

Chapter 5

Linguistic and Cultural Skills for Communication in Global Workplaces of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines issues in intercultural communication in regard to the use of English as a global language in the workplace of the 21st century. The findings that emerged from data gathered in two multinational companies inform discussion about the sort of communication skills that workers will require in the global workplace. A case study with an Australian undergraduate class served to examine whether the skills identified in multinational workplaces are, in fact, being developed in graduates. Based on all the above, the author has developed a four dimensional model comprising the intercultural communication skills that future graduates, including engineers and IT professionals, will require for global workplaces. Some strategies that will facilitate the development of such skills are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines issues in intercultural communication and their impact on global work contexts. The term ‘intercultural communication’ encompasses communication between people from different languages and cultures. While not

wishing to undermine or overlook the importance of any language, this chapter focuses on the use of English as a global language for intercultural communication, since there is little disagreement that much business interaction all over the world takes place in English or that English is regarded as the *lingua franca* of international business (Barghiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003). The ever increasing growth of English as a global

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language, particularly in the world of work, makes proficiency in intercultural communication an imperative. Johnson (1997) places “cultural fluency” at the core of the skills that graduates will need as they face what he identifies as the three major communication related challenges of the 21st century: growing workforce diversity; increasing globalization of business activities; and selection of the most appropriate applications of communication technologies. With multinational/multicultural teams (be they real or virtual) becoming an increasing feature of global workplaces (Smith & Berg, 1997; Distefano & Maznevski, 2000) intercultural communication skills become even more essential for engineers and IT professionals. Moreover recent research (Bartel-Radich, 2006) indicates that global teams are able to facilitate the acquisition of intercultural competence, which can be strategic for multinational companies.

In order to establish the sorts of intercultural communication skills needed for the world of work, this study examined two multinational workplaces. A ‘typical’ business class in an Australian university was then also used as a case study to determine if students were in fact developing the skills they would need in future global workplaces. This chapter first describes the data gathered in the two multinational companies based in South-East Asia and discusses the implications that can be drawn for intercultural communication. It then describes the classroom based case study to examine the ‘fit’ between the communication skills identified and those that university courses are aiming to develop in students. The findings of these two case studies led to the design of a four-dimensional model for the development of intercultural communication skills for global work contexts, described towards the end of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

The phenomenal spread of English as a global language is unprecedented (Crystal, 1997; Brutt-

Griffler, 1998; Graddol, 2000 & 2006). Ferguson (1982, in Kachru 1992, p.xv) states that:

There has never before been a single language which has spread over most of the world, as English has done this century [...]. The spread of English is as significant in its way as is the modern use of computers.

Moreover, the pace of the spread of English seems to be accelerating. While only as far back as 1997 Graddol (1997) was predicting that the number of ‘native’ or ‘first language’ (L1) speakers was likely to decline and the number of second language (L2) speakers was likely to grow, we know now that this has already happened (Yano, 2001; Graddol, 2006). At the same time Crystal (1997) was estimating the number of L1 speakers of English in some 56 countries to be around 337 million, with L2 speakers estimated to be between 1.2 and 1.5 billion. With increasing numbers of learners in China and India alone, we know that these figures for L2 speakers have increased significantly since then (McArthur, 2003; Graddol, 2006).

Graddol (2006, p. 12) also informs us that not only has the pace of the spread of English increased, but the creature itself is changing as it develops into its new global form:

English has at last become of age as a global language. It is a phenomenon which lies at the heart of globalisation: English is now redefining national and individual identities worldwide; shifting political fault lines; creating new global patterns of wealth and social exclusion; and suggesting new notions of human rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

While some may think that the spread of English around the world will make communication easier, nothing could be further from the truth. The global spread of English, in fact, makes the situation more complex (Kachru, 1992; Scollon &

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