Interculturality and Business English: Empowering Learners in Globalized Contexts of Communication

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical exploration of the enterprise of teaching and learning business English (English for business and the workplace) with specific reference to processes related to globalization. The discussion investigates the international contexts of business English textbooks commercially available worldwide and how they position themselves to target the perceived needs of students of business English. As a modus operandi, this paper proposes a coherent definition and conceptual framework of interculturality which is regarded as essential in order to underpin any discussion of, and approach to, teaching and learning business English in international contexts. The key intercultural skills related to this industry can be isolated as: relating and responding appropriately, and developing awareness, respect, and negotiation. These are broad skills that reflect and express a greater awareness of the inseparability of language and culture and delineate the need to prepare language learners adequately for intercultural capability (Bolten, 2017) in an increasingly multicultural world. This paper also draws upon data obtained from a questionnaire distributed to students on practical business English courses taught by the author. The results of the survey reveal that practical communication skills and a specific, specialized knowledge base in English are viewed as essential components of their Business English classes. The paper concludes by underscoring the need to empower learners with relevant skills to meet the challenges of evolving, dynamic, globalized contexts of business.

キーワード：Business English (1), ELT/ESP (2), interculturality (3)

Introduction

Current emphasis in modern language teaching and learning highlight interculturality and reconceptualise goals in terms of producing intercultural speakers who will be capable, adaptable actors and mediators in globalized contexts. It is acknowledged that language proficiency alone is inadequate; communication is holistic and also requires knowledge of the ways culture and language interlock and an understanding of how interaction across cultures operates. (Jordan, 2016:1)

In the space of a relatively short period of time, business English (defined herein as English for business and the workplace) has enjoyed a remarkable period of transformation. It has undergone a significant and fundamental change, shedding the label of a misunderstood subset of ESP (English for specific purposes), emerging as a reputable and credible field in its own right. Unquestionably, it has now become, quite literally, a big global business.

Various commentators and language experts have also acknowledged that this worldwide inexhaustible appetite for business English within ELT (English language teaching) and ESP has resulted in far-reaching implications and opportunities not just for learners, but also for experienced/trainee business-English teachers (courses concentrating on professional skills, classroom methodology, and business concepts and practices) and textbook writers alike. Given the voices within the ELT profession in the not-so-distant past questioning the notion of business English as a specialism within ESP, the business English enterprise has revealed itself to be a truly global flagship brand of English enjoying a high status as a currency in high demand.

As the numerous business-English textbooks obtained from Japanese publishers attest, and after examining the business English sections of numerous textbook catalogues available here in Japan, there is nothing short of a plethora of commercially-available business English textbooks now available on the market. Some titles are packaged and marketed with unique blended learning approaches including supplementary online resources, clinics, and even TOEIC-integrated syllabuses (TOEIC – Test of English for International Communication – is widely used in Japan as a measurement of English proficiency). These textbooks, from publishers big and small, are specifically targeting the needs of aspiring business-English students of all levels and established business professionals who are seeking practical and functional business language with relevant content (banking and finance, insurance, hospitality, advertising and marketing, etc.) in English to complement competencies which they already possess in their own native language.

Globalizing the Business-English Learner

> Globalisation, internationalisation and cosmopolitanism are key features of contemporary social debate, and various forms of education mirror and contribute to these debates. The impact of globalisation on language teaching is of particular interest … (Hatoss, 2006:2)

Global business is generally understood as business activities that involve trade or investment across national boundaries. Consequently, with the spread of business English worldwide as a facilitating tool, the ELT industry has found it necessary to address not only the role of language in business, but also the thorny issue of culture in a more coherent manner. According to Bolten (2017), there is a real need to rethink intercultural learning processes in terms of transculturality. This entails trying to look at cultures more in terms of

interwoven, delimited, hybrid structures and less in terms of cultural comparisons and negative stereotyping. *Culture*, he claims (2017:1), "represents the structural perspective and *interculturality* the process perspective – being two sides of the same coin, as it were." (https://www.goethe.de/en/spr/mag/20906565.html). Scarino (2009) takes this idea further by stating that intercultural capability (intercultural competence/intercultural communication) in international education poses a range of challenges to intercultural orientation that are simultaneously theoretical and practical in nature. Specifically, she argues that: "employers increasingly recognize the importance of developing intercultural capability." Therefore, with the terms intercultural/international/global business becoming increasingly vibrant ELT and applied linguistics industry buzzwords (sometimes with shortcomings in their definitions and rationales), and business English textbooks gearing more and more towards intercultural contexts of business communication, it is an appropriate moment to stop and clarify what is meant by 'interculturality' when it is applied to the teaching of business English for communication in international contexts.

Within communication studies, and applied linguistics generally, there are numerous definitions of intercultural communication that can help us characterize interculturality to various degrees. However, a particularly useful and straightforward explanation has been offered by Rollings-Carter (2010) who defines the concept of interculturality clearly and succinctly as follows:

> Interculturality is a process in which people from different cultures interact to learn about and question their own and each other's cultures. In this context, the term implies the appropriate use of a target language.

(http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/linguafolio/6125)

Additionally, in her proposed model, Rollings-Carter's definition of interculturality focuses on these four, key, interrelated factors:

●Being able to relate appropriately to a particular audience.
●Being able to react and respond appropriately to one's own personal feelings, attitudes, and perceptions as well as those of other cultures.
●Developing an awareness and respect for others and their differences.
●Demonstrating an ability to negotiate language meaning and usage based on cultural understanding and responsiveness.

Rollins-Carter also suggests ways for learners to develop an appreciation of interculturality. This process involves the help of educators whose role it is to guide learners to focus on three essential elements in the teaching-learning environment (represented in Figure 1):
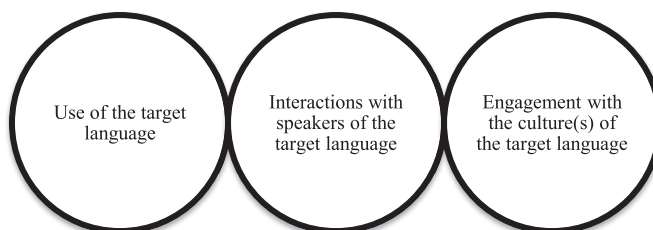

Figure 1. Three essential elements in the development of interculturality (adapted from Rollins-Carter, 2010).

Following on from the above elements, which are largely self-explanatory, she sets out a set of four necessary requirements on the part of the learner which are instrumental in understanding how interculturality actually works in the complex interactions they have with others (represented in Figure 2). These requirements are:

● Reflection (in this case, self-reflection).
● Identification and understanding (of one's own culture in all its negative and positive facets in order to appreciate the different cultural values of people from other countries).
● Acceptance (of cultural similarities and dissimilarities without passing judgment).
● Negotiation (of a common, neutral ground between ourselves and people from other cultures).
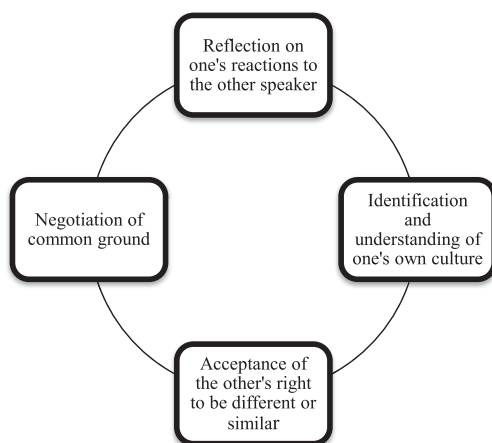

Figure 2. The four requirements on the part of the learner in order to understand interculturality (adapted from Rollins-Carter, 2010).

These requirements can also be interpreted in terms of verbal, emotional and behavioural "soft skills" which learners need in order to be "socially intelligent" in the workplace (Hymes, 1974). These skills (communicative acts in collaborative events) include:

● Adaptability
● Collaboration
● Communication
● Conflict resolution
● Cross cultural skills
● Decision making
● Empathy
● Leadership
● Listening
● Optimism
● Resilience
● Social intelligence

Employing Rollins-Carter's model as a methodological framework it is possible to obtain a clearer understanding of complex, socio-cultural and linguistic processes from the perspective of interculturality. In turn, this may help the business-English industry to address the multifarious needs of learners for the future workplace by adhering to a balanced, experiential approach to learning that empowers learners – nurturing attitudes, values, and motivations – through an active process of self-initiative, analysis, problem-solving, and self-reflection (Kolb, 1984).

Teaching Intercultural Business English: A Global Approach

> Globalization and culture is a live-wire theme in constant flux – in lifestyles, cross-cultural encounters, migration, global-local relations, music, media, movies, marketing, fashion, cuisine, and so forth. As the dynamics of globalization change … so do not just the tides but the shorelines of culture. (Pieterse, 2015: ix)

In general terms, business-English courses demonstrate a tendency to integrate the following components in their resources and materials (represented in Figure 3):

● Key business topics and concepts which reflect contemporary working environments using essential, functional language used in diverse, real business situations.
● Language development involving grammar, vocabulary and communicative functional language
● Authentic problem-solving and critical thinking tasks (including case studies) to develop

confidence and personal skills, to consolidate knowledge, and to further develop essential language skills.

●Intercultural communication activities to stimulate an awareness of cultural diversity, a deeper understanding of other cultures and their cultural patterns (values, beliefs, customs, rules, and languages), and how miscommunication occurs.
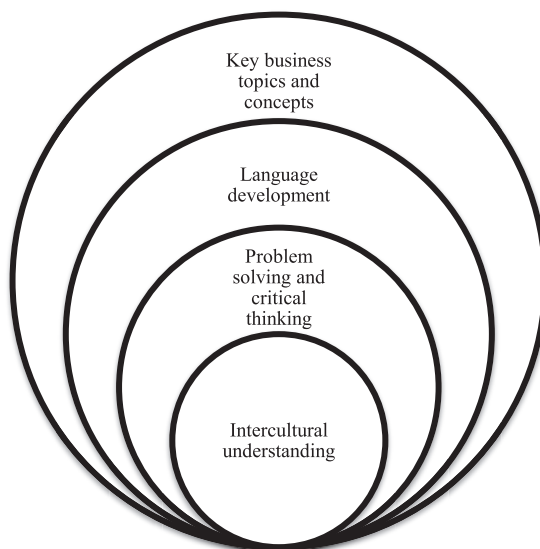

Figure 3. Integrated components in business-English resources and materials

Implications for Learning and Teaching

Given the integrated components above, the following learner-directed activity (defined as an intercultural business English activity in various sources) is best described as an experiential learning tool (with an awareness-raising orientation) that approaches the issue of interculturality and attempts to initiate it within the classroom. It is widely used in business English materials and makes reference to Rollins-Carter's model of interculturality ("soft skills") by requiring learners to reflect, identify and understand, accept and negotiate as part of the thinking, discussion and role-play process. It is also underpinned by the three essential elements in the development of interculturality mentioned earlier. This version has been adapted from Emmerson (2004) who modified it from an original source (Mattock, 1999, who focuses on a set of learning tools for exploring the issue of culture and business in international contexts). Depending on class size, it can take approximately 45 minutes to complete, but can be expanded to 60 minutes in the final phase to increase interaction in the classroom.

In the first phase, a worksheet (represented in Figure 4) is distributed to students to read. The worksheet provides a set of characters to assume and a scenario to interpret.

You are a businesswoman/businessman on a business trip to a fictitious country called Rubovia. You board the flight and everyone around you is speaking Rubovian. You don't speak a word of Rubovian. Before taking off, a Rubovian woman/man sits next to you and greets you in excellent English. During the flight, you have the opportunity to talk to this person and find out about Rubovia and its business culture. What questions will you ask the friendly passenger next to you?

Figure 4. Worksheet 1.

In the next phase, on a separate worksheet (represented in Figure 5) students individually write down four questions about Rubovia and general culture (these could be about geography, language, customs, places of interest, etc.) in Rubovia, and four about business culture (these could be about manufacturing, national products, financial services, tourism, import/export, jobs and opportunities for women etc.). At this point, students should not share their ideas with others in the group. When they have finished writing down the questions (after a given time of 10-15 minutes), students are asked to get into groups to share their questions and reasons for writing them.

General culture	Business culture
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

Figure 5. Worksheet 2.

In this dynamic, sharing and discussion-based phase of the activity, students talk about the suitability of their questions, explain their reasoning and thought processes, offer each other alternative ideas and perspectives to consider, and negotiate the most culturally-appropriate patterns of behaviour for the characters in this scenario.

Emmerson includes some specific, guided questions in a section at the bottom of the worksheet. This section is folded over at the beginning so learners cannot see the questions before writing their own original questions. Emmerson's suggested topics for discussion include: Rubovian greetings, everyday phrases in Rubovian, food and drinks, demographics, geography, politics, current events, and entertainment. Business culture questions include topics such as: formal greetings, punctuality, decision-making processes, economic activity, documentation, business etiquette, official gift giving, etc.

In the next step, students select one person in the group to be the Rubovian passenger on the airplane. The others in the groups take on the role of businesswomen/businessmen who ask the Rubovian questions from their worksheet (and later from the suggested questions which are folded over). The Rubovian is encouraged to actively role play the character by

using desired mannerisms, accents, and even by creating their very own Rubovian language. If time permits, students can switch roles in their group, regroup, or try this in pairs. Students often state that they enjoy this very creative, active and thought-provoking activity and that it gives them a unique opportunity to explore and think carefully and critically about the relationship between language, culture, and business in a very engaging and non-threatening way,

A small-scale study was carried out by the author in the Department of International Tourism and Business of a private Japanese university for women with 68 third-year students and 55 fourth-year students enrolled on mandatory business-English courses (Practical Business English II for third-year students, and Practical Business English IV for fourth-year students「実用ビジネス英語II・IV」). In an open questionnaire in English distributed at the end of the first semester in July, 2018, the following two questions were asked:

● *What is business English?*
● *What do you want to study in your Practical Business English*「実用ビジネス英語」*class?*

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, the students overwhelmingly considered business communication/speaking skills, and business vocabulary as the most important elements in a business English course (represented in Tables 6 and 7). This revelation can be equated with the integrated components in business resources and materials discussed earlier:

● Key business topics and concepts.
● Language development.
● Problem solving and critical thinking.
● Intercultural understanding.

The findings of the study also corroborate the argument put forward by Rollins-Carter concerning interculturality and the expectations of learners:

● Use of the target language (English).
● Interactions with speakers of the target language (workplace interactions with colleagues such as in meetings, taking an active role in discussions, and engaging with others on the telephone).
● Engagement with the culture(s) of the target language (workplace culture/organizational communication).

Table 1. *Third-Year Students' Responses to the Questionnaire (68 Students)*

Business communication/Speaking skills	(Total: 51/68) (75%)
Business vocabulary	(Total: 30/68) (44%)
Business etiquette	(Total: 8/68) (12%)
Reading/Newspaper articles	(Total: 8/68) (12%)
Current affairs/World news	(Total: 5/68) (7%)
Global business	(Total: 5/68) (7%)
Tourism	(Total: 5/68) (7%)
Culture	(Total: 4/68) (6%)
Economics	(Total: 3/68) (4%)
Writing/Emails	(Total: 3/68) (4%)
Hospitality	(Total: 2/68) (3%)
TOEIC	(Total: 2/68) (3%)
Finance	(Total: 1/68) (1%)

Table 2. *Fourth-Year Students' Responses to the Questionnaire (55 Students)*

Business communication/Speaking skills	(Total: 34/55) (62%)
Business vocabulary	(Total: 24/55) (43%)
Tourism	(Total: 4/55) (13%)
Business etiquette	(Total: 4/55) (7%)
Reading/Newspaper articles	(Total: 4/55) (7%)
Business news	(Total: 3/55) (5%)
Current affairs/World news	(Total: 3/55) (5%)
Economics	(Total: 3/55) (5%)
Global business	(Total: 3/55) (5%)
Writing/Emails	(Total: 3/55) (5%)
Listening skills	(Total: 2/55) (4%)
Banking	(Total: 1/55) (2%)
Culture	(Total: 1/55) (2%)
Finance	(Total: 1/55) (2%)
Marketing	(Total: 1/55) (2%)
Politics	(Total: 1/55) (2%)

With regard to the highest ranked item (business communication/speaking skills: 75% for third-year students and 62% for fourth-year students), students provided details as to what specific kind of communication and skills they expect from a business English course in general or require from their own classes (represented in Figure 6). The second highest ranked item (business vocabulary: 44% for third-year students and 43% for fourth-year students) was elaborated as business words, phrases, topics, and concepts in English – a knowledge base that they are already exposed to in their own native language in business classes offered in Japanese by Japanese faculty members.
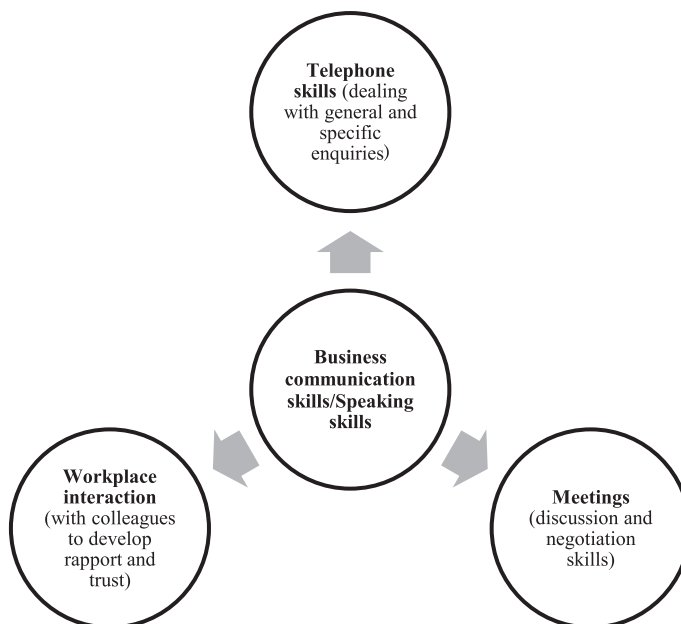
Richard R.P. Gabbrielli

Figure 6. Business communication skills/Speaking skills.

Considering the above data, it is possible to link student expectations and requirements (needs) to the tourism-business objectives and learning outcomes set out in the syllabuses for the Practical Business English courses offered to third-year students and fourth-year students. The textbooks selected for the courses are:

● *English for International Tourism (Pre-Intermediate)* for third-year students (Dubicka and O' Keeffe, 2015).

● *English for International Tourism (Intermediate)* for fourth-year students (Strutt, 2016).

Both these textbooks are: "designed to meet the English language needs of professionals working in the tourism industry…" and they are designed to enable learners to:

● Build confidence in professional skills such as dealing with enquiries, marketing destinations, offering advice, negotiating, writing emails, and speaking to groups in realistic and motivating tourism-related contexts.
● Develop language awareness through an integrated grammar and skills syllabus.
● Acquire specialized tourism terminology needed by tourism professionals.
● Build confidence in the professional skills needed for the tourist industry.
● Practice language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in realistic case studies reflecting topical tourism issues in the tourist industry today.

Conclusion

> The term ("globalization") is unrivalled in its ability to fulfill a legitimate need: to give us a name for the times in which we live. (Osterhammel and Petersson, 2003: 2)

As discussed in this paper, business English has been experiencing a phenomenal growth in the ELT (ESP) industry. In line with this development, the need to empower business-English learners with relevant practical skills, a solid knowledge base, intercultural capability, and the "soft skills" to meet the challenges of the increasingly globalized nature of business interactions becomes ever more pressing. Significantly, the results of the classroom questionnaire revealed a need for speaking skills for contextualized interactions with speakers of the target language in the workplace (intercultural communication skills), and specialized vocabulary and key business topics and concepts (content-specific knowledge). This revelation validates this pedagogical direction within the profession. As business English continues to gather momentum in meeting the needs of learners in various contexts across the globe, it is incumbent upon the ELT industry to address the evolving needs of learners, and to enhance optimum learning opportunities for the future.

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