

THE HANDBOOK OF BUSINESS  
DISCOURSE

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Edited by Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd  
22 George Square, Edinburgh

[www.euppublishing.com](http://www.euppublishing.com)

Typeset in 10/12 Ehrhardt MT and Gill Sans  
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and  
printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 2801 8 (hardback)

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## BELF: Business English as a Lingua Franca

Marinel Gerritsen and Catherine Nickerson

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### Introduction

Communication between speakers of different languages has increased exponentially in the course of the past decades in all walks of life, including in the business world. This is the case not only for internal business communication, as more and more business organisations are characterised by a multicultural, multilingual workforce, but also in external business communication, where the different stakeholders involved in the communication originate from different countries. In such commonplace situations in international business communication, whenever person A with first language A speaks to person B with first language B, there are four options available to them:

- 1 Both speakers use language A.
- 2 Both speakers use language B.
- 3 Person A uses his or her first language A, and Person B uses his or her first language B.
- 4 Person A and Person B opt for a third language, language C, that both parties are able to speak and understand well enough to communicate, i.e. they opt for a lingua franca.

The choice that is made depends on many different factors. The foreign language proficiency of the interactants plays an important role; if B does not speak A, then option 1 is not possible; likewise, if A does not speak B, then option 2 is not possible; and for option 3 to be successful, both parties must be able to understand both languages well. For option 4 to be successful, both parties must be able to use the chosen lingua franca well enough for the interaction to take place. In addition, although research has suggested that organisations may be more likely to complete transactions such as sales transactions successfully by following a strategy of accommodation (as in examples 1 and 2) rather than by using a lingua franca (as in example 4; Vandermeeren 1999), the latter remains the norm in much international business communication, more specifically in situations where the chosen lingua franca is English. Artificially created languages such as Volapük and Esperanto that were purposefully designed as a lingua franca have never played a significant role in

international business, and although French, German, Spanish and Scandinavian have all been documented as being used as lingua francas (Vandermeeren 1999; Poncini 2004; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005), English has played an increasingly dominant role in business transactions in general around the globe over the course of the last two decades.

The role of English as an international business lingua franca is now beyond dispute (Knapp and Meierkord 2002; Mair 2003; Seidlhofer 2004; Gerritsen and Nickerson 2004; van Els 2005; Ammon 2006; Gunnarsson 2006; Jenkins 2006; Louhiala-Salminen and Charles 2006; Mollin 2006; Seidlhofer et al. 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007; Borge 2007; Rogerson-Revell 2007). In this chapter we will discuss the methodologies that have been used to investigate the use of business English as a lingua franca (BELF), i.e. in situations where speakers of two different languages opt for a third that is not a first language for either one of them. In this respect we consider BELF transactions as a special type of international business English (IBE), where IBE may be viewed as an overarching term that includes interactions between first language speakers of different varieties, between speakers of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL), in communication with other first language speakers, and, in the special case of BELF transactions, between ESL or EFL speakers with other non-native English speakers. We recognise that much of what we discuss may also be relevant for interactions between two native speakers of English (NSE), or between an NSE and an ESL or EFL speaker, especially where participants vary in the level of expertise in a given domain, where they differ in cultural background or where they speak a different variety of English (for further discussion, see e.g. Gass and Varonis 1991; Smith 1992; Lindemann 2002). For the sake of clarity, however, we will limit most of our discussion in the rest of this chapter to BELF encounters.

BELF research is not in itself a methodology, nor indeed has it been associated with any one methodology in particular. As we will demonstrate below, it is rather, a rich area of research that has made use of a variety of different methodological approaches, each intended to reveal a different aspect of lingua franca communication. In the sections that follow, we will first discuss the nature of BELF communication, and the underlying reasons why there may be a breakdown in communication in a BELF transaction. We will then go on to highlight a number of the methodologies that have been used to investigate the use of BELF communication, i.e. observations, survey research, corpus research and experiments, and the characteristics of BELF communication that these have revealed.

### **Background: The nature of BELF communication**

In this section, we will discuss the nature of BELF communication, and attempt to analyse what the potential communication problems are in a BELF encounter that the interactants need to be able to deal with in order to communicate successfully. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) provide the following working definition of BELF:

BELF refers to English used as a 'neutral' and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not 'non-native speakers' or 'learners'. (2005: 403–4)

While we accept this definition in principle as capturing the essence of BELF communication, we would wish to add the proviso that the fact that BELF users are also non-native speakers impacts on the interaction both in terms of the (cultural) discourse strategies that are chosen, and in the language that is used to realise them. Essentially, BELF encounters may fail where there are differences either in cultural discourse strategies between the interactants and/or in the language that is used to realise them. Generally speaking, the literature on lingua franca communication would suggest that BELF communication may fail for one of three reasons, which can occur singly or in combination: lack of comprehensibility, cultural differences and stereotyped associations. Although the literature provides numerous examples of these three phenomena, much of what is cited is anecdotal and examples specific to the business context are more difficult to find. The discussion below draws on several studies that we are aware of into BELF communication, and it can be viewed as the basis for a future research agenda to continue to investigate the causes of failure in BELF transactions in a systematic, empirical way.

#### Lack of comprehensibility

Comprehensibility means that the message is understood by the receiver in the way in which the sender intended, and research has shown that most comprehensibility problems occur at a lexical and grammatical level. As reported by Tajima (2004), for instance, the worst accident ever in aviation history was the crash between two Boeing 747 Jumbo Jets in Tenerife in 1977, and this was due to a communication breakdown in a BELF situation. The Dutch captain said in English 'We are now at takeoff', a phrase that was interpreted by the Spanish controller as 'We are now at the takeoff position.' What the Dutch captain meant to say, however, was 'We are now actually taking off.' The English sentence the captain uttered was an unusual phrase in English aviation terminology and this was due to interference from his native language of Dutch. Lexico-grammatical differences in BELF encounters may hopefully lead to less catastrophic results, but they may certainly occur on a regular basis. It would be a useful addition to our knowledge of BELF encounters to investigate systematically the role played by lexico-grammatical differences (see also Seidlhofer and Jenkins 2003, for a discussion on this point for lingua franca communication in general).

#### Cultural differences

A breakdown in communication can also be the result of underlying cultural differences between the interactants. Speakers communicate from the perspective of their own cultural background, which means that they use the communication strategies associated with that culture even if they are communicating in a language other than their own (first) language. While people may need to 'speak the same language' in such multilingual contexts, they may not necessarily 'speak the same way' (Rogerson-Revell 2007: 188) and similarly, they 'tend to interact in accordance with the socio-cultural norms which govern the use of their own first language' (Vandermeeren 1999: 275), Shaw et al. (2004) show for instance, that Europeans from Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and the UK have substantially different ideas about what is preferable and acceptable problem-solving discourse than Italians. The Belgians, Danish, Swedish and British showed a significantly greater

preference for straightforward but relational dialogues than did the Italians, who preferred longer dialogues with the incorporation of additional politeness strategies. It may be the case, as a result, that the problem-solving strategies favoured by the northern Europeans are considered too direct – and therefore potentially detrimental to the communication – by the Italians. In a similar way, Bjorge (2007) shows that in BELF email correspondence, people who belong to cultures with a high power distance use more formal salutations and closing phrases (e.g. 'Dear Madam', 'Yours respectfully') than writers from low power distance cultures (e.g. 'Hi', 'Cheers'). Clearly this difference may lead to communication difficulties, because the high power distance cultures may experience the informal use of language as impolite and too personal, and the low power distance cultures may experience the formal use of language as unnecessarily distant.

A more extensive discussion on the impact of culture in BELF encounters is beyond the scope of this chapter, and the nature of intercultural encounters in business in particular is dealt with in more detail elsewhere in Chapter 24 of this volume. Later in this chapter we will discuss the extensive survey of BELF in Scandinavia by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005), together with the different methodologies that were used, and we will show how the Swedish and Finnish BELF partners involved in the study were aware of the underlying communication differences between them that could be attributed to culture.

#### Stereotyped associations with a particular accent in English

Research in foreign language acquisition has shown that it is almost impossible for EFL speakers to adopt a completely convincing NSE accent (Kellerman and Vermeulen 1995; Bongaerts et al. 2000), and the idea that EFL speakers must learn to ape NSE speakers, i.e. the type of linguistic imperialism that has been pilloried by authors such as Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1998) and Canagarajah (1999), has been increasingly replaced by what Rogerson-Revell refers to as a 'functional realism' (Rogerson-Revell 2007). In this approach EFL is viewed as a new variety of English, rather than an imperfect approximation of an NSE variety (Kachru 1986; Ammon 1996; Alexander 1999; Jenkins 2000, 2006; van Oostendorp 2002; Louhiala-Salminen and Charles 2006; Seidlhofer et al. 2006). The English produced by an EFL speaker in a BELF interaction, then, will reflect the speaker's first language, and research shows that this may often have a negative influence on the associations that a hearer may have with that speaker, since people may associate other (unrelated) characteristics such as high or low status, high or low intelligence, and a particular professional background with a given accent. British hearers, for instance, perceive speakers of German English as less prestigious and less socially attractive than speakers of Standard English, whereas they rate French English speakers much more positively (Coupland and Bishop 2007). Likewise, when Nejari et al. (2007) studied the effect of a slight Dutch English accent compared to the effect of (British) RP in the onset of a telephone sales talk for a Dutch asset management business, they found that RP hearers – playing the role of potential customers – attribute a much lower status to the speakers of Dutch-English they heard than to RP speakers.

Similar associations with different accents may also clearly impact a BELF encounter in either a positive or negative way. However, despite the fact that interactions between EFL speakers with different first languages are a common feature of business organisations in the twenty-first century, surprisingly little is known about the attitude that EFL

speakers have towards the accents produced by other EFL speakers if they do not share the same first language. Research is urgently needed in this area. The literature on BELF interactions that we have selectively reviewed above would suggest that participants need to be aware of the impact that differences in lexico-grammatical realisations can have on their communication, they need to understand the impact of differences in accent, and they need to understand the effects of the differences in discourse strategies that different BELF speakers or writers may use to underpin the spoken or written transaction. The burgeoning of cross-border business interactions and the increase in the diverse nature of the workforce, both in multinational corporations (MNCs) and in local business environments (Louhiala-Saminen 2002), suggests that it is becoming increasingly important to understand the different factors that may play a role in whether or not BELF encounters are successful. In the remainder of this chapter, we will highlight a number of the methodologies that have been used to investigate the use of and characteristics associated with BELF.

### Methodologies used in research on BELF interactions

The body of knowledge on BELF communication is based on research that has drawn primarily on four different methodologies: survey research, the analysis of a corpus, experimental research and observation. *Survey* research applied to BELF could be a survey questionnaire or set of structured interviews about the use of English world-wide in an MNC, and the problems associated with its use. The *analysis of a corpus*, could be a corpus of business meetings, email correspondence or advertising texts in which BELF is used, which a researcher then analyses to establish what the general characteristics of BELF in the corpus are. In *experimental research* a research team could devise a set of experimental procedures to establish empirically the attitudes of one set of BELF users, e.g. German BELF users, to the accent typical of a second set of BELF users, e.g. French BELF users. All three of these methods have often been used in combination with an initial period of *observation*, which is used to inform the questions in a questionnaire survey, to underpin the selection and analysis of an appropriate corpus, or to design the test items and measuring instruments in an experiment.

In the discussion below we will refer to a number of different studies and discuss the contribution that each approach has made to the existing body of knowledge on BELF communication. For survey research we will focus on Vandermeeren's work (1998, 1999) on the car component and electronics industry in five European countries, and on Charles and Marschan-Piekkari's work (2002) in an MNC. We will then discuss how survey research was combined with a corpus analytical approach in Louhiala-Salminen et al.'s (2005) study of cross-border mergers in Scandinavia. For the experimental approach (which is often prefaced by the compilation of a corpus) our focus will be on the work of the Nijmegen group (e.g. Gerritsen et al. 2000; van Meurs et al. 2004; Nickerson et al. 2005; Nejari et al. under review; together with researchers such as Wang 2007 and van den Doel 2006).

The survey of foreign language use in European business carried out by Sonja Vandermeeren during the 1990s is a landmark study that uses the survey method as its main methodology. Data was collected in this large-scale project in the sociolinguistic tradition (e.g. Vandermeeren 1998, 1999) by asking companies in Germany, France,

the Netherlands, Portugal and Hungary to fill in written questionnaires about the use of foreign languages in a variety of intercultural settings. The project aimed not only to identify patterns of language use within the target corporations, but also to establish why these patterns existed, and whether there was a link between foreign language use and export performance. In 1993 and 1994, corporations representing the car components sector and the electrical and electronics industry were surveyed in the five countries, resulting in a response from 415 corporations. The survey showed that English was in widespread use but also that other languages were used and were considered necessary by the specialist informants. For instance, 42 per cent of the French companies reported that they used German almost always in correspondence with German companies, compared to only 30 per cent who almost always used English, and likewise, although just over 30 per cent of the German companies reported that they almost always used English in correspondence with French companies, almost 25 per cent reported that they almost always used French. As Vandermeeren observes, at least for German–French written business interaction in 1993 and 1994, English did not dominate as a lingua franca and a considerable number of the corporations chose to use the first language of their business partner.

Vandermeeren discusses the relationship between the selection of BELF for all transactions and the conscious choice of not using BELF, but using the business partner's language. She suggests that at least for the French corporations that responded to the survey, the choice of German in correspondence with German business partners seemed to be associated with a better export performance than where companies had opted for English in their correspondence.

Vandermeeren's study provides a useful snapshot of the languages used as lingua franca in a particular sector in European business at the beginning of the nineties, or at least what the respondents reported to her by means of a written survey. Inherent within the survey as a methodology is the fact that the findings are based on what respondents report they are doing, and not on what they may actually be doing, such that in Vandermeeren's study, for instance, it would have been a useful addition to observe respondents as they went about their daily business, to interview them or to collect further information on language use in the form of a corpus. In more recent studies that have incorporated a survey as part of the research methodology, researchers have used other, additional methods to collect their data, for example, in Li So-mui and Mead's (2000) study of English as an international language in the textile industry in Hong Kong, observation, interviews, a survey and a corpus are used.

Two studies of lingua franca English in the Scandinavian context have been of enormous influence in defining the field of BELF research. The first of these is the 2002 study of language use at Kone Elevators by Charles and Marschan-Piekkari, and the second the 2005 study of English lingua franca use in two Nordic corporate mergers by Louhiala-Salminen et al. Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) is a study which uses an extensive survey and interview investigation of middle management at Kone Elevators, an MNC with a head office in Finland. Survey data was collected to investigate the relationship between corporate language policy, i.e. the adoption of English as a corporate lingua franca in the early 1970s, and the employees' actual communication practices. One hundred and ten staff were interviewed about their use of English and the problems they experienced, representing twenty-five corporate units in ten different countries in Europe, Mexico and Asia, and this was followed by six further in-depth interviews with key people within



the organisation. Despite the fact that English had been in use within the corporation for more than thirty years at the time when the study took place, the employees interviewed reported that lack of language proficiency caused problems in the communication, as did the frequent lack of a shared language among a set of interactants. Tellingly for BELF research, the employees interviewed reported that there were difficulties caused by the diversity of different Englishes that were used within the company, and perhaps most interesting of all, BEFL and (B)ESL speakers had less difficulty understanding other BEFL and (B)ESL speakers than they did their NSE colleagues, particularly the British NSEs. As a result, one of the recommendations made by Charles and Marschan-Piekkari is to raise NSEs' awareness of BEFL and (B)ESL varieties and to teach them how to communicate more effectively with those speakers. Similar findings are reported by Rogerson-Revell (2007) in her survey of participants that use IBE at a European business organisation, including BELF and NSE speakers, suggesting that this should be an area of interest for both researchers and teacher-trainers in the future.

The 2005 study by Louhiala-Salminen et al. also focuses on BELF in Scandinavian corporations. This multimethod study looks at the use of BELF in two Swedish-Finnish corporate mergers: a bank and a paper manufacturer. It combines a written questionnaire survey, a set of interviews and the compilation and analysis of both a written and a spoken corpus. The study set out to investigate the use of BELF, and more specifically to identify the similarities and differences between the Swedish and Finnish employees in BELF encounters and the problems that arose between them. In this respect, it involved the collection and analysis of not only the language challenges faced by employees in using BELF on a daily basis, but also the cultural challenges they perceived. The data and methods used were varied, and this allowed the research team to build up a rich picture of BELF use within the two corporations. For instance, in the survey part of the project 920 questionnaires were circulated across the two corporations and a total of thirty-one interviews were held with key informants to verify the information reported on in the written survey. Then a corpus of four complete BELF meetings were analysed (using a discourse analytical approach), followed by the analysis of 114 BELF emails (using genre analysis), again to investigate the language and cultural challenges that had been signalled by the survey respondents and interviewees in the first stage of the project. For instance, the Finnish and Swedish employees viewed each other (and themselves) as direct (Finns) as opposed to discussive (Swedes), and this was also reflected in the discourse characteristics observed in the spoken and written corpora. An important finding of the study on BELF use in business organisations is that despite its 'neutral' status as a 'cultureless' communication instrument, 'it can be seen to be a conduit of its speaker's communication culture' (2005: 417).

Louhiala-Salminen et al.'s study is of course not the only study to use a corpus-based approach in investigating BELF: studies such as van Mulken and van der Meer's analysis of replies to customers (2005), Poncini's study of multicultural business meetings in Italy (2004), Tajima's study of interactions between pilot and controller before air traffic accidents (2004), Planken's discussion of BELF negotiation situations (2005), and Bjorge's study of email correspondence (2007) are all excellent examples. What sets Louhiala-Salminen et al.'s study apart, however, and suggests at the same time a fruitful area of future research, is its combination of different methodologies and analytical approaches and its focus on the role played both by language and by culture.

For the past decade, researchers at the Radboud University Nijmegen, in the Netherlands have been investigating the use of English and the effects of this use in the (non-NSE) European context. Using both *corpus* analysis and *experimental* investigation, the group has sought to establish the ways in which English has been incorporated into a variety of different business texts in the various languages spoken throughout the European Union, and then to investigate the comprehensibility of and attitudes to that English amongst the more educated population. Therefore, for instance, Gerritsen et al. (2000) look at television advertising in the Netherlands, van Meurs et al. (2004) at job advertisements, also in the Netherlands, and Gerritsen et al. (2007) at the use of English in product advertisements in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. The studies show a consistent – and increasing – use of English lexis in the business genre under investigation over a period of time, and the experimental investigations have shown that compared to the use of the local language, consumers across the EU hold neutral to negative attitudes towards the use of English. Additional investigation has shown that the use of English does not have any effect on the image of the product or the company with which it is associated, and also that, even for the highly educated sector of society, 30 per cent of the English lexis used is not at all understood. While we accept that these situations may be different in nature from the other BELF interactions we have discussed, since the national cultures involved are not in communication with each other, we also believe that this type of BELF communication will continue to increase within the European context.

Other very recent *experimental* research, both at the Radboud University Nijmegen and elsewhere, has focused on the comprehensibility of different EFL accents, and has so far provided contradictory findings. According to Nejjari et al. (under review), for instance, British NSEs are able to comprehend fully sentences uttered with a strong Dutch English accent, whereas the studies by van den Doel (2006) and Wang (2007) indicate that some EFL accents are less comprehensible for NSEs than others, depending on the first language of the EFL speaker; i.e. the more the accent resembles English the better it is understood. This is also true for ELF communication between EFL speakers with a different first language, such that the more the languages resemble each other the better the speakers understand each other. More experimental research in this field is clearly needed, especially in BELF encounters with EFL speakers of different languages.

*Experimental* methods clearly have their limitations. Texts are manipulated to represent a particular variable or set of variables, sacrificing authenticity in the process, and respondents may answer in a different way in an experimental setting and in real life. In an ideal situation, the data collected by means of an experiment should be complemented by data obtained in real-life situations (observation). Having said that however, experimental research is an important, perhaps crucial, approach in investigating BELF interactions, since it is only through the combination of survey, corpus and experimental investigations that we will really be able to isolate those characteristics of BELF communication that may cause a communication breakdown, and likewise, those that are not likely to do so.

### Discussion and future developments

As Seidlhofer and Jenkins (2003) suggest, perhaps the most fruitful area of inquiry in lingua franca research in the future will be to develop appropriate methodologies to

identify those aspects of communication that are most likely to lead to disruption in the interaction. Rather than focusing on language proficiency in general in courses designed for EFL or ESL speakers, the findings of such research could then drive teaching and training materials to focus more efficiently on those areas that are likely to cause a problem. The same would also be true for courses designed for NSEs of English in raising their awareness of BELF and other types of IBE interactions.

In this chapter, we have identified at least four areas of lingua franca communication that have as yet received little attention. The first of these is the role played by comprehensibility, and specifically what factors affect comprehensibility in either a positive or a negative way. Second, there are as yet few studies that have looked in a systematic way at the role played by different aspects of culture in BELF communication – with the exception of the European-wide project based at the Helsinki School of Economics that incorporates culture in an electronic survey of corporate communication ([www.hse.fi/ckh](http://www.hse.fi/ckh)). Third, BELF research would benefit from research that is specifically designed to identify the associations that hearers have with accents that are dissimilar to their own in business interactions, as well as with accents (in English) that are the same as their own. And finally, little has as yet been done to categorise the relative seriousness of different types of communication failures; e.g. is a lexical miscommunication less or more threatening to the communication than a cultural miscommunication related to, for example, the degree of directness used in an encounter? All four of these areas would benefit from the application of the same set of consistent methodologies to build up a picture of BELF communication around the globe.

In addition to the methodologies that we have discussed above (observation, survey research and corpus research), it would be useful to add the *focus group* as a qualitative way of investigating BELF interaction. A focus group consists of a number of people, usually around eight to ten, who are working in an organisation, for instance, where English is used. Focus groups can be used at two points in a research project. They can be used in order to determine the scope of a large research project, such that a focus group discussion on the use of BELF and the problems associated with its use can be used to underpin a set of questionnaire or interview questions. A focus group can also be used after a period of observation, a survey, a corpus analysis or an experiment have taken place. The group can then be used to discuss the findings, since the reaction of the group may shed new light on how these may be interpreted and why.

### **Conclusion: implications for scholarship, research and training**

As we discussed in the previous section, much still needs to be done in developing appropriate methodologies for the systematic investigation of BELF. Despite some commentators' suggestions that languages such as Hindi and Chinese will steadily gain in popularity as business languages (e.g. Graddol 2004), we believe that English will continue to dominate both business lingua franca interactions specifically and international business communication in general. The work of researchers such as Briguglio (2005), Bolton (2002, 2003) and Chew (2005), for instance, shows the existing need for English in Asia, and the newly emerging interest in the English used in the business processing outsourcing (BPO) industry across Asia, i.e. in call-centre communication in countries such as India, the Philippines and China, will make a major contribution

to our understanding of BELF, BESL and IBE interactions in the future (Forey and Lockwood 2006). Growth areas of business that are directly related to a nation's proficiency in English, such as the BPO industry, would clearly benefit from a battery of diagnostic tools combining observation, survey, corpus analysis, respondent surveys and focus groups, in order to improve upon the effectiveness of the communication that takes place in customer interactions.

The research findings and methodologies that we have discussed here suggest two obvious areas on which teaching and training should focus. First, it is important to raise students' awareness of the different varieties of English that are used in the business world, and along with that to facilitate their understanding of their own variety of English – be that NSE, EFL or ESL – and the impact that that variety might have on a speaker from a language background different to theirs. In this respect, we agree with Jenkins's contention that EFL should not be viewed (by trainers or teachers) as 'incorrect', but rather more as a variety of English with its own characteristics (Jenkins 2006). Second, and perhaps more importantly, teachers and trainers need to make students aware of the impact of culture. This would involve not only an awareness of the students' own culture and associated communication strategies, but also the culture and strategies used by other colleagues that they are likely to come into contact with in the process of doing business.

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