English Language Teaching: Changing Perspectives in Context
THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: 
DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND 
STRATEGIES IN MULTILINGUAL CREWS
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"Most disciplines, and certainly all of the human and social sciences, need to deal with the 
terrelations, between discourse and concepts such as social structure, social relations, conflict, 
ideology, selfhood, postmodernity and social change." (Jaworski & Copeland, 1999: 6)

1. Introduction

The concept of intercultural training (ICT) is expanding rapidly across the specialized 
professional domains, thus engrossing a large list of language terms -such as discourse 
communities,¹ speech community² (Swales, 1990), or discourse systems (Scollon, 1995), used for 
categorizing speech constructs arisen in a speech act, speech event or speech situation (Searle, 
1969, 1975, 1979; Hymes, 1972; Labov y Fanshel 1979) -, and a large chain of attempts to 
regularise the language use in context such as cooperative principles, conversational maxims 
(Grice, 1975) and politeness principles and strategies (Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1978), 
among others. Basically, intercultural training tries to link pragmatic aspects of the cultural 
values of a second language and those inherent to our own mother tongue when they interact.
Since much of what we think is the correct behaviour in society is part of the knowledge of rules 
and norms we have learnt from our own culture, an effective communication is achieved through 
more than just language. For instance, developing skills for negotiation extends beyond the reach 
of the words; gestures, body movements, etc. are modes of communication too; politeness 
principles also perform interpersonal functions; intonation patterns decisively emphasize a

¹ Swales defines the discursive communities as 'common goals, participatory mechanism, information exchange, 
community specific genres, a highly specialized terminology and a high general level of expertise' (Swales, 1990: 
29).
² Swales points out that the main characteristic of a speech community is that it has a hereditary membership 
whereas the discourse community 'recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification' (1990: 
24)
message's ultimate meaning. On the other hand, when nonverbal communication is involved, misunderstandings can occur because speakers do not generally share the same nonverbal behaviour or interpretations of them. The professional world today brings together people from diverse cultural backgrounds and, despite the best intentions, intercultural conflicts occur.

There is a general consensus among teachers and scholars that the majority of errors detected in misunderstandings cannot be traced to phonetic mistakes or deficiencies in grammar usage but to a cultural distance among the interlocutors. Moreover, differing expectations arisen in conversational inferences produce undesirable cross-cultural effects that may result in using language inappropriately. As a result, in cross-cultural communication when people from different cultural traditions have to interact and be understood the signals may not be shared and conflicts emerge. On this point, Scollon & Scollon argue that, 'frequently intergroup miscommunication and even hostility arise when each group has failed to interpret the intentions of the other group as a result of misinterpreting its discourse conventions' (Scollon & Scollon, 1995: xii). On expanding this argument, Thomas (1983), cited by Brislin (1994), distinguishes two types of pragmatic failure, *pragmalinguistic failure* and *sociopragmatic failure* as main causes of cross-cultural interference. Jandt and Taberski (1998: 16) further indicate the features of good intercultural communicators as those possessing personality strength, communication skills, psychological adjustment, and cultural awareness.

Therefore, it is generally held that limitations in the sociopragmatic and strategic competence of some or all the interactants play a determinant role in intercultural training and skills. The fundamental aim of ICT is to provide the users with tools enough that can contribute to negotiate meaning that may help to predict situations of cultural dependance that may hinder the potentially optimum communication process in professional and occupational environments.

The present paper argues for the need for integrating the multicultural factor in ELT and

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3 Jandt and Taberski (1998: 44-45) distinguish nonverbal communication into nine types: Proxemics (the way we use fixed space and personal space); Kinesics (gestures, body movements, facial expressions, eye contact); Chronemics (how we perceive and use time); Paralanguage (sounds produced by the mouth and voice); Silence (sign of interest); Haptics (communicating by touch); Clothing (significance of certain articles of clothing); Olfactics (communicating by smell); Oculusesics (communicating with the eyes).


5 *Pragmalinguistic failure* occurs when ‘the person receiving the communication does not understand either the intended sense or the pragmatic force behind’, whereas *sociopragmatic failure* occurs when ‘people have different perceptions about the appropriateness of language behaviour in a given situation’ (Thomas, 1983: 91-104)
widening its scope towards ESP university settings. This study focuses on the possibilities of using communicative strategies by Maritime English learners as alternative ways of expression in 'talks-in-interaction' in their future professional contexts as well as skills that can increase their competence and autonomy when they face up with a set of different cultural expectations regarding multilingual crews. It attempts to show that discourse analysis can be a useful theoretical framework in ESP teaching and research. It is also suggested that task-based activities are suitable ways to tackle the problem and bridge the gap between language learning and cultural studies.

2. The intercultural factor in ESP

In view of the fact that language in international contexts takes on greater significance in the competitive environments, ICT is an integral part of the training schemes of business training, management and human resources' departments all around the world. ICT covers a wide range of subject areas and situations extending from a technical conversation to the presentation of an academic paper. It is worth mentioning that -though at a slow pace-, ICT is entering in the majority of ESP fields and this new exploration urges for higher standards in language use and for examining further implications derived from English as an International Language within the teaching and learning contexts.

A well-balanced interaction of skills in both content-knowledge and language-knowledge is continuously catered for in ESP. Although ESP professional discourse system has the goal of supporting its members in the realization of their own career interests, an awareness of cultural differences among individuals of different nationalities with a common professional goal is also made necessary. Otherwise, the absence of it may become a source of higher restriction in the behaviour of interactants' communicative inferences. Every ESP user needs to be familiar with the repertoire of culturally appropriate behaviours and to understand how cultural factors impact on language development of job performance.

Researchers in this field share the assumption that discourse analysis is intimately related to intercultural studies since it deals with the structure of conversations, their implied meanings,

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6 As noted by Norman Fairclough (1995: 102), one part of this phenomenon is known as the technologisation of discourse.
7 A general survey of theoretical positions in ESP is provided by Pauline Robinson (1980, 1991).
8 Our interest lays in professional communication between members of different groups or discourse systems, not on the simplistic view of discourse analysis as a set of logical relations among sentences in texts.
the associated values and assumptions and how language in the form of speech interacts with non-linguistic communication. Conversation analysis (CA) is the basis for this sociological approach to language and communication. Hutchby and Wooffitt who prefer the term *talk in interaction* to *conversation*, define CA as the study of ‘naturally occurring talk-in-interaction’ focusing on ‘how sequences of interaction are generated.’ (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 14).

Using this argument as a starting point, Scollon defined the scope and nature of ICT and introduced the concept of *discourse systems* in this area. This approach opens up countless new areas for the investigation of intercultural studies and constitutes the basis for our application to ESP in the present study.

To illustrate and contextualise intercultural conflicts, a standard example could be a business meeting between European and Assian people. Mr. Germán Blanco is a Spanish director of travel agencies and Mr. Siu Yang is a Japanese manager of a shipping company. In their first meeting, Mr. Blanco addresses his counterpart using Mr. Yang's first name in a friendly and inviting manner. Mr. Siu Yang is not used to this kind of address or, at least, not in the initial stage of a business relationship. He feels confused, upset and thinks that business situations are not responding to his expectations, whereas Mr. Blanco, who is trying to build a relationship, has forgotten about cultural diversity and is convinced that he has acted in the right way. There is not a symmetrical solidarity among interactants because the degree of involvement and independence have failed. This is an interesting point to be taken into account because it is believed that ‘it is best to consider more talk, volubility, to be an involvement strategy, and less talk, taciturnity, to be an independence strategy’ (Scollon, 1995: 39). The use of both strategies are highly recommendable provided that, despite conflicting values and multiple language use, both speakers assume their differing and identical positions in IC, are tolerant or accept unfamiliar things, feel a predisposition to empathy, and appreciate the uniqueness of other people and cultures.

We can identify the main focus of the conflict in the contradictory degree of involvement and independence in hierarchical positions. Added factors such as gender, role and status could have worsened the situation. Thus, how to use shift registers, start conversations, initiate turn-taking, interrupt, give instructions, refuse, offer, accept, negotiate meaning under different systems of values and beliefs, use of nonverbal communication strategies conveniently in a foreign culture should also be the aim of an ESP course. Other factors to be taken into account are socially and psychologically determined, such as the perception of the world, set of values,
personal attitudes, beliefs, hierarchical relationships, politeness, corporativism, individualism. All these aspects are interrelated and fix the identities of the members of a specific cultural entity. These discourse possibilities are categorized by Scollon & Scollon (1995) as discourse systems. They argue that the four main characteristics that define a discourse system are ideology, forms of discourse, socialization and face systems. On the other hand, it is worth noting that it could also happen that each interactant may be simultaneously member of various systems of corporative discourse, professional, generational, generic and cultural in the professional environment. For example, a naval engineer may encounter situations in which he/she will have to speak with a shipping agent or with the electricians aboard, shifting registers, coding and decoding linguistic varieties and developing new strategies continuously. Individuals are members of a range of overlapping communities. Therefore, ESP teacher must take into account the intersecting modes of professional discourse which operate in a given ESP context and transfer them into the planning lesson. It is essential to motivate and orientate the student towards the importance of acquiring not only terminology and practicing simple linguistic structures but also the pragmatic aspects of manners in conversation. The perfect communicator, then, should adjust his/her sense of identity and membership so that the signals’ identities of different group members are not affected. Professional communication depends on being able to understand not just when and where to communicate what, but also how it is done. A diagram illustrating standard IC situations can be as follows:
3. Strategies in intercultural communication

Several theoretical perspectives can be adopted when studying SLA strategies, from the monitor theory (Krashen, 1981), to modern pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) and perspectives considering language as a functional system that can be explained in accordance with communicative and cognitive requirements (Halliday, 1978, 1994; Dik, 1989).

Since only by explicitly understanding the cues of communication can a professional come to transmit effectively, it is essential for learners to be familiar with the ways in which discourses are used to establish and reinforce ideological positions in society by processes of inferences used in ordinary conversations. In this sense, Maritime English learners can prepare predictable situations according to face systems such as power, distance, and the weight of the imposition in a hierarchical community divided by rank as the crew of a ship. Relations of ideology, world knowledge, information transfer will be highly involved in interpersonal ordinary conversations.
aboard. This background will conduct teacher’s role towards the devise of learning tasks and communicative strategies that may provide a solution, compensatory in function, that counterbalances the cross-cultural capabilities for self awareness, self-respect, interaction, empathy, adaptability, initiative, etc. Strategic competence involves the capacity to select the communicative strategies. Thus, the next question is arisen: How can we define a communicative strategy? Many authors have provided their own taxonomies and definitions (Tarone, 1976, 1977; Corder, 1978; Bialystok, 1983; Faerch y Kasper (1980, 1983b, 1984) and some comparative studies on communicative strategies (Bialystok, 1990; Poulisse 1990, 1993). The concept of communicative strategies provided by Poulisse as: ‘strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his own linguistic shortcomings’ (Poulise, 1990: 22). This basically seems adequate enough but it is rather restrictive because emphasizes the lack of linguistic knowledge and as we have seen there are more pragmatic reasons that would drive us towards the resort of strategies. For our purpose, we prefer a definition wider in scope and we define it as ‘a set of problem-solving devices which a learner resorts to in order to achieve a communicative aim’. The learning tasks that have been devised are based on the social strategies exposed by Tarone (1977, 1980): avoidance (topic avoidance, message abandonment); paraphrase (approximation, word coinage, circumloution); conscious transfer (literal translation, language switch); appeal for assistance; mime. These are mixed with additional intercultural strategies which have been pursued: individualism/colectivism; gender relations; hierarchical relations. In order to exemplify the importance of individualist and collectivist concepts for multilingual crews, let us consider the following situation.

At 10.00 a.m., during the seventh day of the voyage to New Zealand, the first officer (Danish) of the ship ‘Maracaibo’ goes directly to the navigation bridge and asks the radio officer (Brazilian) about the radar situation the night before. The radio officer was not on watch the night before, and has not been informed by the officer on watch. However, he has a collective idea of group work and sacrifices his personal goals for the good of the group. The first officer, who belongs to an individualistic society 10, does not reward this attitude and insists on speaking to the officer on watch. This situation challenges people’s emotional balance and brings anxiety,

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9 Swales does not agree with the problem-solving criterion as the basis for tasks (Swales, 1990: 75).
10 According to Brislin (1992: 76), in ‘individualistic societies such as the United States, people are socialized to pursue their own goals (...)’. In collective societies (mainly in Latin America and Asia), people are willing to downplay their own personal goals for the good of a group'.
lack of confidence and insecurity to both interactants. Moreover, the radio officer feels that the first officer has made an unfair use of power. It is also worth mentioning that the speakers desire to communicate a meaning. When any of them believe that the language form he uses has failed to communicate, the speakers use alternative methods to communicate (See Appendix).

In both cases their communicative goal is hindered by their cultural realities and it highlights the need for inserting this element in Maritime English Training for assisting in people's cultural adjustment. On the other hand, materialising all the psychological factors in class seems to be quite an ample task since some of these features do not fit exactly in a second language teaching curriculum. Since these gaps should be covered in any case, the teacher's role should be focused on monitoring, orientating and potentiating learners, therefore reducing the factors to communication skills and cultural awareness mainly. From our point of view maritime english teachers should concentrate their efforts on cultural realities such as hierarchical relations, gender differences, role relationships, and individualism/collectivism. These cultural realities shall be known as potentially intercultural conflicts and will have a direct action on the methodology applied and tasks' design for a maritime english course.

4. Learning tasks: the case of multilingual crews

Technical communication can form as much as or even more than 50% of the job of an engineer, a scientist, or a technologist. In the case of a merchant mariner this percentage, it is believed, may increase to 75% due to the constant use of English language in an isolated spot at sea when either speech radio communications or face-to-face speech communications are required. The former mode is normalized by an internationally agreed marine standard language code and in general terms, it could be said that tries to avoid any attempt of creating ambiguity and intercultural problems in communication. The latter mode is mediated by the cultural problems posed by the interactions of multilingual crews and unfortunately there is not literature focused on this subject. A common language is required at present from personnel employed in key positions especially -in the bridge, in the engine room- and also for personnel who may work in other areas or cover other positions such as catering department, navigating cadets, electricians, pumpers, efficient deck hands, boatswains, etc. Another unpredictable element on board is the nature of emergencies that risk the lives of people aboard and intensifies the demands and needs for overcoming language problems due to the polyglot nature of crews.

The danger posed by shipboard communication problems cannot be eliminated by the
simple assessment of language difficulties. Training should be aimed at developing a high degree of confidence and competence in intercultural situations in order to be effective. Good training must cover awareness, cultural knowledge necessary for adjustment, so that learners are not merely passive recipients. In order to this, learners must bring a high degree of extrinsic motivation derived from their own recognition of English language relevance to their needs. The ESP teacher’s immediate task is then to increase the ESP learners’ intrinsic motivation by involving them in the learning activity and relating it to their present needs. In our study we have applied the principles of a task-based methodology within a framework that consists of:

a) Input: It can be a text - definition, description, diagram, dialogue -, a picture - a photograph, or a painting -, an audio tape or a speech that provide the linguistic and conceptual input for a given task. It is a method of presentation technique that will introduce and assist the learners in their developing knowledge. It is the first step towards the learner’s successful completion of the task.

b) Language focus: Useful expressions with phrases organised in structural and functional categories such as refusing, supporting a suggestion, insisting, initiating conversations, ending, getting the turn, interrupting, etc., the main emphasis being on the language used in cooperative, problem-solving, professional discussion.

c) Cultural focus: It consists of case studies that allow the learner to empathize with people who are having IC difficulties. It involves the specification of potentially intercultural conflicts within the most common situations found in multilingual crews. In this case, the language teacher finds the support of the subject teacher or peer that helps in defining the most usual situations aboard a ship. Interdisciplinary collaboration has proved to be an essential tool in devising this typology of learning tasks.

d) Task: It covers the kinds of situations and functions that one would expect and is presented in view of the level and sequencing. As pointed out by Tarone and Yule:

The aim of the task-based procedure is to provide a speaker with some information to convey, a listener who requires that information, and an awareness that an information gap exists. (Tarone and Yule, 1989: 104)

Students have access to the teacher and do not work in isolation but in pair or in groups. However, problems are only dealt with if and when they arise. Concerning the student’s level of English, we consider that a right grading according to task difficulties is really motivating and leads to successful attempts of tasks at higher levels in second stages. As Wilson (1986) suggests:
Even a student whose general proficiency in English is low should be able to perform authentic tasks successfully at gradually increasing levels of difficulty. (p. 29)

e) Feedback: The teacher’s role is as a monitor that controls the process and does not intervene until a proper feedback of the activity is carried out. At this stage, the teacher concentrates on linguistic failures mainly.

e) Self-Assessment exercise: Learners’ attention is deviated towards the cultural conflicts that may have arisen and reflect on possible solutions. This stage reinforces their discussion skills and increases creativity, self-confidence and student-teacher interaction.

5. Conclusions

We can conclude that there should be an awareness by every learner acquiring a second language that the foundations of this language process are closely dependant on mutual collaboration and cooperation shared by every interactant to produce a right adaptation and finally negotiate meaning. On the whole, we have found that the task-based approach is linguistically and communicatively relevant to the learning situation. Teachers should foster learners’ interest and motivation to promote learning. In order to expand the learners’ repertoire of culturally appropriate behaviours, ESP teachers have to be familiar with a selected range of the most frequent cultural backgrounds and conflicts. This claims for an adequate interdisciplinary collaboration that helps to discover and anticipate the features of intercultural encounters aboard. Other important components that may interfere in the learning process are the number of students per class and a reduced class time. The integration of the intercultural factor should be considered as complementary to the general outline of the ESP syllabus. Since ESP essentially requires discourse competence across community boundaries, the tasks aim at building awareness of the mechanism of how to overcome cultural conflicts and communicating effectively aboard. This typology could also be implemented in other ESP fields once the teacher has carried out a needs analysis and applied situations to student’s own fields.

We have found that in ESP contexts a reflexive process provided by the self-assessment stage can help international pre-graduate learners to build a bridge between their professional expectations aboard and the linguistic challenges that students exchanging cultures must experience. In this respect we feel that strategies’ anticipations offer the learners a valuable opportunity to gain greater control over their entry into the discourse communities aboard a ship.
5. References


Appendix

Dialogue transcript
Interactants: First Officer (F.O.); Radio Officer (R.O.)

F.O.: Good morning. Who has been on watch last night? [He does not procure eye-contact or any other nonverbal gesture]
R.O.: Good morning. Pardon, Sir. Can you repeat? [He uses the communicative strategy of appeal for assistance]; [politeness and diplomacy skills are used]
F.O.: Who has been on watch?
R.O.: No, we did not watch anything, sir.
F.O.: Who was, here, in the bridge all night? [He uses circumlocution as the communicative strategy of paraphrasis]
R.O.: Aye, Sir, Mr. Rodriguez was of guard [He uses word coinage as the communicative strategy of paraphrasis]
F.O.: OK. How has the radar been operating last night?
R.O.: Er., can you sp...? [intonation pattern changes]; [intercepted by the F.O.].
F.O.: Any problems?
R.O.: Well, yes, ...there was a problem, Sir. The coverage area is, er ... was reduced. [eye-contact is not produced from R.O.'s position] [anxiety level is increased]
F.O.: Well, I want to speak to Mr. Ramirez.
R.O.: But I can inform you, Sir. It is my problem too. He explained it to me. [eye-contact is produced]
F.O.: No, I want to speak to Mr. Ramirez. He was on watch. Please tell him to come to the bridge. [anxiety level is increased]
R.O.: hum... All right, Sir.