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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CULTURE IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

Introduction

There is no doubt that the lingua franca of today's business world is English, which enables communication among business practitioners coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This fact makes learning English interesting and useful for all those who might be using it when they enter the world of international business. It is therefore natural that there is a demand for business English, which appears to be growing, because learners are becoming clearer about what they want to use English for. In today's global economy they want not only the skills to write, read, listen to and speak English fluently, they also want to be able to communicate in a way which will be recognised and appreciated by their counterparts at international level.

Aspects of teaching Business English

Many students of Business English are people who have been already working in business within their own linguistic environment and who wish, for a number of reasons, to be able to function in their business role in English too. The teacher's role in this case is not to present business concepts to such students or even to instruct them how to conduct their business, but it is to enable them to develop their language skills within a business context. Teachers of Business English are first and foremost teachers of English. It is important for them not to be intimidated by the status and professions of the learners but rather to establish the kind of teacher–learner relationship where both sides are recognized as experts – the learners as experts in their particular field of expertise and the teacher as an expert in the field of language teaching and as an indispensable source of linguistic information. The main differences between teaching Business English and general English are in the choice of contexts for listening and reading texts, as well as in the choice of lexis in grammar and vocabulary exercises, where examples such as "We have just received the invoice" will replace "We have just seen Tom." There is also a huge bank of business-related authentic materials to choose from, what is a big advantage. Articles in magazines, journals, and newspapers also offer both relevant pieces of up-to-date information and a significant learning experience. Moreover, they sound less theoretical than textbooks, so even students often find them more

attractive. In addition, watching business news and other business programmes can be a valuable source of terms and phrases used in different fields of business. The methodology used by Business English teachers can be a little different from general English, because students might learn more from fascinating case studies, interactive problem-solving activities including role plays and interviews, critical thinking activities and authentic business materials including graphs, contracts and advertisements.

Culture – the fifth language skill

On the other hand it is important to point to the fact that by teaching English for business communication we also teach culture to a large extent, because language and communication cannot exist apart from culture. They are closely intertwined because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. Culture is the foundation of communication (Samovar, Porter, Jain 1981: 24). So effective communication is more than a matter of language proficiency. There are several components in foreign language learning, including knowledge of the grammatical system of a language, which is described as grammatical competence, then language proficiency, as well as communicative competence and it has to be complemented by understanding of culture – specific meanings, which is described as cultural competence (Byram, Morgan et al. 1994: 4). Cultural competence is undoubtedly an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. It can also lead to empathy and respect towards different cultures as well as promote objectivity and cultural perspicacity. Culture is therefore considered a fifth language skill by many teachers, in addition to listening, speaking, writing and reading.

There are two good reasons for taking culture into account as a part of foreign language teaching. One is the international role of the English language, which has become the lingua franca and the other is globalisation. The world is full of confrontations between people, groups and nations, who think, feel, and act differently. At the same time these people, groups and nations are exposed to common problems that demand cooperation for their solution. In the booming market for cross-cultural training, there are courses and books that show only cultural synergy and no cultural conflicts, but studying culture without experiencing a culture shock is like practicing swimming without water. Many people assume that if they learn the language, they learn the culture but sharing a language does not imply sharing a culture. Actually they can learn a lot of cultural features, but it does not teach them sensitivity and awareness or even how to behave in certain situations. What the fifth language skill teaches them is the mindset and techniques to adopt their use of English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. It involves understanding how to use the language to accept differences, to be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things which might be different from ours.

What is culture?

At the beginning of our cogitation about the importance of teaching culture we should answer the fundamental question: What do we mean by 'culture'? So first of all it is necessary to define and explain the concept of culture. For this reason we will take the book *Cultures and Organisations* for our starting point, which was written by Geert Hofstede and his son. According to him every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting that were learnt throughout their lifetime. Using the analogy of the way computers are programmed, such patterns of thinking, feeling and acting are viewed in this book as mental programs or software of the mind. The sources of one's mental programs lie within the social environment in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences. A customary term for such mental software is culture, which has several meanings, all derived from its Latin source, which refers to the tilling of the soil (Hofstede 2005: 2–3). In most Western languages the word 'culture' means 'civilization' or 'refinement of the mind' and in the narrow sense also results of such refinement, including education, art, and literature. However, culture as mental software corresponds to a much broader use of the word and is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, which were mentioned before. There are included not only activities supposed to refine the mind, but also the ordinary and menial things in life, for example greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, making love or maintaining body hygiene (Hofstede 2005: 3–4). Culture is always perceived to be a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learnt. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game and can be described as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others (Hofstede 2005: 4). It is also of great importance to emphasize that culture is learnt, not innate and ought to be distinguished from human nature on one side and from an individual's personality on the other, although exactly where the borders lie between nature and culture, and between culture and presonality, is a matter of discussion among social scientists.

Culture is everywhere. It is shaping what you are thinking and seeing right now. And it shapes the way you are being viewed by people from other cultural contexts. Cultural differences manifest themselves in symbols, heroes, rituals and values. Symbols represent the most superficial manifestations of culture. They are words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning only recognized as such by those who share the culture. Heroes are people, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models of behaviour. Rituals are collective activities and are considered as socially essential within a culture. Rituals include ways of greeting and paying respect to others, as well as social and religious ceremonies. Symbols, heroes and rituals are described as practices, they can be observed and identified. These are the visible cues about cultural differences that exist in a society. The core of culture is formed by values which are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others. They lie beneath the surface of what's visible. As almost everyone belongs

to a number of different groups at the same time, people unavoidably carry several layers or levels of culture within themselves (Hofstede 2005: 6–11).

Language and culture

Language is a product of the culture, as any other, but it also plays a distinct role. Members of the culture have created the language to carry out all their cultural practices, to identify and organize all their cultural products, and to name the underlying cultural perspectives. The words of the language, its expressions, structures and sounds reflect the culture, just as the cultural products and practices reflect the language. Language, therefore, is a window to the culture (Moran 2001: 35). To practice the culture, we also need language. We need to be able to express ourselves and to communicate with members of the culture. Moreover, it is important to use the right language in the right way, according to the expectations of the members of the culture. This is the language of self-expression, communication, and social interaction, which is based on direct experience in the culture and interactions with members of the culture. So language and culture are inseparable from each other. However, under certain circumstances, it is allowed to separate them in order to make the teaching process more effective, especially at lower levels of proficiency. This separation has an undeniable advantage. First of all, learners do benefit by concentrating only on mastery of linguistic forms; including the cultural dimension could add unnecessary complexity. Second, and most relevant to culture, we use language to learn culture, a separation that helps language learners. The language we use to learn culture is specialized. It is the language of the classroom, where culture is the topic and language the means to comprehend, analyze, and respond to it. To achieve this, four language functions are needed: language to participate in the culture, language to describe the culture, language to interpret the culture and language to respond to the culture. These four functions mirror the stages of the cultural experience cycle: participation, description, interpretation, response – knowing how, knowing about, knowing why, and knowing oneself. In order to learn culture through experience, therefore, it is necessary to use certain kinds of language at each step along the way (Moran 2001: 38–39).

According to Tomalin and Stempleski the teaching of culture has the following objectives:

– To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours;
– To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave;
– To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture;
– To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words or phrases in the target language;
– To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;
– To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture;

– To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people. (Tomalin, Stempleski 1993: 7–8).

There is a need to emphasize that the main goal of teaching culture is to increase learners' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures. These comparisons are not meant to underestimate foreign cultures but to enrich learners' experience and to sensitise them to cultural diversity. This diversity should be understood and respected, and never over- or underestimated. In order to reach such aims, the teaching of culture should include cultural knowledge, cultural values, cultural behaviour and cultural skills. Every student goes through the culture learning process in a unique way. Because of these individual differences, one of the primary tasks for the teacher is to help students express and respond to their cultural learning experiences. Teachers need to be versatile. It is important for them to be able to present or elicit cultural information, coach and model cultural behaviours, guide and conduct cultural research and analysis. They also need to be able to enter learners' worlds by listening, empathizing, and sharing their own experiences as culture learners, so as to help learners step out of their worlds into another language, another culture. Teachers also need to be learners of culture and go through the cultural experience that they propose to learners in their language classes (Moran 2001: 143–152).

Considering cultural differences

In verbal communication there still exist noticeable differences in understanding specific terms which are caused by cultural differences. For instance the Business English term 'corporate social responsibility' is understood differently in the European and American culture (Búciová 2010: 31–38). Alongside linguistic knowledge, students should also familiarise themselves with various forms of nonverbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, typical in the target culture. More specifically, students should be aware of the fact that such seemingly universal signals as gestures and facial expressions, as well as emotions, are actually cultural phenomena and can also lead to misunderstanding and erroneous assumptions. The significance of a gesture can vary in different cultures. The 'thumbs up' sign indicates approval in some countries, but in others, it is obscene and offensive. Eye contact is another important way in which we signal our intention: but at what point does a look become a stare? According to Straub it is important to encourage students to speculate on the significance of the symbolic meanings of colours, gestures, facial expressions, and the physical distance people unconsciously put between each other and to show in what ways these nonverbal cues are similar to, or at variance with those of their culture (Straub 1999: 6).

As corporate gift giving has become more popular nowadays, knowing the connotative meaning of flowers, items and other words (e.g. colours) may help learners avoid possible pitfalls when travelling abroad and become more confident in language use (Weberová 2007: 1–4). For instance the word 'rose' is associated with love and beauty in many cultures (Kramsch 1998: 16). On the contrary, a chrysanthemum is associated with death in Germany and Slovakia. White lilies are often perceived as a symbol of innocence in Slovakia, but as a symbol of death

in England, Australia and Canada. The black colour is traditionally associated with mourning in most European countries whereas in Asia the white colour has the same meaning.

Humour is another potential minefield for an inexperienced learner as it varies from culture to culture. What is considered funny is highly culture-specific. In intercultural encounters jokes and irony are taboo until one is absolutely sure of the other culture's conception of what represents humour. Humorous remarks are for example particularly welcomed in presentations held in the Anglo-Saxon environment. This is rarely a case in Germany (Weberová 2008: 189).

There are certain cultural differences which have to be taken into account. For example, in business meetings people of different cultures may behave in a different way. In Scandinavian countries meeting participants pay attention to turn taking and do not interrupt their partners. A reserved approach lacking in nonverbal communication is typical of these countries. On the other hand, people coming from Latin America discuss issues in a lively way, interrupting each other without fear and they use expressive gestures. In China it is very impolite to express your emotions, anger or impatience. On the contrary, in Russia feelings are openly expressed and meeting participants can be confronted with expressions of anger or disagreement (Lašáková et al. 2010: 172–175).

Conclusion

Language and culture are inseparable from each other. Due to the fact that we live in the global world where a lot of people come into contact with people from other cultures, the cultural competence is of great importance to all learners who wish to be competent users of the foreign language. This paper has made an attempt to explain the conception of culture and its importance in teaching Business English. It also deals with the relationship between language and culture. Culture plays an important role, because cultural differences are reflected in both verbal and nonverbal communication, therefore, they should not be ignored.

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Znaczenie nauczania kultury w angielskim dla biznesu

Streszczenie

Nie ma wątpliwości, że język angielski jest obecnie lingua franca świata biznesu, umożliwiając kontakty przedstawicielom różnych kultur. Jest więc naturalne, że uczniowie chcą nie tylko opanować sprawności czytania, pisania, rozumienia ze słuchu i płynnego mówienia, ale przede wszystkim chcą być w stanie komunikować się na poziomie docenianym w międzynarodowych kontaktach biznesowych. Aby to osiągnąć, ucząc komunikacji w biznesie uczymy również aspektów kulturowych, gdyż komunikacja nie istnieje w oddzieleniu od kultury. Są dwa powody dla których istnieje konieczność nauczania kultury w nauczaniu języków obcych: międzynarodowa funkcja języka angielskiego oraz globalizacja.

Niniejszy artykuł podkreśla konieczność nauczania kultury w nauczaniu języka angielskiego dla biznesu, gdyż sama znajomość sprawności językowych nie wystarczy do skutecznej komunikacji, ale musi być uzupełniona o znajomość znaczeń specyficznych kulturowo, takich jak konwencje, zwyczaje, przekonania typowe dla drugiego kraju, czyli kompetencję kulturową. Nauczanie kultury powinno zawierać wiedzę kulturową, wartości, zachowania i umiejętności kulturowe.