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The Impact of International Business Games on Improving Cultural Awareness and Writing Proficiency: An Evaluation of The "Course in International Business Writing" (1994-2004)

Abstract

This article gives a critical evaluation of the advantages of adopting a cross-cultural approach to teaching language for specific purposes (i.e., business English) by reporting on ten years of experience with the "Course in International Business Writing," a course that was taught simultaneously at institutions in Belgium, Germany, Finland and the United States between 1994 and 2004. After a brief description of the three course components, i.e., instruction, simulation and case study analysis, this study examines the impact of this teaching and research project on participants' cultural awareness and writing proficiency. The main findings are that international projects need to contain sufficient product and process authenticity in order to increase student motivation and output and to improve cultural awareness but also that these beneficial effects can only be made visible if they adopt a sufficiently rigourous and formal research methodology.

Keywords: Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), foreign language teaching methodology, cross-cultural business communication, cultural awareness, business writing in English.

Introduction

The need for competence in cross-cultural business communication is not in dispute. The two main drivers behind this are growing domestic cultural diversity (also referred to as multiculturalism), and secondly, globalization and the worldwide expansion of firms and other organizations (see, among many others, Victor 1992: 7-9; Varner and Beamer 1995: xi-xv). Success at communicating with unfamiliar or exotic cultures, even within one and the same country, is by no means guaranteed, however. Whenever strangers meet, there are opportunities for cultural gaffes and misinterpretations at all levels. Examples of this can be found in the case studies in Marx (2001) or the critical incidents in Gibson (2002). So, it is argued that businesspeople and managers – both current and prospective – not only need foreign language and business communication classes but also special cross-cultural training, instruction or advice.

Not surprisingly, the market is flooded with "how to" books catering to that critical need. These publications can be roughly divided into general cultural primers (e.g., Lewis 2005) and those that deal with one specific culture only (e.g., Stewart-Allen and Denslow 2002). These days also business communication books will include one or more units on cross-cultural issues and will more often than not provide their readers with advice and practical activities (see, e.g., Rosenberg 2001: 190-199). Most of these titles draw rather heavily – and often uncritically – on leading names in intercultural research like Kaplan (1966), Hall (1976), Hofstede (1991), Schwartz (1992), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), and more recently, Neuliep (2003) or Yunxia (2005) – for a recent overview, see Dahl (2004).

Of course, none of the above is controversial. The real question is whether *descriptive* knowledge of theoretical models and participation in classroom awareness-raising activities enhance *procedural* knowledge, i.e., improved cross-cultural communication skills. And if they do not, whether there are alternatives. Interestingly, we also need to discover whether foreign-language writing and intercultural communication should be trained in tandem or whether it is better to deal with them separately, and if so, in what order.

In this article I would like to address these methodological questions by reporting on an international project, the so-called "Course in International Business Writing" (CIBW for short). The CIBW ran from 1994 to 2004 as part of business English and business writing courses conducted in Belgium, Finland, Germany and the United States. I will investigate whether those ten years of CIBW experience plus the research it has generated allow us to conclude anything about the usefulness of intercultural or multicultural approaches to teaching languages for specific purposes (LSP). After giving a brief description of the CIBW project, I will summarize our findings and impressions with respect to the impact of this international course in international business writing on cultural awareness and competence in foreign-language writing. Though this article will rely on previous publications, its added value lies in the fact that for the first time all of these observations, quantitative results and more tentative findings will be brought together under one roof. Moreover, where relevant, I will update some of the older articles as well as include the preliminary results from more recent and unpublished research into Flemish and US students' rejection letters in English.

The "Course in International Business Writing"

The "Course in International Business Writing" was designed to give business communication students in higher education experience in actual written communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries. At first, the CIBW had three components:

1. *instruction* in international business writing based on a combination of lectures, discussions, classroom activities, etc., using Victor (1992) and Varner and Beamer (1995) as supplementary texts;

2. *a simulation* in which teams of students – acting as either publishing, recruiting or training companies – exchanged a wide range of different letters

and documents internationally by following a carefully structured four-phase business scenario;

3. *case studies* in which individual students interviewed local businesspeople who communicate internationally in writing, interviews that resulted in a classroom presentation of their findings.

For a more detailed description including the simulation instructions, see Connor et al. (1997) and Verckens et al. (1998: 249-254). We could not always complete, however, all three CIBW components every year, and this because of timetable clashes among the institutions, staff changes, partners dropping out and curriculum reforms. So, to salvage the international project as a whole, students were sometimes allowed to sign up for the cross-cultural business game – the second component – without having had any prior instruction. From a research point of view, this is important because it means that some of our papers (see below) have to be looked upon as "effect-of-no-instruction" studies.

The CIBW grew out of a smaller-scale instructional project (1990-1994) aimed at improving Flemish and US students' job application skills. As reported elsewhere (Davis et al. 1994; De Rycker 1996; Connor et al. 1997), both the CIBW simulation component and its earlier version had designed into them higher-than-usual levels of *product* and *process authenticity* – a feature that uniquely differentiated them from the business correspondence exercises then available in the ELT/ESP literature. It is not enough for students to write an error-free and pragmatically appropriate request for information, they should also be able to write such a request as part of a longer exchange of initiating and response moves. Part of the authenticity of the CIBW experience resides in the fact that "instructors keep a low profile [merely acting as sorting offices], students need to take business decisions [e.g., whether to accept a business proposal or hire an outside consultant] and to observe time limits [meaning that teams missing a deadline may find themselves out of the business game]" (De Rycker 1996: 26). Similarly, it is not enough for student teams to interact with each other within the same educational and cultural setting, they should also be exposed to the business communication styles and patterns of complete strangers in other cultures.

Of course, both product and process authenticity have to be viewed as gradients along which business writing activities can be arranged from the "real thing" in which, for example, mature students respond to real job vacancies that they are interested in, over simulations of varying degrees of "real-world" authenticity (like the CIBW) to the more artificial and imaginary role-based activities of students writing a weekly business letter for the instructor's eyes only. For more details, see Davis et al. (1994: 239-249).

However, increased authenticity – also known as bridging the gap between "writing at college" and "writing at work" (Tebeaux 1990) – as well as the international dimension were not the only striking features of our business writing simulation. The "mystique of communicating with real people in another country" produced higher-than-expected levels of motivation than more traditional one-off, one-school and one-country writing assignments (Davis et al. 1994: 255). Note that this finding was based on the analysis of the project appraisal forms submitted at the end of each run of the earlier, more limited simulation. For practical reasons, we no longer could continue these appraisals when the original project was expanded. Yet, there is every reason to assume that this "mystique" and its effect on motivation were also experienced by the CIBW participants.

There is no denying the critical importance of motivation in most fields of learning including foreign language learning (see, e.g., Harmer 2001: 51-54). Yet, does the high degree of motivation associated with the simulation component also influence a student's cross-cultural awareness and the quality of his or her business writing? After all, there would be little justification for elaborate international project work if the learning outcomes were less favourable than those obtained in non-international circumstances. But this brings us to the second part of this article.

The impact on cultural awareness

The concept "cultural awareness" comes in many different guises but for the sake of simplicity it can be defined, following Tomalin and Stempleski (1993: 5), as someone's "sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behaviour on language use and communication." Among the goals of cultural instruction that both authors identify, one is to help students develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture. Put in another way, it is important for students to move beyond the level of cultural stereotyping and to arrive at a better understanding of how cultures can be both different and alike. Tomalin and Stempleski's (1993) awareness-raising activities are essentially forms of monolinguistic/monocultural groupwork focused on cognitive tasks (like recognizing, examining or exploring values, symbols, behaviours, communication patterns, etc.). In contrast, the CIBW business game offers a genuine cross-cultural experience. Participants learn about each other not through speculation and detached observation but through active and affective involvement. The four CIBW phases come with real deadlines and delays, create real uncertainty about getting one's message across or understanding the letters sent by others and cause real emotional satisfaction at having a proposal or job offer accepted.

Only one research article, however, was published on the effect of the CIBW project on cultural awareness (Verckens et al. 1998). In 1998 the first class meeting in Belgium and Finland included a series of cross-cultural warm-ups in which students, among other things, had to choose from a list of adjectives those that they thought would characterize the other participants best (e.g., *friendly, open-minded, impolite* and *ambitious*). After the eight-week exchange of business letters and documents, the Flemish and Finnish students were given the same task so that we could then gauge the project's effect on perceptions of self and other. The main findings were that

1. the post-CIBW generalizations about the target cultures were different from the pre-CIBW ones;

2. the post-CIBW descriptions were either more or less "positive" or "negative" than the pre-CIBW ones;

3. it is difficult to ascertain whether the post-CIBW evaluations were more refined and less stereotypical (cf. Tomalin and Stempleski's (1993) fifth instructional goal);

4. though the impact of other factors cannot be ruled out, changes in student evaluations reflect their personal assessment of the various CIBW interactions.

To illustrate these research results, the Finns viewed the US students as friendlier and more sociable and less superficial, patriotic or self-confident than before the CIBW. On the other hand, largely due to delays in meeting deadlines, they viewed the Flemish participants as being impolite, even rude – adjectives that they had not used in the pre-CIBW evaluation. This ties in nicely with Victor's (1992: 234) characterization of most Western and Northern European countries as "monochronic business cultures," in which "appointment time is rigid" and deadlines have to be met. Because the Flemish letters were more business-like and less informal than theirs, the Finns also attributed to the Flemish properties like *formal* and *well-educated*. This finding seems to support the difference in Hofstede's (1994: 26) power distance index (PDI) values between Belgium (PDI score = 65) and Finland (PDI score = 33), which corresponds to the difference between more hierarchical and more egalitarian cultures.

Note that value-based intercultural theories like Hofstede's suffer from serious methodological deficiencies and have attracted a fair amount of criticism. As a matter of fact, as Dahl (2004: 19) concludes after reviewing the literature,

> "[…] despite all efforts there is no commonly acknowledged 'correct' concept of culture or cultural dimensions as yet. There is also a considerable debate about the validity of the data from which these concepts were derived."

For an excellent critique of Hofstede, see also McSweeney (2002). For present purposes, the main conclusion is that intercultural business communication does affect people's views of one another, views which may or may not influence business decisions.

The impact on writing proficiency

The CIBW has always been thought of as an instructional project, i.e., a pedagogically motivated sequence of learning activities for improving students' business writing skills. However, some of the linguistic data that we have collected in this way have also yielded interesting insights into cross-cultural or other differences in business writing.

Business writing in general

Though we have so far conducted only two empirical studies using CIBW data (see below), no attempt was made to measure the overall effect of CIBW participation on business writing quality in general. Subjectively speaking, however, we can report at least the following two benefits. First, the international and intercultural dimensions help to make sender-receiver differences more prominent and visible, alerting students to the need for audience analysis (Davis et al. 1994: 255). Secondly, the CIBW project creates an in-classroom environment within which much informal learning occurs: group writing, pre-drafting and revision, on-the-spot grammar tuition, close reading of foreign students' documents and analysis of sample letters. All of these are elements that

writing research has identified as being positively and strongly correlated with text quality (see De Rycker 1996).

Interestingly, in those years that explicit instruction did take place students seemed to adjust their writing towards the norms of the target cultures. This resulted in letters that were relatively homogeneous in length and even content. In other words, participants naturally gravitated towards an “international style” of business correspondence, which contained fewer culture-specific features and could be received well globally (Connor et al. 1997: 68-69).

The written CIBW documents consist of sales letters, letters of enquiry, requests for business proposals, job advertisements, job applications, various types of cover letters and acceptance/rejection letters (Connor et al 1997: 71-73). So far only two text types have been subjected to further quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Letters of application

Connor et al. (1995) looked for similarities and differences in a corpus of 74 US and Flemish letters of job application. These letters – all written in English – were analyzed for correctness and clarity, two textual message properties that strongly correlate with communicative success in getting invited for a job interview. “Correctness” refers to the absence of mistakes in spelling and punctuation, word choice, sentence-level syntax and paragraph structure, while “clarity” was used as an umbrella term for those message features that demonstrate a writer’s overall sense of the writing situation (writer, reader, subject and purpose), the content (i.e., rhetorical moves or meaning components) and the organization of those moves or components.

The results show that a typical US applicant writes more than a Flemish applicant (an average letter length of 196.6 versus 104.9 words) and makes fewer mistakes (only 1.9 mistakes per 100 words of written discourse versus 7.1). For both native and non-native speakers of English nearly 50% of all product mistakes were punctuation and/or spelling mistakes, with the Flemish participants being considerably better at spelling (or perhaps at proofreading). They also made a slightly lower percentage of syntactic errors but the Americans showed a far firmer grasp of semantic precision at the word level.

These differences in error types and frequencies reflect, of course, the native/non-native speaker contrast. The findings for content and length of information, however, do point in the direction of cultural differences. The data reveal that the US students not only provide more – but also more personal – supportive arguments for the job application. The US letters highlight qualifications and achievements and also describe the likely benefits for the prospective employer. The difference in mean lengths (130.8 versus 58.8 words) was found to be statistically significant ($t = -7.80$, $p < 0.05$). The US applicants were also more direct than their Flemish counterparts in applying for the vacant position (18.7 versus 9.15 words; $t = -5.18$, $p < 0.05$) and included closing expressions of pleasantries and/or appreciation (9.0 versus 1.3 words; $t = -3.32$, $p < 0.05$).

In this respect, the Flemish applicants resembled South Asian and French letter-writers, putting more emphasis on the CV (or resume), their degrees, past achievements and

references (the people they know) instead of using CV and accompanying cover letter as powerful sales instruments. The US preference for low-context, direct and even assertive communication has, of course, been extensively evidenced. But as Varner and Beamer (1995: 250) observe, written job applications are also influenced by laws. In the US, for example, personal information on CVs is discouraged or even prohibited so that the "division of labour" between CV and cover letter is different from that in other cultures.

Rejection letters

De Rycker and Verckens (2006) examined 21 rejection letters written by Flemish and US students in response to the business-to-business proposal phase of the CIBW simulation. For lack of time, no explicit writing or other instruction had been provided. Using WordSmith 4.0, WordClassifier 2.0, Web VP 2.5 and the statistical SPSS package, we analyzed the letters by looking at the following variables: a range of textual variables (i.e., text size, lexical variation/density and vocabulary profile), correctness (cf. Connor et al. 1995), content and organizational structure, and finally, metadiscursivity (logical connectives, frame markers, explanatory markers, hedges, emphatics and attitude and relational markers). For the latter two dependent variables, coding schemes were based on the available literature (e.g., Locker 1999; Louhiala-Salminen 1999).

Though the data analysis has not been finished yet, the following preliminary results can be reported. For all variables that have been checked so far Flemish and US rejection letters show a nearly perfect positive relationship ($r = 0.996$, $p < 0.01$). Flemish writers make more language errors (punctuation, spelling, lexis, syntax and paragraph coherence and structure) but the differences are not significant except for the variable "lexis" ($t = 2.966$, $df = 19$, $p < 0.05$). Flemish and US writers are comparable with respect to overall text size; word, sentence and paragraph length; and lexical variation and density. Also, near-perfect and statistically significant correlations were found for the WordSmith and WordClassifier vocabulary profiles.

The same observations hold true for the five meaning components that characterize rejection letters as a potentially face-threatening discourse genre: a buffer paragraph to make the negative message more palatable, a rejection and/or a reason for the rejection (both of which can be direct or indirect), procedural information about how the negative decision was arrived at and an upbeat ending ($r = 0.926$, $p < 0.01$). As a final point, Flemish and US writers do not differ either with respect to metadiscursivity like the use of discourse makers ($r = 0.933$, $p < 0.01$).

In fact, the Flemish and US rejections both use an indirect approach (with a buffer, positive ending and procedural information) though not exclusively. The Flemish CIBW participants show a marked tendency for combining both the indirect approach and the direct approach while their US counterparts almost invariably follow the much criticized indirect organizational pattern. They open with a buffer followed by an implied rejection rather than adopting the upfront approach advocated in the literature (e.g., Locker 1999).

These findings are unexpected in light of perceived cross-cultural variations in directness between Belgium (and more generally Europe) and the US, with the latter

being regarded as a “specific culture” rather than a “diffuse” one. If so, the “specific” Americans would have to be more direct, to the point, purposeful, precise, blunt, definitive and transparent than the Flemings – at least, following Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997: 100). The absence of large and statistically significant differences in rejection letter-writing led us to ask the following pertinent questions:

1. How linguistically and culturally dissimilar are advanced non-native Flemish and native-speaker US college/university student writers?

2. To what extent is European business writing influenced by US standards and how does that affect the likely transfer of L1 writing strategies?

3. What is the role of instructive writing interventions given that no explicit instruction took place?

More on all this in later publications.

Concluding remarks

Clearly, the international “Course in International Business Writing” alone cannot give a definitive answer regarding the usefulness of intercultural or multicultural approaches to teaching languages for specific purposes. So many variables are at play that it would be foolish to generalize from our own experience. Still, we hope that our discussion has shown that such a cross-cultural approach needs to secure high levels of both product and process authenticity. The reason is that these high levels positively influence students’ involvement and motivation, which in their turn can be safely hypothesized to lead to improved foreign-language writing.

The problem, however, is that projects like the CIBW – having been primarily designed as pedagogical alternatives to ordinary classroom writing activities – do not always allow one to formally measure that beneficial effect on writing quality (or cross-cultural sensitivity, for that matter). In order to produce robust evidence and valid conclusions, a stronger theoretical and methodological research orientation has to be designed into the project from the very start. So, though we can subjectively report a number of similarities and differences between the various groups of students, more reliable conclusions can be only obtained by using a smaller number of independent variables, more clearly-defined experimental and control groups, larger corpora, tighter conditions for collecting the data, pre-tests and post-tests, etc.

The research reported in Connor et al. (1995) and De Rycker and Verckens (2006) is valuable enough but both are actually forms of empirical *classroom* and *action research* (see, e.g., Edwards and Willis 2005: 6-7). And despite Verckens et al. (1998), the same also holds true for examining the CIBW’s impact on cultural awareness. In addition, there is also a problem of extrapolation. The CIBW remains a simulation, and though we argued differently in Connor et al. (1995: 473), today I would refrain from making any explicit claims about business writing across cultures in real life. Finally, as the work-in-progress on rejection letters has shown, the “experience of foreignness” (Marx 2001) may not always be as big as one hopes. So, anyone interested in setting up an

intercultural learning project would do well to try and maximize that "foreignness," at least, if the idea is to foreground certain critical aspects of LSP learning.

The second question raised in this paper was how best to combine business writing and cultural awareness training. Curiously, our general impression is that writing instruction should not be overdone, especially not when working with advanced university or college students. For most years of the simulation, both US and non-US students were left to their own devices. While working on their writing assignments, they could only fall back on what they already knew (or thought they knew) and/or search the library shelves or the Internet for relevant background information and useful sample letters. Again, we cannot really decide this second question on the basis of our own cross-cultural writing project. All along the CIBW was intended as a collaborative teaching project rather than a formal and methodologically sound research project. By the way, I fully agree with the language instructors interviewed by Edwards and Willis (2005: 260, 266) who say that

> "we should be careful that our research goals and classroom goals do not conflict. […] Research need not be something that is done 'to' or 'about' the students, but something done 'with' them."

This caveat against unethical practices raises the issue of how much we should tell the subjects in a combined teaching and research project. And it also means that we should seek and obtain permission to record and analyze students' written work in advance.

Rounding off, any future CIBW-like project that seeks to adopt an intercultural and/or international perspective on teaching English or any other language for specific purposes will have to address the concerns raised above. In addition, attention will also have to be given to the following five points:

1. Looking for reliable and interesting foreign partners is a time-consuming business, involving lots of email communication and frequent meetings to define common ground and to establish and maintain trust.

2. It is not always easy to interest mother-tongue speakers or their instructors to conjure up much enthusiasm for communicating with non-native speakers. The language-learning benefits to be gained are small compared with those that accrue to the non-native participants. Highlighting the cross-cultural dimension may partly remedy this imbalance but other avenues can be explored, too, such as opting for a more explicit content orientation.

3. Though nearly all colleges and universities have international offices these days, personal networks and contacts are often more effective and will produce results more quickly than lengthy institutional negotiations.

4. The drawback of the third point may well be that the project itself has to be self-financing. The costs involved in the CIBW were very low thanks to the fact that all documents were emailed as attachments, using the partner institutions' email addresses. This does not hold true, of course, for travel expenses and the extra time needed to get the whole business game up and running and to manage it.

5. A final element to take on board is that without commitment and support from departmental heads and deans it may prove difficult to find a big enough "window" within which students in the different countries can collaborate.

Note that this last paragraph is an updated version of De Rycker (1996: 26-27).

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