

Talking about cultivation of business English student's Intercultural communication competence: A case study of the course "Practice in foreign affairs"

Xiaochi, Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, No.1 Shi Da Road, Nanchong, Sichuan, P.R. of China

Abstract

For a long time, the Business English teaching in China tended to attach more importance to some professional fundamental knowledge and skills of commercial management and international trade and neglects relative cultivation of intercultural communication competence, the Business English students could not master well some basic knowledge and skills of intercultural communication in their professional career. Nowadays, it is a hot topic for teachers how to cultivate Business English students' intercultural communication competence. Therefore, the author takes the course "Practice in Foreign Affairs" of Vocational and Technological School in China West Normal University as an example to indicate that it is an important approach to cultivate Business English students' intercultural communication competence in the class. And then the paper mainly discusses how to use some different teaching methods to teach the Business English students in learning different cultures including different cultural customs and traditions and let the Business English students know some basic knowledge of various cultures from different countries, and train them basic skills how to communicate with different people from different cultural backgrounds, so as to really improve the Business English students' intercultural communication competence in the teaching.

Keywords: Business English student, intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, cultural customs

1. Introduction

Nowadays the whole world is stepping into a global village, and no human society exists in total isolation. It becomes more and more frequent for different societies to exchange and share cultures. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that all societies have some connections with others. Today, for instance, many people around the world enjoy the standardized McDonald's, and use similar kinds of technology, such as cars telephones, and televisions. In particular, thanks to commercial trade and communication technologies, such as computer networks, a form of global culture is also coming into the view of human being. Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult to find a culture that is shared completely within only a single society isolated from others (Liu, 2008) [4].

In China, the Business English teaching tended to attach more importance to some professional fundamental knowledge and skills of commercial management and international trade and neglects relative cultivation of intercultural communication competence, the Business English students could not master well some basic knowledge and skills of intercultural communication in their professional career. Maybe, it is a hot topic for teachers how to cultivate Business English students' intercultural communication competence.

Needless to say, the Business English students' intercultural business communication competence not only are able to recognize the necessity of developing mindsets and skills to face the business environmental trends, but also to acquire a new mode of thinking, organization, and behavior by seeing through their eyes, minds, and hearts of people from different cultures. Hence, it is the key to cultivate Business English students' intercultural business communicative competence. The author tries to take the course "Practice in Foreign

Affairs" of Vocational and Technological School in China West Normal University as an example to indicate that it is an important approach to cultivate Business English students' intercultural communication competence in class. And then the paper mainly discusses how to use some different teaching methods to teach the Business English students in learning different cultures including different cultural customs and traditions and let the Business English students know some basic knowledge of various cultures from different countries, and train them basic skills how to communicate with different people from different cultural backgrounds, so as to really improve the Business English students' intercultural communication competence in the teaching. of the course "Practice in Foreign Affairs".

2. "Practice in Foreign Affairs" and intercultural communication

2.1 Brief introduction to "Practice in Foreign Affairs"

"Practice of Foreign Affairs" is a practical course not only for business, but also for intercultural communication. The course book of 'Practice of Foreign Affairs' is constructed by fifteen units, which are reception, schedules and appointments, transportation, emergencies, food and cuisine, recreational activities, sightseeing, festivals and holidays, shopping, ceremonies and press conferences, meetings and negotiations, international exhibitions, investment environment, government, farewell. Each unit involves different knowledge of communication for people with different cultural backgrounds.

For example, Unit one is about Reception including receiving people at the airport/hotel/company; similarities and differences of addressing people in Chinese and Western culture; arranging initial meetings; works and expressions

used in receiving people. At the same time, each unit has five parts involving Lead-in, Situational dialogs, Reading materials, Practical writing and comprehensive activities.

And every part in one unit has various learning tasks to improve the students' practical abilities, such as the first task including working with learning partner and list words and expressions frequently used in receiving people; the second task including working with learning partner and collect their thoughts on the different questions and the third task including read the following introduction to how to greet a foreign guest with his/her name properly, then working with learning partner to answer the questions according to the text.

Finally, the course book "Practice in Foreign Affairs" attaches three assessment forms, which are Peer Assessment Form, Self-assessment Form and Teacher Assessment Form. And then every assessment form has various contents of assessment. For instance, Teacher Assessment Form comprises two aspects: one aspect is Teaching Assessment which includes knowledge, skills, words, expressions and sentences, management of the class, another aspect is Learning Assessment which includes knowledge, skills, words, expressions and sentences.

From the above brief introduction to Practice in Foreign Affairs, it can easily show that the contents and modes of the course book give the Business English students much knowledge about social customs and etiquette rules of various cultures, especially in China and Western countries and the communication with western persons by appropriate words and expressions, and by appropriate skills. It is an useful and practical course to improve the Business English students' communicative skills, especially intercultural communication competence.

2.2 Definitions of intercultural communication and intercultural communication competence

The study of intercultural communication has only a relatively short history. In the early 1940s, Edward Hall published his important *Silent Language*. This laid the foundation for the study of intercultural communication (Tou, 2011) ^[6]. Generally speaking, different scholars have different understanding about intercultural communications and have different definitions about intercultural communication. Then, "Intercultural communication can be simply defined as communication between people of different cultures. The need for intercultural understanding does not begin or end with national boundaries. One does not necessarily need to cross an ocean to have a cross-cultural experience, for virtually every country around the world is undergoing increased diversity with its own borders." (Xu, 2012) ^[7] Every culture has its own customs that are acceptable behaviors and ways by the people in the same culture. The different behaviors and ways that are the various cultural customs are neither right nor wrong. It is simply that different people do the same things or have the same behaviors and ways in diverse manners and attitudes. That is to say, people have differences in cultural backgrounds, living patterns, educational, political and economical conditions, even hobbies and characters, so there exist all kinds of problems and difficulties in intercultural communication.

A British Professor Gillian Brown said, "Communication is a risky business," which means the process of communication is the process of complete interaction. Yet it's not an easy thing

to fully communicate because of different histories, cultures, social habits in different people (Samover, 2001) ^[5]. Intercultural communication comes primarily out of an interpersonal orientation and addresses the mutual negotiation of social reality among participants. Because of the necessity and reality of interpersonal aspects of our globalization, we can no longer neglect these aspects of any communication among peoples around the world, whatever problems we may be addressing. Now, intercultural communication comes out of a mass media and political orientation; it addresses information flow between and among nations and other large groups of people. While there areas are constantly in the news and represent the more visible issues confronting us, we must recognize that these concerns subsume the more personal aspects of interpersonal communications (Hill, 2009) ^[3]

And intercultural communication competence can be defined as four categories: (a) Personal Attributes, (b) Communication Skills, (c) Psychological Adaptation, and (d) Cultural Awareness. Comparing dimensions of communication competence with those of intercultural communication competence, we also see that Personal Attributes indicate the ability to be relaxed in social interaction and the ability to self-disclosure or be open with others, Communication Skills mean the ability to send and receive messages and the ability to demonstrate social skills. Cultural Awareness implies the understanding of environmental varieties. Psychological Adaptation focuses on the ability to handle problems such as frustration, stress, alienation and ambiguity which are caused by cultural differences. Scholars have consistently suggested that only through intercultural communication competence can people from different cultures effectively communicate with each other (Chen, 2010) ^[1, 2]. This definition show that competent persons must not only know how to interact effectively and appropriately with people and environment, but also know how to fulfill their own communication goals by respecting and affirming the multi-level cultural identities of the interactants (Chen, 2010) ^[1, 2].

However, no intercultural communication is done without involving some social customs and etiquette rules. The social customs and etiquette rules vary of course from culture to culture. Differences in cultural conventions can lead to difficulties in the communication between peoples with different cultural backgrounds. Such difference can cause misunderstanding, unsatisfactory interaction and even unpleasant physical reactions. Thus, social customs and etiquette rules are closely related to the deep structure of a culture that determines how a person responds to events and people. Even though what member of particular culture value and how they perceive the universe explain a lot why people behave the way they do, we shouldn't try to connect every human behavior with a certain value. (Zhang, 2010) ^[8]

And then the course "Practice in Foreign Affairs" is just about the contents of the social customs and etiquette rules of different cultures and different countries. It is just suitable to teach the Business English students to learn more things for their intercultural communication competence and enhance their real communication skills to deal with their business through this kind of competence in their future career.

3. Approaches to cultivate the Business English students' intercultural communication competence

From the above study and discussion, it is well acknowledged

that intercultural communication is the essential part of communication in the international trade. Therefore, intercultural business communication competence takes the knowledge dimensions of intercultural communication, cultural differences including different social customs and etiquette rules. from different countries in communication as the core of intercultural business communication. Thus it is necessary for us to explore some effective approaches and measures to cultivate the Business English students' intercultural nonverbal communicative competence.

- The teacher should take the course "Practice in Foreign Affairs" as the main entrance of teaching and leading in. The Business English students should be aware of the social accustoms and etiquette rules' differences from one country to another country, show their clear understanding and respect for different social customs and etiquette rules most importantly, and then really build their bridges across misunderstanding among different cultures. Overall, these social customs and etiquette rules from various countries and cultures make an important impact on the Business English students that they may carry these knowledge codes with them into intercultural communication in their future professional career.

The teacher will focus on the basic concepts related to social customs and etiquette rules, and applications under different circumstances. The Business English students will have opportunities to discuss and learn from practical problems in intercultural communication and interpersonal relationship in domestic and international environments, including cognitive models, thinking patterns, ways of communication, value systems and culture adaptations. The class will also provide practical methods in dealing with intercultural problems in daily life as well as some skills needed in the workplace, like enterprises, schools and other organizations.

- The teachers should help Business English students to make a change from ignorance to awareness of intercultural communication through the teaching of "Practice in Foreign Affairs". At the same time, the teacher should offer the Business English students not only knowledge of intercultural communication, but also common senses of intercultural communication.

Here, it is necessary for teacher to design new syllabus and curricula which combine Business English teaching with the concepts of intercultural communication, including verbal communication and nonverbal communication, so as to help the Business English students not only learn business English language but also master knowledge and skills in intercultural business communication. The teacher should adjust or clarify the purpose of business English language skill courses, aiming at developing in the students' intercultural business nonverbal communication competence needed in various future business environments.

- The teacher should take advantage of teaching aids including videos, computers, TV and movies to help the Business English students get more vivid pictures of intercultural business communication and some information of what the real communication of different foreign businesspersons in the target cultures in class.

From the observation through the teaching aids or media, the features of everyday and real business situation will

give the Business English students deep impression such as social customs and etiquette rules involving greeting, appointment, food and cuisine, ceremonies and press conferences, meetings and negotiations and so on. In this way, the Business English students can understand intercultural communication at a deeper level and learn how to use different etiquette rules, i.e. to help them to reduce their cultural bias and grasp the values and beliefs of other peoples. Meanwhile, the Business English students will really understand the practical intercultural business communication and easily know how to communicate or do business with different foreign tradesmen by intercultural communication.

- The teachers will provide more similar business scene or business workplaces such as Trade negotiation Room, the Customs, Market, Bar, for Business English students to do business. These business practices may increase the Business English students' interest in intercultural communication and their general awareness for intercultural business communication, foster greater sensitivity to details of intercultural communication, and understand that differences of intercultural nonverbal communication from different countries are but a natural phenomenon.

Needless to say, the Business English students should learn to compare the culture of other countries. In this way, the Business English students can really master social customs and social codes of other countries and make full use of some basic skills of intercultural communication such as 'silent way' and 'shaking hands' in real life, so as to raise the Business English students application ability of nonverbal communication in the future business.

4. Conclusion

At the present time, people are living in a multicultural society with various cultures. Intercultural communication has become more and more important than any before in the world. Meanwhile, it is very convenient for people to travel or move further and faster from one country to another. Also, the internet makes it possible to communicate with people from all over the world. Needlessness to say, "communication and transportation technology not only enables people to easily and efficiently move from continent to continent to encounter others in face-to-face communication, but also brings about other impacts including increasing domestic cultural diversity and the globalization of economy" (Chen, 2010) ^[1, 2].

To sum up, the idea of cultivating the Business English students' intercultural communication competence in the teaching of "Practice in Foreign Affairs" is a constructive proposal for how to teach course of intercultural business communication in Business English teaching in China. Because most of the Business English teachers tend to attach more importance to the concepts and theories of intercultural communication in the teaching and neglect practical communication activities including addressing, greeting and shaking hands and so on, the Business English students could not master well some basic skills of communication. However, the cultivation of intercultural communication is increasingly important in the Business English students' future business careers.

Therefore, the Business English students should know some

knowledge about intercultural communication such as all kinds of social customs and etiquette rules. And then, colleges and universities in China will provide the Business English students with different business practice in different business situation, and let the Business English students have a chance to really combine theoretical intercultural communication knowledge with practical business activities. Maybe, the BE students will learn understand and practice well in future business careers. As a result, it is special significance for the Business English students to improve their real intercultural communication competence.

5. References

1. Chen Guoming. Foundations of Intercultural Communication Competence. Hong Kong: China Review Academic Publishers Limited, 2010, 26-30.
2. Chen Guoming. A Study of Intercultural Communication Competence. Hongkong: China Review Academic Publishers, 2010, 34.
3. Hill L. Brooks. The future of cross culture communication: Perspectives from 20 years of the IAICS Intercultural Communication Research. 2009; 1:83-108.
4. Liu Ping. Intercultural Business Communication. Tianjing: Nankai University Press, 2008, 3
5. Samovar LA *et al.* Communication between Cultures. Beijing: Foreign Language Education and Research Press, 2001, 5-6
6. Tou, Weilin, Liang, Jonathan, Clark, George W. Intercultural Business Communication. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2011, 125
7. Lisheng Xu. Intercultural Communication in English (Rev. Ed.) Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2012, 11.
8. Zhang Xiaochi. Developing Students' Intercultural Communication Competences in Western Etiquette Teaching. English Language Teaching. 2010; 3(4):225-1187.