

# Developing cultural awareness and intercultural communication through multimedia: A case study from medicine and the health sciences

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## Abstract

Awareness of how different cultural beliefs may influence one's own and others' linguistic choices is fundamental to successful spoken communication, particularly in intercultural professional settings such as contemporary healthcare. The aim of this paper is to outline how this sensitivity can be enhanced through teaching that develops reflectiveness as practice for analyzing and understanding the interrelationship of language, communication and culture. The setting is an intercultural ESP learning context supporting international students in undergraduate medical and health sciences education. A multimedia tool was developed as a trigger for the teacher to assist learners to explore, understand, and take into account the interrelationship between language, culture and communication in healthcare settings. The multimedia tool includes a series of 'voxpop' style interviews with students to give voice to the students' perceptions and experiences of their clinical experience in Australia. Simulated interactions of these ESP learners in clinical settings provide triggers for classroom discussion, build reflective practice skills, and develop the requisite language competence and clinical communication skills. The discussion includes strategies for implementation and evaluation of the multimedia supported methodology.

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## 1. Intercultural communication and cultural awareness

In intercultural communication, language and culture can negatively impact on the success of the interaction. When this occurs in professional settings such as healthcare, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns can have serious implications for health outcomes and patient safety. While the interrelationship between culture, language and communication has been theorised and has informed education and training sessions (e.g., Scollon and Scollon, 2001),

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it remains a challenging construct with which to engage English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners. For English for Specific Purposes teachers, the relationship between language, communication and culture is constantly brought into question as we engage with the task of teaching language from within a specific content domain that has its own ‘culture’ such as the ‘hospital culture’. Added to this is another cultural layer, that of ‘ethnicity’, such as ‘Asian health culture and health beliefs’, or ‘Western health culture and health beliefs’. For ESP teachers, a major challenge is to raise awareness amongst learners of the ways in which these multi-layered cultural domains inform language choices in professional communication.

At the heart of this challenge is the question of how to best explicate the context surrounding language choice, that is, the interpersonal expectations, intentions, and beliefs which underpin daily exchanges between interactants in professional communication. The notion of appropriacy in language choice, which has been a guiding principle in language-teaching syllabus design over the last 30 years, relates to this match of socio-pragmatic action and pragma-linguistic choice (e.g., Kasper, 1997; Yates, 2004). An appropriate or successful communication exchange in a professional communication context is measured in terms of its effectiveness, in the first instance, to establish and conduct a professional relationship in order to achieve a second more specific objective, such as diagnosing a patient’s illness. An understanding of this context therefore precedes the communication event and influences its socio-pragmatic success. Teaching these layers of culture, however, extends the knowledge base of the conventional language teacher, whose primary concern has been viewed as being more confined to the mechanics of grammar, syntax, coherence, cohesion, vocabulary, and intelligibility, albeit ‘appropriate’ in choice (Savignon, 2007). Furthermore, this task of interpretation and explication of ‘culture’ may cause what Singh and Doherty (2004) describe as a moral dilemma for English language teachers; teachers may feel they are possibly spreading a cultural homogenisation: a merging or loss of traditional cultures into a globalised, essentially Western world culture through the promotion of Western standard English (Pennycook, 1997; Yates, 2004).

Related to this concern about how to teach culturally appropriate interactions for ESP settings such as healthcare is the issue of learner identity construction. English language learners may feel compelled to adopt the cultural norms and behaviours of the English-speaking Western culture, thereby reinforcing notions of themselves as possibly linguistically and also culturally ‘deficient’ (Belcher, 2006; Bhatia, 1997; Haggis, 2006; Savignon, 2007). Norton (1997) has described the relationship between language and identity construction as fundamentally linked; each time a language learner speaks, [she/he] “is constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are” (p.420). Northedge (2003) recognised the potential danger of this link and argued that for English as additional language speakers to participate effectively in their professional fields, they need to learn to be able to recognize any differences in their own and others’ cultural identities as well as move back and forth between these cultural and language identities without feeling a sense of loss or guilt. Byram (2000) described this ability as intercultural competence. He also recognised the need for additional language users to critically analyse their own and other cultures and to have an understanding that their thinking is “culturally determined rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural” (Byram, 2000, p.2).

### *1.1. Intercultural communication and teaching ESP*

These theoretical insights raise the question of how language teachers should assist learners to understand the relationship between culture, intercultural identity construction and language production to enable them to function in the new language/workplace setting without compromising their personal and cultural identities. Yates (2004) argues for the explicit teaching of English pragmatic and linguistic conventions to English language learners so that they are able to effectively interact in the English-speaking community. However, she warns against the dangers of teachers interpreting cultural norms ‘naively or prescriptively’ and of seeing culture as static and monolithic rather than dynamic and evolving. Scarino et al. (2007), in their exploration of an intercultural off-shore delivery communication skills learning context, found that language and culture play a mediating role in shaping the teaching process itself, in particular how teachers from both international (western) and local (off-shore country) backgrounds perceive and operationalise their roles. They concluded that for a learning process which delivers knowledge from one cultural context to another to be effective, it should be viewed and implemented as a collaborative self-exploratory effort by teachers and learners and one which recognizes and addresses their own linguistic and cultural influences on teaching and learning at every stage of the delivery process.

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