
The Importance of Teaching Intercultural Communication to ESP and BE Students

Marina ZORANYAN

Abstract: *The article provides a review of publications concerning the role of intercultural knowledge in business communication. In business communication culture-imposed rules are even more important than linguistic rules. For business communication in English such rules are application of special request formulas and tentative discourse. It is essential that these peculiarities should be explained to non-native English speakers and concrete cases created. When students are unaware of them communication problems should be viewed to prove to students the importance of the issue. Examples of both phenomena and practical recommendations how to overcome the difficulty are offered in the article..*

Keywords: culture-imposed rules of communication, tentative discourse, understatement, politeness strategies

Introduction: the importance of the issue in question

Since the 1990s in literature on ESL/EFL (English as a Second Language / English as a Foreign Language) the issue of teaching culture while teaching a language has often been tackled. As, for instance, Kramsch (1993:238) puts it, learning another language for communication means leaving behind the native paradise of native-tongue socialization. As language learners become more and more proficient in a second language and familiar with a second culture, language learners try to articulate their new experience within their old one, making it relevant to their lives, one day their way, one day that way, creating their own popular culture.

Tomalin and Stamleski (1994) view different aspects of culture to deal with in the process of teaching English (customs and traditions, idioms, symbols, history, literature, etc.) and recommends how to present

Marina ZORANYAN is an assistant professor in English language teaching at Georgian Technical University, Georgia

this information as the process of the so-called acculturation through language teaching. However, there is insufficient research concerning intercultural aspects of business English teaching.

Meanwhile, the role of culture-imposed rules is more conspicuous in business communication than, for example, in academic contacts, because unlike academic communicants businessmen cannot confine themselves to a corresponding content area expressed by special terms. Instead they often refer to etiquette and try to charm a partner, a client or an investor. Besides, it is only in business communication that money is directly involved, therefore trust and a feeling of security gain particular importance.

Disregard of possible cultural implications may be misinterpreted as arrogance or deliberately aggressive behaviour which may cost an individual his or her international career. In business, we may add, the price of intercultural illiteracy may be much higher in terms of money: it may cost a company its reputation.

According to Richey (2004), some BE (Business English) specialists might claim that intercultural training is just an added 'extra' to our lessons. There is only a minimal emphasis since language teachers are not really in the cultural training business. She proposes the contrary where BE training is invariably intertwined with a strong intercultural element. If not, then, our efforts to prepare our students to genuinely communicate in a real-life business setting will be impractical, not yielding any concrete business results.

Politeness strategies in business communication

In the present paper the politeness strategies while communicating in English are emphasized. This topic involves two main aspects: a) request formulas and b) means of tentative discourse. Both are characterised by tremendous differences observed between English and Georgian or Russian verbal patterns that cannot be explained only by grammar dissimilarities.

As Ivanov (1989) remarks, requests in Russian are mostly based on the Imperative, the equivalent of please being added for politeness. The same refers communication in Georgian. This linguistic + behavioral pattern existing in the minds of Georgian and Russian native speakers dominates their linguistic performance when they are speaking other languages too. Consequences of this are most detrimental in speaking

English: the native formula directly translated into English sounds insufficiently polite or even abusive.

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and BE students should know that sentences like “Go and bring some Xerox paper, please” or “Please, give me a copy of your report” sound like orders rather than requests and can not be recommended for use in professional or business environment, even if one addresses a secretary or an assistant. In addition to formal and semiformal circumstances, examples can be given to students in the form of short stories, when the misuse of the Imperative in requests sounded offensive and caused problems even in informal situations.

The habit of expressing requests in the form of questions “Can you?” “Could you ...?” “Will you ...?” “Would you ...?” can only be built up if Georgian students whose native language is Georgian or Russian are constantly exposed to polite requests by the teacher who refrains from abrupt commands still typical in our classrooms: “Open the books, please”, “Read the text out loud”, “Translate the next sentence”.

An effective exercise that can be recommended is discussing multiple choice dialogues after students have read them and chosen the option that seems most appropriate. Polite and impolite dialogue options can be written by the teacher on the basis of those found in various course books. While comparing such options, students will learn to distinguish between the more polite Subjunctive forms could/would and the more casual can/will. They will also learn that please, though desirable in all the request formulas, cannot make the Imperative sound acceptable in business conversations in English.

Special care is needed in studying requests containing mind: “Do you mind opening the window, please?” or “Would you mind coming closer?” There are two typical mistakes made by both Georgian and Russian native speakers in the use of mind: first, they tend to confuse requests with asking for permission (“Do you mind if I use your telephone?”) and secondly, answers expressing readiness to help tend to be “Yes, of course” (which means “I mind your opening the window, you shouldn't open it”) instead of “No”, “Not at all”, “I don't mind”, which is misleading. Students should also be told that if one is asking for something less obvious the English request formulas become more tentative: “Do you think you could ...?”, “I don't think/suppose you could ..., could you?”. The roles of both interlocutors in such dialogues can be practised in a role play.

Request formulas cannot be confined to oral communication. The

traditional patterns used in formal letters “We would appreciate it if ...”, “I would be most grateful if ...” are worth practising in students' writing (Jordan, 1999).

The second aspect included in the study of English politeness strategies is what is called tentative discourse. It reflects an observation that, compared to the Georgian or Russian languages, English is characterised by a greater dislike of too explicit and straightforward statements (e.g., not just “I cannot come to the conference”, but “The conference is really interesting, but, unfortunately my earlier plans make it impossible for me to attend it”).

Non-native speakers of English need to be more careful about any claims they make. However, this peculiarity of English is underestimated by both course book writers and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers.

To enable Georgian students to master the strategy of tentative discourse we selected a list of the most typical English discourse patterns based on Jordan's (Jordan, 1999) recommendations.

These patterns differ from their Georgian and Russian equivalents by showing a greater degree of tentativeness and thus deserve special practice in the ESP or BE classroom. They are:

1. Answering general questions by saying “I think so”, “I don't think so”, “I suppose so”, “I don't expect so”, “I hope so”, “I am afraid so” instead of plain “Yes” or “No”.

2. Using tag questions instead of general questions to avoid sounding too inquisitive; using tags instead of affirmative sentences to keep discussions going and to facilitate an exchange of opinions: “Your idea deals with methods of payment, doesn't it?”

3. Using negative tag questions while asking for information or making an implicit request: “Jack, you haven't seen Alice, have you?”, “Tom, you haven't got a cigarette, have you?”

4. Using implicit negations expressed by the words hardly, barely, scarcely, fails to, lacks, little: “There was hardly anywhere to sit down”, “She scarcely remembers her mother”, “Physiologists had little idea how that occurred”, “She failed to lose weight”, instead of explicit ones.

5. Using the verbs – appears (to), seems (to), tends (to), may, might; adjectives – likely (to), unlikely (to); adverbs – perhaps, possibly, probably,

apparently – more frequently than their equivalents are used in Russian.

6. Using words rather, quite, fairly, a little, a bit before Adjectives and Adverbs, especially when expressing an opinion: “The service in the hotel was rather slow”, “The excursion was a bit tiring”.

7. Using impersonal verb phrases that imply rather than directly express the speaker's own attitude: “It is widely accepted that ...”, “It is very doubtful that ...”.

8. The reluctance to use modal verbs must, should, ought to in the second person, using milder formulas for expressing recommendation or advice: “Why don't you ...?”, “You'd better ...”, “If I were you, I'd ...”.

9. Using the subjunctive for refusing permission: “I'd rather you didn't”, expressing desire: “I'd like to ...” (instead of “I want ...”) and accusation: “I wish you wouldn't...”.

10. Using mild and tactful formulas for expressing dislike: “I'm not very (too, particularly) keen on ...”.

11. The tendency to avoid sounding dogmatic by beginning sentences with “As far as I know ...”, “As for me ...”, “As far as I am concerned ...”, “If I'm not mistaken ...”.

12. Using double negation (one explicit and one implicit), instead of an affirmative sentence: “She didn't look indifferent”, “It isn't uneasy”, “It's not beyond any doubt”.

An essential feature of the English politeness strategies is the so-called understatement, or saying less than is implied. It also leads to playing down the seriousness of misfortunes and failures: “I'm not too well at the moment” (instead of “I'm very ill”); “It's not good enough” (instead of “It's very bad”); “Well, naturally, I'm a bit disappointed” (instead of “I am desperate”).

Understatement should also be specially practised with advanced students because in Georgian as well as in Russian it is opposed by the tendency to exaggerate the seriousness of events.

The following typical features of the English politeness strategies are worth discussing with the students:

- 1) as with all cultural stereotypes they function subconsciously;
- 2) native speakers' tolerance to their misuse is unpredictable and

does not always depend on realising the causes of the misuse;

3) the closeness of the relationship does not presuppose neglecting politeness;

4) Russian speakers need to be particularly careful when making requests and strong claims;

5) the opposite case of misuse, when excessive politeness is transferred from English into Russian is less dangerous; it may sound amusing, but it cannot be taken for rudeness.

Practical application and research

Unfortunately, lack of research on the issue under discussion concerning English-to-Georgian comparison does not permit us to give more specific recommendations. The publications we were able to find concern teaching vocabulary (e.g., Çepik, 2002).

In Cebon (2005) the experience gathered in the area of intercultural awareness raising with respect to methods and approaches used in the classroom and in terms of students' response is discussed. The developments related were an integral part of an EU - Leonardo da Vinci Programme sponsored project in which learning of Business English has been carried out through an integrated skills approach in a series of virtual workshops. Within the CCBC project the teacher had to assume the role of a facilitator helping students to deal with cross-cultural issues while carrying out a simulated transaction in English. Virtual environment formed the backdrop for an international network of simulated companies, thus motivating the exchange of business messages and intercultural encounters. In the academic year 2003/04 almost 500 students, 18 teachers, 16 institutions from 10 different countries participated in the CCBC network.

Conclusion

While comparing English-Georgian and English-Russian discourse patterns we should bear in mind two important considerations:

1) tentative discourse patterns similar to the English ones are used in Georgian and Russian by some native speakers in certain situations, but their frequency is negligible compared to their use in English;

2) all the above does not imply that Georgians or Russians are less polite than the English, they just have a different means of expressing

politeness that may be misinterpreted in international communication when directly translated into English.

More comparative (English-Georgian) studies should be carried out to provide efficient teaching of business English, free from errors based on the cross-cultural factor.

References

1. Cebon, Neva, Jablonkai, Reka, Rados, Ljerka. 2005. The cross-cultural business communication project or exploiting ICT to facilitate ICC. <http://www.immi.se/Intercultural/nr9/cebron.htm>
2. Çepik, Shaban. 2002. Sociocultural comparison and vocabulary teaching. – In Sazrisi, issue 7, Tbilisi. p.141-145
3. Ivanov, Alexey and Jane Povey. 1989. English Conversational Formulas. St. Petersburg. Prosvesheniye.
4. Jordan, Rita R. 1999. Academic Writing Course. Longman.
5. Kramsch, Claire 1993. Context and culture in language teaching. Oxford. OUP.
6. Richey, Rosemarie 2004. The intercultural dimension of Business English. MED Magazine. Issue 32 Oct. <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/med-magazine/October2004/23-Feature-Business-Issues.htm>
7. Tomalin, Barry and Susan Stempleski. 1994 Cultural Awareness. Oxford Univ. Press.