CROSS CULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: LANGUAGE TEACHING BY PROJECT WORK

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Project life

Cross Cultural Business Communication is a continuation of a project sponsored by ELTeCS (English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme) during which a network of teachers, students and institutions was established with a view to participating in a virtual learning community created by them [1]. The project is an outcome of the ideas of Neva Čebron of the Faculty of Humanities of Koper, Slovenia, who has been the promoter and coordinator of the project from the very beginning. She produced the syllabus plan and all the materials are based on her lesson plans.

The project goals have been to enhance student motivation and involvement in learning Business English in a simulated business environment and to raise their linguistic and intercultural awareness. The extent to which these were attained was so much appreciated that the project was awarded the 1st prize by the German Ministry of Education within the programme «Europäisches Sprachensiegel 2000, Auszeichnung von beispielhaften Inventiven zur Foerderung des Fremdsprachenlernens».

For the past two years, the project has benefited from funding by the Leonardo da Vinci Agency. It has expanded the network and worked at refining methods of teaching business communication, developing a cross-curricular teaching module supported by a web site and by learning /teaching materials. The main way in which the objectives mentioned above were achieved has been by carrying out learning through an integrated skills approach in a virtual workshop of Business English. Inge Koch, of Bundeshandels-Akademie und Bundeshandelsschule, Vienna, had the overall idea to use a portfolio, and her contribution in terms of project development has been consistent

throughout the past four years.

The part I have in the project involves several aspects. First, it has been facilitating learning by students in International Business and Economics of how to deal with cross-cultural commercial correspondence in English by founding a simulated company and carrying out commercial correspondence with similar companies from different countries.

During year 2001-2002 students founded Masterads, an advertising company, which bought electronic equipment from an Austrian company and sold advertising services to an Indian one. This year we have Patches, a fashion design and production company, selling to an Austrian jewellery firm and to a Slovenian advertising company, and buying from a Croatian health food producer and an Estonian flight and business meeting venue provider.

While carrying out the activities related to the letter exchange I had to accommodate the teaching objectives intended within the simulation with the requirements of the syllabus to be covered by students in International Business and Economics at the Academy of Economic Studies of Bucharest.

It meant putting in a nutshell topics and skills otherwise dealt with within a much larger time span. The students were appointed in executive positions and had to make decisions and act on them, very much on their own.

The students have worked on improving their proficiency, having as guidance in their self evaluation and immediate objective setting a SELF ASSESSMENT GRID based on the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and of OPEN SESAME - Observing Performance in Enterprises Single European System for Auditing, Measuring and Evaluating Language Skills - elaborated by Mari Uibo from Estonia and

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Neva Čebron from Slovenia, core participants in the project.

One of the aims of the project was to create a course book to be used as material for teaching. I have been piloting the first units, observing the materials from all possible angles and reporting in the fashion of a teacher engaging in this type of teaching for the first time. Piloting has meant answering detailed questionnaires about the units covered in class and having the students give their own answers as to the relevance of the units in their learning process.
The answers will be compiled and analysed and decisions will be taken as to improving the course book in a new version. This will be done in meetings of the team when also future directions of action or development of the project will be established. The intention is to publish the final product of the project, i.e. a portfolio type of book for students and teachers.

One of the new elements that the project has brought is practising business communication at distance, in our case by tertiary level students as well as high school students (some of our partners) but it can also be used by adults engaging in business studies and practice.

As mentioned in the project proposal, the methods, approaches and results could be transferred to learning other business languages.

Project presentation

As Garry McManama explains in the Guidelines for Students included in the Students' Portfolio [3], the students set up a virtual company to market a product or service of their choice and carry out commercial correspondence with similar companies from different countries. The project co-ordinators, International Business English teachers from Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Switzerland, Romania assign international contacts, i.e., students in a similar situation, with whom they are supposed to communicate. By so doing students learn about the activities of a company (interdependence of various departments in developing and selling a product or service) as well as practise dealing with international suppliers and customers.

This includes presenting own company to prospective business partners (making themselves, their company and their product known and designing an advertisement), writing and receiving enquiries, offers and orders and dealing with financial and transportation matters and adjustments.

Before beginning the correspondence, students determine the structure of their company, design company logo and stationery, introduce themselves to the participants from other countries, and introduce their educational institution and country. Then they introduce the company by writing and sending the company profile. To do so, students research the product or service, by contacting real, existing companies, collecting advertisements about this product or service or looking into the Internet for information. Also they collect information about the partners they will be dealing with, for example by doing Internet research. The next step is to prepare an advertisement for their product or service to be sent to their business partners by e-mail.

During the correspondence students prepare and send enquiries after receiving advertisements, and follow up with necessary correspondence (offers, orders, adjustments, etc.) to their business partners. Original, uncorrected letters are sent by e-mail; copies are given to teachers after letters have been sent. A copy of their correspondence is sent to the teacher and to the Webmaster. Students continue research to gain additional information about partners, in order to present it to the other members of the group.

To participate, students need interest in making international contacts, basic IT-skills, computer with Internet access, e-mail address, and key skills, such as teamwork ability and problem-solving strategies. No expenditure for materials is expected of them.

Students benefit from the project as they have the opportunity to establish contact with a number of members of peer groups from different countries and learn about different cultural communication patterns and possible misunderstandings ("Dos" and "Don'ts" in business). They also learn business communication skills and are able to test them in an almost real business environment. They learn and practise decision-making strategies in various situations, e.g. making offers, dealing with complaints diplomatically, encountering technical difficulties, and practising time-management.

After successfully completing the project students receive a certificate of participation.

The web site - http://www.2cbc.net
The web site includes the documents produced and

mailed by the partners, grouped into:
INTRODUCTIONS, ADVERTISEMENTS, LETTERS, APPLICATION FORM, FORUM, EXERCISES and LINKS.

In the *Introductions*, there are presentations of the countries, lists of the cultural dos and don'ts specific to each community represented, presentations of the learning institutions the participants come from, individual introductions of all the members of each group and the company profile.

As the titles show, *Advertisements* present the materials created to advertise the products or services offered by the companies and *Letters* includes the correspondence, grouped according to the deals. Each transaction pair has (or should have) sent an enquiry, reply/price list/ catalogue, further enquiry, reply/ quotation, order, confirmation, complaint, adjustment.

While the *Application Form* is just that, containing details of the teachers and the statement of their willingness to join the project, *Forum* enables anybody who joins to participate in discussions related to cross cultural issues in business and not only, and *Exercises* can be used on a self access basis as a tool for autonomous learning.

As an example, here is the welcoming page of the *Forum*, written by the moderator, Antonella Pedretti, from Italy:

CROSS-CULTURAL QUIZ; INTRODUCTION
Dear CCBC community,

In this FORUM we want to discuss some cross-cultural situations that a person/business person travelling to your country might have to face. How would you behave in the following situations IN YOUR OWN COUNTRY?

Can you provide/think of an explanation for your behaviour as well?

Your replies will help your friends around the world avoid misunderstandings and awkward situations: at the same time you will benefit from reading about practices in other countries. You are welcome to discuss these points further and we will gain from our mutual insights.

However, when explaining and discussing behaviour patterns observed in your environment, keep an open mind. One should always remember that there are no absolute truths or rules, and what people consider 'wrong' in their own country may be quite acceptable in another cultural environment and vice versa.

The moderator
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Harmonizing curricular and project objectives

The International Business English course taught at the Faculty of International Business and Economics of the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest and the project share some common objectives in that they both aim at building skills students will need in their future business careers.

Thus, the project objectives as mentioned in the application proposal are:

- Integration of ICT skills with language training;
- Development of intercultural communication sensitivity;
- Simulated work setting and real-life assignments thus enhancing students' motivation;
- Development of common descriptors and assessment criteria within the scope of devising a module on business communication at distance.

As such, the objectives address the needs of the students involved in the project as well as the teachers'. In other words, while working with the students and carrying out the tasks required, a better understanding of the requirements of communication occurs, so the teachers can refine the instruments used for teaching/learning and assessing the language, cultural and business proficiency levels of their students.

Such awareness of the need to continually adapt and refine approaches, methods and tools to address the needs of the students drive teachers to develop, so even if the syllabus only specifies objectives related to the teaching of International Business English, teachers are free to apply what they think will be the most efficient way to reach the results.

The syllabus for second year students of International Business and Economics in the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest provides for the following objectives:

- Developing students' comprehension of reference materials and of other economic texts at a fairly high level of complexity;

- Improving oral and written communication in English from lexical and structural points of view, using the specialised economic language of administration, commerce and banking;

- Acquiring linguistic functions such as arguing, suggesting, contradicting, granting/denying concessions, etc. required when participating in business meetings.

Working on this project I can say that all the objectives have been approached and will be further pursued in the feedback stage during the second term.

Besides addressing the ***language learning objectives***, the project has also provided opportunities for practice and use of extra linguistic, IT or "content" knowledge.

As regards the ***topics*** provided by the syllabus for the 2nd-year ASE students in International Business and Economics, the project work covered two of the three main areas required for the first term: *Types of Business Structure* as input for the company profile that the students were supposed to write and *Management*. As employees of their virtual company, each of the students either headed or was a member of one of the departments and had to know the activities carried out there and make the decisions related to it. Although the activities required in the project concentrated on public relations, marketing, selling and buying, we considered that the company's other activities should be known (human resources, legal office, and production).

The only topic not covered was *Applying for a Job*, which will be done in the second term. It can very well be related to the project and perhaps can be included in it for the next stage.

Harmonising ***evaluation*** has not been very difficult.

Evaluation required by the syllabus is as follows:
a. Written and oral test   50%
  b. Class activity   10%
  c. Class attendance   10%
  d. Homework dossier   30%

Students' evaluation within the project, includes a traditional part (tests, presentation, oral participation), but also a new element, the dossier, mainly new in that it assesses progress. Also self and peer evaluations are allotted a place: each student has to carry out the self-evaluation of their presentation in a filled-in form plus written comment (about 100 words) and to evaluate a colleague's presentation, also in a filled-in form plus written comment (about 100 words).

All the components of the dossier are evaluated according to a scale, the criteria being: focus, content relevance, ideas (inventiveness and argumentation), organisation, personal point of view, variety of activities, presentation of portfolio.

For the end-of-term assessment in ASE, I could use the grid, adapting it to the way evaluation is required in the project by considering the portfolio dossier for evaluation.

Achievements

I believe that the main merit of going through the project has been raising awareness of the importance of cultural differences and sensitivity in establishing and maintaining international contacts, of time management and of the meaning of activities related to doing business.

Also, autonomous work has become so meaningful as to keep students awake all night to email a message, to surf the net or to actually produce marketable documents, like advertisements and catalogues.

Finally, evaluation has become more meaningful and palpable as everyone could show the product of their work, talk about its usefulness and relate the teacher's evaluation to their own.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. This project has been carried out with the support of the European Community.
    The content of the project does not reflect the position of the European Community or the National Agency, nor does it involve any responsibility on their part.
2. KIRIȚESCU, L.   *Programă analitică An II REI Sem.I,* ASE Bucharest, 2002
3. McMANAMA, G.   *Cross Cultural Business Communication: Guidelines For Students*
4   PROGRAMME LEONARDO DA VINCI   *Community Vocational Training Action Programme, Second Phase: 2000-2006, Procedure B, Annex I*