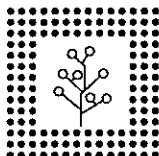


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Developing English for global competence in international business education

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INTRODUCTION

What are the attributes that the university business graduate of the 21st century should possess? The answer will depend, largely, on who is asked this question. Although there is some debate as to just which attributes should be developed in such a graduate, there seems to be agreement by all concerned that communication skills are essential, with Australian employers ranking them as even more important than do academics (Sinclair, 1997; Cummings, 1998). In the context of growing trends towards globalisation and the increasing importance of English as a global language, communication skills in English deserve particular attention.

This paper examines questions relating to international business education in Australia. 'International' should be understood to encompass two aspects: firstly, the fact that large numbers of international students are in the business disciplines in Australia (49.8% in 1999, according to DETYA 2000 statistics); and, secondly, the fact that many Australian universities and Business Schools claim to be preparing students for 'international business' or business in the global arena. For example, the Curtin Business School states as its strategic vision "to provide students with a superb international education through the discovery and application of knowledge" (Curtin Business School, 2001). In this context, this paper seeks to probe what sort of English communication skills might be required for global competence and asks if the necessary skills are being developed in our business courses. The paper then discusses approaches which might best assist students to acquire desirable English communication skills for global competence.

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

There would seem little doubt that English is, increasingly, a global language. Even those who decry this fact (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999; Pennycook, 1994) acknowledge it. Although it is difficult to obtain precise data in this area, Crystal (1997), estimates that nearly one quarter of the world's population, or between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people, are already fluent or competent in English. And ironically, while the number of 'native speakers' or 'first language speakers' of English may be declining (again Crystal estimates the number of first language speakers of English in some 56 countries to be around 337 million) the number of second language speakers continues to grow (Graddol, 1999).

Is this enough to make English a 'global' language? According to Crystal (1997) English not only has a large number of first language (L1) speakers in a number of countries, but it has also been made the official language in a number of others (eg Ghana, Nigeria and Singapore) and a priority foreign language in many more. Kachru (in Crystal, 1997) describes the spread of English as three concentric circles. The countries where there are most L1 speakers of English (eg UK & USA) represent the 'inner circle'; the countries which were formerly colonised and where now English is the official language (eg India & Singapore) form 'the outer circle'; and those where English is increasingly being taught as a foreign language (eg China, Greece & Poland) are in the expanding circle.

These developments, coupled with economic developments on a global scale, new communications technologies, the explosion in international marketing and advertising and mass entertainment have also supported the continued expansion of English as a global 'lingua franca'.

There has never been a time when so many nations were needing to talk to each other so much. There has never been a time when so many people wished to travel to so many places (...) never has there been a more urgent need for a global language (Crystal, 1997, p12).

The position of English as a global language is not hailed universally as a welcome event. And whether we consider it a good thing or otherwise for English to hold this position, we need to keep in mind the cautions of writers such as Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1999, p 21), who remind us of "the responsibility to examine how a command of English relates to contemporary power structures". Pennycook (1994, p 24), too, warns us that "to view [the spread of English] as beneficial is to take a rather naively optimistic position on global relations and to ignore relationships between English and inequitable distributions and flows of wealth, resources, culture and knowledge."

Nevertheless, the importance of English as a global language is likely to continue to grow in the foreseeable future (Crystal, 1997) and in the field of business, arguably even more so than in other areas. As Julian Amey says (in Graddol et al, 1999, p17) "Although there are some concerns about American imperialism, there is a belief that young people need English to be internationally competitive. That's the trend in places like Malaysia and the one emerging also in South America."

Ghim-Lian Chew (1999, p 43) in discussing the choice of English as the official language of Singapore states:

There is a pragmatic multilingualism in existence [in Singapore], a situation where the population has knowingly done a calculation and views the adoption of English not so much as a threat to their own languages but as the key to the share of the world's symbolic power: towards the accumulation of cultural, political and economic capital.

So while monolithic English might indeed pose a threat to some smaller languages and other cultures (some decry the 'McDonaldisation' of culture) its march, at least in the foreseeable future, would seem unstoppable. Given this probability, we need to

keep in mind that many, if not most, future business interactions in the global arena will take place between English speakers from different national/cultural backgrounds, only some of whom will be L1 speakers of English. In this sort of scenario, 'native speakers' will not necessarily be advantaged. Indeed they might well be disadvantaged, lulled into a false sense of security by the belief that "everyone speaks English", so no extra effort is required. Developing English for global competence then becomes an issue not only for international students, who may have English as a second language, but for all students.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ENGLISH FOR GLOBAL COMPETENCE?

What sorts of skills, then, should we be developing in business students to equip them for successful interaction in a global context? Successful communication in future scenarios, where many interactions will take place between non-native speakers of English, is likely to require:

- a certain level of competence with English at the linguistic level;
- sensitivity to other cultures;
- sensitivity to other 'Englishes'; and , most importantly,
- competence in cross-cultural/intercultural communication.

Competence with English at the linguistic level

The English language teaching (ELT) business is a huge industry worldwide, with the British Council estimating that students learning English would reach 1,000 million in the year 2000 (Crystal, 1997). Large providers of transnational tertiary education, such as Australia, require minimum English language levels, often measured with international tests such as IELTS, for entry. Many also provide pre-entry English language courses and bridging courses as well as support programs of various types for international students. Even with minimum English language requirements, the fact is that most ELT courses all over the world, according to Ronowicz & Yallop (1999) teach only first level (literal) meanings and correct grammar and only a limited amount of what the authors call 'second level meanings', ie culture specific meanings essential for effective intercultural communication. It is possible, therefore, that even high levels of linguistic competence would not necessarily make it easy for an international student to understand a lecture with lots of local references and assumed (local) knowledge.

Sensitivity to other cultures

This goes beyond learning about the surface aspects and artefacts of a particular culture to learning about how people think, interact and solve problems in culturally specific ways. It means going beyond what Verner (2001) calls 'front stage' cultural behaviour (the evident things that we can see) and beyond sophisticated stereotyping based on the work of Hofstede (1980) and Trompenars (1998), so often quoted in business literature. "Instead we need to emphasise the backstage: why [certain] behaviours exist and how cultural priorities relate to business" (Verner, 2001, p 99).

Sensitivity to other 'Englishes'

There exist tangible differences in the way English is used in different countries/regions. There is no standard model that can be offered internationally, although the American model is perhaps prevailing due to America's super power status and its dominance in world media. However, the balance between English as a

first language (L1) and English as a second language (L2) speakers is set to change critically in future with L2 speakers eventually overtaking L1 speakers:

In future English will be a language used mainly in multilingual settings as a second language and for communication between non-native speakers (Graddol, 1999, p 57).

Knowledge of the different ways English is used in different countries will be advantageous. David Flack, Senior Director of MTV Asia says:

I sometimes have to re-write a memo in Singlish [ie Singapore English] to make it suitable for an international audience. In one way it shows people in this region are quite secure in who they are (Graddol, 1999, p 57).

Competence in cross-cultural/ intercultural communication

This is perhaps the most crucial area and the one in which different approaches are suggested. Ideally, this competence would be embraced as part of a broader thrust towards internationalisation of curriculum in universities for, as Whalley (1997, p15) says:

A successfully internationalised curriculum provides students with the skills and knowledge to perform competently (professionally and socially) in an international environment. Students' intercultural competence develops out of both an awareness of other cultures and perspectives and awareness of their own culture and perspectives.

Roberts, Davies & Jupp (1992) suggest that what is required is that we teach an 'expanded view of language' which includes knowledge of 'schemata' (the cultural and social knowledge brought to an interaction) and 'frames' (strategies and assumptions which allow for an interpretation of the interaction) as well as language uses and forms. The authors call this a 'grammar of discourse', which is much more difficult to learn than a grammar of linguistic forms. Highly formalised situations such as job interviews, for example, depend on the interviewee being familiar with the schema and frame for this interaction in a particular cultural context in order to be judged positively.

Gumperz (1984, in Roberts et al, 1992) has shown that at every level, from general notions about how to get things done, or about what is relevant or significant, down to the most specific linguistic features of stress and intonation in talk, different ethnic groups may operate differently. He has also shown how these communicative differences feed into the process of evaluating individuals and stereotyping them.

Scollon & Scollon (1995) suggest a discourse approach to intercultural communication. They maintain that most miscommunication in business contexts arises not out of poor use of grammar or mispronunciations but because of differences in patterns of discourse. They see the discourse of cultural groups as one of a series of discourse systems including corporate, professional, generational and gender systems. None of the discourse systems is static (just as culture is not static) and professional communication usually involves communication across as well as within discourse systems. For such communication to be successful, a shared knowledge of context is required. The issue becomes more complicated because we are all simultaneously

members of multiple groups or discourse systems and we cannot be defined simply by our membership of any one. In this situation:

successful intercultural communication depends on learning to move with both pragmatic effectiveness and cultural sensitivity across lines which divide discourse systems (...) Cultural sensitivity means being conscious of the ways in which one's own communication may be perceived and also accepting the fact that one is never likely to be considered a full member of most of the discourse systems in which one will participate. (Scollon & Scollon 1995, p121).

Verner (2000), on the other hand, argues that to teach intercultural communication to business students is not enough. What she proposes is a theoretical framework for intercultural business communication which sets it apart from intercultural communication and international business. Intercultural business communication, she says, is "more than the sum of its parts (...). In intercultural business communication the business strategies, goals, objectives and practices become an integral part of the communication process and help create a new environment out of the synergy of culture, communication and business" (Verner, 2000, p 45).

Whichever approach we might think more suitable for teaching intercultural communication in business, it is clear that being an L1 speaker of English will not, of itself, suffice. Intercultural communication skills will be needed and should be developed by **all** students.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Given the above considerations, are we doing enough in Australian universities to equip students (both local and international) to operate confidently in a global context? If university Mission and Vision statements and Teaching and Learning policies are to be believed, we would seem to be aiming to do just this. Many Australian universities have 'internationalisation' goals spelt out in such documents.

The following are some examples:

- The Queensland University of Technology aims to: "provide an educational environment which will enable [students to develop the skills to] be able to work effectively and sensitively within the Australian and international community" (Watters, 1997).
- A University of South Australia graduate will be expected to demonstrate "an international perspective as a professional and as a citizen" (University of South Australia, 1997).
- Curtin University of Technology aims for the development of students and staff as "citizens of the world, emphasising an international outlook, cultural diversity and informed respect for indigenous peoples" (Curtin University of Technology, 1998).

These are the aims at the policy level; implementation is usually more difficult. Equipping students to operate in an international context has been interpreted by academic staff in their teaching in a variety of ways, including:

- imparting knowledge that encompasses other countries/cultures (eg Asian economies)
- giving students some cross-cultural sensitivity through case-studies from other countries; and
- providing students with a comparative approach in their discipline (eg international management).

In the narrowest sense, internationalisation is still seen by some as no more than taking Australian education offshore or attracting international students to Australian campuses – ie as having an international student population. This factor could contribute to internationalisation, but as Hawthorne (1997) and others (Volet & Ang, 1998; Smart Volet & Ang, 2000) have commented, there is unfortunately very little mixing between international and local students on Australian campuses and very little use is made in Australian classrooms of the rich cultural diversity within them. However, as Sadiki (2001, p 2) states:

The internationalisation of the student body, which is likely to intensify even further in the twenty-first century, calls not only for inclusive curriculum but also, and more importantly, for cross-cultural rethinking of curriculum as well as of teaching and learning practices.

Also rarely has the issue of internationalisation been associated with the question of English for global communication. Universities must begin to consider themselves international in fact and not just in rhetoric, so that there is a greater understanding by staff, and indeed by local students, of the need for support (not remediation) for international students who are L2 speakers of English. In a truly global/international university it should be clearly accepted that L2 as well as L1 speakers in the language of instruction will need to continue to develop their linguistic proficiency to the highest levels. Moreover, as Whalley et al (1997, p 1) state:

[In future] most [graduates] will need to function competently in social and work environments which are international and intercultural in nature. A new literacy, an intercultural/international literacy, is crucial to meeting this challenge successfully.

What are we doing in business education, an area where students will, of necessity, be thrown into the global arena? Here often internationalisation is seen as having students complete units in 'International Management', 'International Business Law' and so on. This might help students to acquire global perspectives but it will not necessarily equip them to operate effectively in a global context. As we have seen, acquiring the English communication skills to do this is a much more complex process.

EQUIPPING STUDENTS TO OPERATE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

It should be evident from the above that developing English for global competence involves more than simply linguistic skills in the narrowest sense. It also becomes clear that English for global competence is as much an issue for L1 as for L2 speakers of English.

How, then, can we impart the required knowledge and develop the necessary skills in students, particularly business students? There is a variety of possible strategies, including:

- teaching a special unit, such as 'English for global competence';
- ensuring there is input across the curriculum to raise student awareness of cross-cultural issues, for example through intensive use of international case studies;
- introducing learning processes which can enhance student understanding and awareness of cultural and linguistic issues (for example through deliberate intervention in the use of group processes).

A unit in 'English for global competence'

This would be the easiest option, in that a single unit is far easier to implement than some of the other strategies suggested. However, a unit by itself has its limitations, nor is it a simple matter to determine the sort of content and processes that such a unit might embrace. Verner (2001) provides useful suggestions for a unit in 'intercultural management communication'. She stresses the importance for students in such a unit to avoid being blinded by static and traditional views of culture and tries to ensure that they avoid judging other cultures from their own viewpoint (what she calls 'the self-reference criterion'). The unit she teaches includes:

- Videos which provide a springboard for discussion of cultural issues in the business arena
- Panel discussions where students from different cultural backgrounds talk about their culture and then field questions
- Current events in a particular country followed for a semester
- International case studies
- Internet discussions with classes from another country
- Major assignment reports for an 'international company' case study.

Most important, however, would seem to be the fact that the teaching and learning processes are based on questioning and discussion, rather than more traditional transmission models.

A unit in 'Exploring linguistic diversity through world Englishes' suggested by Kubota & Ward (2000, p 84) has the following goals:

- To become aware of the existence of domestic varieties of American English and world Englishes
- To become aware that there are certain prejudices attached to certain varieties of English
- To understand that language has political, economic and ideological implications
- To explore the importance of understanding linguistic diversity
- To discover the origins and development of English
- To explore critically the global spread of English and its impact on other languages and cultures
- To understand the factors that affect learning a second language/accents
- To understand the importance of sharing communicative responsibility in intercultural communication

A unit in 'English for global competence' for business students in Australia might cover at least some the following areas:

- Expectations for oral and written communication in Australian tertiary contexts
- Aspects of university discourse
- Aspects of business discourse
- Varieties of English or world Englishes
- The rise of English as a global language
- The concept of culture
- Cultural, organisational, gender, professional, generational and other discourses
- Issues in cross-cultural communication
- Business negotiations in cross-cultural contexts.

Most importantly, such a unit would make extensive use of seminars (rather than lectures), class and small group discussion, group work in mixed cultural groups, case studies based on cross-cultural issues and tasks which would require students to probe each other's cultural perspectives (see section on learning processes, below).

Input across the curriculum to raise student awareness

Thus far, what has been interpreted as internationalisation of curriculum in many Australian universities has been the inclusion of content relating to other countries/cultures. However, as Smart, Volet & Ang (2000, p 37) state, "while such content reform at program level is beneficial (...) it is likely to be in the area of instructional methods and classroom intercultural interaction that the most promising innovations will emerge". Nor has there been consistency across courses, which, according to Nesdale and Todd (1997) is likely to be the most successful approach.

A broader cross-cultural input into the curriculum can also come from students themselves. Some international students have complained that in Australian classrooms they are not presented with opportunities to discuss previous experiences and knowledge that relate to their own country (Briguglio, 2001). Others have indicated cases of where they lacked the local (Australian) knowledge to be able to complete assignments or understand questions.

In business studies, the 'case study' is a very common teaching and learning strategy and presents a good opportunity for designing appropriate teaching and learning tasks. Many commercially produced materials already exist (see, for example, Mendenhall & Oddou, 2000). However, care should be taken to avoid merely tinkering with exotic names and overseas locations. Effective cross-cultural case studies should throw up cultural dilemmas and require serious interrogation. Case studies should be carefully developed to ensure they raise student awareness of more than just superficial cultural aspects.

Learning processes which can enhance student understanding and appreciation of cultural and linguistic issues

As indicated above, there is very little mixing between local and international students on Australian campuses. This 'separation' seems to continue to a large extent within university classrooms. Smart et al (2000) found that, if students were left to their own devices, very little would change. They advocate a deliberate interventionist approach

to encourage both local and international students to learn from the rich cultural diversity that exists on Australian campuses.

Many group or team projects and assignments are undertaken in business studies. Unfortunately, students are often just thrown randomly together and given very little preparation for working in groups. With a more structured intervention, careful selection of team members, judicious preparation of case studies, the development of challenging tasks and processes that allow the students to learn from each other's cultural perspectives, case study work can produce wonderful results and prepare students for working in real multicultural settings. The Curtin School of Design has used group and pair work in this way with a series of very structured activities, and the results have been truly impressive (Smart et al, 2000). In one assignment, for example, students from different cultural backgrounds work in pairs and each in turn acts as a 'client'. Over a semester students must probe each other's cultural background to design a poster for a particular event that will please the other client. Apart from the poster, the assessment also includes diary entries describing what each student has learned about the other's culture. What is particularly valuable about this sort of task is the fact that it: carries over a whole semester; involves students probing each other's cultural values and tastes; has students reflecting on what they have learned; allows students to adapt their design product to please the other 'client'; and channels them into developing a design that is a blend of their own ideas and the cultural perspective of the 'other'. Similar tasks could be developed and adapted for business students.

CONCLUSION

It can be seen from the above that 'English for global competence' is a very broad communicative concept which includes both communicative abilities and the cultural understandings and sensitivity which impact upon such abilities. The strategies and approaches described above should not be seen as alternatives, but as different elements of a multi-dimensional approach which would reach the greatest number of students and be most effective. No doubt, some aspects of the strategies described above are already being implemented in some universities. However, the approach has not been consistent, nor have these sorts of strategies been embedded and integrated fully into the formal curriculum. If we are serious about preparing business graduates for operation in the international sphere, then a much more consistent and deliberate approach is needed.

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