



# Multicultural Literature: an Innovative Tool to Enhance Business Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence

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## Abstract

*Globalization and computer-mediated technologies bridged the gap between nations and altered the nature and the role of culture in language teaching. They also denationalized English and turned it into a lingua franca. This phenomenon resulted in adjustments in EFL classrooms such as the change in teaching goals and the re-evaluation of cultural awareness especially with the rising tone of hate speech today. Business English teaching is not an exception to all these changes. In fact, it is no longer considered as a mere transmission of infinite lists of vocabulary, diagrams, tables, and figures. In their future career business students will need business jargon as well as intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to cope with multicultural situations and be part of the global citizenry. Based on field research, this paper will be more about practice than theory. After enumerating the factors behind the necessity of including ICC in business English teaching, I will report back my pedagogical experiment on a class of Tunisian MA business students. It was a qualitative action research intended to explore whether multicultural literature, specifically short stories, together with inquiry-based learning (IBL) can enhance their ICC. Data were collected through class observations, journals and semi-structured interviews. Findings showed that using multicultural literature may improve business students' ICC, the short story may be a motivating material for them to read, and inquiry-based learning being enjoyable and autonomous can be an effective approach to teaching literature.*

## 1. Introduction

The twenty first century brought about changes to the humanity such as globalization and computer-mediated technologies, which bridged the gap between nations and altered the nature and the role of culture in language teaching [14]. They also de-nationalized English and turned it into a lingua franca [1]. This phenomenon resulted in adjustments in EFL classrooms like the acknowledgement of the role of learners' cultures [5] and of the importance of intercultural communication. The latter necessitates mastering intercultural communicative competence (ICC) which requires recognizing cultural differences, accepting them, and avoiding stereotypes [11]. Business English teaching needs adjustments too. In this paper, I will proceed by enumerating the factors behind the necessity of including ICC in business English teaching. Then, I will report back a pedagogical experiment on a class of Tunisian MA business students. It was intended to explore whether multicultural literature, specifically short stories, together with inquiry-based learning (IBL) can enhance their intercultural communicative competence.

## 2. Why is intercultural communicative competence necessary to business English teaching?

### 2.1 Change in the workplace

The radical change in the workplace has been the direct result of globalization which is not only a movement of merchandise but also of languages and cultures between countries. Similarly, progress in communication and transportation, and huge waves of immigrants contributed to alter the labor force into a multicultural one [14]. More international business and cooperation are now happening. Therefore, the company which promotes intercultural communicative competence in its employees will be able to avoid drastic disasters and reach higher ranks [7].

### 2.2 Business students' future employability

Business students who are sufficiently trained in ICC are urgently needed in international business market. In fact, it may be a decisive factor in their future employability. Thus, they should be both knowledgeable (i.e. culture and business knowledge) and skilful (i.e. language and business skills) [12].

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### **2.3 Global turmoil**

The growing demonstrations of intolerance, the rising tone of hate speech, and the expanding danger of terrorism in the modern societies led to the global need to achieve better human relationships [8]. This will only be possible through a change in youth's attitudes towards other cultures.

### **2.4 Students' cultural background**

Diversity of students' cultural backgrounds necessitates the inclusion of ICC in educational curricula. Nevertheless students who do not belong to a diverse setting may still need openness to other cultures in order to survive future intercultural encounters [2]. Therefore teachers should provide opportunities for learners to acquire other cultural experiences through authentic cultural materials. Indeed, when a material "is transported from its context of origin, and presented to different learner groups it becomes an example of an intercultural encounter" [6].

### **2.5 Current business English teaching**

The quasi absence of ICC in business English teaching originates from the emphasis on correctness, propriety, spelling, punctuation and business correspondence rather than on cultural diversity. However business English should not only be a mere transmission of infinite lists of business jargon, tables and diagrams. Teachers should rather bear in mind that students may be recruited in a foreign or a multinational company. They will need business jargon as well as intercultural communicative competence to cope with different multicultural situations [12].

## **3. Using multicultural literature to enhance business students' intercultural communicative competence**

### **3.1 Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)**

It is the concept that gave Hymes' 'communicative competence' its intercultural dimension. ICC comprises four interdependent components.

- Knowledge of elements and products in one's and other cultures.
- Skills of discovery and interaction and of interpreting and relating.
- Attitudes of curiosity and openness to all other cultures.
- Critical cultural awareness which can be summarized in the ability to evaluate, critically the practices and products in one's and in other cultures [4].

### **3.2 Multicultural literature**

Multicultural literature is not only what differs from the mainstream but it may emerge from any culture [11]. Produced by people from other cultures, multicultural literature is an authentic material. It mirrors other cultural practices and experiences and, therefore, helps students reach openness to diverse cultures. Moreover, when discovering other people's cultural heritage readers can make connections across time and be aware of the significance of their own heritage [13].

### **3.3 The short story**

Teachers of business English constantly face the challenge of motivating their students who- most of them- think that their area of studies is uninteresting. Consequently, the use of literature among other innovative instructional tools can make learning business English fun [9]. However, not all literature genres are applicable to business studies due to students' general reluctance to read long literary works and the limited time dedicated to language learning. Therefore, being short, brief and concise, the short story can help students learn autonomously and independently, hence encourage them to read literature. Moreover, the emotional and personal involvement that the short story offers may lead learners to grasp the importance and complexity of economic issues after being distant and abstract to them [9].

### **3.4 Inquiry-based learning (IBL) as a teaching approach**

IBL is one of the constructivist approaches which rely on collaborative learning in order to reach higher cognitive development. Indeed, when students collaborate in small groups to solve problems, they can reach a variety of methods and a multitude of solutions. Hence, the teacher is no longer the sole source of information. IBL provides a highly contextualized environment for authentic learning



experiences. It empowers learners with learning autonomy which can be transferred to novel contexts [3].

### 3.5 Methodology

#### 3.5.1 Research design

Since there is no fixed goal in ICC proficiency, its components cannot be entirely measured in a quantitative way [4]. Therefore, I implemented a qualitative action research in order to find out how a group of Tunisian business students could enhance intercultural communicative competence through multicultural literature.

#### 3.5.2 Course design

After an introductory session, two short stories (see Table1.) were examined over 4 weeks. Once the stories were read, students prepared for presentations in groups with the help of teacher's guiding questions. The presentations consisted of the different aspects of ICC in relation to business domain. In fact, the ultimate goal of the course was not to study the literary characteristics of the short stories, but to examine the different components of ICC which will be needed in the students' professional career. Afterwards, discussions over the short stories took place. Ultimately, students reflected on the experience through journals.

#### 3.5.3 Selection of the short stories

The two selected multicultural short stories rarely present difficult or unknown vocabulary. In fact, both of them are taught to intermediary levels in native speaking settings. Students' orientation towards business studies was also a determining factor in the selection process. The themes existing in the short stories are essentially relevant to business field and intercultural communication.

Table1. Multicultural Short Stories Read in the Business English Course

<b>Short Story</b>	Everyday Use
<b>Author</b>	Alice Walker
<b>Background</b>	African- American
<b>Intercultural Themes</b>	Dee, the educated girl wants to get the quilts, symbols of African-American cultural heritage. Mama has to decide who deserves the quilts; Dee or Maggie. A dilemma is set; should the quilts be preserved through everyday use or display?
<b>Short Story</b>	Interpreter of Maladies
<b>Author</b>	Jhumpa Lahiri
<b>Background</b>	Indian-American
<b>Intercultural Themes</b>	Mr Kapasi served as a tourist guide for the Das, the American-Indian family. He works as an interpreter of maladies, a result of Indian linguistic diversity. Differences of communication styles in Indian and American cultures are depicted.

#### 3.5.4 Participants

The research involved 20 MA business students of Higher Institute of Technological Studies, Charguia, Tunisia. They are aged 21 to 32. They are generally reluctant to read literature.

#### 3.5.5 Data collection instruments

Qualitative methods are advisable for the evaluation and the assessment of ICC proficiency [4]. Therefore, I employed class observations, journals and semi-structured interviews to collect students' opinions about the experience.

### 3.6 Findings

I grouped the data emerging from the pedagogical intervention according to the three research questions:

- To what extent does the use of multicultural literature, enhance Tunisian business students' intercultural communicative competence?
- How far can the short story be a motivating material for business students to read literature?



- How effective is the IBL approach in teaching multicultural literature? (see Table 2.)

Table2. Themes that Emerged From Data Analysis

<b>Knowledge</b>	Through multicultural literature students acquired knowledge about cultural heritages and culture-specific products.	
<b>Skills</b>	<b>Skills of discovery and interaction</b>	Through multicultural literature students were able to discover the mechanisms of interaction in cultures.
	<b>Skills of interpreting and relating</b>	Through multicultural literature students were able to interpret the cultural origins behind communication styles (i.e. collectivism Vs individualism) (skill of interpreting)
		Through discussions over multicultural literature students were able to interpret the drawbacks of ignoring other cultures' communication styles (skill of interpreting)
		Through discussions over multicultural literature students interpreted the possibility of reinserting cultural heritage in the economic cycle (skill of interpreting)
		Discussions over multicultural literature helped students to compare cultural heritages, products and communication styles to those in their culture (skill of relating)
<b>Attitudes</b>	Students were able to be open to other communication styles.	
	Through multicultural literature students were able to appreciate and respect other people's cultural heritage.	
<b>The short stories</b>	The short stories were easy to read.	
	Reading the short stories was fun and interesting.	
	Students related to and identified with the characters	
<b>Inquiry-based Learning (IBL)</b>	During IBL tasks students enjoyed learning	
	IBL made students responsible for their learning	

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings support our initial idea that the use of multicultural literature in a business English classroom can enrich students' intercultural communicative competence. Indeed, focus on the three fundamental aspects of ICC when dealing with multicultural short stories may be a systematic and planned guideline for the teacher. By exploiting the cultural elements in relevance to business, instructors may provide students with a rich motivating learning material. The research has also validated the rationale of using multicultural short stories as a motivating instrument for students to read literature. The familiarity of vocabulary in the short stories turns students into independent readers and therefore into autonomous learners. Similarly, engaging students in inquiry-based learning makes them feel responsible for their own learning process.

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