultural competence in the BELF context has not been addressed thoroughly. Given the centrality of intercultural competence to establishing effective communication, this article discusses how intercultural competence can be enhanced in BELF classes to promote intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills and how dispositions of language learners toward intercultural learning can be fostered. It elaborates on the possible means of achieving these goals and tasks that can be used to hone intercultural skills of English language learners. Moreover, it provides curriculum designers, material developers, BELF teachers and English language learners with practical implications that could stimulate intercultural competence.

Key words: Intercultural competence, English as a lingua franca, business English, intercultural learning/teaching.

Kültürlerarası yeterliliğin İngilizcenin ortak dil olarak kullanıldığı iş bağlamlarına yönelik öğrenimi ve öğretimi

Öz

Yetkin dil kullanıcısının yeni tanımına uygun olarak, 21. yüzyılda ikinci/ yabancı dil öğrencilerinden yalnızca dil yetkinliği değil aynı zamanda kültürlerarası yetkinliği kazanmaları ve bu yetkinliği geliştirmeleri beklenmektedir. Modern dünyamız uluslararası iletişimi gittikçe daha fazla gerekli kılarken, kültürlerarası yeterlilik olgusunun, ikinci ve yabancı dil öğrencilerinin daha etkin bir biçimde iletişim kurmalarına olanak sağladığı varsayılmaktadır. Bu nedenle, kültürlerarası yeterliliğe sahip dil öğrencisi kavramı, son yıllarda özellikle İngilizcenin iş yaşamında ortak bir dil olarak kullanıldığı (BELF), bireyler ve kuruluşların uluslararası iletişim kurdukları ve bu iletişimi sürdürmeye çalıştıkları bağlamlarda oldukça dikkat çekmiştir. Söz konusu bağlamın (BELF) dil yetkinliği ile ilgili kısımları ve iş alanına yönelik önemli boyutları ilgili literatürde çeşitli açılardan incelenmesine rağmen, bu bağlamlarda kültürlerarası yetkinlik kavramının nasıl sağlanabileceği

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hususlu yeterli ölçüde ele alınmamıştır. Kültürlerarası yeterliliğin etkili iletişimde oynadığı başat rol göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, bu makalede, kültürlerarası yeterliliğin bahsi geçen bağlamlarda kültürlerarası farkındalık, bilgi, beceri ve yatkınlık gibi hususları desteklemek amacıyla nasıl ele alınabileceği tartışılmaktadır. Makalede, bahsi geçen amaçları gerçekleştirmenin olası yolları ve İngilizce öğrenenlerin kültürlerarası becerilerini geliştirmek için kullanılacak eğitimsel etkinlikler ele alınmaktadır. Ayrıca, bu makalede, müfredat tasarımcılarına, materyal geliştiren uzmanlara, iş İngilizcesi öğreten İngilizce öğretmenlerine ve bu bağlamda dil öğrenen öğrencilere kültürlerarası yeterliliği artırmak için yardımcı olabilecek uygulamaya yönelik birtakım öneriler sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kültürlerarası yeterlilik, ortak dil olarak İngilizce, iş İngilizcesi, kültürlerarası öğrenme/öğretim.

1. Introduction

In the modern era, a good command of English, the lingua franca (i.e., common language) of the increasingly globalized world (Seidlhofer, 2004), has been a prerequisite and key to successful international business (Akar, 2002). As a consequence, a new term, BELF (English as a lingua franca in business contexts) has emerged in the relevant literature to refer to English that is used in international contexts (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). In international business contexts, BELF is used for various purposes such as making negotiations, conducting and maintaining projects, making contracts, sharing information through meetings and e-mails ultimately to achieve a buying-selling negotiation (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999). However, success in business relations cannot be taken granted with only ensuring linguistic competence and domain-related knowledge. The reflection of this assumption may also be observed in English for Specific Purposes movement, which has been driven by two trends. These two trends can be summarized as a turn from the analysis of discrete business texts to the analysis of genuine communication and a shift from language skills to language strategies which would facilitate communication in multilingual settings (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). Since most business activities take place in intercultural and multilingual settings, besides linguistic competence, intercultural competence (i.e., a combination of intercultural knowledge, skills and awareness) is also needed. Another important rationale for incorporating intercultural knowledge into BELF would be the impact of culture on social, political and economic systems of a society (Chang, 2010). This means, functioning effectively in an intercultural environment requires being equipped with the knowledge of norms and conventions of particular communities and appropriate behavior patterns.

Given much of the communication in the context of global business takes place between nonnative speakers of English with different cultural backgrounds, it could be argued more attention needs to be devoted to the issue of intercultural competence in BELF classes. While the essential nature of this need may be recognized in most BELF courses, determining and applying the ways of ensuring intercultural competence might be relatively painstaking. As such, this paper initially discusses why intercultural competence needs to be incorporated into BELF classes. Furthermore, it focuses on how intercultural competence can be enhanced in BELF classes to promote intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills and how dispositions of language learners toward intercultural learning can be fostered. Finally, it summarizes what implications both BELF and intercultural learning have for each other and for language classes.

2. Redefining the competent language user

The period between the 1880s and 1980s witnessed “the changing winds and shifting sands” (Marckwardt, 1972: 5) in second/foreign language education. This endeavor to promote more effective language teaching practices resulted in a paradigm shift from a structural view of language to more a functional and communicative view of language respectively. Consequently, the concept of competent language user was redefined by Kramersch (1988) as an individual who could select accurate and appropriate forms and effectively use these forms in a particular social context. In line with this new definition of the competent language user, learners are required to acquire and use essential linguistic, pragmatic and discourse skills to communicate successfully and effectively. However, in the modern world, where different cultures meet, interact and influence each other, communicative competence cannot alone ensure successful communication in intercultural situations. Thus, understanding how cultures work as a system and affect the communication process becomes an essential skill that should be developed in language classes. Sercu (2006), for instance, claimed that the fundamental aim of second /foreign language teaching is not only helping learners acquire communicative competence but also intercultural competence.

3. What is intercultural competence?

Intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to deal with differences that result from intercultural communication and the ability to deal with the unknown (Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001). In the relevant literature, several models of intercultural competence have been developed and these models have underpinned subsequent empirical work (e.g., Byram & Zarate, 1997; Sercu, 2005) One of the oft-cited intercultural competence models was proposed by Byram and Zarate (1997). The model comprises several dimensions named *savoirs* that include information related to an individual’s own culture and other cultures. “*Savoir apprendre-faire*”, for instance, is related with the ability to encounter and use the knowledge effectively in communication. The “*savoir comprendre*” on the other hand, refers to the ability to understand and interpret the features of another culture, and compare and contrast it with one’s own culture. The “*savoir s’engager*” is related with the ability to assess and approach the practices of cultures with a critical eye. Finally, the “*savoir etre*” is about being open and ready to evaluate stereotypes and reconsider prejudices that are held towards other cultures. Byram (2000) proposed that a person with some degree of intercultural competence can see the relationships and mediate between cultures and pose a critical and analytical understanding to varieties within cultures.

Another definition of intercultural competence was proposed by Clouet (2008) who maintained that intercultural competence encompasses the ability to handle conflict, a sense of empathy, sense of collaboration, flexibility, awareness that culture affects conversational styles, ability to deal with interactional problems, reflection on one’s own culture and the ability to tolerate ambiguity. Sercu (2005) also created a taxonomy of intercultural competence. Sercu (2005) claimed that an individual that possesses intercultural competence reflects such features; being willing to interact with foreign cultures, seeing the world through others’ eyes, handling uncertainty, evaluating one’s own and the others’ perspectives, reading cultural context, understanding that a person’s manner cannot be generalized to the whole culture and using culture learning skills. Furthermore, Sercu (2005) divided intercultural competence into three dimensions which are intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills/behavior and intercultural attitude/traits. The first dimension is *intercultural knowledge* which refers to culture-specific knowledge and the knowledge of how culture affects intercultural interactions. Intercultural knowledge encompasses the knowledge related to native and foreign culture. The second

dimension, *intercultural skills/behavior* refers to the ability of interpreting, discovering and acquiring new knowledge, and using intercultural skills and knowledge under time constraints and in real life conditions. The third dimension, *intercultural attitude/traits* refers to the opinions of individuals towards their own culture and other cultures, and disposition towards intercultural learning. This dimension necessitates an objective perspective and an open mind that is clear from bias.

4. Intercultural competence and BELF

In the aftermath of World War II, English has thrived as the lingua-franca of the modern era. The economic, political and technological power of the USA along with the influence of media and popular culture has resulted in the linguistic imperialism of English, as many scholars call it (Canagarajah, 1999; Modiano, 2001; Phillipson, 1992). English nowadays is learned and spoken by millions of people all around the world and is the world's most widely studied second language (Altbach, 2007). When four people from different linguistic backgrounds come together, English proves to be the medium of communication in such multicultural contexts. Therefore, it is almost impossible to conduct business on an international basis without communicating in English. That is why there exist courses entitled "Business English" that target at helping learners gain adequate English competence to conduct business activities.

In the process of designing and implementing such courses, besides linguistic and area-related concerns, the issue of promoting intercultural competence in learners needs to be considered as well. This need may be accounted for by the rapid and large-scale changes that have been taking place in global business. For instance, various cultures, norms, and standards meet, blend and interact more than ever in global business contexts. Moreover, alliances and partnerships are formed between companies at both national and international basis. These continuous alliances and partnerships promote both intra-firm and inter-firm diversification and multiculturalism (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Collins, 2008; Zonis, Lefkowitz, & Wilkin, 2005). Hence, it becomes essential for employees to gain an understanding of how culture affects workplace communication and practices (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). This understanding is highly crucial in that culture is a living entity that impacts, shapes and even controls individuals' actions in a great number of areas.

First, it is well documented that culture may influence effective problem solving, decision making and organizational growth in business settings (Caccioppe, 1998; Tung & Thomas 2003). That means when people of different cultural backgrounds gather to accomplish a mutual task, each person may employ various methods or techniques to deal with the same situation. In other words, German attitude and approach to a specific situation may differ from the Turkish one. Second, apart from influencing the thought and communication styles of communities, cultures also may affect existing social, political and economic systems in societies. Put differently, economic systems and policies, market dynamics, financial bodies, and management can all be intrinsically culture-bound. Thus, understanding differences across cultures would be crucial to grasping the discrepancies and functioning across systems. A businessman conducting business activities in another country, though an outsider, might become temporarily affected by the norms of these specific systems and may have to act following their rules. Awareness and knowledge of culture are also needed to negotiate in another cultural setting since the success of international business relationships mainly depends on active business negotiations. Figuring out how to reach global business negotiation outcomes and determining factors that play a great role in the process may help negotiators be more successful (Numprasertchai & Swierczek, 2006). If negotiators act cautiously by considering cultural differences, this may reduce confusion and

misinterpretations during the negotiation process. Third, understanding the conventions of a particular community may also be crucial to establishing effective business communications since conventions and values may vary considerably from culture to culture. For example, while Thai, Chinese, and Japanese negotiators may value long-term relationships, Western negotiators may focus on signing a contract and solving a problem. Another example would be related to body language and gestures. While Americans are reported to commonly handshake, wave, high-five and make other gestures using their hands and fingers, Koreans often consider these behaviors as impolite and rude (Hofstede, 1980; Kublin, 1995). In another case, whereas in Latin countries interruption during a conversation shows high involvement in the discussion topic, Dutch, German and Finnish people tend to find interruption impolite (Uljin & Li, 1995). Knowing about these aspects may be of great use in conducting intercultural business.

While possessing intercultural competence would aid in conducting business activities in multicultural settings, yet, a word of caution might be needed. Of interest, Francis (1991) claimed that the assumption that foreigners who behave as natives will be accepted as natives is faulty. In other words, no matter how hard they attempt to imitate the target culture, people of the target culture would regard the others as outsiders to their culture. Hence, the principle "Do in Rome as Romans do" may not produce useful results if intercultural knowledge is mistakenly perceived as imitating the target culture. Instead, a practical solution would be reflecting an awareness of the diversity and respecting the target culture while preserving one's own identity.

5. Practical considerations for fostering intercultural competence

Taking discrepancies in cultures, norms, appropriate behavior patterns and their impact on effective communication, BELF courses should not only target at equipping learners with essential language and domain-related skills but also aim to develop intercultural competence in language learners. Nearly all of the models of intercultural competence proposed in the literature have several features in common, such as exploring, comparing, acquiring and negotiating culture (Lee, 2012). Hence, it could be suggested that language content and tasks that emphasize understanding cultural diversity and require socializing, making a presentation, negotiating, carrying out small talks, interacting and keeping in touch before and after meetings need to be included in BELF syllabi. Besides these, BELF courses need to hone learners' more fine-grained skills such as understanding the company culture, financing a business, understanding the characteristics of the market area, advertising, persuading, applying for a job, interviewing, dealing with customers, traveling and avoiding culture shock.

Drawing upon the conceptualizations of intercultural competence in the relevant literature (e.g., Byram & Zarate, 1997; Sercu, 2005) a wide range of techniques and activities could be implemented in BELF classes to promote cultural exploration, comparison, acquisition and negotiation. These activities and techniques can be classified into two categories as awareness raising tasks and production tasks (Planken, Van Hooft, & Korzilius, 2004). Awareness raising tasks may help learners observe and scrutinize authentic instances of intercultural communication such as rejecting, inviting, turn-taking that mainly take place in business settings. Language learners can be asked to pay attention to particular features of such communication breakdowns, interpret these specific features, make comparisons to their own culture and reflect upon such instances. This way, learners would be able to identify similarities and discrepancies in intercultural communication on their own, in small groups or pairs. Based on the classification proposed by Planken et al. (2004), an extensive survey of the literature on intercultural education and the professional experiences of the author, it could be suggested that awareness raising tasks can include but are not limited to:

- The use of videos and films that present an authentic environment for intercultural knowledge transmission and reflection
- The use of literary work that depicts a particular culture
- Inviting informants who are from another culture to the classroom
- Fun quizzes through which learners can find out more about the other cultures
- The use of authentic communication tools such as internet technologies and social media which provide ample and wide-spectrum cultural input
- Observation

Intercultural awareness raising tasks are significant in that they help learners become cognizant of norms, traditions, and attitudes accepted in different countries. Taboos existing in relevant cultures may be introduced to learners to prevent them from making huge and irreparable mistakes while conducting business at an international scale. For instance, learners may need to learn that in many African countries using the left hand is regarded to be inappropriate while giving, receiving, eating and drinking something (Kita, 2009).

The second category of tasks is production tasks which require learners to engage with language production in intercultural or simulated intercultural settings. Tasks falling in this category could be exemplified as:

- Role plays which help learners put themselves into others' shoes and view the world from another person's eyes
- Simulations
- Project/pair work
- Games
- Case studies
- Debates
- Brainstorming

Specifically, role-plays and simulations could be of great help since they pose a problem-based approach to intercultural learning and teaching. In other words, learners would be able to immerse themselves in real-life like intercultural situations in which they could try to handle conflict, ambiguity and produce appropriate and relevant linguistic content. To this end, learners could be presented with a role-play task which focuses on cultural misunderstandings and requires learners to understand discrepancies between cultures and take an intercultural stance. Intercultural stance means to view a person's cultural behavior from another perspective and interpret it (Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

In a more blended fashion, intercultural awareness raising tasks could be used in conjunction with production tasks. Usually, in BELF classes, students have the chance to concentrate on topics that aid them in becoming familiar with linguistic aspects and relevant terminology about management, finance, and international relationships that are widely used while maintaining business communication. For instance, learners may be presented with a reading text which contains information about the nationalization of companies in Cuba, a Latin country. This reading task may contribute to the intercultural awareness of learners since it throws light on a set of significant dynamics that impact the Cuban context. Then, learners may focus on the key vocabulary and structures to facilitate their understanding. After focusing on such linguistic issues, learners can engage with a brainstorming task that requires them to come up with the feasible solutions to deal with the economic instabilities of Cuba.

Since this second task requires students to identify a problem, work on possible solutions and report these solutions, it may function as a production task.

Typical examples of production tasks could be projects that may be completed individually, in pairs and as a group. To illustrate, language learners may be asked to create a business innovation or a product and discuss the chances of this product becoming popular in a particular country by conducting a SWOT analysis. Such a task would require language learners to come up with business-related innovation ideas, collect country or region-specific information related to economic and cultural systems, and assess the suitability and effectiveness of this product in this particular county. Accordingly, language learners may write a brief report about the region or country that provides information about its culture and economic resources by using the data presented in their handouts and finally share the results of these endeavors with their classmates. Consequently, learners could conclude that they need to understand cultural systems and dynamics to do business effectively. Specifically, production tasks that are used in BELF classes may address local cultures and their impact on advertising and marketing.

6. Conclusions and implications

A good command of English, the lingua franca of the modern world, has become a must nearly in all walks of life. In particular, business has been one of the areas in which English is used extensively. Nevertheless, attaining language skills alone does not guarantee success in conducting business on an international scale. BELF learners need to foster their intercultural competence to function effectively in multilingual and multicultural settings and conduct business activities. At this point, a problem-based approach to intercultural learning, which requires language learners to work on the real world and business-related problems and identify potential solutions, could be effective.

Moreover, tasks that target at intercultural competence could be structured as intercultural awareness raising tasks which focus on intercultural understanding, and production tasks which necessitate language production in intercultural scenarios. Tasks such as writing a business e-mail to a Chinese partner for a time extension or inviting an Indian partner to a business dinner could be included in BELF syllabi. Tasks that help language learners view the world from others' perspectives, solve conflicts between different parties, think outside the box, grasp that there are similarities and differences across cultures would not only foster their intercultural competence but also would boost linguistic competence that enables intercultural communication. Incorporating intercultural learning into BELF courses and using intercultural awareness and production tasks would eventually contribute to the development of intercultural competence in BELF learners.

This situation leads to a set of implications for curriculum designers, material developers, teachers and BELF learners themselves. The curriculum needs to be designed in such a way that it covers intercultural knowledge and skills required in international business settings along with language skills to conduct business related tasks. As to the materials developers, during the process of text and task production, they need to pay specific attention to real business practices and subject-matter dimension (Zhang, 2013). Hence, both curriculum designers and materials developers need to consider findings of the intercultural pragmatics and communication research while working on course, text and task creation processes. This need is evident in the increasing interest in the relevant literature to understand the impact of cultural and organizational variables on effective communication in business context and transform this understanding into materials development (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999). However, whether this transformation has taken place remains an open question as inferred from the paucity of

materials that incorporate both intercultural teaching and business communication in tandem. Thus, language teachers themselves may need to play a more significant role in addressing the above-mentioned issues in BELF classes. Language teachers should incorporate business life related authentic tasks which enable BELF learners to be equipped with linguistic, job-related and intercultural skills. Specifically, tasks such as simulation, observation, case study and role play may help BELF learners become more aware of cultural differences and similarities and understand the impact of such differences and similarities on business communications. Given the range of factors that may influence communication in intercultural settings, perhaps, the most significant characteristic that BELF learners need to acquire would be flexibility. As to BELF learners themselves, they need to foster a considerable degree of flexibility to meet the demands of extremely varying and dynamic nature of intercultural communications and develop strategies enabling them to deal with unfamiliar situations.

Moreover, future research can target at empirically exploring the effectiveness of i) taking a problem-based approach to intercultural learning and teaching and ii) creating and implementing tasks that stimulate intercultural learning and teaching in the BELF contexts. BELF learners' and teachers' intercultural learning and teaching journeys can be investigated in terms of linguistic, cognitive, social, professional and organizational aspects. These scholarly efforts would hold promise for understanding the relatively underexplored intercultural dimension of the BELF contexts whose linguistic and work-related features have been addressed in the relevant literature.

Finally, the argument that native speaker norms should be accepted as standard in English communication seems not to be in conformity with the BELF context. The BELF context would require challenging the old assumption that English language learners need to be taught to sound like native speakers of English since, in essence, BELF is all about ensuring that learners can participate in multicultural and multinational communication to conduct business activities by using the lingua franca of the modern era, English.

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