A situated genre approach for business communication education in cross-cultural contexts

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Introduction

Cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly important with the rapid development of internationalisation and globalisation. This international trend is also evident in the tertiary education sector. With an increasing number of students from foreign countries, especially from Asia, coming to study in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (NZ) in the past two decades, the student composition in the tertiary institutions of these countries is changing. Instructors on professional communication programmes are often challenged with issues of finding appropriate models to teach students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. What were assumed to be good models for teaching professional communication may not be appropriate for a class of mixed cultural backgrounds.

As expected cross-cultural education has attracted extensive research attention in cross-cultural management and communication (e.g. Chen and Starosta 1996; Egan and Bendick 2008; Earley and Ang 2003; Earley and Mosakowski 2004; Kim 1991). Yet, cross-cultural issues so far have not drawn sufficient research attention from professional communication (e.g. business writing), education and learning. Relevant cross-cultural theories such as Hofstede’s individualism vs. collectivism, and Confucian long-term orientation have been used extensively in exploring how cultural values shape the way international students learn in a foreign context. These cross-cultural dimensions, although useful and comprehensive to a certain extent for understanding cultures (e.g. Al-Olayan and Karande 2000; Albers-Miller 1996), are also known as sophisticated stereotypes and generalisations of cultures (Osland et al. 2000). Hence it is imperative to incorporate alternative perspectives into cross-cultural research. A salient perspective derives from cross-cultural discursive competence, which may offer nuanced views about cultures through the use of language.

Although extensive research (e.g. Swales 1990; Bhatia 2004) has been done on discursive competence using a genre-based approach in English professional communication, little research has been conducted on achieving discursive competence (Bhatia 2004) in cross-cultural contexts. There is also a practical imperative for conducting such a study. For example, Andrews and Henze (2009) found that it is important to incorporate local knowledge in teaching business writing for a study abroad programme. Likewise, other researchers (Carter et al. 2007;
Nickerson 2001; Schneider and Andre 2005; Yu 2011) also expressed a similar practical concern about the importance of local situated knowledge in industry. It is therefore imperative to develop new models to promote situated learning for professional communication. It is also timely for such a study as an increasing number of researchers have drawn our attention to the discourse in organisational settings (e.g. Cornelissen 2008; Hardy et al. 2000; Levina and Orlikowski 2009; Phillips et al. 2004; Zhu 2008; Zhu and Hildebrandt, 2012) and their research suggests that organisational discourse is vital for institutional practice and activities.

In order to fill the above particular research gap, this paper proposes a situated genre approach based on genre theory (e.g. Bhatia 2004; Martin 2009; Swales 1990), situated cognition (Brown et al. 1989), and cross-cultural persuasion to enhance international students’ cross-cultural generic competence in business communication education. A situated genre approach is defined as genre learning process in a professional context, aiming to incorporate real-world practices (Lave and Wenger 1991). Cross-cultural generic competence is defined as the competence of using written communication fluently in a cross-cultural context (Zhu 2008). The major contribution of this paper mainly lies in extending the genre approach to the learning of business communication in a cross-cultural context.

Specifically, this paper examines issues in the teaching of written business communication, looking in particular at teaching sales Expo letters used in organisational settings. The various types of written communication found in workplace settings constitute an important topic for business communication courses. This topic is chosen for two reasons. First, as indicated in Eunson (2004), the lack of written communication skills can create barriers to accomplishing specific tasks of management, not to mention the blunders of business communication that often occur due to lack of communication skills in cross-cultural contexts. Second, and also more importantly, we should explore how to use international students’ knowledge as a resource (Connor 2004; Zhu 2008) and bring this into play in their learning processes.

This paper has four sections. First, it examines a range of current issues relating to business communication education. Second, it develops a situated genre model for cross-cultural contexts, which also aims to solicit international students’ contributions to learning and education. In particular, it discusses in what way this approach can help to enhance student generic competence through situated learning and peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Third, the proposed model is applied to Chinese students’ learning experience of one particular written genre – English sales Expo invitations. Finally, implications for cross-cultural professional communication learning and education in general are highlighted and discussed.

**Genre approach**

According to Hyland (2007), genre approaches see ways of writing as purposeful, socially situated responses to particular contexts and communities. This view echoes other genre-based views such as the notion of genre as social action (Miller 1984). Likewise, genre is seen as characterised by communicative purposes and shared by a particular discourse community (Swales 1990).

In the context of this study, genre is further conceptualised ‘as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities’ (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995: 3). In a similar light, genre is seen as related to social constructivism within the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bergmann and Luckmann 1995; Schutz and Luckmann 1974). According to this view, genres are ‘socially constructed models’ that respond to recurrent communicative problems. Furthermore, the social stocks of knowledge are not statically transmitted, rather they are ‘being built up, maintained, transmitted and also modified in communicative processes’ via ‘prepatterned’ conventions (Gunthner and Knoblauch 1995: 5).
Genre researchers also point to the importance of understanding genre from the expert members’ perspective. For example, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) stress the intimate link between genre and disciplinary knowledge and point out that genre should be studied in relation to the discipline’s norms, values, and ideology. Their view coincides with Paltridge’s (1995) explanation of institutional understanding on the part of the members of the discourse community, who understand ‘the function of genre from the perspective of the actor or the insider’. The insiders are the managers who are also the users of genres, and thus understand the ‘typical regularities and organisation’ of genre (Bhatia 1993) as well as being familiar with the genre strategies of their discourse community. Their views about ‘regularities’ and ‘strategies’ (Bhatia 1993; Rutherford 2005) can offer us some interesting clues for identifying significant patterns within genre conventions, and will therefore be incorporated in this study.

Although the regularities and patterns of genre conventions are relatively stable, they are rather dynamic and can be constructed and re-constructed by intertextuality. The concept of intertextuality originates from Bakhtin’s (1986) ‘dialogic interaction’ in writing processes, by which he means that an utterance is linked to other utterances like a dialogue in a complex organising system. Kristeva (1986) employs intertextuality as a property of text, which makes reference to previous texts. In this way, a text is no longer regarded as static and constrained by existing structure, and it actually interacts with the writer’s or the reader’s pre-acquired knowledge of other types of text or genres. Fairclough (1992) applies intertextuality as an important construct to investigate the relationship between genres as social action and the concurrent social structures. Here Fairclough points to intertextuality as part of an essential genre system and as a response to social structures and social change.

We can infer from the above discussion that intertextuality focuses on genre creation, genre construction, and genre interaction through a system of interactive texts within a community and across communities (Orlikowski and Yates 1994).

The above discussion also indicates that a genre approach offers insights for training students to become professional members of the discourse community. Yet, questions about how to use this approach in cross-cultural learning still remain:

1 How can we help international students to learn a genre of written business communication situated in a foreign culture they are not familiar with?
2 In what way can they contribute to learning using their existing knowledge as resources of learning?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the concept of situated cognition and culture, hence the following review of both areas.

**Situated cognition**

Situated cognition is composed of two important aspects, namely soliciting legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (Lave and Wenger 1991) and providing alternative world views in classroom contexts (Brown et al. 1989).

Firstly, in terms of LPP, Lave and Wenger (1991: 29) note that ‘learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community’. Lave and Wenger also point out that LPP is a process that differs from intentional instruction. For example, tailors learn how to make clothes in a reversed order of learning from specific skills such as sewing straight lines, which will prepare them to become a professional tailor later. This
principle of peripheral participation can also apply to learning written business communication in order to achieve high-level competence. Lave and Wenger’s view ties in well with process-oriented learning, and LPP involves a process that goes beyond the classroom to include mastery of real-world social skills and practical generic competence. This kind of participation can be extremely crucial for enhancing international students’ generic competence. According to Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2004), non-native speakers tend to have a lower level of genre awareness and rhetorical appropriacy.

Secondly, Brown et al. (1989) proposed the imperative of practising situated cognition in classrooms by bringing changes to the school culture of teaching textbook content. They offered an example of solving mathematics problems from the mathematician’s perspective. In this way, students can think beyond the limitations of the textbook and reflect on real world experiences. So teachers need to proactively provide students with opportunities that may convey these experiences and provide alternative views to students.

Based on the above literature review, a situated genre approach in cross-cultural contexts can be defined as applying a genre approach with cross-cultural competence and locally situated knowledge. Specifically, high-level competence involves interactions between novices and experts (e.g. for novices to learn from the experts’ views); students thus need to get involved in the processes to understand genres beyond the text, and involve themselves in the processes in which genres are produced as much as possible in order to achieve a high-level generic competence. However, since the context in question is a cross-cultural context, cross-cultural knowledge in areas such as persuasion should be seen as an important resource for learning and education.

Cross-cultural persuasion

Cultural dimensions are useful concepts for understanding persuasion across cultures. According to Hofstede (1991), cultures can be divided into individualist and collectivist, based on how ‘self’ is related to ‘the other’. The former refers to cultures such as the USA, Australia and NZ, which have a focus on individual achievement and business objectives. The latter alludes to cultures such as Japan, China and Hong Kong where group interest and long-term relationships are seen as important. For example, one particular way of establishing long-term relationships in the Chinese culture is through guanxi, or personal relationships and connections (Zhu et al. 2006).

Culture serves as a basis for reasoning and persuasion, and different cultures may resort to different types of rhetoric and persuasion (Hall 1976). Here Aristotle’s and Confucius’ views on rhetoric are discussed as a point of comparison. These two sets of rhetorical theories are essential for understanding modern Western and Chinese persuasion (Campbell 1998; Lü 1998). Aristotle, as a major representative of Greek rhetoric, developed a wide range of concepts in rhetoric, and the most relevant to this study are the persuasive appeals or orientations including ethos (character and standards), pathos (emotion) and logos (reason and evidence). Aristotle (1991) places major importance on logos, treating pathos only as secondary to the logical presentation of an argument. This stress on logos has a fundamental influence on today’s business communication textbooks (e.g. Eunson 2004; Murphy et al. 1997).

Similar persuasive orientations are also in existence in the Confucian rhetorical tradition (Garret 1993; Lü 1998). Confucian rhetoric is based mainly on his philosophy of ren tao or the way of humans and the moral codes he prescribes in his teachings. To him, ren (benevolence) is seen as the highest standard of moral perfection. In order to achieve these virtues, Confucius sets the highest standards for adequate conduct in these five key role relationships between ruler and subject, neighbour and neighbour, father and son, husband and wife, and older brother and
younger brother, among which four are hierarchical relationships. These relations are related to *pathos* and are often advocated as important forms of effective persuasion in specific genres of Chinese business communication (Zhu 2000a, 2000b, 2011).

Confucian persuasive orientations have a strong influence on today’s Chinese writing in general, including business letter writing. Li (1990), for example, advocates that *qing* (feelings) has great persuasive power and complements *li* (reason). *Qing* and *li* can thus be seen as essential elements in Chinese persuasion. This principle also permeates business writing in China. As Li (1990) puts it, feelings and intuitive thinking are still an important element in business writing with which the writer can create a specific effect of persuasion on the reader. This effect is particularly relevant for Chinese invitations, which are often described as a type of *liyi xin* or ‘letters of social etiquettes’, or *shejiao xin* or ‘letters of social networking’. The meaning of *shejiao* or ‘social networking’ is readily apparent; however, *liyi xin* or ‘letters of social etiquettes’ needs some explanation. According to Zhuge and Chen (1994: 361), *liyi* means etiquettes and ceremonies. Accordingly, Chinese sales Expo invitations are treated as a form of etiquette for building relationships in which *qing* or ‘feelings’ plays an important role.

It can be inferred from the above discussion that Chinese students may have already learned the Chinese rhetorical traditions. Their knowledge should not be seen as conflicting knowledge in relation to English written communication, but rather these differences in persuasion represent a continuum of different expectations for written business communication. Their knowledge of persuasion can be used as a resource for further re-construction of written communication that fits into different genre regularities of different cultures.

**Cross-cultural learning model**

In light of the conceptualisation of the situated genre approach, this paper proposes a cross-cultural learning model taking into account peripheral participation and intertextuality, and also paying attention to the previous knowledge of the international student. The model consists of the following processes:

1. Living sociocultural contexts across cultures through internship
2. Learning persuasive orientations and communicative purposes
3. Learning to write texts and incorporating peripheral participation and intertextuality
4. Incorporating authentic data and managers’ views.

The first process provides contextualised knowledge about business texts in specific cultures. Similar background knowledge is also stressed in the field of cross-cultural management (Earley and Mosakowski 2004), and genre learning (e.g. Nickerson 2001; Zhu 2000b). This process offers cultural knowledge for understanding persuasive orientations of cultures that will be further reinforced by student internship experiences (Liebman 1988).

In the second process, students compare persuasive orientations and communicative purposes. More importantly, they can also apply theories to written business communication practice. For example, English rhetorical theory can be used to identify persuasive orientations in English business genres, while Chinese persuasion theories can be introduced as a guideline for identifying persuasive orientations in Chinese business genres.

The third process provides an opportunity for students to learn written business communication through real-life experience, and they can apply the knowledge they learned in the classroom, for example practising various strategies relating to rhetorical structure and intertextuality. This is also the most important process for incorporating student peripheral
participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), which can be carried out through internship or other relevant industry learning experience. It should also be learned in relation to previous processes as a situated textual realisation of persuasive orientations and communicative purposes.

The fourth process involves learning generic praxis about how a particular genre is used. During this process, students will have the opportunity to have access to authentic texts relating to appropriate written communication skills in class. This process also incorporates business managers’ or insiders’ views on effective communication. Business managers are the experts and their views will reflect the relevant stock of knowledge of the discourse community. In this way, this process targets a high level of learning and competence close to mastery of real-world skills. Students can also test their learning by comparing their views with those of the managers, thereby identifying gaps in learning, which, in turn, are likely to inspire them to learn from these professional members.

In sum, these processes complement each other and the totality of them forms part of a systematic nexus of learning and community practice, in which students learn theories, apprentice themselves in industry, test their understanding in light of the professional members’ views, and eventually achieve generic fluencies and competence across cultures (Leki 1991).

Applying the situated genre model

This section illustrates teaching and learning briefly, using Chinese students’ experience of learning to write English sales Expo invitations in tutorials as an example. The tutorial activity involves a specific project requiring students to re-write a Chinese sales Expo invitation in English. This invitation was an effective invitation since it had succeeded in bringing a great number of participants to a Chinese trade fair. The particular tutorial group were in the final year of an undergraduate programme on a business communication course at a tertiary institute in NZ. All students had some internship experience in business organisations in NZ.

The following specific steps were taken for this project. The students were asked to re-write the Chinese sales Expo invitation in English supposing their company is to promote their Expo in NZ. The activity was arranged across three tutorial sessions and activities (see Table 3.1).

As shown in Table 3.1, each of the three tutorial sessions involves completing specific tasks, has clear learning objectives and targets different stages of competence. For example, the first tutorial focuses on assigning the first re-writing task and deals initially with the first three learning processes relating to understanding communicative purposes and persuasive orientations. These activities mainly target a high-level discursive competence relating to world experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Task 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tut 1 (Day 1)</strong></td>
<td>Overview of activities</td>
<td>Brainstorming session on communicative purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tut 2 (Day 7)</strong></td>
<td>Submitting Version 1</td>
<td>Incorporating Chinese and NZ managers’ views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tut 3 (Day 10)</strong></td>
<td>Submitting Version 2</td>
<td>Brainstorming session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflective journal</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(Brown et al. 1989). The final tutorial is reflective of the whole writing process and students are expected to reflect on their learning experience in relation to achieving cross-cultural competence in this particular context.

At the first tutorial session, a brief overview of Chinese and English sales invitations was also given to students. Here is the background information and specific requirements I distributed to the students during the session:

1 Re-write the Chinese invitation (due at the 2nd tutorial) in English: Suppose you are a sales manager in a Chinese exhibition company. Now your company is arranging promotional tours in NZ. You need to re-write this letter based on your internship experience. Secondly, you are asked to write a summary note in bullet-point form about what criteria you followed for re-writing the invitation.
2 Revise the English sales invitation (Version 2; due at the 3rd tutorial) with a summary note for this new version. You will have a chance to discuss your work in comparison with the Chinese and NZ managers’ views about Expo invitation writing, which will be distributed during this tutorial.
3 Submit your final version at the 3rd tutorial and debrief on the implications of this writing exercise at the tutorial.

The above class activities were conducted with two tutorial groups, each composed of five Chinese students, who participated according to the above requirements and completed the project. Findings from these tutorial sessions will be referred to in the following detailed discussion of each of the learning processes.

**Learning and comparing the sociocultural contexts through internship**

The major objective of this first learning process is to help to build students’ world schemata. First, students need to be acquainted with the social and economic environments in relevant cultures. English sales invitations are a written genre used to promote trade fairs. Major teaching points should include an introduction to the market economy prevalent in the West, such as Australia and NZ, and to the marketing strategies relevant to this type of economy.

These two learning points can be helpful. The first point is to discuss the economic reform and changes that have occurred in the Chinese economy since 1978. These changes have led to the increasing popularity of sales invitations. The second point is to draw students’ attention to the use of marketing strategies alongside the economic reforms. For example, the use of the AIDA (attention, interest, desire and action) model and stress on sales promotions were discussed as an illustration here as an additional teaching point. In individualistic countries such as NZ, people tend to stress individual autonomy, and reducing imposition upon the invitee is likely to be the major persuasive strategy. In contrast, people from high context cultures such as China prefer to adopt a collaborative and host-like attitude. Therefore it is essential for Chinese invitations to employ a respectful tone to indicate adequate qing or ‘feelings’ towards the reader. In this regard, reference can be made to relevant Chinese scholars’ views (such as Zhuge and Chen 1994) to indicate the importance of li yi or ‘social etiquettes’ and politeness rituals for invitation writing.

This background information was discussed in the first session as guidance to solicit students’ input and reflections, and was also meant to help them understand different expectations regarding the persuasive orientations of invitations.
Learning persuasive orientations and communicative purposes

This process focused on different persuasive orientations found in English and Chinese business genres. As noted earlier, English sales Expo invitations have an emphasis on *logos* while Chinese tend to stress both *qing* and *li*. Theories from target cultures, in this case both English and Chinese, can be referred to where relevant to help students understand persuasive orientations in business writing.

As part of the participation in classroom teaching and learning, students were encouraged to identify communicative purposes themselves first in a brainstorming session. They came up with various purposes. They also tried to justify their findings with relevant persuasive orientations and link them to the sociocultural environments they had learned about so far. After sufficient discussion and clarification amongst students, they were able to identify the two sets of communicative purposes (see Table 3.2).

As shown in Table 3.2, the similarity exhibited in these purposes in both English and Chinese sales Expo invitations lies in the fact that they can be divided into two kinds: inviting the reader to the Expo and advertising the Expo and the exhibits. These two types of purpose are related to the application of *logos* and *pathos*. Students were able to identify the differences and similarities without any difficulty by referring to the previous teaching points as well as their work experience. On the face of it English and Chinese genres displayed similarities in terms of promoting trade fairs. However, students also realised they exhibited significant differences in the use of politeness rituals, as shown in the emphasis on respectful image and host–guest relationships in the Chinese genre.

This difference served as a further discussion point to highlight the importance of establishing a host–guest relationship with the reader, which exhibited stronger ‘*pathos*’ in the Chinese sales invitations compared to the English invitations. Students agreed that in Chinese culture, a host was supposed not only to show hospitality and kindness, but also to extend this to a long-term relationship, which would help the promotion of the product. Intercultural theories relating to face and cultural values (such as Hofstede 1991; Hall 1976; Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998) were also referred to at this point, which helped students interpret cultural differences in sales Expo invitation writing.

## Table 3.2 A breakdown of the communicative purposes students identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English sales invitation</th>
<th>Chinese sales invitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To invite the reader to Expo</td>
<td>To invite the reader to Expo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To attract reader’s attention</td>
<td>To attract reader’s attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give positive appraisal</td>
<td>To give positive appraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To persuade the reader to attend</td>
<td>To persuade the reader to attend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To achieve a positive image</td>
<td>To achieve a positive and respectful image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To build a host–guest relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning to write texts and incorporating LPP and intertextuality

The third process, learning to write the text, involves peripheral participation and situated learning. This is also the process linking theories with practice. The Chinese students were beginning a process of making reference to the authentic English texts actually used in the NZ business contexts on their internship websites. In other words, they were establishing a new set
of schemata for writing English sales Expo invitations while making reference to their prior knowledge.

According to their summary notes, their writing criteria appeared to be based on three sets of knowledge during this process:

1 Situated knowledge about English sales invitations
2 Intertextual knowledge about Chinese sales invitations
3 Intercultural knowledge about differences and similarities across genres.

First and foremost, their situated and contextualised knowledge gained through peripheral participation turned out to be very helpful. The students had some access to invitations in the workplace. In addition, they were also exposed to internet websites containing similar information about sales exhibitions besides invitations letters, which is also an instance of intertextuality in application. They thus had first-hand experience about what English sales Expo invitations should be like. For example, they commented that they preferred a personal salutation such as ‘Mr Smith’ in their first draft of the re-written invitations to the more impersonal but more respectful jing qizhe or ‘Respected Reader’ used in the original Chinese invitation, since they learned that sales invitations were often sent to individuals in NZ. Another student commented on the informal use of polite closing in the English sales invitation, which also differs from that of the Chinese. This process reminds us of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) analogy about the apprentice learning sewing with straight lines, which may eventually constitute part of the garment-sewing process. The basic first-hand experience of using appropriate personal salutations thus helps to prepare the students towards an expert mastery of writing English sales Expo invitations.

Intertextualised knowledge about Chinese sales Expo invitations was also helpful in this process. For example, they realised that some linguistic features to do with the AIDA promotional strategies were very much similar across cultures and their knowledge about Chinese invitations was used as reference in this process. This was reflected in keeping most of the content moves from the original invitation. Students noted that they were overjoyed about this finding since they could use and transfer their knowledge to the new learning environment.

Finally, they commented that they had benefited from their enhanced intercultural knowledge through comparing the English and Chinese texts. For example, they could work out the similarities and differences in terms of invitation rituals and writing conventions. In doing so, they have acquired two sets of schemata for writing both English and Chinese sales invitations, hence gaining competence in fluency in both cultures, and especially in the new NZ culture.

Using authentic data and incorporating managers’ views

The fourth process incorporates authentic data and managers’ views in the second tutorial. Some research has been done on the importance of using authentic data and native speakers’ views for teaching (Bhatia 1993; Zhu 2000b). Specifically, the objective of the tutorial was to expose the students to the managers’ views of both cultural groups towards the English sales Expo invitations.

The NZ and Chinese managers’ views on this English invitation were incorporated into the learning and teaching process. For example, students compared their understanding of the English sales invitations with managers’ views. The managers’ views, provided by ten NZ and ten Chinese managers via focus group interviews, are summed up in Table 3.3 for ease of discussion.
The students commented that the NZ managers’ views and, in particular, the first two views further confirmed the persuasive orientations learned in the previous processes. The NZ managers explicitly emphasised the importance of clarity in style and idea development. Chinese managers’ comments pointed to a different kind of expectation relating to politeness rituals. Students also commented on the informal tone (you approach) used by the English invitation. However, they indicated that they shared a similar view with the NZ managers about the stress on clarity of style for writing English letters. At this point, one student referred to the brevity of invitations he received during his internship as further confirmation of his findings. Managers’ views have thus triggered further learning. This is also an instance to show that the knowledge this student gained through peripheral participation earlier has been built into part of his knowledge structure and can be retrieved under appropriate learning circumstances such as this. The incorporation of managers’ views not only helped trigger this process but also offered an insider’s perspective into the understanding of effective persuasion.

Furthermore, students also identified gaps in their knowledge in this process. For example, managers’ views on the informal and friendly tone of the English invitation offered new insight. This ‘gap’, they agreed, should be the focus for the revision. As such, the managers’ views on this helped them reach a higher level of generic competence.

**Implications for cross-cultural generic competence**

The final tutorial was a debriefing process that started with similar brainstorming sessions to those used in the earlier processes. It was student-led, focusing on what they had learned. Here is a summary of what they discussed at the tutorial.

First of all, they discussed theoretical implications in relation to real-world learning experience as in this case. Students can have a thorough understanding of the sociocognitive approach in a situated context, and learn to apply this approach as an important tool to build relevant knowledge structures in similar situations.

The second implication was that peripheral participation and situated learning were an effective way of learning, in which students were exposed to an abundance of knowledge and communication skills. In this way, student internship and work experience were seen as an essential part of peripheral participation, which equipped them with situated knowledge and fluency of cultures gradually. As shown in this case, both types of situated cognition (Brown *et al.* 1989) of real work experience (internship) and managers’ views were applied to class. The Chinese students’ learning and unlearning processes illustrated well the importance and absolute

### Table 3.3  The NZ and Chinese managers’ views on the English invitation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The NZ managers’ comments</th>
<th>The Chinese managers’ comments</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is an excellent letter which starts straight to the point.</td>
<td>The letter does not have the <em>ketoohua</em> or ‘polite rituals’ as would be expected of Chinese invitations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This letter is quite clear in structure, and the writer gives necessary details.</td>
<td>The purpose of the letter is clear. It is short and easy to understand and there is no exaggeration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The style of the letter is quite professional and yet calm. No flowery expressions and exaggerations are included.</td>
<td>It is polite using a friendly and informal approach.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
necessity of having this kind of participatory experience. In a less direct manner, the use of authentic data and managers’ views can also help students enhance their generic competence. The incorporation of these data has actually further initiated student reflections on their own previous industry participatory experience.

Third, students can enhance their generic competence through effective use of intertextuality. For example, understanding universal features of promotional strategies helped students greatly. They also made reference to previous knowledge of writing Chinese Expo invitations. Re-writing the Chinese invitation in English actually helped them to reflect on their previous knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper proposed and applied the situated genre approach to cross-cultural education, using teaching and learning business writing in the NZ context as an example. As shown in the case described here, learning took place through two kinds of situated cognition incorporating peripheral participation and managers’ views. The education and learning processes represented a combination of classroom teaching, peripheral participation, unlearning existing knowledge, and reconstructing texts. These activities complemented each other with the aim of bringing student initiatives into play.

This study has contributed to cross-cultural learning by going beyond using culturally stereotypical dimensions and applying discursive competence to specific cultural contexts. Specifically, it views soliciting international students’ knowledge structure as a resource of learning. The case study indicates that there is potential for instructors to explore new ways of learning, which will encourage international students’ participation and contribution. Business communication education should be seen as a dialogue between students, the professional members of the discourse community and the authentic texts or other real-life practices, in which the instructor serves only as a facilitator to ensure that the dialogues take place applying process-oriented learning in the new cultural context.

Related topics

business communication; discourse variation in professional communities; a situated genre approach for business communication; workplace communication; management communication

Key readings


Tanaka, H. and Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (2011). ‘Asian business discourse(s)’, in J. P. Gee and M. Handford (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 455–69), London: Routledge. (This paper offers insight about different types of discourse in the business contexts in Asia.)

Zhu, Y. and Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (in press). ‘Balancing emic and etic: Situated learning and ethnography of communication in cross-cultural management education’, *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 12*(3), 380–95. (This paper proposes a new approach based on ethnography of communication and language for learning cultures as situated knowledge.)
Notes

1 In this paper, all terms such as ‘international students’, and ‘students from foreign countries’ refer to those who speak English as a second or foreign language.

2 These managers’ views were collected from two focus group interviews (one Chinese and one NZ group) before the experiment. Each group was composed of ten managers from three international trade companies in Auckland and Zhengzhou, where the Chinese invitation was collected. The managers were chosen based on their experience of writing business letters. Therefore their attitudes can be taken to represent professional attitudes, and reflect the shared conventions of the business community. One of the interview tasks was to let them reflect on general criteria for good writing for sales Expo invitations in their own culture. I gave them this scenario for them to reflect on: Supposing you were to write a trade fair invitation to your potential customers, what criteria do you think are appropriate? We recorded and decoded all their discussions and finally came up with a summary of their views.

Bibliography


