ESP: LINGUISTIC AND CROSS-CULTURE COMPETENCE THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: THE GROWING MULTICULTURAL WORLD REPRESENTS A CHALLENGING SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT FOR THE FREE ROMANIA THAT NEEDS TO DEVELOP A NEW EDUCATIONAL APPROACH IN TERMS OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING TO MAKE SPECIALISTS ADAPT TO IT. THE ARTICLE MAKES REFERENCE TO DIDACTIC PRINCIPLES OF CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION THROUGH ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES ESP AIMING TO DEVELOP A SET OF SPECIFIC SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE MATCHING GLOBAL PROFESSIONAL AND CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING. THE FOCUS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REAL-LIFE LEARNING EXPERIENCES, BLENDED-LEARNING ASSISTED, MAKES PROFESSIONALS REACT AND INTERACT APPROPRIATELY IN A MULTICULTURAL GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT.

KEY WORDS: ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP), LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE, CROSS-CULTURE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE, NEEDS ANALYSIS, BLENDED LEARNING

Motto: "One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try." (Aristotle)

Background

Our article focuses on the opportunity that academic applied English provides through the use of blended learning which is able to commit young learners to professional cross-cultural networking and global education target. The challenge consists in the active involvement of the students in engaging learning experiences in order to
- rise their sense of ownership and responsibility of their language learning experience
- develop the students' commitment to build professional culture experience

The need to relate linguistic[1] interaction to the global cultural context redefines the process of foreign language learning as a key component of the communicative act that make students acquire the specific cross culture competence and improve their professional abilities. ESP has developed its specificity as a result of international labour market and business community.

The characteristics and variables that Dudley-Evans and St. John [1] developed to the arguments on ESP definition were directed to meet the specific needs of the learners, the use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves, and its centrality of language appropriateness to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and

genre. The variables they attached to ESP are related to or designed for specific disciplines, to specific teaching situations, and to a different methodology from that of General English. The aim of our article focuses on the cross-cultural communicative needs that should drive any ESP course making its outcomes practical [1] and give language learning, associated skills and instructional expectations, an appropriate view. We add the authenticity, relevance and suitability of the material match which easily improved through the modern-day communication technology.

Professional and cross-culture communicative competence

The cultural diversity of the world is an ever growing challenge for the professional language education which is seen nowadays as a holistic didactic process based both on language skills development and cross-culture competence. The appropriateness and effectiveness of the cross-cultural communication through language proficiency alone is inadequate, because such a process requires knowledge of the ways language and culture interact and of how this interaction operates across cultures. The individuals' relationship to different cultural background and to new communication situations raise the need to redefine the process of foreign language learning based on the key component of the communicative act which makes intercultural competence a matter of knowledge and adequate training. We count on the adequacy of the conceptualization and the practice model of the cross-culture competence in international business which was developed by Johnson, Lenartowicz and Apud [2006: 525-543] [2] and we add our further didactic directions in teaching English for Special Purposes in terms of a global international labour and business market.

The core components of the foreign language learning process addressing a cross-cultural context are the communicative and the cross-cultural competence. They are currently incorporated in the *cross-cultural communicative competence*, which has been defined as a body of knowledge, skills, attitudes that enable learners to become "intercultural speakers", i.e. "someone who has a competence different from that of the native speaker, someone who is able to see and establish relationships between languages and cultures" [Byram, 1996:364] [3]. The same author adds the definition "sensitivity to the identities present in inter-lingual and cross-frontier interaction, an ability to mediate/relate own and other cultures with 'intercultural communicative competence' (…)" [Byram, 1999:18] [4]. The final result is that cross-culture communicative competence requires "the cognitive, affective and operational adaptability of an individual's internal system in all intercultural communication systems" [Kim 1991:259][5].

By engaging in intercultural communication an individual has to be aware of one's culture and language characteristics, which otherwise might be not noticed. Promoting a spirit of tolerance for diversity, an intercultural speaker can review his/her own vision of the world, redefine the values that are seen as immutable, understand that truth is plural and relative and that different cultures have different values. The intercultural communication situation emphasises the communicator's intercultural affective competence, self awareness and critical cultural awareness.

Taking the contexts, where the intercultural interaction can take place, as a starting point Byram, distinguishes two ways of acquiring the intercultural competence. An intuitive non-reflexive intercultural competence acquired outside the institutions with educational purposes, by interacting in complex cultural contexts, and a conscious reflexive intercultural competence developed in educational contexts. In the first case the goal is the adaptation and the adjustment

without reflexivity to new communication situations, in the last one is the development of critical awareness and cross-cultural skills that will make it possible for learners to understand cultural diversity and to reassess their own culture values. The self-reflection and the critical reflection on the origin and target culture are the defining features of the cross-cultural competence in the formal context for foreign language learning. Therefore, the teaching materials have to include the ways in which the learners can develop a conscious ability of interacting with new people and new situations.

The cross-cultural competence forges the rational capacity to deal with alternative points of view, while interpretative alternation develops the level of cognitive complexity, which means a broader and more subtle vision on the otherness, less rigid and more adaptable ability to metacommunicate.

The effectiveness of the cross-cultural competence is revealed by the ability to project and receive positive emotional responses, to develop a sense of community, tolerance and respect. According to [Chen/Starosta, 1996][7] it consists of four elements: the desire to find out about things, the desire to learn them and break down cultural barriers, the wish to find out about ourselves. Cross-cultural competence is one of the main skills that individuals need to operate effectively in the globalized contexts.

English for Special Purposes through blended learning
Modern information technologies give learners access to knowledge available all around the world that make possible the dialogue based on the instrument of foreign languages. Virtual learning environment allow learners to come into contact with a much broader range of materials than any printed and audiovisual course materials could include.

The multimedia teaching materials combining sound, text and images enhance the development of learners' language skills by developing knowledge and consolidate cultural mobility through extending information to the multiculturally diverse world which we inhabit. It also provides increasing opportunities for independent learning, but also for group and collaborative learning.
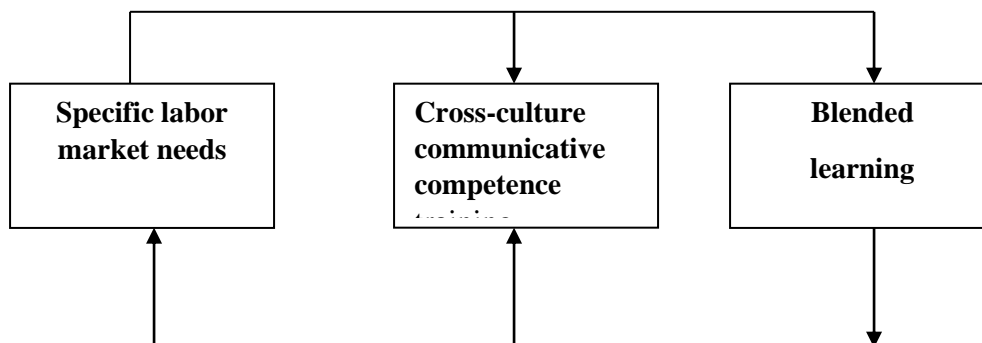
The pragmatic-communicative approach to language learning is expressed by the needed interaction, i.e. a socially reciprocal action based on meaning negotiation which involves at least two people. Blending learning takes into consideration the specificity of cross cultural training which cannot be mastered through either technology or classical education separately. The opportunity that students have to practice their language skills by an oral face to face feed-back in the classroom can be matched by virtual environment.

The experience of blended-learning allows participants acquire cross cultural skills on virtual basis at their own pace and space and then it gives them opportunity to exchange ideas and practice in the classroom which ensures the consistency of the learning process.

Blended learning makes cross-cultural competence a training tool for professionals. The language competence descriptors are defined in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[2]. The cross cultural competence descriptors, which make use of the language assessment criteria and standards, become relevant through teaching and learning tasks activity carried out both in virtual and real classroom environment.

Relevance to learning achievement

Blended learning solutions suggested for the cross-culture communicative competence training are closely connected to the current needs of the specific European labor market and to the international business risk, according to the following flow chart. [Spitzberg, Chagnon, 2009][8] The relationship between the specific labour market needs and learning goes through research and education feed-back which continues to develop and diversify the market needs.

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┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
│  Specific labor  │   │  Cross-culture   │   │    Blended       │
│  market needs    │   │  communicative   │   │                  │
│                  │   │  competence      │   │    learning      │
│                  │   │  training        │   │                  │
└──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘
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The raise of students' cultural awareness and sensitivity through the development of cross cultural skills are targeting:
- effectiveness of cross cultural communication
- awareness of students' own cultural characteristics
- understanding behaviors and attitudes in the learning units considering their particular cultural extraction
- facing general culture patterns of particular English speaking countries
- raising the respect for cultural differences
- increasing adaptability in various cultural working environment
- providing the student with the know-how to detect cross- cultural communication problems
- developing the actual cultural skills needed to resolve specific problems related to the cross-cultural communication

The major findings on the value added of cultural skills to the corporate that emerged from the project experiment fall into several categories:
- communication: accent, tone, body language, specific vocabulary and jargon
- job philosophy: time management, relationship between payment and productivity, management effectiveness of raw materials and energy, environment protection
- attitude: gender, religion, etc

Blended learning teaching materials have four functions [Dudley-Evans and St. John, 2001, 297-314][9]: *source of language* (spoken and written materials), *learning support* (in progression structured knowledge body for learners), *motivation / stimulation* (challenging activities for learners in and outside the educational context), and *reference* (support for teachers regarding the learning outcomes).

The ESP methodology of blended learning is adaptable to any professional domain it is built on in terms of course design, goals and targets of the course outcome. The "emphasis on practical outcomes" to a "very focused course" [1] includes learners' self-knowledge awareness of target situations, life goals and instructional expectation. {Belcher, 2006: 133-156] [10]. The

ESP course built on blended virtual learning techniques will develop and increase cross-culture meanings and comprehension. The cross-culture situations need to be easily identified to make course design consistently recognizable patterned: "determination of realistic goals and objectives; integration of grammatical functions, abilities required for the future workplace communication, assessment and evaluation"[Gao, 2007][11]Although under debate, the issue of the negotiated syllabus comes into force when the technology of blended learning is associated to the ESP methodology, as it makes negotiation easily and effectively approachable to the cross-culture skills of the learners. The increasing focus on individual learner will make his decision enhance his responsibility on his autonomous, independent and efficiency on cross-culture ESP learning. The learner centeredness will move away the eclectic approach to material selection and processing and makes cross-culture target situations analysis and needs analysis an objective pursuit to evaluation and assessment of the ESP course. [Graves, 2000] [12]

The cross-culture communicative competence acquisition aims the effectiveness of labor across cultures that turns ESP oriented practicality into cultural synergy at the work place. The increasing range of professions and mobility of the workforce demand for the raise of ESP courses suitability. Their adaptability to the ever growing needs of the process of globalization is fueled by the global market needs of both a good command of English and cross-culture skills that empower self-expression of the learning professional. The association of blended learning technology variable to the development of cross-culture skills makes ESP practice and course design an important factor contributing to the smoothness of the irreversible process of globalization.

Our research adds to Brunton's view on ESP [13] the value-added learning profit of the ESP cross-culture approach that makes it a growing social facilitator to the global mobility of professionals matching the needs of an aged society.

Endnotes
1. We use the definition that Noam Chomsky gives to the linguistic competence in 1965 [6]
2. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf

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