

# Aspects of Communication in International Business

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## ABSTRACT

International business has become a vital component of the expansion of the 'Global Village'. The ability to communicate succinctly across cultural, linguistic and national borders is now mandatory for all effective international transactions. The purpose of this paper is to examine the conceptual framework of communication across linguistic and cultural barriers and to explore ways in which communication competency can be increased in Business Communication Courses.

KEY EXPRESSIONS: international business, barriers to communication, turn-taking negotiation, a cross-cultural mind, and business case studies.

## Introduction

As international trade and business initiatives increase, the need for better communication has become not only more important but also more difficult. All business interactions deal with the exchange of information and ideas, decision-making activities, negotiating interaction, and the motivating and co-ordination of key players. When dealing internationally, we must take into consideration our ability to communicate beyond our cultural and linguistic experience. In addition, use of new technology is increasing both the volume and speed of all communication interaction.

## International Business Communication

In the past, international business communication relied primarily on formal forms of correspondence (memos, letters, telex and fax machines). Today, we make use of more instant and less structured forms, such as email, video or voice conferencing, and, because of cheaper rates, telephone correspondence. In the past we had time to develop, check and revise our messages. Today our messages are transmitted more frequently, to more people, and often in real time. Also, despite September 11, business trips and international conferences continue to be an important part of business activities upholding the importance of face-to-face contact. But has our ability to communicate effectively increased? How do we react to foreign accents and writing styles, international-based protocol and customs, and cultural-based thought patterns? Are we aware of our own linguistic and cultural attributes, customs and abilities? Are we interpreting messages sent to us correctly?

## Barriers to Communication

In the simplest form, communication can be described as a process whereby two or more individuals interact. One person is the source of information and the other or others are the receivers. The source encodes the message and transmits it by using gestures, posture, voice and visual stimuli. The receivers decode the message. However, rarely is the received message found to be exactly the same as the original message. There are many barriers to this transaction.

Let us first deal with encoding the message. This includes language and thought. For many students, language is seen as the

main barrier, since the message must be broken down into words or groups of words, sounds and grammar or syntactical patterns. The form of language used will be determined by individual knowledge and ability. Next, the message must be produced, but rarely do foreign accents or simple grammar mistakes severely hinder understanding.

Thought patterns, however, can cause problems not only in the form the sentence or utterance take, but also in the way the thought or idea is presented. When we compare Japanese and English, we find that in Japanese you start with the specific (justification, background and explanation) and then end with the main point (general). In English, we start with the main point (general) and then follow with the justification, background and explanation. In thought and discourse patterns, English speaking people tend to be direct. In business terminology this is described as the 'John Wayne approach to negotiation' or to 'shoot from the hip' negotiation style. However, most Japanese speakers prefer to be indirect and non-confrontational, avoiding conflict at any costs.

Transmitting the message is also complex. It includes active participation through the use of turn-taking and listening techniques, and the interpretation of linguistic nuances, tone variations and body language. Other barriers to understanding may include: topic knowledge, interest, personal affiliation, nervousness and other individual emotional or attitudinal aspects.

Linguists have also shown that communication is closely related to culture. Hence, it is important to take into consideration both individual and culturally taught values, beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Most international business communication courses focus on such aspects as attitudes towards time, space, problem solving, business protocol, achievement, motivation, social values and attitudes, and conflict and change. One of the most widely used studies is the work done by Hofstede (1980) on individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity, where he found that national culture explained more of the differences in work-related values and attitudes than position, profession, age or gender.

Communication can therefore be described as a dynamic, multi-layered activity, linked to individual knowledge, past experiences, and personal idiosyncrasies. In other words, it goes far beyond linguistic ability.

### Business Communication

Often Business English courses focus only on linguistic aspects of communication. However, to master communication in an international business setting, it is also necessary to master cultural and discourse patterns. Words taken out of underlying patterns of thought and behavior will not lead to understanding. Nancy Adler, in her book *International Organizational Behavior* (1991), gives a number of examples where, because of nuances of language, communication breaks down between native speakers of the same language, as well as between different nationalities because of nuances of language. She includes examples where word choice leads to misunderstanding or miscommunication.

- a. The use of 'Yes' (British) versus 'Yeah' (American) in offering an invitation, led to a misunderstanding based on the culturally based codes of politeness.
- b. The interpretation of the phrase 'That will be very difficult,' used by a Japanese business person was meant to mean the deal is off, but was misinterpreted by a Norwegian business person to mean that there were still some unresolved problems that needed to be solved. (p.66)

It is also important to become aware of the nuances conveyed by behavior and, in some cases, lack of behavior. In English, discourse is often more dynamic than in Japanese. We expect a lively exchange of turns, with frequent interruptions and turn-stealing. These aspects are rarely found in Japanese conversations, where a smooth transition of speakers is the norm, and frequent and often long periods of silence are common. The listener is expected to interpret what is unsaid. Hence the reputation of many Eastern cultures as being evasive, inscrutable and uncooperative. Most English speakers make use of sounds such as 'muh' and 'aha', and physical clues such as focused eye contact or head nodding, to encourage conversation and demonstrate understanding. In

Japanese, sounds of encouragement are rare, and 'Hai', which is often interpreted as agreement, actually functions much like 'aha', meaning 'I am listening'. Rarely is there any eye contact and virtually no head nodding. These mannerisms often result in misperceptions, as well as misinterpretation and misevaluation of messages being sent.

#### Using critical incidents or tasks to facilitate communication

It is, therefore, important to teach business students awareness of their own cultural and linguistic-based mannerisms. Business communication training should help students strengthen their ability to transcend language-based limitations and overcome barriers to communication. Through active participation in business related exercises, it is hoped that tolerance to making mistakes and self-confidence will be increased. Furthermore, students will learn how to 'do' business better and become more familiar with the functions of international trade and commerce by:

- acquiring relevant and usable business vocabulary
- acquiring a broad array of communication skills
- learning how to transcend behavior limitations such as shyness
- learning to initiate responses and negotiate verbal exchanges
- becoming sensitive to their own and other people's patterns of self-expression
- developing an increased sensitivity to other ways of thinking and behaving
- becoming more flexible and objective
- engaging in new patterns of thinking
- learning how to think quickly
- increasing their knowledge of basic business concepts, and
- stimulating their interest in the field of international management.

The aim of a business communication course must go beyond language teaching. It imposes a broader perspective by emphasizing and strengthening communication skills. It encourages the development of what Edward Hall (1973, 1981) has termed as a 'cross cultural mind'. Hence, students will increase their capacity to understand other people, to comprehend the world in a meaningful way, and, to increase their ability to cope with their own culturally based internal dialectics. It enables them to test and widen their understanding of business concepts and become familiar with basic business format and procedures.

An approach that I have used in teaching international business communication is to stimulate students' awareness of these complex processes by active participation in mini-components of business cases. Students are required to participate, observe and analyze their linguistic ability and communication behavior in specific business situations. This is done through formal writing assignments, such as guided research projects and reports, mock business meetings and interviews, as well as problem-solving activities. These exercises emphasize the experiential aspects of learning. Learners are required to identify direct patterns of behavior, as well as, to ascertain their own strengths and weaknesses.

In developing these activities, I draw on examples used by multicultural trainers such as Pierre Casse, in his book *Training for the Multicultural Manager* (1982), and Betty Jane Punnett, in her book *Experiencing International Management* (1989). Both Casse and Punnett apply the concept of international training to the managerial process, styles of leadership, synergistic teamwork, and participation learning. However, these training activities should be supplemented with guided readings that reinforce basic business concepts, related vocabulary and language practice.

## 6. Summary

What happens if no training is provided beyond that of the introduction to basic business terminology and vocabulary? In the area of business communication, knowing only aspects of grammar and vocabulary will lead to a breakdown in communication. It will lead to increased examples of misinterpretation, misperception and misunderstanding. Kilpatrick (1984) in his study of correspondence among over 100 major corporations found that many problems of communication were based not just on the use of language but on cultural barriers and style(pp.33-34). Students must be taught to use clear, simple precise language, which is easy to decode and translate and which is least likely to lead to misinterpretation. They must also become aware that the major obstacle in international business is not just weakness in lexical or grammatical forms but lack of cross-cultural awareness and business acumen. Without practice in actual business cases and business related activities, students will not be able to function in the business environment. They will not be able to understand the exchange of information and ideas, partake in decision-making activities and negotiations, or act as participants in business related exchanges.

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