

# PANEL DISCUSSION

## How much intercultural competence do Business English trainers need?

Rudi Camerer  
Mike Hogan  
Kirsten Wächter

The panel discussion included three brief sections where the speakers presented their points of view, followed by a discussion with the audience.

The speakers were:

Rudi Camerer – directs a language and intercultural consultancy, elc European Language Competence, which was awarded the European Language Label for developing teaching materials which combine foreign language teaching with teaching intercultural competence; author of a number of publications including Intercultural Competence in Business English with Judith Mader (Cornelsen)

Mike Hogan – a director of York Associates, delivering language, communication skills and international team training to clients throughout Europe. He also co-authored Business English for Beginners (A1/A2) and Basis for Business (B1/B2) for Cornelsen

Kirsten Wächter – teaches at the interface of business communication, business English and interculture; she focuses on working with international teams and is the author of Meetings in English and Emailing in English writing about successful international communication (Cornelsen Scriptor)

## PARTICIPANTS EXPECTATIONS

Curiosity and other people including the speakers brought them in:



KW:

We asked participants to write down their experience with the issue and what brought them to the session. The answers were clustered and will be included in the presentation. Curiosity for the topic, the speakers etc. came up often.

## PARTICIPANTS EXPECTATIONS

But also a like of the format and the topic:



KW:

But it seems that there is also a general interest in the format. We had a large audience and a lively discussion which was fostered by the cards as they also gave the speakers some issues to address later.

## PARTICIPANTS EXPECTATIONS

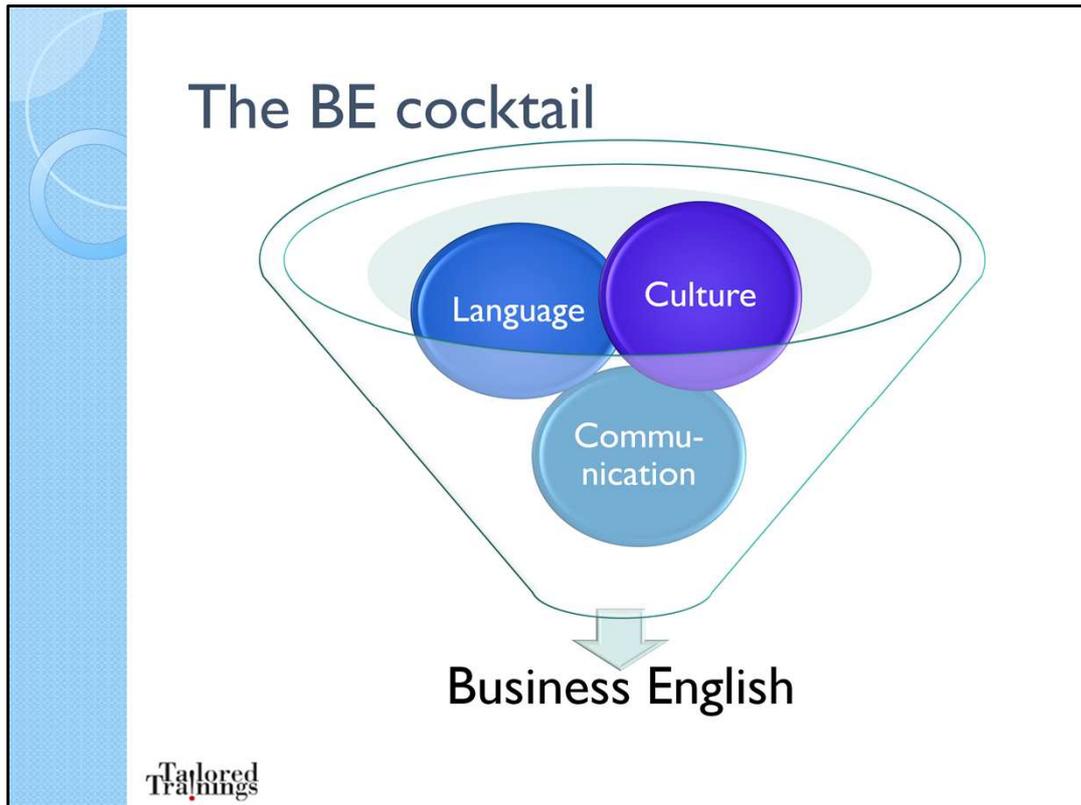
And experience that there is a clear need for their work:



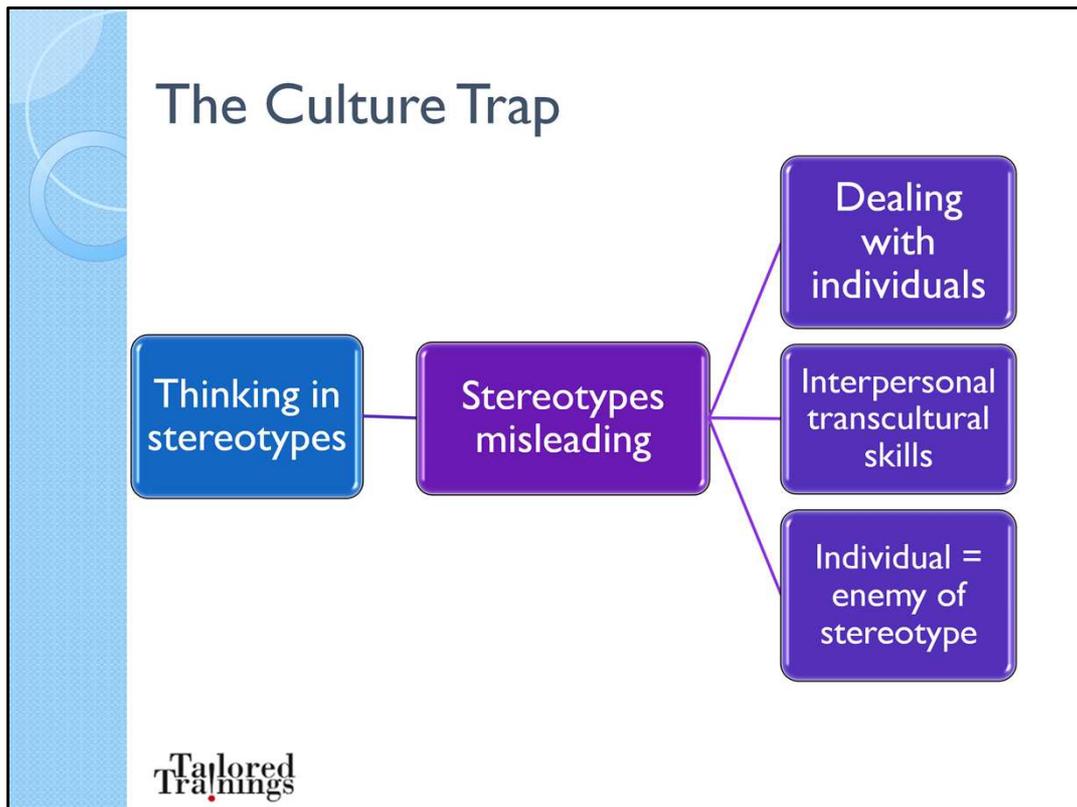
KW:

My reason for organising this panel discussion was that often companies come to me and ask for training of their staff in Business English, or to be precise, they want English language training because they were taken over by some multinational or now have subsidiaries in other countries; so now their staff have to communicate with their new colleagues in English.

Quickly, however, it becomes clear that such a teaching brief includes more than just language, and that takes us to what I call the Business English cocktail:

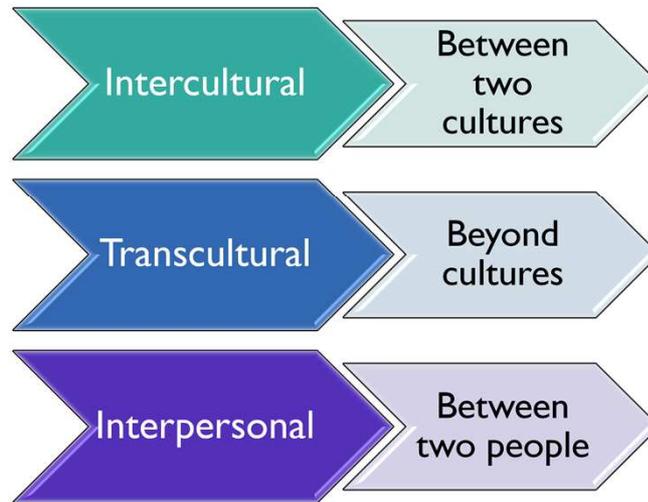


This slide addresses the first question from the description in the programme : can we separate language teaching from intercultural training? My answer is no, as for me language is a key carrier of culture, and you produce language in conjunction with your preferred communication style or certain communication norms as well. Often, the reasons for misunderstanding or communication problems cannot really be disentangled, e.g. a breakdown in a conversation: it may be a cultural, personal, or linguistic issue. And usually, it is either language or culture that is blamed if any misunderstandings occur: this is the easy way out.



People either say their English bad enough, or they hide behind their culture. That attitude, however, is counterproductive: in the classroom, we deal with individuals, and in the business world, our students deal with individuals, so for me intercultural training as it is often provided is limiting and dangerous. It seems that national culture is the first filter we perceive people through, we reduce their personality to one thing and one thing only. It can be, of course, that communication problems are culture-related, but I believe that, especially when we work in virtual and international teams, we have to move beyond that.

## Interpersonal and transcultural

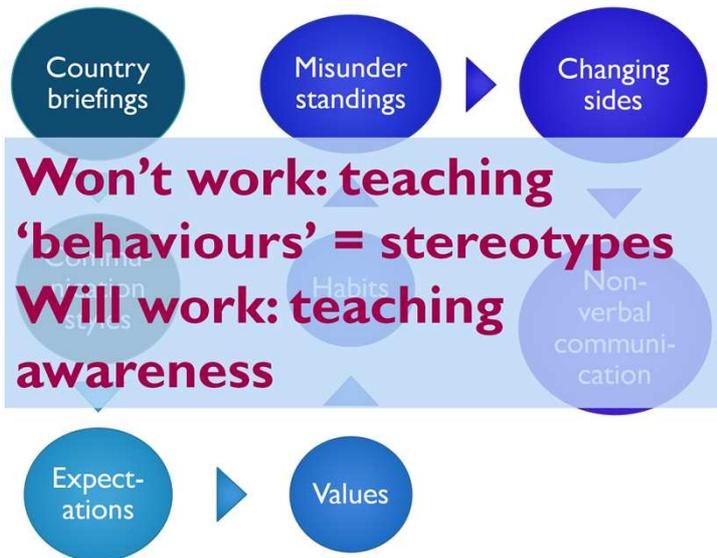


Talored  
Trainings

KW:

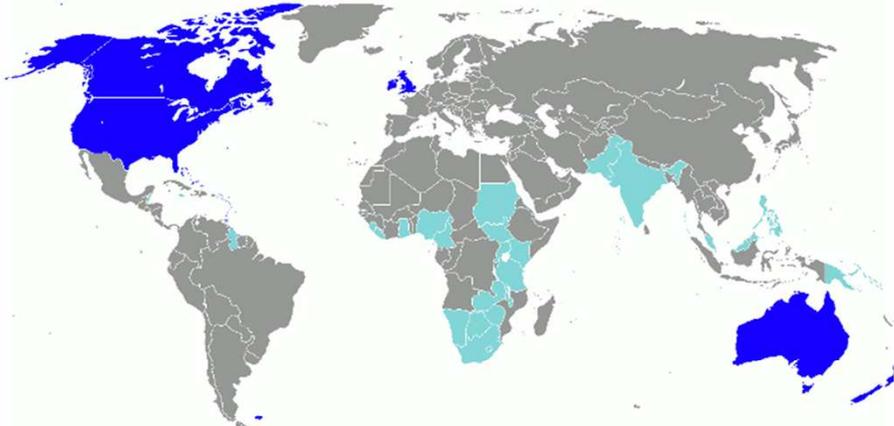
So, to give you one example, I had a student who worked in international teams and who told me: "I cannot work with the Indians, I cannot talk to them." Well, that was quite a big statement, so we probed that a bit. He had lived in India and enjoyed working there and got along quite well with 20 of his 22 Indian colleagues, but there were two guys who just communicated in a totally different style. And that led him to making that statement. However, he had similar problems in Germany with some colleagues. So what we did was we moved beyond the cultural aspect, we left that behind, and we did not only deconstruct the cultural filter he applied – which would be the transcultural aspect for me – but we worked on his interpersonal skills.

## Elements to be taught?



Talored  
Trainings

Now the question would be what elements need to be taught, and are they communication, culture, or linguistic? Is that feasible? Will that make sense? Teaching about behaviours won't help, teaching awareness might so that teachers will not become victim of a culture trap.

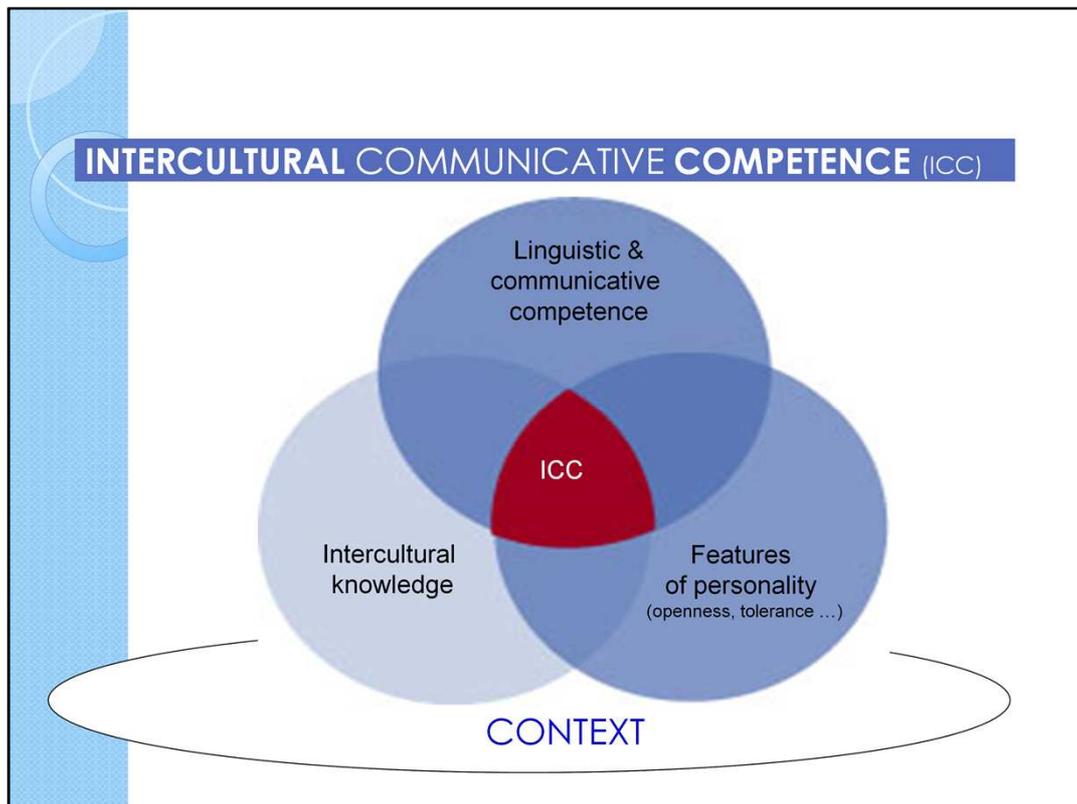


Language of International Business:  
*Anglo-American English* or  
*English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)*

?

e | c  
European  
Language  
Competence

RC: The use of English as a global lingua franca (ELF) has become a crucial issue for the future of our trade, be it for the teaching or testing of (Business) English. After all, 80% or more of international meetings today where English is used take place in the absence of native speakers of English. The English used in the majority of international/intercultural encounters is being recorded and documented by (so far) three computer-based corpora focusing on predominantly European, Asian and academic use, each of them containing roughly 1 million items. In other words: the issue of *International English* or ELF is not one of ideology or personal conviction but one of empirical evidence.



RC: Based on such research, Jennifer Jenkins, Barbara Seidlhofer, Andy Kirkpatrick and others have identified something that might be called a *Lingua Franca Core* and have suggested, among other things, focusing on pronunciation difficulties. Following this, people like Robin Walker and Ian Badger have suggested practical ways of dealing in teaching with the enormous diversity of pronunciation that can be found the world over. One thing seems clear: The native-speaker model no longer serves as the only standard for the teaching of (Business) English. For *“In ELF reseach we have already seen a radical rethinking of the norm against which ELF speakers’ pragmatic knowledge and behaviour is matched. This norm is not the monolingual native speaker but rather the expert multilingual user. There is empirical support for this stance from studies of the pragmatic behaviour of bilinguals.”* (Juliane House (2010). *The Pragmatics of English as a lingua franca*. In: Anna Trosborg (ed.)(2010). *Pragmatics across Languages and Cultures*. p.382).

## Culture-based COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

- Directness
- Enthusiasm
- Formality
- Assertiveness
- Self-promotion
- Personal disclosure



A. Molinsky (2013). *Global Dexterity*. 49f.

Since ELF/*International English* is the number one language of intercultural communication, Anglo-American politeness conventions may be adequate and (hopefully) effective when dealing with people from those particular parts of the world. They will, however, often be inappropriate (or even worse) when communicating with people from a different cultural background – regardless of the fact that the language used by all concerned may be English. The six aspects of discourse, which are mentioned on this slide, may be interpreted differently by different L1-speakers in international/intercultural encounters and may lead to a great deal of hidden misunderstanding.

## Influence of L1 on pragmatics

e.g. **request schemata in writing:**



Anglo-American style	Common in China, Indonesia, Japan ...
Salutation Request Sign off	Salutation Face-work / Securing of Good Will Reasons for request Request Sign off

Andy Kirkpatrick (2010). English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN. p. 118f.



RC: This is not the place to elaborate on linguistic aspects of ELF-use as a whole, but pragmatics does need to be mentioned, since it refers to questions of politeness. It is politeness, understood as a process of establishing positive relationships through communication, which is the first and most important requirement for any internationally/interculturally appropriate use of English. To illustrate what I mean: “Keep it short and simple (KISS)” is the pragmatic suggestion given to students of business correspondence in most business English course books today. This is, in fact, a helpful rule of thumb provided we mean e.g. the email exchange with Northern European or North American business partners. Convincing empirical evidence has been provided, however, to show that in large parts of the world the KISS strategy might be considered inappropriate (to say the least). If positive relationships are sought by means of correspondence with e.g. new partners in Asia, a great deal of active face-work is expected, something that may feel alien to most Europeans and North Americans and may need explicit training (cf. F. Bargiela-Chiappini / M. Gotti (eds.)(2005). Asian Business Discourse(s). Peter Lang. A. Kirkpatrick (2010). English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: A Multilingual Model. Honkong University Press. and others).

## Influence of L1/C1 on **pragmatics**

e.g. **Reacting to a compliment**

*You speak Chinese really well.*

*a) Thank you.*

*b) I have been trying hard to learn, but my Chinese is still not good.*

*c) No, no, my Chinese is very poor.*



RC: Reacting to a compliment may serve as a second example. The Anglo-American response (a) would probably be considered a sign of arrogance by most interlocutors from Asian backgrounds, because (c) is what they would expect in most cases. So perhaps (b) can be seen as a 'middle way' by way of maintaining one's own identity without infringing your interlocutor's expectations.

## Current trends in business communication training and coaching:



RC: Face-to-face communication across cultural borders may be even more demanding and it is because of this that I believe that the future teaching of (International) English will need to go along with the teaching of cultural differences, of practical ways of dealing with 'otherness', and most of all with handling unexpected and/or difficult situations, behaviour or utterances. This includes, in fact, more than the traditional English language teaching prevalent in most teaching material to be found today. Instead it includes the appropriate use of the global lingua franca in a great variety of international/intercultural encounters. In other words: *International English* rather than exclusively British or US-American English (for a detailed discussion of the topic see Rudi Camerer & Judith Mader (2012) *Intercultural Competence in Business English*. Cornelsen).

## How much intercultural competence do BE trainers need?

### What's our remit?

- Helping our clients
  - communicate effectively in English
  - get results in their business environments



MH: It can also be useful when considering all of this to specifically start with the initial interaction with our client and the service we are providing them. Working off the assumption that our remit is to help them to become better communicators in English (or whatever their target language is) thus leading to better workplace results, we should start by thinking about what will help them to become more effective communicators, and what will help them to achieve better results in their working environments.



MH: The answers to the questions on the previous slide are not simple and straightforward, and will be different for everyone. However, a commonality that all people have when communicating (whether in another language or not) is that the language they use and how they use it has a major impact on the outcome of that communication. We cannot reduce such usage to the learning of vocabulary, grammar, phrases and so on, and strip it away from the other components of communication (style / approach / skill, etc.) and culture (yours, mine, the team's, our company's, etc.) when following our remit as discussed on the previous slide.

# Professional Communication

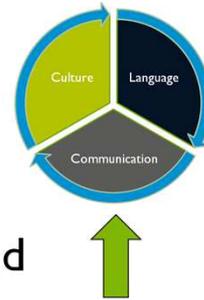
- The big 6
  - Meetings
  - Presentations
  - Negotiations
  - Telephoning
  - Emailing
  - Socializing/Networking



MH: The traditional Big 6 of Business English Communication skills are very important and relevant functional areas for business people, but they are also limited and process driven. Each process has discrete stages, which each have their own steps and associated phrases to learn. But a question which arises is: 'Where is the international element to all of this?' Are we, for example, teaching our learners language and skills for presenting in English or are we, in addition, helping them reflect on their own communication style, how they present, and how presentations at an international level are different? Are we thinking about how they usually build credibility in their own context and which approach is appropriate in their current presentations context? So, in addition to the Big 6, we should also be addressing international communication skills in our training (see next slide)

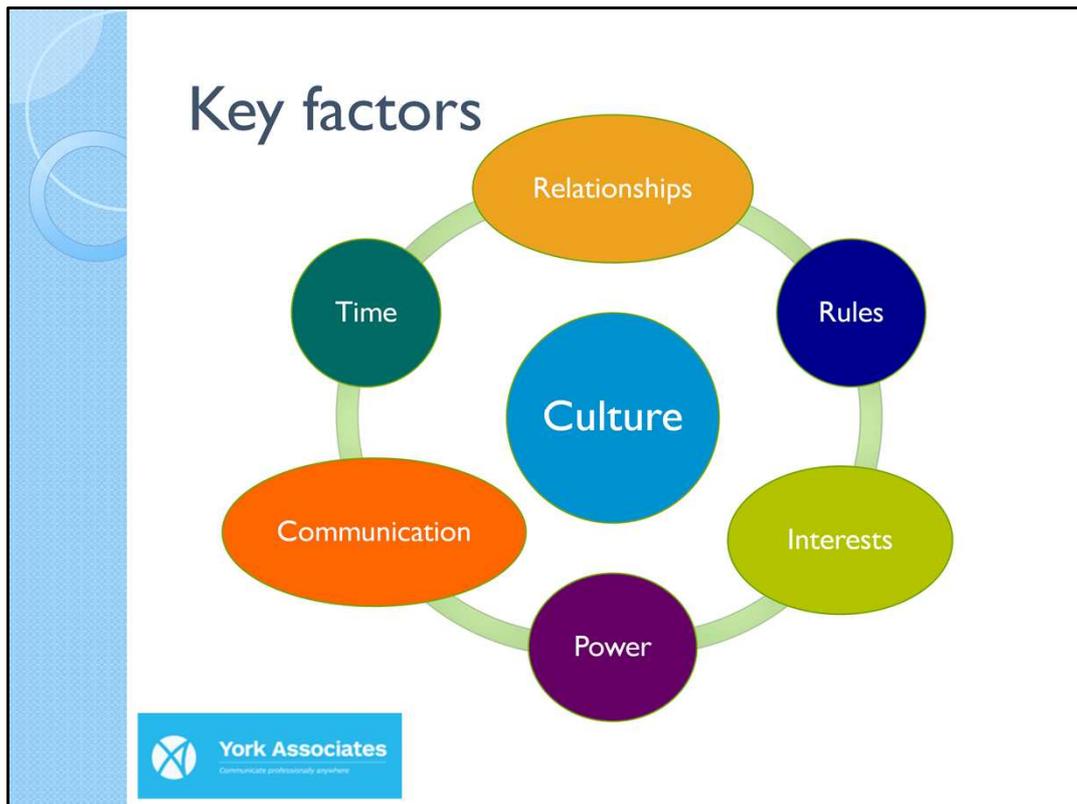
## International Communication Skills

- Relationship building
- Trust and Influencing
- Collaboration
- Working styles (organisational and individual culture)
- Dealing with conflict
- And so on ...

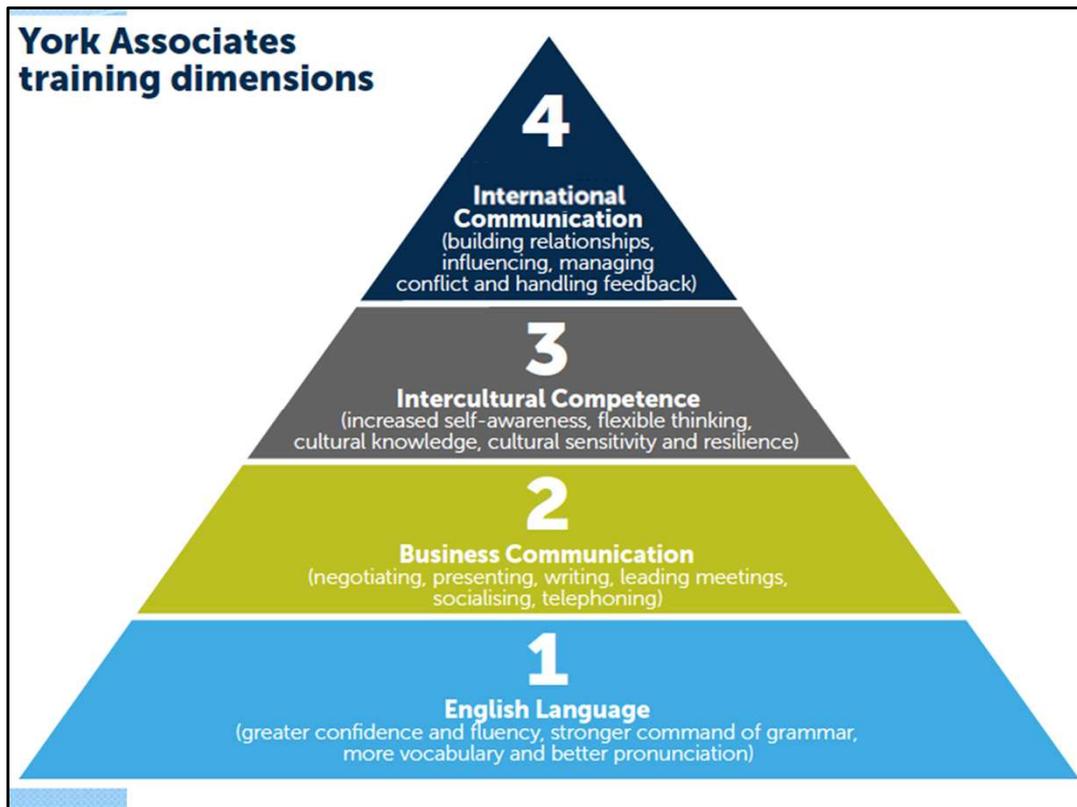


York Associates  
Communicate professionally anywhere

MH: If business is built on result and relationships, we also need to go beyond traditional Business English Skills and think about the communication skills necessary for successful international performance. Identifying our clients sense of reality and their 'as is' position on these topics, and how they address them, is a first step, before then thinking about those of their business partner's. The examples listed on the slide above are just a few of the essentials which cannot be ignored when doing international business. Note that they are not necessarily topics that would typically fall into the 'intercultural' pot and are not meant to replace them, but complement them. (see next slide)



MH: Added to the Big 6, and the International Communication skills of the previous slides, are various elements often associated with culture when communicating with others who aren't 'from here'. Note that it is very difficult (and often wrong) to generalise in terms of 'other cultures' because you and I are different, even though we might come from the same country or even place. Culture is what makes us who we are as individuals, but also something which can give us a sense of identity through association with a group. That group might be a team of colleagues, a company, or something else, and not immediately always a country. Nevertheless, how we approach the topics above in these groups will differ and it is also important to be aware that this will have a direct impact on the success of our business communication.

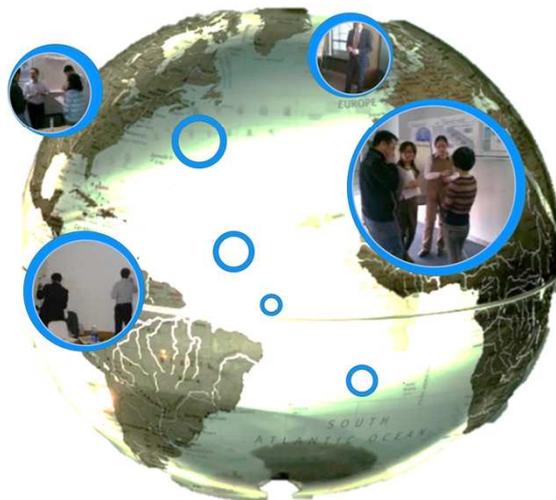


MH: With the aim of bringing these elements all together, York Associates has developed the four-dimensional training model, which builds on language development and business communication skills and also addresses key skills to develop intercultural competence and international communication skills. It is this model we use flexibly in our bespoke training with clients, knowing that everyone is different and will want to lay more/less focus on a particular dimension. We have also developed our core team of trainers with specialist Institute of Leadership and Management endorsed training (ILM), for example our Developing People Internationally course (DPI) or qualifications in Executive Coaching and Mentoring.

# DISCUSSION



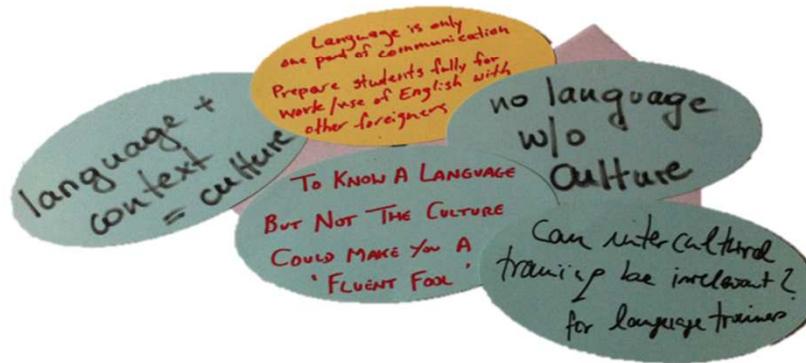
How much intercultural competence do Business English teachers need?



KW:

## PARTICIPANTS VIEWS

Connection was acknowledged & challenged:



KW:

## PARTICIPANTS VIEWS

Opinions among audience as diverse as on stage:



KW:

## DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON

- The risk of ignoring national culture vs the assumption that e.g. THE Chinese culture does exist
- To what extent difficulties in communication are an issue of corporate culture, i.e. company systemics, and not of national/regional cultures
- Do we want people to give up their cultural identity to take on some bland international business culture?
- To what extent does English transport specific Anglo-American business manners?
- How is the use of English as a lingua franca challenging this?

KW: I cited a case study where a German HR student of mine wanted to know more about how to collaborate with the Chinese candidates for a high-pot programme; when we looked into „typical“ Chinese values and behaviours, she said that was no use as those people did not behave like that; likewise, recruiting of other German companies in China has shown that those candidates are recruited that seem to match the company values or personal behaviour best that the recruiters found most important or suitable, thus creating a common attitude to work and performance, for example.

## DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON

- Should we then still use the term intercultural?
- What is the risk of labelling?
- What competence do BE teachers need in that field?
- Are they already competent because most of them live in a different cultural environment and work with people from different cultures? Good basis?
- Or is BE teaching 100% IC teaching as well?
- How much awareness is needed when we supposedly **ONLY** teach the language?
- How should we then teach conflict, for example?

KW: On teaching conflict: that is an issue that would differ with regard to your teaching environment, e.g. when I deal with existing conflict in a company, I can go and do a root cause analysis, look at the specific work environment, use profiling tools and teach communication skills. But how would I handle that e.g. in a university environment, when I have to teach conflict theoretically, anticipating situations?

## PARTICIPANTS VIEWS

Those are the teaching situations participants face:



KW: And it seems that many participants share similar experiences disregarding whether they teach in companies or at universities.

## WRAP UP

What's our remit?



KW: The high interest and the controversial discussion show that there is a need to further address the issue and to think about what exactly the teaching of Business English comprises these days. What is changing? Will we move away from country briefings? Will textbooks include a better discussion of the topic considering that there is no black and white? We can discuss certain values or aspects or communication styles, but how do we help our students to deal with them without walking into the culture trap? Also, how can we integrate issues such as multiculturalism and company systemics into our teaching and even make leverage of them?

## What needs to be done?

Trainers need more support and awareness to include those aspects in teaching



Companies and schools must be willing to pay more for this (extra qualification)



Move intercultural training away from the country trap



Be aware that being “word perfect” does not make great intercultural communicators

What teacher training would need to be provided?

More info can be found on:

ELC: <http://www.elc-consult.com/61601/home.html>

York Associates: <http://www.york-associates.co.uk/course/3>

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