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ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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IN TEACHING BUSINESS communication, instructors usually can take for granted that English is the language of business communication in a globalised world. Even in a multicultural and multilingual country such as Malaysia, the assumption that English is the language to use is shared by those who manage programs, those who teach, and students. The unquestioned assumption that English is the language of business pervades the teaching of business communication in Anglophone Asia.
This was the situation I faced when teaching in Malaysia for a New Zealand university that was contracted to provide a business programme in a private Malaysian university, with the choice of the provider no doubt influenced by the fact that, in Kachru’s (1991) terms, New Zealand is a largely monolingual English-speaking society in the inner circle (Bell & Kuiper, 2000). A multiethnic nation with a population of 20 million, Malaysia is in the outer circle (Kachru, 1991, p. 179), with Malays and other indigenous groups (Iban, Bidayuh, and Kadazan) constituting 59% of the total population. The Chinese, who constitute 32% of the population, are mostly located in urban areas, while the Indian population of 8.2% is mainly made up of Tamils.

In the profiles with which they introduced themselves at the start of the course, most of the students aspired to employment in English-speaking, multinational companies. For the students, learning business communication in English was therefore congruent with their aspirations. All students accepted the discourse of the English-speaking classroom, unquestioningly listening to lectures in (New Zealand) English.

I was alerted to the fact that conducting all communication in English might be problematic for some students, given the diversity in the ethnic backgrounds and first languages of the students. English was the first language of only a few students, and in accordance with the national education policy, the language of their secondary schooling had not often been English. Discussions with students revealed that in their own lives, at home, with their friends, and in the marketplace, they spoke Bahasa Malaysia, an Indian or Chinese language, or one of the Malaysian dialects. How much were they comprehending of what was being taught?

Further questions were raised by experiences in and outside the classroom. English was usually not the language of local commerce and was not normally that of the students’ employment experiences. For example, in this richly multilingual society, I found a taxi driver who was able to conduct conversations, with varying degrees of fluency, in five languages. A local restaurant was run by a graduate of my home university in New Zealand. Most of her communication with, for example, suppliers was conducted in Malay and Chinese languages. Much written and spoken official communication is conducted in Bahasa Malaysia. Would learning how to conduct business
communication in English be the best preparation for our students in their employment? Should we teach business communication in English?

Workshop exercises provided the opportunity to test this. A series of communication exercises had been planned for workshop groups to create awareness of communication situations in general, and of business situations in particular, and to provide time to practise relevant communication skills. In the workshops, many of the language exercises were conducted in English, although code switching among languages was evident in the informal small group discussions. The exercise in which a message is passed by whispering through a chain of speakers was conducted in English, the language choice being initiated by the first student speaker. Although the results at the end of the chain were nonsensical, the use of English reflected the students’ view that English was the appropriate language in this situation.

Encouraging the students to try the exercise in Bahasa Malaysia produced dramatically different results, with a message recognisably like its beginning being retrieved at the end of the chain. Similarly, when the students were given the task of writing an email message with no language specified, initially they all chose to use English, although for some of them, this made the exercise doubly difficult. I discovered that most of them normally emailed friends in colloquial Malay (Bazaar Malay), so I changed the instructions to highlight that there was a language choice involved. Instructing the students to write a business email to someone with whom they shared a common language changed the nature of the exercise from a language-writing one to an exercise concerning the appropriate use of the medium for business.

When students were conducting discussions in small subgroups of four or five, a great deal of code switching took place. The topic made a difference. In one exercise, the students played a simulation game that produced more English in the groups, probably because the game involved simulated decision making as if the participants were NASA astronauts stranded on the moon.

As a result of these observations, action research was planned with the aims of both providing data on whether the choice of English language was appropriate for our students and providing the students with a stimulus to consider their own linguistic backgrounds and aspirations. A
questionnaire was administered to the students that asked them about their language use at home and in business environments, both when speaking formally and informally to someone who spoke the same home language and when talking with those who spoke different languages. The students were also asked about the languages they would use when writing emails or business letters and in other formal occasions.

The results showed that the students saw English as a language for formal situations and for cross-linguistic communication in a business context. English was not the first choice for communicating with those with whom they shared home languages. When prompted, the students revealed a significant degree of awareness of how much variation there is in language use in Malaysian business. They reported that among speakers of the same home language, small businesses in Malaysia, particularly family businesses, might have relatively little use for English. Even in multinationals operating in Malaysia, if the students are correct in their assessment, there is likely to be relatively little need for English and even less for standard English.

So although the students assumed that standard English was the language of business internationally and thus their passport to successful careers in business in Malaysia, when they were asked about their actual and anticipated language use, English appeared less important. Apparently, Malaysian students do not seek English business degrees in the expectation that standard English will be the sole or primary means of communicating in the business world, but they recognise the gatekeeping power of speaking English (Kuiper & Kuiper, 2003). The students aspire to work in multinationals, but most are more likely to find employment in Malaysian companies and local businesses. For us as teachers, therefore, providing opportunities for students to practise business communication in their local languages, although the predominant classroom discourse was English, appeared to be appropriate.

References


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TEACHING TIPS AND ASSIGNMENT IDEAS FOR ESL STUDENTS

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ESL STUDENTS POSE a challenge in the classroom because teachers’ assumptions about the languages and cultural information in students’ heads may be wrong. Students’ assumptions about teachers, courses, and subjects may likewise be faulty (Beamer, 1994; Gilsdorf, 2002; Holmes, 2004; Silva, 1992; Steinman, 2003). Our teaching tips and assignments are designed to democratize and demystify the content and teaching practices of the business communication classroom by making both parties’ assumptions more explicit. By talking and writing about their assumptions, both teachers and students can spot comprehension problems and expose normally hidden cultural assumptions. By encouraging students to model thinking and communicating styles, teachers provide the guidance and scaffolding ESL students need, without singling them out as different from the class norm, and thus ensure these students’ inclusion in all classroom events.

Our polytechnic institute offers business, engineering, and health programs that merge academic and applied learning, maintain close ties with industry and employers, and conduct applied research. Diploma and degree students are required to take a 1-year, 105-hour business and technical communication course. Many students, one third in one program, already have undergraduate degrees but need applied skills for the job market. Many are ESL students. Because