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Developing cross-cultural competence in business through multimedia courseware

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Abstract

The globalisation of business and the internationalisation of companies witnessed over the past decade has increased the need for business people operating across cultures to become both culturally and linguistically aware. The evolution of multimedia computing means that learning material can be created which amalgamates video, subtitles, tasks, text and a variety of support tools. This environment lends itself to the provision of learning opportunities and materials which aim to develop cultural understanding. This paper describes an on-going development project entitled SELECT which is creating multimedia courseware to develop cross-cultural awareness of the British business context. The paper outlines the background to the creation of the courseware and the needs it aims to meet. The theoretical underpinning of the development is outlined, covering the nature of cross-cultural competence, its development and the fit between the capabilities of multimedia and such competence. The approach taken and methods used to research and construct a valid, empirically-based cross-cultural syllabus relevant for those doing business with Britain is described and exemplified. The process of creating the courseware, including the authentic video assets and configuration of the learning design is discussed. The paper concludes with projections of future developments in technology assisted development of cross-cultural competence.

1 Introduction

The role which 'culture' should play in language education has received a lot of attention (Brown, 1990; Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993; Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1998; Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Holliday, 1999). Views about incorporating cultural training within the language curriculum range along a continuum, one end seeing this as an integral and essential element, with the other viewing cultural training as being potentially divisive. In the world of business though, research has indicated that an understanding and awareness of culturally bound business practices, in addition to language competence, is seen as being helpful to doing business successfully across cultures. Research has also indicated that 'cultural misunderstandings' which have arisen in cross-cultural business ventures have resulted in lost business opportunities (Hagen, 1999). Given the increasing globalisation of the business world it appears that an awareness of the culturally bound

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tendencies of aspects of business protocols, in tandem with linguistic development, may facilitate cross border enterprise. This paper describes the creation of multimedia courseware designed to develop cross-cultural competence in the field of business.[1]

2 Cross-cultural competence

2.1 What is cross-cultural competence?

This section gives a very brief overview of some of the issues in cross-cultural communication training. The seminal work on cultural differences in business is Hofstede's (1984) empirical study of IBM employees which established four basic value dimensions that underlie organisational behaviour. These are:

- power distance, the level of acceptance of unequal power distribution in companies;
- uncertainty avoidance, the extent to which individuals are able to tolerate ambiguous situations;
- individualism / collectivism, the values and emphases placed either on individuals or on the company;
- masculinity/femininity, which refers to the degree of acquisitiveness, rationality, or aggression as opposed to the degree of value placed upon caring and intuition.

Hofstede (*op. cit*) used these four dimensions to create cultural maps of the world which show the similarities and differences in possible business behaviours. These differing values may result in what might be termed 'critical incidents' where different perceptions, approaches and behaviours within the typical business scenarios such as meetings, presentations, negotiations and business lunches may result in communication breakdowns. Different cultural perspectives, for example, on the role and status of the boss, the use of humour, appropriate dress, on the importance attached to agendas or minutes, attitudes to time-keeping, who can make decisions, when decisions are made, and expected levels of formality, may result in communication breakdowns at non-linguistic levels. This is being confirmed by a growing body of literature which demonstrates that competence in language as well as awareness of the local business culture might influence companies' performance in cross cultural business (Schegelmilch & Ross, 1987; Bjarnarson, 1992; Weiss, 1992; Castro, 1992; Trompenaars, 1993, Tomlinson, 1996; Hagen, 1999).

2.2 Developing cross-cultural competence

What are the aims of pedagogic intervention targeted at the development of cross-cultural awareness? Maley (1993) proposes:

[1] This work was completed under the SELECT (Strategies for European LE-Enhanced Communication Training) project: Language Engineering in CALL for Learners in the Business Community, Language Engineering Telematics Applications Programme LE4-8304. Readers are invited to visit the SELECT project website at http://www.wlv.ac.uk/select for a complete overview of all aspects of this project.

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> " … what we can do is to raise awareness of cultural factors. In so doing we shall aim to sharpen observation, encourage critical thinking about cultural stereotypes, and develop tolerance."

Others believe that cultural facts also need to be taught "…. because students welcome solid facts as an island of security in a sea of slippery concepts" (Pecorari, 1999:13). Killick (1999:12) sees cross-cultural capability as comprising:

> ".. an understanding of the nature of culture; a conscious awareness of oneself as a cultural being; the ability to recognise cultural difference, without seeking to relativize as 'better' or 'worse' and the ability to communicate across cultural differences."

Kramsch (1993:256) argues that cross-cultural awareness develops when learners find a 'third place' which ".. grows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and the new cultures he or she is being introduced to." It seems then that any learning opportunities aimed at the development of cross-cultural capability need to include: information about the target culture (C2); opportunities to observe C2, and opportunities to reflect on and recognise differences between C2 and one's own culture (C1).

2.3 The potential of multimedia for developing cross-cultural competence and linguistic awareness in business

The aim of the SELECT project was to provide opportunities for cross-cultural business and linguistic training through a CD-ROM-based multimedia application. This method of delivery may have several advantages over face-to-face delivery of cross-cultural training. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) and Kramsch (1993) champion the role which video can play. Video footage of C2 affords access to all the paralinguistic features of communication, its participants and its settings. Video can easily be incorporated into multimedia applications. Authentic video of the C2 business world, that is, film of real interactions which occurred in the pursuit of business goals, as opposed to scripted and acted footage, is seen to be the most beneficial for linguistic and cultural development (Willis, 1991; Kramsch, 1993; Brett, 1995). Authentic video portrays the C2 as it occurs and thus avoids the dangers of stereotyping. Multimedia technology is portable and reusable, especially useful for the business community. In addition, it allows learners choice and control over the time, length, place, pace and approach to learning. Kramsch (1993:201) sums up the advantages of the use of multimedia for the development of cross-cultural awareness:

> "… by providing opportunities for autonomous, exploratory learning, for analysing, synthesising, interpreting social phenomena, … not only are attractive to use, they also encourage teachers to devise ever more refined procedures for the organisation and presentation of knowledge."

In addition, the potential of multimedia for second language acquisition (SLA) has been

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outlined both theoretically (e.g. Chappelle, 1998, 1999; Doughty, 1992) within the interactionist perspective of SLA, and has also been demonstrated by research as effective for a variety of areas of SLA. For example, Chun & Plass (1996) showed how certain combinations of hypertext facilitated retention of vocabulary and Brett (1997) demonstrated its success for listening comprehension.

3 The courseware for cross-cultural competence

3.1 The approach

The courseware aimed to develop cross-cultural understanding of the British business culture and thus be used by those doing business with this culture[2]. The approach taken to the presentation of the world of British business was based around showing authentic C2 business interactions on video. It thus modelled and exemplified the British business culture in action, rather than focusing on any possible differences between this and other cultures. This approach enables learners from any culture to exploit the materials and to be able to form their own interpretations of how and where cultural differences may manifest themselves. The approach also avoids the danger of invoking stereotypes (Pennycook, 1994).

3.2 The cross-cultural syllabus

3.2.1 The syllabus content derived from research into 'critical incidents'

It was first necessary to construct a syllabus upon which to base the cross-cultural learning and the subsequent multimedia materials' production. In order to establish the content of our cross-cultural business syllabus we contacted and interviewed more than fifty British companies who had had successful experience in cross-cultural trade. A questionnaire was used to elicit these companies' experiences of cross-cultural communication breakdowns. The resulting information on the common and key features of the British business culture which these companies' experiences had shown were likely to lead to 'critical incidents' providing the building blocks of the syllabus. The syllabus content was based upon receptive skills to reflect its computer-based delivery, however, it would be a relatively simple matter for others to add a productive skills dimension to this syllabus. This might be envisaged if the syllabus was delivered by a trainer in a classroom context or there were fundamental advances in speech recognition technology. The secondary aim of the courseware was development of linguistic competence. The linguistic elements of the syllabus, e.g., functions or grammatical components, were derived from the critical incidents but seen as secondary to, and supportive of, the cross-cultural component.

3.2.2 Organisation of the syllabus

The syllabus was divided into seven levels. The levels were based upon the extent of

[2] Project partners based at the University of Poitiers, France and the Open University in Portugal produced courseware which could be used by those aiming to do business in France and Portugal.

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business experience with the host culture, from Level A0 'no experience of business with the host culture' to Level C2 'has lived and worked in the host culture'. The levels were devised to correspond with the Council of Europe's six Common Reference Levels (1996:131) for different levels of proficiency in communicating in a foreign language, with the addition of an extra level A0 to account for no proficiency in the target culture or language. These seven levels are labelled A0, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. Each of these levels was allocated typical business scenarios in which a business person with such a level of experience in the target culture might be likely to engage. For example, it is unlikely that those with no experience of a target culture would be involved in giving presentations or with conducting negotiations. However, if this were the case, then the non-linear accessibility afforded by the multimedia configuration would enable access to such material. The list of business situations according to level is shown in Figure 1.

Each syllabus level was divided into the following sections. It had: a descriptor, stating the intended learning outcomes; the business events thought applicable to the level of competence; the watching and reading tasks used to develop cross-cultural competence; and the linguistic skills and knowledge which might be used to underpin the feature of cross-cultural performance. The syllabus levels function as entry points to the materials. Two of the levels, A1 and B1, are described in Figure 2. No attempt was made to specify the learning time needed for each level as this will be learner specific.

3.3 Authentic video to depict business interactions

The core learning resource is authentic video of real business interactions which occurred in British companies. Companies such as British Telecom, Rover and VideoLogic kindly co-operated in this project. The resulting video footage contains completely unscripted dialogue. We also filmed 'talking head' interviews with C2 business people who were experienced in doing business in Britain. The raw footage was edited into clips which portrayed features which might lead to the 'critical incidents' indicated from the survey. So Level B1 which was centred around business meetings had clips entitled: Fitting in to British business meetings; Agendas; Deadlines; Participation; The boss is part of the team; and Procedures in British business meetings. Figure 3, which is part of the tapescript from the video provided at Level B1 – Topic: Business Meetings; Clip: Participation, between British and Dutch colleagues working

LEVEL	Business Situations
A0	1. The Company and its Employees; 2. Working conditions
A1	1. The Business Day; 2. Interaction with Colleagues
A2	1. The Business Framework; 2. Behaviour and Attitudes at Work
B1	1. Business Presentations; 2. The Business Lunch
B2	1. Business Meetings; 2. Negotiations
C1	1. Social Values; 2. Short-term Residence
C2	1. Long-term Residence; 2. Integration With An International Team; 3. Exercising Responsibilities Within An International Team

Fig. 1. The seven levels of the cross-cultural business syllabus and the business situations addressed in each.

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LEVEL A1	TITLE: The Business Day
DESCRIPTOR	Can compare and contrast the daily business framework in the target and the source cultures.
CULTURAL FACTORS	Working hours; Breaks; Lunch
READING TASKS	Understanding the key content in:menus, business diaries, company information
LISTENING TASKS	Identifying times; Distinguishing between foods and meals; Identifying daily work patterns
FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE	Talking about daily routines and habits; Time; Holidays; Ordering meals; Expressing non-comprehension (e.g.: *I'm sorry I didn't understand*)
GRAMMATICAL ISSUES	Present Simple; Adverbs of frequency (often, sometimes, etc); Like + verb + ing; Questions; Numbers
LEVEL B1	TITLE: Business Presentations
DESCRIPTOR	Can follow a presentation on a familiar topic from his/her own field provided it is well structured and clearly delivered.
CULTURAL FACTORS	Protocol to be followed at the event (including dress, hand-outs); Roles of the participants; Body language; Introductions; Sequence of the discourse; Mini-stages of the presentation Degree of linguistic formality required by the situation; Question time
LISTENING TASKS	Identifying functions; Distinguishing signpost and bridges; Distinguishing between main points; Distinguishing between opinion and fact
READING TASKS	A paper connected to the topic of the presentation; Bullet points from a Powerpoint presentation
FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE	Openings; Stating objectives; Moving on; Handling interruptions; Referring to visual aids; Discourse signposts; Discourse bridges; Closings
GRAMMATICAL ISSUES	Present tense: simple and continuous; Present Perfect; Relative clauses; Linking expressions; Indirect questions

Fig. 2. An example of the cross-cultural syllabus items at Levels A1 and B1.

in the same company, serves to provide a flavour of the resulting video, although of course without the essential visual element. For each of the syllabus levels so far completed there is about 30 minutes of authentic video.

Studies of the use of video for different aspects of SLA have demonstrated that this has positive effects. Kellerman (1990) showed that when the visual image of lip synchronisation was made available to listeners, comprehension improved. Baltova (1994), in a study which used the three treatment conditions of: video, video with sound, and sound only, also found that the visual clues increased comprehension. Rubin (1990) found that the listening comprehension of students who received video support improved more significantly than that of those who had not used video. Herron et al. (1995) and Secules *et al*. (1992) found that video improved L2 listening skills.

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Chair:	Have you had any cases where you know er… Dutch colleagues have applied for jobs in the UK and have (No) not been successful?
Dickie:	No. I think they're sort of waiting to be offered something (Ok) and that's the problem as well, isn't it.
Chair:	Is it a cultural thing about how people… whether people put themselves forward or whether they expect (Yes) a more proactive career management.., you know, you'll be picked from here and moved…
Dickie:	…or a bit of guidance maybe…(Yeah)

Fig. 3. A brief extract from the video clip 'Level B1 – Topic: Business Meetings; Clip: Participation'.

3.4 The learning tasks

3.4.1 On-screen learning tasks to develop cross-cultural competence

Each video clip and topic was accompanied by learning tasks aimed at developing cultural awareness. A range of task types for the development of cultural awareness was used, including those which:

- asked users to reflect on their own cultural norms;
- involved the prediction of British business cultural features;
- asked users to compare what is seen on the video with their own business context;
- focused on the body language and roles of participants;
- asked for the extraction of the main features of the interaction such as use of agendas, time-keeping, humour, etc.

The tasks were presented in a three stage sequence as follows. Tasks were written to prepare learners for the video (or written) input by raising schematic and linguistic awareness, a pre-watching stage (e.g. Underwood, 1990). While-watching tasks provided opportunities to focus observation, encourage reflection or to extract salient cultural features. The final task stage of post-watching further exploited and extended the cultural content or the language of the video clips. At the final task stage, learners were given a choice between three different tasks. To provide a wealth of material each of the video clips has two different sets of cultural learning tasks to accompany it. Two examples of sequences of the cultural learning tasks are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

In total there are about a hundred learning screens for each of the topics. There was a choice of fifty different task types which could be used by the materials writers to frame the learning material. Tasks used combinations of text, sound and video. The more familiar multimedia task types such as true / false statements or fill in the gap were enriched by more novel tasks such as "put the video clips in the correct order", "choose the best continuation for a video clip", and "put the paragraphs in the correct order".

3.4.2 On-screen learning tasks to develop language awareness

The courseware is also configured to provide opportunities for learners to develop their language awareness. The CDs provide separate on-screen tasks and information in the

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Before watching

Deadlines and time-scales for most business tasks are important in British business. Look at these statements and compare these with your own business context.

Projects will have deadlines
Deadlines are agreed in advance
Nobody keeps to the deadlines
Items on agendas will usually have a time limit even if this is unwritten
Deadlines are more important for top-management
A large project will have several deadlines for small tasks
It is usual to explain why deadlines are not kept
Deadlines can be negotiated about
Meetings will have time limits

While watching

Watch Sue talk to a meeting about her idea for analysing the training needs of new staff. A key part of her description is the timetable she proposes. Click on the one item which is not discussed.

They did not know what skills new people had.
Sue proposes a timetable.
Sue proposes deadlines for two stages of the project.
The second deadline is the next team meeting.
Sue asks for opinions about the time-scale
The time-scale is discussed before the approach.
Sue asks for agreement on the time-scale

After watching

There is a choice of task:

1. A gap-fill exercise based upon verbs used in the video
2. Watch and look at the subtitles – all the phrases connected to deadlines are highlighted
3. Who said what? An exercise allocating phrases connected to deadlines to the participants in the meeting.

Fig. 4. The learning tasks which accompany
'Culture – Business meetings – Deadlines' at Level A.

following linguistic areas: listening comprehension skills, grammar, vocabulary, language functions and reading and writing. For example, in the grammar section at B1 there are tasks for Present Perfect, Past Continuous, Noun Phrases, Comparatives and Phrasal Verbs. In the vocabulary section at B1 the following topics are provided: Business Meetings, Reports, Appointments, Numbers, and Quantifying Adjectives. Tasks are based around the same video clips as used for cultural awareness, however,authentic written business documentation is used for the writing tasks. Learning tasks for linguistic development are configured similarly to those described above for cultural issues.

3.5 Feedback on tasks.

Computer-delivered feedback has been shown to positively assist language learning e.g. Van der Linden (1993), Nagata (1993) and Bationo (1992) and is a constant feature of

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The start of a presentation

Before watching

1. Think about the business presentations you have attended. Are the statements below true or false for these presentations?

Dress would be smart – suits and ties for the men and no jeans and trainers.
Men's hair length would be short and tidy
Presenters try to keep eye contact with their audience
The presentation may start with an amusing story
The presentation is likely to be made by a team
The presentation will have a clear opening, middle and conclusion
The presenter will keep to time.
The presentation will be goal orientated
The presentation is likely to focus on the present and future

2. Watch these two openings to formal UK business presentations. Click on the one item which is not in the video.

Dress is smart
Men's hair length is short and tidy
Trainers and jeans can be worn
The presenter may use visual aids
The presentation is likely to be made by a team
The presentation will have a structure which is described in the opening
The presenter will aim to have a time limit
The presentation will be goal orientated
Questions will be welcomed.

3. If you are going to give a business presentation to a UK audience which of the following do you think would help the success of your presentation.

Dress smartly
Rehearse your presentation
Use visual aids
Talk for as long as you want
Don't invite questions at the end
Describe the structure of your presentation at the start.
Take a team of specialists with you if you need them.
Have a clear opening, middle and conclusion.
Include an overview of your main points in the introduction.

Fig. 5. The learning tasks which accompany 'Culture – Presentations – Starting a Presentation' at Level A.

and necessity for self-study multimedia courseware. The SELECT courseware allows learners to choose from three types of feedback to the tasks: right / wrong feedback through ticks and crosses, hints when wrong, or full explanations to each part of the task. Many of the culturally focused tasks were to encourage reflection or comparison and therefore feedback was included for such tasks.

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3.6 Error collection

In addition, each of the task elements is hard coded in the program with up to four error code tags. These tags were allocated for each task item and were based on the material writers' best guesses as to why an incorrect answer might have been provided. There are more than a hundred error code types which can be allocated. The computer records the error types and is able to provide learners with feedback on repeated errors when such error patterns become clear. The courseware then suggests which of the materials might be useful for further work to address areas of misunderstanding.

3.7 Subtitles

The use of subtitled video by language learners has been extensively investigated and all studies show increased comprehension results from their use e.g., Borrás & Lafayette (1994), Danan (1992) and Guillory (1998). Subtitles to the video clips are available in three forms. Learners can choose which, if any, of the three forms they use in conjunction with the video pictures. These are full subtitles where each word is available, keyword subtitles (Guillory, 1998) where the key word from each 10-second element is provided, and simplified subtitles where a rephrased gloss of the authentic dialogue is available. An example of the three different subtitling options is shown in Figure 6.

4 The learner interface

Figure 7 shows the learner interface. The top right box of the screen plays the video clips. The figure below shows a scene from a British Telecom meeting. The controls to the video are directly below the video screen and include buttons to make the video full-screen and a button to change the type of subtitles being used. The subtitles automatically scroll through beneath the video image. Words or phrases in the subtitles which are hotspotted with a definition or further explanation are indicated by a different colour, in this example 'pick up' meaning 'to return to and discuss further' is hotspotted.

The left side of the screen displays the learning tasks, in this case one which is asking for recall of the features of agendas seen in the video clip. The feedback appears below the questions, in one of the three forms described above. The menu at the top of the screen allows for multiple entry routes into the materials. Entry to the materials can either be through a choice of level or through a choice of topics. Topics are subdivided

Dialogue from the video, Full subtitles	**Keyword Subtitles**	**Simplified Subtitles**
Right. OK. We er… we ready to go? Erm… what I want to do er… today really is… is twofold, one is to pick up a number of actions we had out of the last meeting that uh th… the away day we had…	Go Pick up actions	Let's start. There are 2 things to do. First look at the actions from the last meeting.

Fig. 6. Example of the three types of subtitles available.

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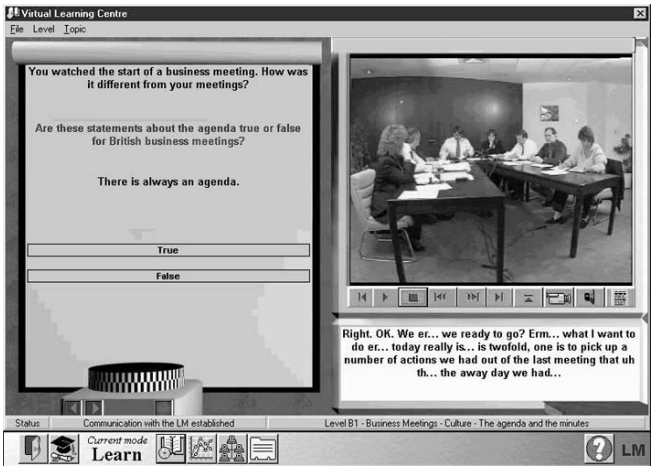


Fig. 7. The interface for the SELECT courseware.

into culture, listening, reading and writing, grammar, vocabulary and functions. The icons at the very bottom of the screen access the Language Learners Workbench. In this are a variety of learning tools such as phrasebooks, bilingual dictionaries, and corpora (see Krishnamurthy *et al.*, 1999). In addition, a full log of work covered by the learner is available and a complete record of task success rates.

5 The future

The courseware is now complete for the syllabus at Levels B1, Business Meetings, and B2, Business Presentations and Negotiations and the CD-ROMs are being used in various companies across Europe. There is an on-going large-scale evaluation of the effectiveness of the materials. Plans are underway to make it commercially available. As the expansion in speed and capacity of the Internet is likely to continue it might be envisaged that such cross-cultural multimedia materials will eventually be made available through the Web rather than on CD-ROM. In addition, it is envisaged that given the rapid globalisation of business the demand for cross-cultural materials will increase.

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