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AUTHOR	Bahous, Jocelyne
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ABSTRACT

Students registered in courses for English for special or occupational purposes usually already have a good command of the language. Their objective is not to acquire fluency in the language as such, but rather to learn to use the language adequately in specific professional contexts. The filed of international negotiation and peacekeeping provides such a context for multicultural communications. English for special purposes (ESP) or English for occupational purposes (EOP) courses focusing on international negotiations and peacekeeping can be used to teach students to understand and interact with people of different nationalities who use English as a means of communication. Strategies adopted in business negotiations should prove helpful to this field. This paper aims to do two things: (1) show the need to understand the culture of the people involved in the negotiation process; (2) study the methods of critical thinking and problem-solving that should be implemented in the writing of letters and memos across cultures. This paper will show that some theory is required in ESP courses and that an intensity of practice in the skills of business communications through critical thinking and problem-solving is essential. (Contains 28 references.) (KFT)

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Abstract

Students registered in courses such as English for Special or Occupational Purposes usually have a good command of the language. Their objective is not to acquire fluency in the language as such, but rather to learn to use the language adequately in specific contexts. The field of international negotiations and peacekeeping provides a context for multicultural communications. ESP or EOP courses focusing on international negotiations and peacekeeping can be used to teach students to understand and interact with people of different nationalities who use English as a means of communication. Strategies adopted in business negotiations can prove to be helpful in this field. This paper will be divided into two major parts. It will first show the need to understand the culture of the people involved in the negotiation process. A method of understanding, respecting, and appreciating other cultures will be presented. A comparison between negotiation strategies adopted by different countries will follow. Second, it will study methods of critical thinking and problem-solving that should be implemented in the writing of letters and memos across cultures. This paper will show that little theory is required in ESP courses, while an intensity of practice in the practical skills of business communication through critical thinking and problem solving is mandatory.

Effective international negotiations and peacekeeping require not only a good command of the English language but also an awareness and understanding of various cultures. Students of English for Occupational Purposes have to learn to show interest in others if they want to be successful in their own businesses. They have to overcome their self-centerdness in their negotiations with people from all over the world. In other words, they have to be able to adapt to new conditions, show respect for others at all times, and understand others' feelings and situations. Moreover, students have to learn to be smooth in handling negotiation of topics discussed, take turn, enter and exit episodes, conduct meetings, communicate decisions, and most importantly, respond to others in a descriptive and nonjudgmental way. Judgment, evaluation, and appraisal, as we all know, are the major barriers to interpersonal communication. Furthermore, students should develop the skill of flexibility while explaining issues to different people under different conditions in order to reach the same results (Zhao and Parks, 1995). "Effective communicators must also be effective politicians in terms of 'being able to get things done without the exercise of formal authority, because oftentimes they don't have formal authority'" (Pierce 1996). It is not enough to memorize steps required to communicate verbally or in writing, but more importantly, learn how to appeal to others' logic and emotions. This can only be achieved when problem-solving and critical thinking are applied.

This paper will be divided into two major parts. It will first show the need to understand the culture of the people involved in the negotiation process. A method of understanding, respecting, and appreciating other cultures will be presented. A comparison between negotiation strategies adopted by different countries will follow. Second, it will study methods of critical thinking and problem-solving that should be implemented in the writing of letters and memos across cultures. This paper will show that little theory is required in ESP courses, while an intensity of practice in the practical skills of business communication through critical thinking and problem solving is mandatory.

In order for students to understand the culture of the people involved in the negotiation process, they need to learn to distinguish between formality and informality in communication. Not only should they know who the reader is, but they should also be aware of the following conditions: the status, situation, and nationality of the reader (Wolford and Vanneman 1992). It is needless to say that the reader's status at all times affects the formality of communication. In my paper, I will focus mainly on the situation and nationality. Paradoxically, while each situation is characterized by its uniqueness, studying the nationality of communicators involves much stereotyping.

Much has been written to acquaint students with the various aspects of handling international business. Nevertheless, little help has been offered to help these students understand the connotations that come along with letters written in English but by people of different nationalities. The result may be... misunderstanding (Devet 1998). A bad news letter written in America, for example, usually contains a buffer, a review of facts leading to the bad news, and a polite closing to maintain rapport with readers. However, a German bad news letter may omit a buffer before presenting the bad news, a Latin-American writer could avoid the bad news altogether, and a Japanese letter may present it so politely that an American business communication student could not detect misunderstandings between businesses (Devet 1998).

Business letters can be analyzed according to their format, organization, ethos, pathos, logos, and style. A common international format for letter writing helps students locate the date, the inside and return addresses, and the signature. The organization singles out major ideas. It is easy to understand a letter that follows the common American AIDA sales pattern of A gaining attention, I creating interest, D arousing desire by linking the product's benefits directly to the readers' needs, and A explaining the action readers should perform. (In international negotiations, the product's benefits can be replaced by the proposal's benefits). Ethos and pathos refer to the writer's and reader's attitudes respectively. Logos, on the other hand, appeals to the audience's reasoning and understanding. Finally, sentence length and word choice reflect the style (Devet 1998). Students cannot overlook cultural and stylistic differences when attempting to write well in any context or situation. Understanding cultural differences has become so important that with the globalization of the economy, Varner (1987: 7) writes "Businesspersons cannot isolate themselves from international involvement; the international world is right there in the office."

Donne's observation, "No man is an island..." as Reardon and Spekman (1994: 71) remark "is more true today than ever before. There are no islands where people remain untouched by the actions of others." We are not today what we are simply because of decisions we made all along but because of decisions people all over the world made at different times in the past.

Reardon and Spekman (1994) believe that one type of asset often overlooked as a source of power is information. Although they focus on partnership, the concept they introduce can be easily applied to international negotiations. Two types of information are required for effective partnership: technical knowledge, which permits contributions to decision-making, and relationship knowledge — understanding of the partner, knowledge of partnership activities, political intelligence — which provides the background for successful negotiations. Reardon and Spekman stated that Japanese success at assimilating their US partners' skills is attributed to their knowledge of English and American culture.

These two types of information have proved to be powerful not only in business but also in diplomatic negotiations. At the Wye River summit in the fall of 1998, for example, Arafat was "amazed at [Clinton's] command of the details," says a State Department official. The Israelis were impressed too. "Clinton's got sachel — common sense," says Dore Gold, Israel's former ambassador to the United Nations. "Sometimes people are great diplomats but are ignorant of politics. He's got the unusual ability to do both." (A battle of wills 2000: 18). This was due to the fact that Clinton had studied very closely the events of 1978, the first Camp David summit between Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, and Jimmy Carter. If politicians who determine the future of the world have to sift very thoroughly through old documents to know how to tackle a problem or appeal to the other party, then students have to learn strategies to follow in achieving both types of information the technical and the relationship knowledge.

For students to learn to communicate with people across cultures, they have to learn how each culture regards negotiations. The French, for example, have great respect for punctuality. They conduct negotiations in French unless the negotiations take place out of France. They are formal in their negotations, depend on reason, examine various options before taking a decision, and move to expressions of goodwill only when the relationship has existed for some time.

In Japan business often goes to the party respected the most. Moreover, the Japanese take their time consulting with all parties involved before they make decisions. They ask detailed questions relevant to the negotiation, as well as questions that some outsiders would perceive as irrelevant.

Because American negotiators believe that "Time is money," they are quick in their decision making and may be perceived as tough or insensitive. As a matter of fact, American business negotiators' tendency to "get to the point" is responsible for many failures (Reardon and Spekman 1994). Similarly, in the political field, the same tendency to measure the success or failures of negotiations according to Americans is perceived through the pace of these negotiations. James Rubin, the U.S. State Department spokesman, commented that the pace at which peace negotiations in the Middle East were going through was not the pace they were satisfied with (Whitelaw 2000).

Moreover, American negotiators rarely speak any language other than English (Reardon and Spekman 1994). Gundling (1999), however, cautions against taking for granted the language and method of communication. Native speakers of English have to be considerate in their speech and transmission of written materials to nonnative speakers. Moreover, they have to ask the involved parties for their preferred method of communication.

Similarly, different nations have different understanding of the word "contract." To a Swiss, German, Scandinavian, American or British, it is something that has been signed in order to be adhered to. To a Japanese, it is a starting document to be rewritten and modified as circumstances require. However, to a South American, it is an ideal which is unlikely to be achieved, but which is signed to avoid argument (Lewis 1999:11). Students, therefore, seeking through their letter writing to reach an agreement between two parties have to understand a primordial fact, which is the connotations of the word "contract" to people of different cultures.

Besides, effective negotiators try to find out what actually matters to the others rather than what should matter. The US negotiator should be aware that his Saudi counterpart is more concerned with hospitality and developing rapport than he is with time efficiency. Knowing something about Islam is an asset in such negotiations. Similarly, a negotiator who presents a Japanese counterpart with a contract full of US legalese is likely to cause offense. It implies that their motives are suspect even before the venture starts (Reardon and Spekman 1994).

Once a negative impression is formed, it is difficult to establish positive rapport. The American business negotiator who arrives in China hoping to establish rapport by presenting his host with the gift of a fine clock creates a problem before negotiations begin. Clocks are inappropriate gifts in China. They are associated with death. The Arab businessman who insists on giving his Japanese counterpart gifts of greater value than those he receives harms the alliance before it even begins to form (Reardon and Spekman 1994).

Students, or employees, who understand these lingual and cultural variations can improve their performance, increase productivity, and prevent additional costs (Getting smart 2000). They develop an awareness that if they do not know all facts about each and every culture, they know at least where to look for solutions or explanations, and more importantly, they know they need to look for them. Moreover, students learn about their own culture. They become conscious of what was previously subconscious and thus examine it. This makes them think of why they are what they are and how others may regard them. Moreover, they learn where their assumptions and biases come from and how they influence their behavior (Meier 2000).

Acknowledging cultural differences is a major first step; managing them is quite different. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch researcher, suggests that four key attributes may provide a framework to help identify how culture affects values, attitudes, and behavior in society and within organizations. His first attribute, individualism/collectivism, refers to whether individuals use personal characteristics and achievements to define themselves. Individualism values individual welfare over that of the group (such as most of the Americans). However, collectivism refers to individuals who belong to group-oriented societies, where people define themselves as members of clans or communities and consider the group's welfare to be supreme (as in many Asian societies, as well as Latin America). Second, power distance describes the relationship between subordinates and superiors, and the degree to which bypassing a superior is considered insubordination. High power distance countries include those of southeast Asia, while low power countries include Scandinavia. Third, uncertainty avoidance, as the name implies, reflects the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations and how they try to avoid these situations by providing greater career stability through imposing respect for rules, general truths, and authority. Finally, it is through masculinity/femininity that some dominant traits in societies are determined. For example, materialism and aggressiveness in society reflect masculinity (Briggs 1998).

Differences, rather than similarities across cultures, can form the basis of mutually beneficial solutions. In a multicultural environment, where the differences are increased, the opportunities for mutual gain are also increased. The mutual gains framework suggests the following six-step process: acknowledge the concerns of the other side, encourage joint fact finding, offer contingent commitments to minimize effects if they do occur, promise to compensate unintended effects, accept responsibility, admit mistakes and share power, act in a trustworthy fashion at all times, and finally, focus on building long-term relationships (Briggs 1998).

Bridging differences is not accomplished without effort. If both parties desire to reach an agreement, they have to be aware of their differences; regard them with respect rather than contempt; focus on reconciling interests rather than taking positions, forming judgments, or making decisions; and finally find out how the other party thinks. Both parties' perspectives and reasons should be made clear. Proposals in all cases should be backed up with evidence while both parties pause to reflect on proposals, positions, tone, and style changes. The "talk tough and negotiate later" approach has led to many failures in negotiations (Reardon and Spekman 1994). Students usually find this fact hard to believe and tend to write in a non-diplomatic, tactless tone. Therefore, teachers should work very closely with students to modify their tone and style to make their writing better accepted by negotiators of different cultures. This can be best achieved by training students to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Evans (1999: 616) stresses the need for students to be "reflective thinkers." This implies developing students' critical judgment and the ability to synthesize and evaluate by providing them learning experiences that require the development of higher level thinking skills. Rogers (1999) states that business communication teaching and research reflect the global business environment especially after the internet has revolutionized communication. As a result, he believes that the classroom should reflect these changes. Writing and speaking activities should prompt students to consider content development, organizational approaches, business grammar, and issues of visualization from a global perspective in which various cultural interpretations play. Savvy companies realize that to succeed in today's world, they will need to employ communication skills, disciplines, tools and technologies for issues that in the past were dealt with by government relations and legal or public affairs departments (Aboulafia-D'Jaen 1998).

Hoger (1998) suggests critical thinking be applied before, during, and after communication situations, prompting frequent pauses, constant analysis of the context — i.e. of others' views and written documents— planning, and examining complexities. Consequently, students can improve their critical thinking skills by analyzing their own work as well as samples and situations from the business world, going beyond the literal content of a message, to infer hidden messages, consider larger contexts or strategic maneuvering, and predict side effects.

Dembo (1994) defines critical thinking as reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. Examples of critical thinking skills are focusing on a question, analyzing arguments, judging the credibility of a source, identifying assumptions, deciding on a course of action, and understanding logic. Problem-solving, on the other hand, is finding solutions for which solution methods are not immediately clear. Critical thinking focuses on the process of thinking, whereas problem-solving pertains to the outcomes or procedures of thinking.

Students learn through exercises that enhance their problem-analysis skills and relate skills taught in class to real world problems. In this way, students do not learn about the language, but rather learn to use the language correctly. Learning EOP through problem-solving supports the basic definition of learning as "acquainting or getting knowledge of a subject or a skill by study, experience, or instruction which leads to "a relatively permanent change in a behavioral tendency and is the result of reinforced practice" (Brown 1994: 4).

The first step students learn to do in order to develop their critical thinking is to ask questions. Questions vary with the situation. As a first step, they have to know how to communicate with others. How frequently should they communicate? Who will communicate with whom? What modalities (telephone, face-to-face, memos) are appropriate? What types of information will be shared? What types of information are proprietary? How will they deal with communication problems? What aspects of their respective cultures might hinder communication? A party that finds memos offensive, for example, will not respond well to another party that considers them the most efficient and effective means of conveying information. The questions later on gain some more focus. They will focus on culture, management styles, and credibility. How similar are the cultures? Is cultural adaptation possible and desirable? Do they have a strategy of merging different management styles? Have they given adequate attention to credibility and rapport at every interface? Teaching the students how to ask questions, how to listen, or how to use questioning as a powerful persuasive strategy is another way of teaching them how to control the process of negotiation and thus accomplish more in bargaining situations (Reardon and Spekman 1994). Students then learn how to extend themselves beyond the information gathering stage to a consideration of what that information means, how it can be applied, and the consequences of application (Dyrud and Worley 1998).

Critical thinking involves not only asking questions but also analyzing arguments, judging the credibility of a source, identifying assumptions, deciding on a course of action, and understanding logic. These skills can be mastered if students practice the following tasks: role-play, simulation, and case studies. For these tasks to render best results, the following four key methodological principles should be met. Reality control, i.e. the manner in which tasks are rendered accessible to students, non-triviality, authenticity, and tolerance of errors should be maintained (Robinson 1991).

Role-play and simulation, though slightly different, require a prior analysis of the arguments and judgment of the credibility of the source. They both depend on identified assumptions and logic and determine the course of action. Role-play is a task which involves the learner taking on a different role and even identity from his or her own. For example, if students role play the positions of the two negotiators before setting out to writing their assigned letters, they will gain insight into how each party thinks and what each party would expect to read in the letter. A simulation is another technique, frequently longer than a role-play and can allow the students to maintain their normal "persona". In a simulation the learner is given a task to perform or a problem to solve; not only the background information but also the environment of the problem is simulated. (Robinson 1991).

The case study method provides the ultimate in an interactive technique involving as it does interaction between the student's experience and the case content, the student and other students, the student and the videotape, the student and other members of the business community, and the student and the teacher. The case study method gives students materials to make them think purposefully. A case is a set of data concerning a real-life decision-making situation. Students are expected to analyze the facts presented and based on their experience, come up with a recommended course of action. Students prepare a written analysis (in a number of forms as requested by their instructor), discuss their analysis with their group, and then present their views in front of the whole class (Robinson 1991). This task, or even teaching strategy, solves the problem that Muir (1996) refers to when he discusses students who are inadequately prepared to think and communicate at work. Moreover, it allows the students the chance to criticize each others' work. At this stage, most students gain a realization that their writing in general or their analysis in particular are often unclear and incomplete. They begin to realize the importance of clear written communication (Shukla 1998).

The case study method is task oriented and purposeful. The objective is not only to find a solution and support it but also to persuade others of its merit. It is highly motivating to students because of its relationship to real-world problem-solving and interpersonal strategies. It emphasizes cooperation in study groups and allows students to build on others' ideas. Importantly for EOP, case studies draw upon students' professional know-how utilizing the cognitive and behavioral styles (Robinson 1991). Animated and generally substantive discussion among peers takes place leading many more students to volunteer to take part in the all-class discussion (Smith 2000).

Stephanie Griffiths of Material Assistance Communication in South Africa added, "Two-way communication can help establish credibility only if it is perceived to contain real valued information that is understandable and believable. Our workers today focus on their information rights rather than their information needs and filtering criteria are thus higher. Furthermore, trust of the sender or source becomes crucial in the process. Content, climate, and worker expectations would thus play a role in how this information is received" (Moore 1996).

Business and technical communication instructors must rely less on the established patterns of thinking about organizational communication and the conventional approaches to teaching business communication. More analysis and evaluation of workplace practices and situational constraints will help students better understand the complexity of even the simple memorandum and letter or the logical decision-making process. Bernhardt (1995) notes that students in the technical writing classroom should be taught to perceive current changes in this age of information and technological growth. In his study, Muir (1996) showed that getting students involved with consulting projects allowed them to think beyond the classroom and to see the political and social realities that their clients used in decision-making. The benefits of using the real-world context of the workplace to teach critical thinking in business and technical communication were immense. Critical thinking skills entail more than learning to question conventions and traditions in an organization.

This paper does not aim to revolutionize teaching methods. The limitations of applying critical thinking strategies as they should be in classes are due to a number of factors. First, many faculty members who have been teaching for quite some time may not welcome change very easily. Second, the whole strategy has to be reinforced by the administration, which sometimes fails to carry out all its duties. Next, some teachers may raise the conflict between content and process. Finally, although critical thinking may be applied in all fields, it is certainly more time consuming than...a lecture, and as a result, the material scheduled for the session or semester may not be completely covered if critical thinking is applied. Nevertheless, critical thinking instructional development efforts deserve our best try (Browne and Meuti 1999).

Finally, since letter writing depends on the writer's ability to be persuasive, show an understanding of the other party, apply critical thinking, and come up with logical solutions, much time should be spent training students to develop these skills so that the actual writing of the letter does not take more than ten minutes.

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Organization/Address: NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY P.O. BOX 72 ZOUK MIKHAEL ZOUK MOSBEH LEBANON

Telephone: 9613820979

FAX: 961-9-218771

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