COMMENT / HOW

Reading between the Lines: Teaching Direct and Indirect Communication Styles in Business English Seminars

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Abstract
In today's globally operating business environment, successful communication hinges not only on linguistic proficiency but also on cultural awareness. Out of the numerous implications understanding cultural awareness has, in the present research, we have opted to focus on the challenges raised by correctly identifying direct and indirect communication and tailoring one's messages accordingly. We will look into how contrasting expectations about how a businessperson is supposed to communicate can lead to misinterpretation and total interaction breakdown; in particular, we will explore the challenges raised by interactions between representatives of low-context and high-context cultures.
Using four case studies from Craig Storti's Cross-Cultural Dialogues, the paper examines how young Romanian business students interpret dialogues between American professionals and their French, Greek, or Japanese counterparts. In light of our findings, we will also dwell on the following paradox: although Romania is traditionally considered a moderately high-context culture, the students' views and interpretations consistently align with the American, low-context communication style—likely influenced by Western education models, English-language media, and business training that prioritize clarity and directness over implicitness and nuance. We strongly believe that, by analysing these scenarios in the classroom, students learn to decode implicit or multifaceted messages and enhance their cultural sensitivity with a view to successfully participating in future cross-cultural encounters.
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Introductory remarks

Throughout the world, English is often regarded as the *lingua franca* of global communication and, consequently, as the main channel of communication for conducting international business. However, the fact that more and more people worldwide, especially practitioners across

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the board, have some knowledge of the language and are able to use it to attain their professional goals does not necessarily guarantee an appropriate and full understanding of the meaning conveyed in various situations, nor does it ensure the successful conclusion of mutually beneficial deals. There still exist a number of key sources of misunderstanding, many of them deriving from cultural factors. The present research revolves around highlighting instances of interactional breakdown that could emerge due to the differing expectations about ***directness*** and ***indirectness*** in spoken communication.

Generally speaking, in some cultures, a direct statement signals efficiency, honesty and transparency; by contrast, in others, it may come across as inconsiderate, rude or even aggressive. Conversely, indirect communication can be perceived as polite and deferential in some countries, while being misunderstood as awkward, evasive, unclear and even rude in others. On a related note, silence means completely different things in different cultures, as do considerations pertaining to success and social status.

Given the restrained scope of the present research, in the following, we will attempt to put forward four scenarios where the direct and indirect styles clash, alongside some suggested pedagogical insights for teaching business students how to understand and interpret such situations so as to adapt their communication accordingly. The four extracts selected have been taken from Craig Storti's famous 2017 study, *Cross-Cultural Dialogues: 74 Brief Encounters with Cultural Difference*; they all present brief interactions between an American businessperson and an opposite number from another culture, and they all result in miscommunication due to the parties' failure to understand the interlocutor's stance. We have opted to look into the encounters through the lens of the *low-context vs. high-context culture clash*, aiming to illustrate, on the one hand, how divergent communicative styles may hinder mutual understanding and, on the other, how these dialogues can be used in the classroom, challenging business students and preparing them for real-world intercultural encounters. The students who analysed the extracts are 2nd year FABIZ[2] students majoring in English, who are known for their proficiency in English as well as for their deep understanding of the business arena overall.

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2. Understanding direct and indirect communication

Effective communication represents the cornerstone of successful cross-cultural interactions, especially in the field of international business. In interactions involving negotiating towards a mutually beneficial goal, the parties involved normally have conflicting interests and reaching a common ground where the gains outweigh the losses depends to a large extent on the degree to which each of them manages to understand the opposite number's perspective and to tailor their message accordingly. "Negotiation has often been defined as conflict or dispute resolution" (Usunier, 2019: 69) – for the encounter to be successful, the transition from conflict to agreement needs to unfold smoothly. "Historically, negotiation is one of the oldest human practices. To this day, the skill of knowing how to negotiate is considered a valuable tool for reconciling differences in our professional and social lives. (…) Negotiation is, at once, an art and science. It is a multidisciplinary subject in which socio-cultural, behavioural, psychological and economic factors interact with each other and with the negotiation subject" (Khan & Ebner, 2019: 6-7).

Out of the many instances of miscommunication that may arise in interactions involving participants with different cultural backgrounds, one of the most commonly encountered ones stems from the contrast between direct and indirect communication. Direct communicators tend to express their thoughts, needs and expectations clearly and unequivocally, while indirect communicators often rely on nuance, implicit meaning and an expectation that the interlocutor will understand the context, thus aiming to avoid disagreement or confrontation and preserve harmony. Sadly, when a negotiator engages in such an interaction without having conducted proper research of the opposite number's cultural norms and values, they may be up against a demanding task. "In international negotiations, the challenge is now effectively managing differences across cultures and dealing with the different expectations of the parties involved in negotiations", as one has to manage "context, socio-cultural protocols, and etiquette" (Khan & Ebner, 2019: 6). Misunderstandings may ensue, as what is considered honest, straightforward and effective in one culture may come across as inappropriate, inconsiderate or even rude in another.

In high-stakes interactions, understanding whether the interlocutor's communication style leans more towards directness and indirectness is crucial. Misinterpreting indirect cues can derail discussions,

strain relationships and result in significant financial loss. "International negotiation is a complex intercultural interaction. The potential incompatibilities due to cultural differences may bring corporation opportunities as well as threats to negotiations" (Liu & Liu, 2006: 10), and threats are all the more serious if cultural distance is significant, where cultural distance refers to the extent to which the two cultures are dissimilar to each other (Black & Mendenhall, 1991) . For this reason, the case study below will show that the riskiest situations involve interactions between ***low-context*** and ***high-context cultures,*** the latter including both moderately high-context and extremely high-context countries.

> *"According to the research of Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede, culture profoundly influences people's ways of thinking, communicating, and behaving. Understanding the diversity of culture and its components is crucial in cross-cultural business negotiations. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is particularly helpful in explaining behavioral differences across various cultural backgrounds. These dimensions include individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint. (Liu, 2024: 190)".*

In almost any business interaction, the parties involved have colliding goals deriving from diverging economic stakes; however, they are also interdependent, in that rely on one another toward attaining a mutually beneficial deal. This interdependence is what forces them to associate temporarily, with a view to a final result that will benefit them both; to this end, developing an awareness of the communicative differences and the reasons behind them translates into a more productive dialogue. "Context and culture are critical factors in doing business internationally. Companies create a diverse corporate and personal culture by understanding the differences in ethics, beliefs, values, and rules of different countries and developing cultural awareness" (Leonavičienė & Burinskienė, 2021: 106), all of which translate into how businesspeople from different backgrounds use language or understand and convey meaning.

The first thing students need to process and internalize (since most of them are already familiar with the theory, but find it difficult to tailor their communication properly) is the difference between ***direct*** and ***indirect*** communication, as well as the impact this distinction can have on business

partnerships. Thus, direct communication is clear and explicit. It leaves very little room for interpretation, the speaker laying everything out unequivocally. Direct communication is traditionally associated with **low-context cultures** (Hall, 1976), where meaning resides primarily in the words themselves. "Low-context communication cultures use explicit, precise messages, so that understanding does not require context-bound interpretation of messages (Usunier, 2019: 56)". Aside from direct, unequivocal communication that translates into messages being clearly stated and understood, with little to no reliance on nonverbal cues and implicitness, the typical characteristics of low-context cultures include an individualistic focus (where individual needs and achievements rather than group obligations lie at the centre of the decision-making process), emphasis on carrying out concrete, specific tasks rather than building relationships, and the existence of clear rules and regulations aiming to eliminate ambiguity and ensure a fair, transparent rendering of messages. The most commonly cited examples of low-context cultures are The United States, Germany and Switzerland.

By contrast, indirect communication relies heavily on implication, tone, and shared context, thus standing out as typical of **high-context cultures**, where what is unsaid is just as important as what is said. "In the high-context communication style, interpretation (decoding) of messages is context-bound" (Usunier, 2019: 56). In these cultures, much of the message conveyed stems from nonverbal cues, social context and the prerequisites of the situations itself, all of which often take priority over the words actually uttered. Understanding these cultures as well as the messages rendered by representatives thereof requires, above all else, a strong grasp of the surrounding context and social dynamics. "The power of the system is such that new situations can be learned only if they are approached technically and in the greatest detail." (Hall, 1976: 127). A wide range of factors differentiate between low context cultures and high context ones, with the latter being characterized by a strong focus on implicit communication (meaning is often inferred from the context rather than explicitly stated), the overriding importance of nonverbal cues like body language, facial gestures, tone of voice and even silence (as our research below will show), a strong emphasis on building long-lasting relationships (which are essential for conducting business successfully), the omnipresence of indirect communication (with a view to face-saving and preserving harmony, so direct confrontations and even instances of explicit

disagreement are avoided at all costs). Last but not least, there is powerful situational sensitivity attached: to a great extent, communication is sensitive to the specific situation, to the parties and to their social and hierarchical roles within the company. The most commonly cited examples of countries with a high context culture include Japan, China, Korea as well as many African and Arab nations[3].

The distinction between low-context and high-context cultures highlighted by Hall overlaps, to some extent, with the one identified by Michele Gelfand in her 2018 study *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire Our World,* namely the one between ***tightness*** and ***looseness*** and their importance in cross-cultural communication. Thus, she explains how a simple, yet powerful cultural framework can help businesspeople across the board make sense of their differences and get along better, with more successful results.

Social norms, or the behaviours that a culture deems acceptable in certain contexts, are deeply instilled in us, as be begin absorbing them from early childhood. While all cultures present, to some extent, some "tightness" in their social norms, its degree varies greatly from one nation to another. In relatively "tight" cultures such as Japan, India, and Turkey, people face strict norms regarding everything, whereas in "loose" nations such as the United States, Brazil, and the Netherlands, a broader range of behaviours are seen as socially acceptable. While countries can be found on all points of the tight-loose continuum, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Nordic and Germanic European nations tend to be tighter, while English-speaking, Latin, and Eastern European cultures are often looser.

One's participation in business negotiations and one's style are inherently affected by the relative tightness of one's culture. Broadly speaking, people from tight cultures tend to be rule followers (more disciplined, more punctual and self-controlled, mainly risk-averse); they tend to be less open to new ideas and new people and are reluctant to implement change. On the contrary, people from "loose" cultures are more likely to break the rules, they embrace novelty and risk, and appear as more creative and open to new ideas, cultures and outsiders.

While the distinctions ***low context – high context*** and ***loose – tight*** both describe cultural variation, they focus on different dimensions thereof.

[3] https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/communication-and-mass-media/high-context-and-low-context-cultures, accessed on August 14, 2025.

They are not identical; however, they often overlap. A low-context culture can be loose, and most are (such as the US, which embraces direct communication and flexible norms); still, it can also be tight (such as Germany, the most significant exception, which counterintuitively values direct communication and strict norms at the same time). Conversely, a high-context culture can be and usually is tight (the clearest example being Japan, where implicit communication predictably coexists with strict social rules and prioritisation of professional hierarchy). Loose, yet high-context cultures are more difficult, if not impossible to find.

To conclude this section of our study, we will state that, while Hall's low/high-context model mostly explains *how* cultures communicate, Gelfand's tight/loose distinction addresses *how strongly* they tend to enforce their deeply ingrained behavioural norms. While the two frameworks cannot be said to be identical, they often intersect, with Japan symbolically standing out as the best-known high-context, tight culture, while at the opposite end of both spectra we find the United States, a largely low-context, loose culture.

The following sections of the present study will attempt to highlight how communication between otherwise accomplished professionals who find themselves dealing with people from different cultural backgrounds can fail, solely due to misguided or incomplete research about cultures situated at the other end of the ***context*** scale. "If the low-context person interacting with a high context culture does not really think things through and try to foresee all contingencies, he's headed for trouble" (Hall, 1976: 127).

The final point to make in this section dwells on the following paradox: Romania is generally considered a moderately high-context culture where communication tends to be indirect and implicit, especially in formal situations, while Romanians have been reported to communicate vaguely and indirectly (Budrina, 2011). Non-verbal cues are important in the way we communicate; equally, we value the trust and familiarity that can only come from long-term relationships and we prioritize group harmony and politeness. However, our culture also presents a number of low-context elements: in urban, younger environments, we see an overwhelming influence of the West, translating into more direct communication, especially when dealing with international partners. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the current study has shown that young Romanian business students with a very good level of English identify

more readily with the American low-context perspective when asked to interpret the scenarios presented. Their education and their stance are increasingly shaped by Western, particularly Anglo-American models of communication and business, due to their constant exposure to English-language media and business case studies, all of which emphasize clarity, directness and efficiency. As a consequence, when asked to analyse interactions between a direct, low-context background communicator (an American) and a more indirect communicator, Romanian students without exception interpreted the American's approach as the more logical and effective or, in their own words, the "good" one. It is precisely at this point that the usefulness of our research arises, since, by using the four scripts below, we have attempted to raise awareness of the fact that there is no "right" or "wrong" way of communicating. Each professional will act pursuant to their own cultural norms and, in the absence of proper research, will fall into the risky trap of assuming that everyone else sees the world just as they do.

3. Case study - findings

3.1 Moderately high-context cultures: Greece and France

The first two scenarios we have selected put forward an interaction between a businessperson coming from a low-context culture (an American) and one from a moderately high-context culture: A Frenchman and a Greek man. Before we move on to the analysis, it is important to point out that, in cultures that have been labelled as moderately high-culture, meaning, in varying degrees, can be conveyed indirectly through tone, nuance, shared cultural references and implicit meaning, or the underlying expectation that the interlocutor will read between the lines. Hierarchy and context are important and social norms place great emphasis on harmony and saving face. By contrast, the Americans, as representatives of a strongly low-context culture, act pursuant to their values and rely on clarity, transparency and efficiency in their interactions. They tend to articulate expectations explicitly and to take language at face value, without struggling to identify layers of implicit meaning. As the following two scenarios will show, the mismatched assumptions of the participants in the dialogues result in misunderstanding and, in Example 1, in clear financial loss for one of the parties involved.

Ex. 1.

An Honorable Company

Mr. Williams: We agreed the building would be completed by the middle of October.
Mr. Papas: Yes. That's what it says in the contract.
Mr. Williams: But now there's not enough time. You'll need at least two more months.
Mr. Papas: Oh yes. At least.
Mr. Williams: The only way you could finish in time is if you hire twenty-five more workers.
Mr. Papas: Yes. There's no question. The only way we could meet the contract as it is now written is if we hire more workers.
Mr. Williams: But if you hire more workers, you won't make a profit. In fact, you'll lose money.
Mr. Papas: Very true. We can't afford to hire more workers.
Mr. Williams: Then you can't possibly meet the terms of the contract.
Mr. Papas: We must honour the contract. We are an honourable company.

As we have already pointed out, Greece is generally considered a high-context culture, though not at the very extreme end of the spectrum, like Japan or many Arab cultures. An important number of aspects factor in the general acceptance of the fact that Greece is a **moderately high-context** culture. In terms of communication styles, Greeks value shared history, relationships and implicit meaning above what is explicitly stated. They prioritize personal trust over formal agreements, tend to soften criticism in business and in social contexts, and rely on indirectness to a large extent, particularly in matters that may be sensitive. Meaning can be conveyed through tone, body language, facial expressions or implicitness, which makes Greece more indirect and relational than Northern European cultures like Germany or Scandinavia, but still more explicit than countries situated at the far end of the high/low context spectrum, such as Japan or China.

Example (1) is one of the most difficult cases discussed with the students, as it was incredibly difficult for them to identify what is really going on. To most of them, the dialogue seems to make no sense, as if the two participants just happened to find themselves in the same room and hold parallel monologues, without any real connection between them.

To begin with, let us see what really happens in this scenario. We are witnessing a discussion between Mr. Papas, a Greek businessman, and Mr. Williams, an American one, about meeting a deadline regarding a building. While it is clear that Mr. Papas desperately needs an extension of the original deadline so as to be able to complete the work and make a profit, he cannot afford to say so explicitly. To him, it is crucial that the suggestion should come from his American partner, so that he does not come across as a person who cannot meet established deadlines and comply with the terms of the contract agreed upon. In his turn, the American, while sensing that something is off, cannot quite put the finger on it and fails to grasp just how important it is for him to be the one suggesting the deadline extension. In the low-context American culture, words should be spelled out explicitly and reading between the lines does not rank among their strengths. Consequently, the Greek businessman, after doing his best to hint at what he really needs and failing to get through to his interlocutor, has no choice but to keep his word, meet the deadline and incur losses, as the losses caused by the damage to his reputation if he did not meet the deadline would be much worse. He cannot afford the word to spread that his company cannot comply with contract terms and meet deadlines.

When presented with the extract above, not only could the students make no sense of what was really going on, they also seemed unable to predict the outcome of the dialogue and what Mr. Papas would do. Out of the answers they suggested, the following stand out:

1. Many assumed that Mr. Papas was simply being overly dramatic or moralistic about his "honour" – the syntagm "drama queen" came up at some point; in other words, students seemed to take "honour" at face value, as a purely moral construct, and failed to grasp the fact that it was, in fact, a coded way of saying "***We*** cannot be the ones asking for an extension, it has to come from you". While students are theoretically familiar with the concepts of "saving face" and "face loss", they still treated the implications of "honour" as a quaint cultural flourish instead of a critical negotiation tactic.

2. Equally, they found it difficult to understand that, in high-context cultures, ***who*** makes a suggestion can be more important than ***what*** the suggestion is; that makes perfect sense since, in low-context cultures, cultures, it is actual facts that matter, whereas in high-context ones, it is relationships and implicitness that take priority. In a low-context background, one is most likely to think, "If Mr. Papas needs an extension, why doesn't he just say so?" Thus, they miss that in Greece, admitting

inability to fulfil a contract openly can irreversibly harm one's reputation long-term.

3. While to us, American directness can be perceived as competence ("lay out the facts, get a solution"), in reality, in this case, Mr. Williams' inability to read the implicit message (Please *you* suggest the extension) makes him the culturally incompetent one, which upends the assumption, deeply ingrained in low-context cultures, that the more direct, more explicit communicator is also the most skilled negotiator.

4. Without cultural awareness, Mr. Papas' stance could come off as stubbornness, irrational pride, or even behaviour making no sense. Students find it difficult to understand they are looking at a vital strategic necessity – in this business environment, asking for an extension himself would be reputational suicide. Students are inclined to legitimately think that clients should understand delays happen, without realizing how fast malicious rumours can spread.

By analysing the dialogue above and discussing the answers, students eventually learn that, in high-context cultures, what is unsaid is more important that what is actually said. They subsequently become able to internalize the fact that, sometimes, a conversational impasse has nothing to do with personality or knowledge of the language, but with cultural aspects and face-saving needs. Sometimes, effective negotiation in intercultural settings can mean looking at the situation from the opposite number's perspective, factoring in their context specificities and giving them a dignified way to get what they need without admitting fault.

Example 2
L'École des Hautes Études Commerciales

M. Le Beau: I think we have an excellent candidate for that marketing v.p. position.
Ms. Rogers: Great! Who?
M. Le Beau: His name is Jean-François Bertrand.
Ms. Rogers: What are his qualifications?
M. Le Beau: He went to l'École des Hautes Études Commerciales.
Ms. Rogers: What did he study?
M. Le Beau: Excuse me?
Ms. Rogers: What did he specialize in?
M. Le Beau: I'm not sure, accounting or something like that.
Ms. Rogers: But if you don't know, how can you be sure he's qualified?

Generally speaking, very much like Greece, France is considered a moderately high-context culture – not as high-context as Japan or many Middle Eastern Countries, but definitely more so than the US, Germany or Scandinavia. As a crucial part of the "old continent" and possibly its cultural, diplomatic and philosophical backbone, France relies heavily in its communication on shared background, on assuming a common base of cultural knowledge, education and social norms. Consequently, indirectness is important – criticism or disagreement may be expressed in a nuanced way, including irony and understatement rather than blunt directness, especially in formal and professional contexts, where hierarchy is of the essence. In that respect, the French are as far as can be from the American mindset, the Americans being hierarchy-averse (as their democratic ideals treasure egalitarianism and merit over status), whereas for the French, the class system still stands strong. For the French, form is just as important as content – the ***how*** (tone, phrasing, style, nonverbal communication) matters almost as much as the ***what***. In professional interactions, meaning and the interpretation thereof depend to a large extent on cultural cues and hierarchy. Communication is layered, reading between the lines is required and, as the current example shows, failing to understand the subtext can result in total dialogue breakdown.

The disagreement stemming from the exchange in example (2) is striking; however, the real causes underlying it may be more difficult to grasp. The two participants are arguing in regards to a candidate for an upper management job. The American, who values a person's real skills (in other words, performance and meritocracy), enquires about the person's specific educational background and qualifications; by contrast, the French participant needs nothing more than the name of the school the applicant attended, since it is enough to give him the right "pedigree", as well as the right connections. We are thus looking at a classic clash between the low-context, meritocratic approach to the workplace as against the moderately high-context, pedigree-based one. If in the former case it is skills, measurable achievements and explicit qualifications that matter the most, in the latter, elite institutions carry enormous weight, partly because of the social networks and prestige they confer, which will likely reflect upon the company. While this would be implicitly understood by any French professional, the American clearly fails to internalize this reality.

In this case, students tended to misinterpret the scenario in the following ways:

1. Some believed the French side is "lazy" or "unprepared", assuming M. Le Beau had simply failed to check the candidate's specialization or work history. They missed that, in the Frenchman's cultural frame, having graduated from a *grande école* like HEC is already sufficient proof of competence and suitability — the details come second, if at all. On a related note, they underestimated the symbolic function of the school, legitimately assuming, in line with their background, that a good school doesn't necessarily guarantee a good professional, especially one in upper management. While this is true in a low-context culture, it couldn't be further from the truth in the French one.

2. Insufficiently aware of the cultural differences, students tended to assume that both participants in the dialogue mean the same thing when referring to a "qualified" person. Thus, they make the common mistake of taking for granted that everyone else sees the world just like we do. In reality, by "qualified", the American means *formally trained and experienced in the right areas*, while the Frenchman means *socially and intellectually formed by an elite institution*, with assumed transferable skills and connections. The role of social capital is fatally underestimated, as is the fact that, in France, elite schools function as direct pathways to upper management roles.

3. Last but not least, some tended to interpret the disagreement as a personal clash, which it is not. Ms. Rogers is not accusing M. Le Beau of being careless or biased, nor is he defending himself. They both act in perfect accordance with the cultural norms they have internalized, and neither seems to have done the research necessary to understand that what is true in one culture may be false in another.

We strongly believe that the scenario above helps students understand that "merit" is not a universal construct, but a culturally defined one; also, the "right" hiring decisions may vary depending on context and culture (at some point, there were similar discussions related to performance vs. seniority). Professionals across the board need to constantly update their knowledge, to research the specifics of their business partner's culture and to show insight and flexibility so as to successfully adapt to varying international settings.

3.2 High-context cultures: Japan

Our final two examples draw on instances of miscommunication between American and Japanese businesspeople, with extract (3) being typical of the Japanese's reluctance to say "no", whereas example (4) comes across as a little more subtle and requiring more in-depth explanations.

To begin with, we will state the obvious: Japan is one of the world's classic examples of a high-context culture, people relying heavily on indirect communication (thus, disagreement or refusal are hardly ever expressed with a blunt "no", while vague wording and polite, positive-sounding phrases may carry negative meaning). Moreover, nonverbal cues like tone, gestures, facial expressions and pauses signal more than words themselves. The Japanese culture treasures group harmony, which takes precedence over the individual's personal interests, while the strong sense of shared norms and expectations makes explicit explanations less necessary, especially to those familiar with their social fabric.

In fact, most of the norms and values governing the high-context Japanese business culture come as a shock to people educated and trained within the framework of the Western expectations of meritocracy, individuality and clarity on the one hand, as well as the "pursuit of happiness" on the other. The Japanese value seniority over performance, with a view to reinforcing stability, loyalty and wisdom; they place the community above the individual, emphasizing group consensus rather than individual initiative, no matter how valuable; employees are expected to align with the overall goals of the group and not stand out. Thus, both merit and fault are attributed to the group rather than the person. Decisions are rarely made in the open, during a meeting; instead, much of the "real" agreement occurs behind the scenes, via informal consultations and consensus building; as has been said already, formal respect for hierarchy (seniority, rank, age) is deeply ingrained, so younger or lower-ranking employees may not openly contradict seniors, even if they disagree. In this respect, in the Japanese culture, hierarchy strongly overrides equality (Manrai & Manrai, 2010: 81), Leonavičienė & Burinskienė, 2021: 103).

In Japan, lifetime employment is still very much the norm, with employees being grateful and loyal to the employer and deriving a strong sense of identity from their workplace. It is true that, in recent years, under the influence of the West, some Japanese values have weakened to some extent; however, loyalty, seniority and long-term relationships still matter

much more than in many Western contexts. Relationships come before contracts – while a written contract may be seen as a starting point, mutual trust weighs more than legal wording and lies at the basis of business partnerships. The distinction has also been referred to as the "relationship" versus "deal" contrast, where "a deal is composed of the concrete, sometimes physical, most often measurable, in any case objective attributes of a discrete transaction (e.g., type of good or service, order size, delivery date and conditions, payment terms). It is based on material, financial, and precisely defined numbers for quantity, price, and time-related issues" (Usunier, 2019: 13), whereas "a relationship is based on human connections and/or feelings/emotional bonds, and generates a sense of being in some way attached to the other person/party. It progresses on the ground of joint experiences, sympathy, or antipathy" (Usunier, 2019: 14). While the two cannot be completely separated from one another, since negotiators are human being, not robots, and "inevitably, feelings and emotions will intermingle and coalesce with the material side of the deal" (Usunier, 2019: 15), it is still clear that low-context cultures prioritize deals, whereas high-context, community-oriented cultures value relationships above concrete transactions. "Americans spend very little time discussing non-business activities at the negotiation table, whereas Japanese devote significant time and effort to building rapport" (Manrai & Manrai, 2010: 85). Last but not least, as we have pointed out, face-saving strategies are very important – conflict is avoided at almost any cost, since confrontation is seen as destructive to group cohesion. Hence the subtlety, the roundabout ways of expressing refusal (which we can see in extract 3), whereby outsiders may miss the "no" wrapped up in politeness. "American negotiation style is usually direct and result-oriented, whereas Japanese negotiation style tends to be more indirect and relationship-focused (Liu, 2024: 192)."

Ex. 3.

A good price

Ms. Young: We will charge you $5 per unit if you order 10,000 units.
Mr. Kawabata: That's a good price, Ms. Young.
Ms. Young: So you accept that price?
Mr. Kawabata: It's very good.
Ms. Young: Great! Let's talk about a delivery schedule then.

In the "good price" scenario, by not saying "yes" explicitly, the Japanese Kawabata clearly intends to convey a refusal. While the American Ms. Young is not completely clueless and does check to see if she got the meaning right (*"So you accept the price?"*), she is still not familiar enough with the culture of her opposite number to identify the "no" between the lines. While the Japanese does not want to embarrass the American by refusing her price outright, his exceedingly unenthusiastic response, which he fully expects his interlocutor to process, means anything but "yes".

Given the Japanese's globally known reluctance to say "no", one may legitimately wonder how one is supposed to know when a Japanese is just being polite and when they have actually accepted an offer. The distinction may seem challenging to the layperson; however, a little research into the culture will provide the answer unequivocally. Briefly speaking, if an offer has been accepted, "the conversation will naturally shift to a discussion of the implementation details (of delivery or production or whatever). Conversely, if they have not accepted an offer and you move on to discuss such details, the Japanese will come back to the unresolved issue at hand" (Storti, 2017). For a Japanese, not saying "yes" explicitly means a refusal, and instead of the offensive "no", the resourceful Asians have come up with a number of deferential ways to convey the rejection, such as asking a question, saying they don't understand, changing the subject, avoiding a clear answer (which is what happens here), giving a conditional yes, saying that the question is very difficult or that answering it falls outside of the scope of their authority. (Storti, 2017).

As we have already pointed out, tributary to her low-context American background, Ms. Young fails to process the message conveyed and immediately attempts to move on to discussing delivery. In their turn, when asked to interpret this scenario, students were tempted to provide the following, partially misguided insights:

1. Predictably, the most common assumption was that Kawabata really agreed. Many students took *"That's a good price"* at face value, attributing it an affirmative value and failing to grasp that what it really was, was a polite formula with social value, not a real commitment. People who mistakenly believed the conversation was successful did not notice that the real negotiation hadn't even started yet, since Kawabata's dissatisfaction hadn't been expressed in direct terms – the first condition for a negotiation to start is that both parties' initial positions be clear.

2. Another interpretation revolved around students missing the actual function of politeness – thus, to some of them, who correctly identified the hidden "no", Kawabata came across as indecisive or not businesslike, due to his going around in circles rather than directly refusing the price. To them, the fact was not very obvious that, in the Japanese business culture, avoiding open disagreement preserves harmony and respect in the community.

3. In terms of cultural intelligence, some students were foreseeably tempted to see Ms. Young as the more competent communicator, as she was perceived as "clear" and "efficient"; while this perspective makes sense in our culture, aligning with our norms and value, in the given context, her missing the implicit message makes her the less effective negotiator.

4. Surprisingly enough, some students thought that Kawabata's wording reflected a limited command of English (e.g., "He doesn't know how to say yes/no properly"). They overlooked the fact that this way of wording his answer was a deliberate, strategic cultural choice, not a linguistic mistake.

The scenario in extract (3) can help students see that words don't always mean what they appear to mean in international business, that their interpretation draws on knowledge of the values of high context cultures, and that effective negotiators need to do research and read between the lines, identifying hesitation, evasive answers or polite compliments as possible signals of disagreement.

Ex. 4.

Negotiations

Martha: How did the negotiations go?
Janet: Not so well. We were taken.
Martha: What happened?
Janet: Well, I proposed our starting price, and Maruoka didn't say anything.
Martha: Nothing?
Janet: He just sat there, looking very serious. So then I brought the price down.
Martha: And?
Janet: Still nothing. But he looked a little surprised. So I brought it down to our last offer and just waited. I couldn't go any lower.
Martha: What did he say?
Janet: Well, he was quiet for about a minute, and then he agreed.

Martha: Well, at least we've got a deal. You should be pleased.
Janet: I guess so. But later I learned that he thought our first price was very generous.

In the "negotiations" scenario, we are looking yet again at a dialogue (this time recounted by a third party) between an American and a Japanese. While the underlying assumptions may be more difficult to grasp than in extract (3), the consequences are striking, since in this case it is clear that the cultural misunderstanding results in significant financial loss for the insufficiently prepared Westerner. In the negotiations Janet recounts, she misinterpreted the opposite number's silence as resistance, disagreement or even displeasure, while in fact, in the Japanese culture, silence is often a sign of respect and a reaction whereby one shows the interlocutor that one is thoroughly considering what has been said rather than a rejection. Moreover, in low-context cultures, silences are avoided as awkward and risky and participants in a dialogue will usually do their best to fill them with words. "In societies where verbal communication is the norm, silence is viewed as a problem" (…), whereas in cultures like Japan, the use of silence and nonverbal communication is overly complex (…) and can create significant challenges for individuals. It can show respect, for example, when a person listens carefully or thinks carefully about his / her answer." (López Gutiérrez & Arroyo Paniagua, 2024: 5).

When shown this script, students had the following reactions:

1. They, just like Janet in the dialogue, tended to interpret the Japanese negotiator's silence as a negative reaction and were subsequently surprised that this was not the case. In our culture, without proper research or experience, it might be unusually challenging to internalize the fact that, for other cultures, silence may stand for thoughtfulness, consideration and deference.

2. Some students also misguidedly concluded that Janet was proactive and flexible, therefore a successful negotiator with good salesmanship skills, while in reality, by not preparing properly for the interaction, she undermined her company's position and incurred a substantial loss.

3. In our action-driven culture, we may also underestimate to what extent patience is a strategic asset in the Japanese business culture. We may think, as some students did, that the Asian negotiator was passive, while in fact he was solely acting in line with the conventions deeply ingrained in his culture, conveying consideration and deference to his opposite number.

4. The power dynamics in this interaction was also misread. While the Japanese negotiator might come across as uncommunicative, inflexible or difficult, what really happened was that the power balance was shifted onto him, while Janet, by misinterpreting the silence and putting forth lower and lower prices, actually negotiated against herself.

5. Last but not least, in our culture, which emphasizes individual personalities and accomplishments, in the absence of the right cultural framing, some students were tempted to think that the Japanese businessman was just "quiet, shy or introverted", or that the American was nervous, so she rushed and made a mistake. We predictably tend to attribute people's behaviour to their personalities, instead of grasping the fact that the misunderstanding above pertains to the clash between two completely different cultural communication styles and had very little to do with random individual traits or conduct.

By presenting the students with this final and impactful scenario, we attempted to show them that, far from being empty, silence can be replete with meaning, only the meaning varies depending on the culture. Thus, in high-context cultures like Japan, silence often conveys consideration and respect, unlike in low-context cultures, where it usually translates into rejection, displeasure or, at the very least, an awkward, potentially risky break in the conversation. In low-context cultures like the U.S., silence often creates discomfort that people rush to fill; "Americans tend to see silence as signs of indifference, anger, or disagreement" (López Gutiérrez & Arroyo Paniagua 2024: 6); failing to understand the distinction may turn out to be a significant weakness in the negotiation process.

4. Pedagogical implications for Business English teaching

> *"The incompatibility between different cultures may account for the difficulties and unsatisfied outcomes in intercultural negotiations. Since negotiators from different cultures may have diverge frames (Morris & Gelfand, 2004, as cited in Liu, 2006: 5), different emotional experiences (Kumar, 2004, as cited in Liu, 2006: 5), distinct communication and strategies (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000, as cited in Liu, 2006: 5), and dissimilar construction of the social context (Gelfand & Cai, 2004, as cited in Liu, 2006: 5), cultural differences can be a source of conflict in negotiations" (Liu, 2006: 5).*

As we have attempted to explain by using the four scenarios above, to a large extent, the difficulties, challenges and risks in cross-cultural encounters stem from the fact that participants have radically different expectations about the others' communication styles. "While (…) misunderstandings can (…) occur between two people from the same culture, they are much more common between two people from different cultures" (Storti, 2017), because each assumes the other looks at the world exactly as he or she does. In the absence of proper research, a participant in a business interaction will assume the norms of their own culture are universal and will expect others to react just like they do themselves.

Hence, cultural misunderstandings hardly ever stem from incompetence, ill-faith, personality clashes or poor knowledge of the English language. Rather, the common underlying ground behind them has to do with people's natural tendency to project their own cultural lens onto the behaviour of others. Cultural awareness comes to the rescue and helps break down cultural barriers, build cultural bridges, and make one appreciate those differences (Yehia, 2018).

The scenarios discussed in the *Case Study – Findings* section of our research aim to contribute to preparing students to look beyond the surface of words and behaviours in international business. They represent only one of the many ways in which we have pointed out that teaching business English cannot be confined to grammar and vocabulary, since language proficiency is not enough to ensure an accurate understanding of the context and an appropriate crafting of one's own messages. For a future business professional, cultural insight represents an inherent part of their communicative competence, which goes beyond grammatical correctness or grammatical competence – "the accurate use of words and structures" (Yule, 2020: 227). In effect, communicative competence also incorporates sociolinguistic competence, or the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts, as well as strategic competence – "the ability to organise a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties" (Yule, 2020: 227). Understanding cultural differences and, consequently, correctly reading the opposite number's verbal and non-verbal language as well as their expectations appears closely intertwined with one's linguistic competence. It is only in this way that one's message will be customized accordingly, so a final, mutually satisfactory result can be reached.

A successful professional communicator must be able to decode indirectness, politeness and face-saving strategies, non-verbal communication and silence; equally, they must be able to recognize when apparent clarity masks a deep cultural misalignment. All of these make them socio-culturally intelligent (Khan & Ebner, 2019: 6), which is a must in today's globally interdependent business arena. In practice, for students, this translates into curbing quick, superficial judgements, considering alternative explanations and, above all else, thoroughly researching the cultural values underlying different communication styles before participating in a negotiation whose results will impact the company. "Negotiators who are narrow-minded, lack global understanding, and possess negotiation skills that are rigid, self-focused, and egocentric will not have much success in international business" (Khan & Ebner, 2019: 7).

Concluding remarks

To ensure success in their interactions, future business professionals need to work on their cultural sensitivity so as to understand the cultural background and societal values of the other party, which will enable them to develop flexible negotiation strategies, emphasize relationship building and improve their overall communication skills (Liu, 2024: 199); to this end, seminar activities based on Storti's dialogues can be especially effective. By re-enacting and debriefing these encounters, students become self-aware, confront their own assumptions and learn to identify layers of hidden meaning.

Far be it from us to state that low-context cultures do things "right", while high-context ones do things "wrong"; there is no right or wrong way of communicating, nor do we believe that business professionals ought to replace their own cultural style with another. What we are, however, pointing out, is that awareness has to be built across the board for negotiations to be effective, as language proficiency, while crucially important, is not enough. In this way, business English teaching should equip future specialists with the wide array of skills necessary to successfully participate in high- and low-context interactions without this leading to costly misunderstandings.

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