

Raising business intercultural awareness among Puerto Rican business students: preparing future business people to adapt to international business settings- exploratory phase

Abstract

The present paper deals with teaching strategies to raise business intercultural awareness among Puerto Rican business students at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus (UPRRP). The exposure to other cultures can help business students better prepare themselves to cope with the diversity in the workplace. The topic for this study will deal with an exploratory phase for the research proposal to be presented in this paper. This work intents to explore best and most effective teaching practices and strategies in the area of business administration, specifically in business communication dealing with culture and adaptation to foreign corporate culture.

Keywords: intercultural, communication, cultural awareness

In this paper I first intend to present case studies and research in the fields of Intercultural Business Communication and in Business English as a Lingua Franca at the international level. These studies will provide the basis and justification for the study I propose in this paper. Thus, secondly, I will present an exploratory phase of a research topic for this paper.

Increased globalization has brought people from different cultures and countries together to collaborate and compete internationally (Vijaya and Tiwari, 2010; Virkkula-Raisanen, 2010). As part of the global village we live in, the ability to communicate effectively with other cultures is a key to success and also a fundamental skill that companies seek in business graduates. Communication skills in business are crucial to establish and strengthen good business relationships and interpersonal skills. But, for global business to succeed internationally, their members must develop effective intercultural skills. Companies that spread to other countries must have a clear understanding of the cultural differences between locals and foreigners that work in the companies.

The present paper deals with teaching strategies to raise business intercultural awareness among Puerto Rican business students at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus

(UPRRP). The exposure to other cultures can help business students better prepare themselves to cope with the diversity in the workplace.

The topic for this study will deal with an exploratory phase for the research proposal to be presented in this paper. The present work intents to explore the best and most effective teaching practices and strategies in the area of business administration, specifically in business communication dealing with culture and adaptation to foreign corporate cultures. A theoretical framework is developed from the literature review and directions for future research using the case of Puerto Rico to illustrate are devised and discussed.

The approach taken in this study is primarily influenced by the Intercultural Business Communication and Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) fields. In these frameworks, language is seen as a resource. As cited in Kankaanrant and Planken (2012), English plays an essential role in spoken communication in the business context, such as negotiations, meetings, email and advertising. English is considered a key component of business knowledge required in today's global business environment. It is an intrinsic part of communication in multinational settings and a fact of life for many business people (Akar 2002; Bilbow 2002).

Intercultural Business Communication

Intercultural communication focuses on how people from different cultures communicate and understand each other. Specifically, it is the communication among individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds in business environments (Dutta, 2008; Vijaya and Tiwari, 2010; Varner, 2000). Social and non-verbal behavior form part of the culture of a country. The single biggest barrier to the success of a company in the business world today is the lack of cross-cultural understanding (Vijaya and Tiwari, 2010). Understanding and appreciating intercultural differences will promote effective communication and will avoid breakdowns in communication.

Studies of workplace and employers' needs show that much importance is placed on developing good communication skills. Oral communication skills were identified as valuable for both obtaining employment and successful job performance in a national survey of 1000 human resource managers. Another survey with Fortune 500 executives, stressed that college students need better communication skills, as well as the ability to work in teams and with people from diverse backgrounds. A U.S. Dept. of Labor database analysis, surveying 8600 managers, representing 52 occupations, concludes people-skills, such as leadership and

communication, need more emphasis. And in a 2006 national survey of employers, it was stressed that for students to succeed and contribute to the global economy, more emphasis must be placed on communication skills (the Department of Communication and World Languages, 2011). Still, little training is given to improve communication skills. It seems that the emphasis is more on formal presentations. Although this is very important for the business field, oral communication skills are more varied and are essential to develop and maintain business relationships.

It is crucial to carry out more ethnographic studies to gain more information on different strategies adopted to conduct business according to intercultural encounters (Virkkula-Raisanen, 2010). Several studies in intercultural communication have identified multiple abilities that are considered crucial to attain effective intercultural communication. Some of them are the ability to communicate interpersonally; the ability to adjust to different cultures; the ability to adjust to different social systems; and the ability to establish interpersonal relationships (Hammer *et al.*, 1978; Abe and Wiseman, 1983). Varner, (2000) states that individual factors are better predictors of communication styles than cultural values of individualism and collectivism.

Success in business interactions demands that participants have good communicative competence in the language and the situation. According to Virkkula-Raisanen (2010), global professionals require more than good linguistic performance. In order to have a successful business interaction in an international context, professionals need to also command the field's terminology, strategies of negotiation in the particular country, intercultural business awareness, interactional competence and good interpersonal relations management, among others.

Multicultural team members need to have intercultural and communicative competence. This will enable them to obtain important information about other team members, and to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. In addition, it will help them develop empathy which is an essential communication skill in business relations. Cultural, historical and language backgrounds of each business person that interacts with another come into play in business interactions. In addition, if business professionals are empathetic, they are able to step outside their own cultural and business environment and they create a new context. Business transactions will be more successful if each person or company has an understanding of each other's cultural and business background. In addition, corporations as well as individual business people have to take into account the

national culture, the general business culture, and the specific corporate culture. Individual communication styles must also be considered in business transactions (Varner, 2000: p. 45). There are multinational companies, such as Procter and Gamble that have a strong corporate culture. Thus, they don't allow traditional culture characteristics of the particular country to intervene. For example, punctuality will be strictly followed in Puerto Rico, even though Puerto Ricans are more flexible with time and punctuality. Americans are clock-conscious, since their pace of life is fast.

Virkkula-Raisanen (2010) studied the participants' role alignment and interpersonal relationships in a business interaction setting between Finnish and Chinese employees of a small company in Finland, in which English was used as the lingua franca. The Finnish manager served as a mediator in a multilingual meeting. The study revealed that professionals working in international or multilingual business settings face several challenges in business interactions at the communication level. She states that in multilingual contexts in which English is used as the language of interaction, professionals' language skills are very unequal. Even individuals at the top management levels, such as top executives, may not have good command of English. The use of language may not be underestimated. It is crucial that individuals not only know English but that they also recognize how to use the language appropriately for the setting and situation, in this case, a business context.

Kobayashi and Viswat (2011) carried out a study to examine intercultural awareness and accommodation phenomenon while business interactions are taking place. According to these authors, having intercultural awareness applied to communication is not enough. An individual may have intercultural communication knowledge, but it will be meaningless unless it can be applied to real situations. Thus, intercultural communication applied to business should be focused on helping people find solutions (Kobayashi and Viswat, 2011). When people from different countries are involved in business transactions, each must be willing to share the responsibility of cultural awareness. According to this study, the Japanese seem to accommodate unilaterally to American culture. In Kankaanranta and Planken (2010), the tendency of non-natives speakers of English was to also accommodate. Their interviewees adopted accommodation practices with different types of English as non-native speakers.

Still, the study shows many examples in which each culture, American and Japanese, is struggling to adapt to the other's culture, to be tolerant and accept each other's customs and job routines. The Japanese are methodical, prepare carefully for meetings, don't like confrontations, and have slow decision-making. Whereas Americans point out that verbal interaction between boss and subordinate is normal, they expect confrontations and they are fast at decision making (Kobayashi and Viswat, 2011). Culture defines our working behavior and customs. Nowak and Dong (1997) found that the Chinese were more group-centered. The Chinese share their homes with many family members. Thus they are able to work together in the same room. They are also introverted and conservative, and they don't reveal their feelings easily. Americans on the other hand are independent and individualistic. When exchanging business cards, the Chinese offer their card with both hands to show respect. Americans don't exchange business cards that often. In terms of time management, both the Chinese and the Americans expect appointments to be on time, and they don't tolerate tardiness. Sriussadaporn (2006) carried out a study with managers from diverse multinational companies with Thai senior employees. Thais had punctuality problems, which was not tolerated by non-Thai foreign managers.

Vijaya and Tiwari (2010) carried out a study in which they observed Japanese and Indian business people's interactions in business meetings. They also observed that the Japanese prefer more passive forms of criticism than Indians, but are stricter than Indians when it comes to turning in a report on time. Indians seemed to have some delays in their projects since they have flexible business practices. On the other hand, when Indians are carrying out business transactions in Puerto Rico, they seem uneasy with our lack of punctuality, which is a cultural norm.

Each language has its own idiosyncrasies and peculiarities that may produce different terminology, even in business. Some languages may share grammatical and semantic patterns, others, such as Japanese and English, don't. These are details that the professionals must take into consideration when preparing for international and intercultural business interactions (Aktan and Nohl 2010). Idiomatic expressions may cause confusion among the second language speakers. These cannot be translated literally since the audience won't understand their meaning. "A literal translation for specific words would leave the foreign audience perplexed" (Aktan and Nohl, 2010: p. 4).

Business English as a Lingua Franca

Language enables human beings to communicate. Thus, language enables individuals and companies to communicate (Charles, 2007). The language of communication in this era is English. The total numbers of people who speak English as a foreign language outnumber those who speak it as their mother tongue. Crystal estimates that about a quarter of the world's population speaks English; and that by 2060, the non-native speakers of English will outnumber native speakers of English by 50% (Crystal, 2000; Kashru, 1990, 1992). Business English has become the lingua franca of the international business world. It is undisputed that business English as lingua franca has dominated as the language of international business in the last few decades. It has also become an intrinsic part of communication in multilingual settings for many business professionals (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Nickerson, 2005). More international business is done in English between non-native speakers than between native speakers (Charles, 2007).

The research in this field has increased due the increased concern of language as discourse, specifically, English used as the lingua franca in the business world. The research in this field has shifted its focus to identifying language strategies used by non-native speakers to achieve, for example, effective communication in business interactions (Nickerson, 2005). Scholars in this field have focused their work on identifying core linguistics elements that conform to native speakers' expectations so that they don't cause intelligibility problems, and distinguish them from noncore elements recognized by native speakers as anomalies but that do not cause problems (Charles, 2007: p. 262). Misunderstandings are somehow managed. They are solved, and will only rarely lead to complete breakdowns of communication (Hinnenkamp, 1999).

Some studies have shown that problems in business interactions arise when there is linguistic imbalance between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English (Rogerson-Revell, 2008; Pullin, 2010). Still, other studies have pointed that BELF speakers avoid and overcome misunderstandings in spite of the usage of non-standard forms of English. Lexicogrammatical features such as dropping of the third person present tense –s seemed not to cause obstacles in communication process (Firth, 2008; Charles, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2004; Bartlett & Johnson, 1998).

For most business professionals, having competence in BELF is an essential skill to be used along with their business knowledge (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). BELF should follow the principles of clarity, simplicity, and relational orientation.

The phenomenon of BELF has produced many hybrid forms of English in countries where English is spoken as a second, third, or even fourth language. As BELF is adopted in other countries, it receives linguistic and cultural influence from the non-native speakers (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Nickerson, 2005; Charles, 2007). BELF will carry the non-native speaker's culture, as well as his/her mother tongue discourse (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). In the companies included in Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) study, the researchers found that there was a hybrid version of English that contain features from the speakers' mother tongue. The authors described it as: "...a simplified, shared code whose basis is English with highly specialized vocabulary and a variety of discourse practices" (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010: p. 402). These processes are similar to one of the theories of the pidgin and Creole language development in which speakers of different language background simplified their language to facilitate communication in a highly multilingual setting (Alleyne, 1988; Mufwene, 2001; Devonish, 1986).

Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) carried out a study with five globally-operating Finland-based companies, where they administered an online questionnaire. The authors wanted to learn about the business professionals' perception of their BELF communication skills and that of their partners. The interviewees admitted facing several challenges in business interactions using BELF with native speakers of English. They showed lack of competence in English, limited repertoire of idioms, and incomprehensibility of some regional U.S. and U.K. accents (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). When these interviewees interacted with natives speakers of English, they tried to adopt their pronunciation or just made efforts to keep up with the conversation. In this study, the researchers found that the shared business domain of BELF, shared special field of expertise and length of relationship affected the participants' BELF discourse. The interviewees stated business English was more useful for their work than "general" English, since BE was more persuasive, task-oriented, and goal-based. Terminology and concepts of certain fields is usually more widely understood in English across cultures. Therefore, the expertise in the field meant an increase in business-related terms that helped in the

communication process in cross-cultural settings. According to the findings in their study, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) described some of the characteristics of BELF discourse as a simple and clear version of English, with no usage of idiomatic expressions or complex sentence structures. This could aid in the communication process among various non-native speakers. The participants admitted accommodating to simple and clear English.

In their interviews, the participants observed that in general, even if they spoke English as a second or third language, their core message would most of the time get through. In their oral communication process, the grammatical inaccuracies did not break down communication. Still, there were some instances in which misunderstanding did occur and interrupted communication. Some of these interviewees admitted feeling frustrated with the usages of English as the corporate language, since their non-native proficiency sometimes affected their work. In Charles (2007), interviews carried out in a company showed that in general, participants felt disempowered due to their relative lack of language skills. They showed a sense of frustration and a struggle to maintain dignity. If the employees feel that the frame of reference in communication is the native speaker, the challenge of communicating appropriately becomes quite acute. Their language affected their perception of themselves or others. In Puerto Rico, most Puerto Rican non-native speakers of English, feel ashamed and intimated when speaking English in public. In many cases, lingua franca speakers complain that native speakers of English don't adjust or simplify their language. But, sometimes the frustration emerges due the non-native speakers' lack of proficiency in English. Sweeney and Hua (2010) explain that often, the miscommunication problems in intercultural business interactions are due to native speakers of English. They argue that native speakers of English continue to speak idiomatically.

Still, the majority stated that overall, in spite of the cultural and linguistic differences between non-native and native speakers of English, there were hardly any breakdowns in communication in business interactions.

With network communications going global, many people around the world with perhaps no access to ESL teaching learn English via the entertainment industry, such as by watching cable television and Hollywood movies in English.

Small talk is also a communicative strategy that has shown to help build business rapport more easily, and develop solidarity that can help mitigate tensions and anxieties (Pullin, 2010). In interviews carried out as part of a study, the participant admitted the following: “ Learning banking terminology in another language was not a problem, but finding the right expressions in ‘ordinary small talk’, or acting assertively in negotiations and being able to suddenly and effectively express opinions or convey nuances in meetings, was difficult” (Charles, 2007:p. 273).

The BELF nature of providing flexibility, tolerance and ability to negotiate meaning can help provide insight to raise awareness among native and non-native speakers concerning effective business communication and international communicative competence (Pullin 2010).

Charles (2007), states that research is needed to make us understand better the process of how people relate to each other across language barriers.

Conclusions

Based on the literature review discussed in this paper, multinational corporations throughout the world are affected by BELF and by the Intercultural Business Communication (IBC). There are challenges that non-native speakers of English face when interacting with native and non-native English speaking managers and/or colleagues in multinational companies, both at the cultural level as well as at the psychological level. Studies showed that there is some degree of local adaptation to the corporate culture and to the native English speaker’s language. Although some miscommunication instances were found in some studies cited in this paper, these were not a cause for breakdowns in communication. In Puerto Rico, there are many multinational companies operating, thus the communication processes in these corporations are most likely affected by BELF and by IBC as well. Still, studies in these areas, using the case of Puerto Rico, are lacking. Thus, the proposed study in this paper is to uncover whether there is breakdown in communication interactions, and whether these are affected by the degree of local adaptation to corporate culture and language, and how the regulative forces affect these interactions.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

This paper seeks to raise cultural awareness and encourage cultural sensitivity among future business people. Globalization will continue to increase and thus people with very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds will continue to increase and interact in international business settings. It is, thus, the responsibility of managers who are foreign to the country where they are based, to learn about the national culture, general business culture, specific corporate culture and individual communication styles. They have to develop this awareness and sensitivity in order to improve business communication and thus have effective job performance and profits in their organization or company.

In addition, the research pursues to reduce ethnocentric views and negative attitudes of foreign managers. Learning about the culture of the country will greatly help foreign managers to respect the culture and accept diversity.

Future research can focus on expanding the topic of degree of local adaptation of both language groups to the local culture and corporate culture, and how the regulative pillar might lead the local culture to adapt to the corporate culture. In addition, a more detailed study can be carried out in terms of other factors that can lead to communication errors. The following outline for such a study would be an initial effort towards advancing the knowledge of the impact of the use of idioms in managerial communication on subordinate performance and effectiveness.

Future studies: The case of Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico has a particular cultural and political identity that distinguishes it from other countries. Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States, which means that we are neither a state nor an independent country. The Island is a leader in the corporate world with many multinational corporations operating locally. Puerto Rico is heavily influenced by American culture. Still we have a strong Hispanic and Caribbean identity and culture. Spanish is the Island's first language. English is taught as a second language, as explained above. But, many Puerto Ricans lack basic skills in English in spite of many years of second language training. This causes a general resistance and fear of Puerto Ricans to speak English. While teaching Business Communication in English, I have encountered many business students that lack confidence when employing the language. All these factors have an effect in language and

customs which can influence behavior in multinational companies that have a strong corporate culture and that do not adapt to the local culture. Thus, future studies could address how these fears might affect the dynamics of corporate communication in multinational companies, and to look for similarities and differences in the communication processes in other countries with similar and different linguistic and cultural situations.

Discussion of the study

As a first step, the business students will work on a project titled the International Peers Project in their Business Communication course. Students have to search for an international business person to learn about the business etiquette and cultural aspects on their particular country. This will form part of the exploratory phase of the study in which the degree of cultural awareness developed will be measured by final presentations of their projects. In this presentation they will share their new knowledge acquired from this particular country and share important business etiquette tips discussed with their new international friends. A set of questions will be posed to each student to measure the degree of cultural awareness attained through this project.

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