12-1-2007

The Business Communication Model for Teaching Foreign Business Languages

Virginia Yonkers
Siena College

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl

Virginia Yonkers
Siena College

THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION MODEL FOR TEACHING FOREIGN BUSINESS LANGUAGES

The role of language becomes more important as technologies allow for increased international business. Studies, such as the ones sponsored by the European Union, (Sheikh and Kenny, 2001), indicate that linguistic competency is not sufficient to overcome cross-cultural negotiation and business problems. Culture and what Sheikh and Kenny call "language strategies" also play a role in effective business dealings. This is something that Foreign Language for Special Purposes (FLSP) teachers and researchers have recognized for a while.

TRADITIONAL METHODS

Traditionally, business language teaching begins with a linguistic model that is adapted to a business context. The focus is on providing the language needed for a business context, with some content on business practices and culture. The focus moves from written to oral language skills. However, grammar, syntax, and lexicon are still vital components to the business language class.

Evidence of this can be seen in the business language tests used to evaluate language competency. While organizations such as the Paris Chamber of Commerce (2001) now include a substantial oral and listening section that better represents the language skills needed in the business world, they still test lexicon, grammar and culture. The Michigan test and TOEFL are still the standards that language and business schools use to assess a person's competency. Proficiency testing has existed for almost 15 years, however, teaching methods are often not used to support it (Barnwill, 1996).

Looking at current business language syllabi, there is a common format. Most business language courses contain a series of themes in which the appropriate vocabulary and business practices are combined

with grammar, pronunciation, and measurable oral and written skills. Especially adept teachers include role-plays, videos, self-evaluation activities, and cross-cultural communication simulations to give students the practice of producing the language in context. The expected outcomes are easy to measure, usually using finite testing methods such as multiple choice listening exercises, close testing, or essays (Barnwill, 1996).

The focus for traditional business language courses is on appropriate language production by the student. This may be achieved through teacher, peer, or self-correction. Even with student-centered language teaching methods such as Community Language Learning and the Silent Way, the focal point is on the student producing the correct language in a given business context.

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE TRADITIONAL MODEL

The main weakness in the traditional model is the emphasis on language production rather than two-way communication between the native and non-native speaker. Related to this are the difficulties in assessing language ability beyond grammar, syntax, and lexicon. There are limited measures for cultural adaptability, professional proficiency, and business functions.

Another shortcoming is the lack of training in language strategies when communication problems arise. The problem is that the traditional model starts with the premise that knowledge of business language allows businesses to communicate across cultures effectively. Being culturally sensitive in a business context helps, but does not guarantee success. Likewise, being fluent in a foreign language may not be sufficient, even if language training has been in a business context. Students need to understand the basis for professional language genres including business practices and cultural influences (Charles, 1999).

The traditional business language model also assumes that messages appropriate in one language will be appropriate to a business context in another culture. However, this is not always true, even in communicating between two cultures with a common language. For example, references to family names may be important to establish a sense of credibility in the Northeast and Southern United States, but holds little meaning for Westerners. There are many layers of communication that are inferred depending on the context.

Likewise, there is also the assumption that the forms of communication are similar between cultures. It is assumed that businesses use e-mail, letters, and oral presentations for similar business situations. Written correspondence is used only in the most formal manner in Latin America, usually as a follow-up to oral communication. However, most business is conducted face-to-face, as opposed to the United States where telephones and e-mails are vital to the business process.

Finally, business communication in a foreign language is influenced by the corporate culture. Formats, communication styles, and even the choice of language is often dictated by the corporation. Students learning commercial language may be asked to communicate differently than they are traditionally taught depending on the corporate policy (Nickerson, 2000).

THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION MODEL

Looking at the way that business communication is taught in the United States, a more effective model for teaching foreign business language can be developed. Basing foreign business language courses on this model will help businesses to develop the language strategies necessary for successful international business. The business communication curriculum is based on the communication model (Locker, 2001; Guffey, 2000; Ober, 2001).

The communication model begins with a sender who encodes a message that is sent to a receiver. In encoding the message, the sender must take into consideration who the receiver(s) is, the context of the message, and possible modes for transmitting the message, such as letters, phone, e-mail, or oral presentations. The sender encodes the message by deciding on lexicon, syntax, rhetoric style, tone, and format.

After choosing how the message will be encoded and transmitted, the sender sends the message to the receiver. The receiver may receive the message the way in which it was intended or in a distorted version, based on the communicative filter that a message must pass through. Distortions may be caused by noise, accents, cultural differences, lack of attention, physical or mental distractions such as mood, discomfort, or lighting, assumptions and preconceptions, or non-verbal communication. All of these can have an effect on how the receiver decodes the message. The receiver than transmits feedback, which can be verbal (replies,

questions) or non-verbal (silence, gestures, facial expressions). Feedback can also be distorted by the sender's communicative filter.

In the business communication model, audience analysis is extremely important. Both in written and oral communication, the sender should know as much about the audience as possible (Guffey, 2000). Applying this to foreign business language, the student producing the language would need to know the level of education, experience with non-native speakers, level of knowledge of the host and target cultures, business experience, class and/or position within the company, and personal characteristics of the receiver that would influence the "communication filter." Students need to analyze the benefits to the audience in participating in the dialog (written or oral). Students will also need to learn the common form of feedback for the target language.

Using France as an example, students would need to know the following about their French audience:

- The level of English proficiency,
- Whether or not British or American English was studied,
- Previous experience with American companies,
- Attitude towards Americans,
- Sex, age, education, region of origin.

A pro-American, young, educated audience trained in American business practices from a regional city will probably have less cultural communication filters than a British trained, pro-European, less educated audience from rural France. Speaking to the second audience requires more feedback and a greater knowledge of the language than speaking to the first group. Not only will students need to have a better command of the language, they will also need to learn strategies in case of communication breakdowns. These may include rewording, using written communication in place of oral communication, or finding a third party to help in the communication process.

In learning to develop the message and choose the form of transmission, the international business communication model focuses on understanding the cultural basis for business formats. It is not sufficient to simply teach a business genre, because students have a tendency to use the format they would use in their native language, never questioning if it is the correct usage. As a result, the genre may be used inappropriately. A

good example of this is the genre analysis done by Zhu Yunxia with Chinese and English sales letters (Zhu Yunxia, 2000). While both the English and Chinese letters share four common characteristics (attention, interest, desire, and action), these are manifested in slightly different ways. In addition, the Chinese letter is used to establish a long-term business relationship, which is more important than any of the other characteristics. Students need to learn about the cultural priorities which establish the basis for the foreign business language and genres (Verner, 2001).

Business communication teachers often approach the mechanics of a language differently from the traditional model, since business language, including lexicon, syntax, rhetoric, and style, is often different from every day language. This is why so much time is spent on these topics. However, the corporate culture can have an effect on choice of language, grammar, and style. As a result, the business communication model needs to teach communicators to be flexible.

For example, when we look at foreign language textbooks, there is an indication of a growing movement towards English as International Language, and a neutral Spanish language that is not Castilian. Students need to be able to communicate in the target language, depending on the audience. Rather than beginning with concrete language rules and looking at the exceptions, students need to be taught which rules may not be broken to prevent communication breakdowns. Students also need self-study language learning skills so they can master a foreign language outside the classroom, in the work place. These skills include observation, language trials, and self-correction.

Finally, there is a growing movement in Europe to define errors that interfere with the communication process, and to focus on correcting these rather than focusing on producing error free language (Charles, 1999). In one study in Spanish, for example, it was found that the grammatical errors that most language teachers focus on, the subjunctive, did not interfere with communication, while most native speakers were bothered when a preposition was not followed by an infinitive (Barnwell, 1996). The business communication model focuses only on those errors, grammar, lexicon, pronunciation, or culture, which interfere with the communication process. This depends on the audience, however. Students need to be taught when an error is acceptable and when it must be corrected to continue the communication process.

If a business professional is giving an oral presentation in English and conjugates a word incorrectly, there will not be a breakdown in communication, unless the presenter stops and searches for the correct form of the verb. However, an incorrectly conjugated verb in Spanish can result in misunderstandings about the subject of a sentence. This would result in a serious breakdown in communication and should be addressed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT

There is a growing body of research on which to base the change of approach for business language teaching. The Association for Business Communication, for example, has many members working on international business communication research (Charles, 1999). Other organizations, such as the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERs), also have been working in creating effective business language teaching. It is important now that teachers use this research in developing effective programs.

Specifically, business language teachers need to be trained in the cultural priorities that are the basis for business practices and communication. Teachers must not only teach the language formats, but the cultural basis for them. They should also have a good understanding of business practices in the target and native cultures. By focusing on communication skills rather than language skills, teachers can make students more adaptable to any business context. This means there will be less focus on correction, and more emphasis on audience analysis, verbal and non-verbal communication, and developing the message. Foreign language teachers should also be trained in teaching students language-learning skills they can use outside the classroom.

Since learning outcomes will be different, the traditional assessment tools need to be modified. If the goal of business language teaching is communication, discrete testing will not measure the outcomes. In the last decade, proficiency testing has been used to assess communication skills. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) scale has been in use for a while to rate professional communication skills. However, there has been criticism that the definitions are ambiguous and the scales have no research basis to make them valid (Barnwell, 1996).

Meanwhile, business communication teachers continue to develop proficiency scales for native speakers. One especially useful set of tools was developed by Rogers and Rymer (2001). These assess task

completion, coherence, error interference, and reasoning, and could easily be adapted to foreign language study with a focus on the dialog between the writer and audience.

FURTHER RESEARCH

In conclusion, there still needs to be research to support teachers using the business communication model of business language learning. Specifically, teachers need more genre analysis studies comparing target and native languages. With this as a basis, course curriculums could work in developing language strategies that are appropriate to the situation.

There also needs to be further work on "acceptable" errors as opposed to language errors that distort communication. Research on the influence of the corporate culture on international business communication is still in its infancy. It would, therefore, be important to look at how the corporate culture shapes the sender's and receiver's concept of distracting communicative errors.

Finally, proficiency tests for international business communication should be developed to help teachers in course design and outcomes assessment. These proficiency tests should be based on communicative skills rather than traditional language skills such as oral comprehension, syntax, and lexicon. The result would be the basis for business language courses.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrate, Jayne and Steven J. Loughrin-Sacco. Eds. *Making Business French Work: Models, Materials, Methodologies*. San Diego. SDSU CIBER Press, 1998.

Bartwell, David Patrick. *A History of Foreign Language Testing in the United States.* Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press, 1996.

Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris, *Certificat de français professionnel CFP: Jeu d'épreuves.* Paris, France: CCIP, 2000.

Charles, Mirjaliisa. "Developing the Conference Theme and Tracks," *Business Communication Quarterly* 62:4 (December 1999) 105-108

Domke-Damonte, Daria. "Language Learning and International Business," *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal* 66:1 (Winter 2001) 35-40.

Gee, James Paul. "Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 44:8 (May 2001) 714-725.

Guffey, Mary Ellen. *Business Communication: Process and Product, 3rd Edition.* Cincinnati: Southwestern College Publishing, 2000.

Interesource Group. *Elise: Trade Secrets of Successful European Companies.* United Kingdom: InterAct International, 2001.

Kenny, Breda and Haaris Sheikh. "European Language & International Strategy Development in SMEs: A Comparative Analysis of Language Strategies in Ireland & Northern Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Scotland and Sweden." A paper presented at the CIBER 2001 Conference on Language, Communication and Global Management, San Diego, March 28, 2001.

Locker, Kitty O. *Business and Administrative Communication, 5th Edition.* Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill, 2001.

——. "Factors in Reader Responses to Negative Letters, Experimental Evidence for Changing what we Teach," *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 13:1 (January 1999) 5-48.

Nickerson, Catherine. *Playing the Corporate Language Game: An Investigation of the Genres and Discourse Strategies in English Used by Dutch Writers Working in Multinational Corporations.* Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2000.

Ober, Scot. *Contemporary Business Communication.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Omaggio, Alice. *Teaching Language in Context.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Inc., 1986.

Siciliano, Julie. "A Template for Managing Teamwork in Courses Across the Curriculum," *Journal of Education for Business* 5:74 (May/June 1999) 261-264.

Verner, Iris. "Teaching Intercultural Management Communication: Where are we? Where do we go?" *Business Communication Quarterly* 64:1 (March 2001) 99-111.

Zhu, Yunxia. "Building Knowledge Structures in Teaching Cross-Cultural Sales Genres." *Business Communication Quarterly* 63:4 (December 2000) 49-68.