


## TEACHING CULTURE IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: A THREE-STEP APPROACH FOR MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** *This paper addresses the issue of teaching culture in English for Specific Purposes and some aspects of the articulation between language and culture in professional communication. Although the close relationship between language and culture has been recognized in European language education since the 1980s, the integration of culture into ESP curricula has remained a subject of debate among scholars and practitioners. Using English for media and communication studies as a context, this paper outlines a three-step approach to teaching culture in the ESP classroom: (1) raising cultural awareness, (2) developing intercultural and pragmatic competence and (3) building domain-specific discursive skills.*

**Key words:** *culture, English for Specific Purposes, media, communication, intercultural competence, press release, genre*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The challenge of integrating culture into language classrooms has been a longstanding concern in education. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Council of Europe acknowledged the importance of cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding in language acquisition. This development was based on the belief that European citizens should be trained to become both multilingual and multicultural citizens. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars such as Van Ek (1986), Kramsch (1993), Byram (1997), Zarate (2000) and Neuner (2004) developed intercultural approaches to language teaching and learning. In 2009, Coste, Moore and Zarate asserted that building communicative competence in a foreign language involved taking "as a principle" the strong relationship between language and culture and rejecting the idea that "cultural discovery [would] in some way come 'with' the language or 'in addition to it'" (p. 10).

Despite these theoretical advances and the implementation of intercultural communication training in professional settings since the 1970s, the question of and how to integrate specific cultural content into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) academic courses and build students' cultural competence has remained a subject of ongoing debate. Liddicoat et al. (2003) make the following assessment:

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One problem for the integration of culture into language education has been that many of the early models on which culture learning is based see culture as unvarying and composed of discrete, concrete facts that can be taught and learnt as factual information. This approach to culture is a problem for language teaching because it omits key elements of cultural knowledge that are important for intercultural communication, such as underlying value systems, cultural variability within target language communities, the role of the individual as a creator and enactor of culture, and the ways in which language and culture interact in the creation of meaning. (p. 7)

Over the past 20 years, the development of ESP as an academic discipline and a distinct field of research has led to a clearer definition and characterization of its cultural aspects. Culture is approached as a malleable concept that permeates both the practices and discourses of specialized and professional communities (Crozet, C. & Liddicoat, 2000; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Belcher 2006; Wozniak 2019). As a result, studying culture in ESP spans a broad range of disciplines ranging from history and ethnography to discourse analysis and genre studies. In a didactic perspective, this cultural continuum, which extends from communities to their discourses, becomes even more complex, as it must take into account learners' own cultural backgrounds and needs (Liddicoat et al., 2003), as well as transform this academic knowledge into teachable content and learning activities. Being culturally competent thus encompasses a wide range of knowledge and skills including sociocultural knowledge, intercultural competence and specific discursive skills related to the professional field.

The field of media and communication appears as a suitable context for examining the interplay between these aspects of culture and their articulation with language skills in an ESP course. Indeed, in media and communication, culture and language are closely intertwined and play out at every stage of the interaction between the professionals and their audiences. The former tailor their communication strategies, whether corporate, political or digital, to their audiences and, at the same time, contribute through language to the shaping of socio-cultural norms and beliefs (Pierson-Smith, 2014). The teaching of English for media and communication must therefore go beyond meeting students' immediate linguistic needs and aim to develop broader communicative skills based on an understanding of diverse socio-cultural contexts and mastery of specialized discursive norms.

This paper purports to review the process of designing and implementing a teaching unit for first-year Master's students in Information and Communication. Based on the results of a needs assessment that identified students' strengths and areas for improvement, it proposes a three-step approach that begins with raising cultural awareness, moves on to developing intercultural and pragmatic competence, and eventually leads to building domain-specific discursive skills.

## 2. ASSESSING LEARNER NEEDS

A learner needs assessment was conducted among 65 students through a placement test, a survey questionnaire and an interview with the head of the Master's program. The placement test revealed notable variations in language proficiency levels, with 16 students at CEFR A2/B1, 33 at B2, and 17 at C1/C2. Among the respondents, 89% identified as French native speakers and were proficient, though at varying levels, in

three languages, including English. The remaining 11% had a different native language and were proficient in at least four languages, including English.

### 2.1. Survey questions on language, culture and communication needs

The survey aimed to identify students' expectations as English learners and their needs as users of English in a professional context. In line with Belcher and Lukkarila (2011), who recommend that needs analysis should "broaden its focus on the learner to include multilingual learners' self-perception of their cultural identities and positionings, both in terms of their current situation and the futures they imagine for themselves and the role English may play in this desired future", the questions sought to assess students' understanding of culture in relation to foreign language learning, their experiences of miscommunication or cultural conflict, and their level of intercultural awareness.

It also examined culture as a component of communication within the specific field of media and communication by asking about students' knowledge of communication standards and conventions, familiarity with different types of discourse and experience using English in professional settings.

### 2.2. Sample survey results

The skills that students felt needed improvement were production skills, especially writing. The professional English needs identified in the survey refined this finding by showing high expectations in three areas: media and organizational communication, digital communication and professional communication.

Table 1. Language learning needs

Listening	13 (20%)
Reading	9 (14%)
Speaking	25 (39%)
Writing	33 (50%)

Table 2. Domain-specific language needs

Media and organizational communication	31 (50%)
Digital communication	43 (69%)
Workplace communication	28 (45%)

In addition, the survey revealed that a large majority of the students (50) had previous experience communicating with professionals in their field, usually as interns, but only a small number, 10, had had the opportunity to use English in a professional setting. It was assumed that students' familiarity with the professional culture of their field could nevertheless provide a possible basis for building professional communication skills, as this knowledge would support their understanding of the conventions and communicative purposes in the target language.

Table 3. Students' approaches to culture

Importance of learning about culture in the English classroom	58 (89%)
Belief in a strong relationship between language and culture in communication	39 (61%)
Importance of cultural awareness for professional communication	60 (92%)
Experience or example of cultural conflict affecting communication	23 (34%)

For a very large majority of students (89%), discovering the culture was a motivating factor for learning the language. 61% of them also believed that language and culture are closely related and that knowing about the culture helps to understand the language. In a professional context related to their field, 92% of the respondents thought that cultural awareness was important for communication. However, it was observed that a much smaller proportion of the respondents (34%) were able to link the cultural component to a situation or interaction and give an example of miscommunication or cultural conflict.

### 3. DESIGNING THE UNIT

Media and communication studies encompass various professional fields such as journalism, advertising, public relations, digital media and corporate communication. The needs analysis revealed the importance of teaching culture, both as socio-cultural knowledge and as intercultural competence. It also showed the importance of developing writing skills and of raising students' awareness of how culture affects communication in social and professional contexts. The field of public relations (PR) seemed particularly well suited to meet these expectations and needs.

#### 3.1. Cultural dimensions of public relations

##### 3.1.1. *Connection with the national culture of the United States*

The development of public relations as a profession is closely tied to the history of the United States. As such, it offers an opportunity to learn about some of the characteristics of this national culture. Historians of the field have traced the first instances of public relations to the campaign to ratify the U.S. Constitution in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cutlip, 1995, p. 280). They have also linked the development of public relations to the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment, which "ensures the right of public relations practitioners to represent all points of view in the democratic marketplace of ideas" (Grunig & Grunig, 2003, p. 326).

The relationship between the development of the field and the history of the United States is also illustrated by famous historical figures. In 1906, Ivy Lee's *Declaration of Principles* recommended that the press and the public be provided with timely and accurate information on matters of public interest. Edward Bernays, who combined theories derived from psychology and sociology with these early communication strategies, then transformed the practice of public relations into a "science of persuasion" (Pierson-Smith, 2014, p. 427).

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural influence of the United States, and more broadly the Western world, has shaped communication models on a global scale, with communication frameworks still serving as benchmarks in the education of PR professionals around the world (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Today, PR professionals form a "discourse community" whose language is "shaped by sets of culturally-influenced

discoursal conventions concerning their intended audience and communicative purpose" (Orna-Montesinos, 2012, p. 2).

### *3.1.2. Cultural awareness in PR practice*

The practice of public relations is characterized by a constant concern for cultural awareness as practitioners adapt their strategies and messages to culturally diverse audiences. In her study of the role of the public relations industry in professional communication theory and practice, Peirson-Smith (2014) notes that PR professionals act as "cultural intermediaries" (p. 433), channels through which cultural norms and values are disseminated. In this context, cultural awareness and the ability to communicate across cultures are highly valued competencies among PR professionals. These competencies are also quite relevant in the ESP classroom, as learning a foreign language necessarily entails crossing cultural boundaries and adapting the language accordingly.

## **3.2. The press release as genre**

### *3.2.1. Professional discourse: adhering to the culture of the community*

The social constructivist perspective on language sees disciplines and professions as being constructed and maintained through their discursive practices. In this approach, language is conceived as a form of situated action, not just a code or system. According to Hyland (2002):

Language is not just a means for self-expression then, it is how we construct and sustain reality, and we do this as members of communities, using the language of those communities. The features of a text are therefore influenced by the community for which it was written and so are best understood, and taught, through the specific genres of communities. (p. 41)

ESP courses aim to make these discourses explicit to help students understand how communities enact their everyday work and define themselves as a profession. As noted in many textbooks used to train PR professionals, news and press releases are the "staple of PR writing" (Seitel, 2017, p. 341) and the means by which the profession measures its ability to inform and persuade.

### *3.2.2. Pragmatic features of press releases*

In genre analysis, the press release is recognized as a "hybrid genre" due to its dual function, both informational and promotional (McLaren and Gurău, 2005; Catenaccio, 2008). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) have examined the features of organizational and business genres and noted that each genre is characterized by "similar substance and form", "substance" referring to "the social motives, themes, and topics being expressed in the communication", while form relates to "the observable physical and linguistic features of the communication" (p. 301).

Jacobs (1999) identified specific pragmatic features in corporate press releases, which he called the "meta-pragmatics of press releases". Among these features are self-reference, self-quotation and explicit semi-performatives.

Pander Maat (2007) analyzed the promotional elements in 89 corporate press releases. He argued that these elements are used to "intensify a statement in a direction favorable

to the sender" (p. 68). They may also be "left out without affecting the grammaticality and the interpretation of the sentence", or replaced by a "weaker element" (p. 68). He identified 13 types of elements, which he grouped into four categories: pre-modifiers, adjectives, adverbial elements and connectives.

Jacobs and Pander Maat's studies link content to form, context to text. Their findings were thought to be relevant to the set learning goals, provided they were adapted for instructional purposes.

### **3.3. Didactic transposition: adapting academic knowledge for the ESP classroom**

The concept of "didactic transposition" was developed by French mathematician Yves Chevallard (1985). It stems from an anthropological approach to didactics that seeks to analyze and model human action in educational contexts. All stages of the teaching-learning process, from the selection of content and the design of activities to the acquisition of knowledge by learners, are conceived as interrelated human activities (Chevallard, 2006).

In ESP, the transformation of disciplinary knowledge into teachable content is guided by four criteria: type of activity, learning method, didactic approach and learning theory (O'Connell & Chaplier, 2021). However, the process of transposing academic knowledge may prove particularly challenging since the competencies to be developed originate in specialized contexts that may be unfamiliar to the language teacher. Conversely, the knowledge specific to the field may be more familiar to the students, albeit in a different language. Even though this knowledge is still developing and varies from one student to another, it constitutes "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), understood as the incorporation of students' intellectual and cultural resources into the classroom. Such resources support comprehension of the target language as students draw analogies or notice contrasts with their existing specialized knowledge. The outcome is "hybrid", "co-constructed" knowledge (O'Connell & Chaplier, 2021, p. 95), at the intersection of the teacher's linguistic expertise and the students' specialized knowledge.

The lesson plan outlined below draws on these theories and concepts. The aim is to teach students how to write a press release. Not only do they have to adhere to the textual conventions of structure and style, but they also have to take into account some cultural aspects from the contexts (social and professional) in which the discourse is produced. To this end, classroom activities progress from comprehension to observation and then to production, and from culture in the broad sense to culture in its communicative and specialized dimensions.

## **4. TEACHING UNIT OVERVIEW**

The idea of co-constructing learning through the pooling of knowledge and skills is consistent with the theory of socio-constructivism, which favors active, collaborative and situated learning. The preferred didactic approach for the unit is both action-oriented, as students take on social roles, and genre-based, as it focuses on the conventions associated with a particular discursive genre. Learning methods range from inductive reasoning during the discovery and observation phase, to collaborative learning during the writing phase, to autonomous production. These methods are implemented through a variety of activities: annotated reading, Internet research, group discussions and collaborative writing.

#### **4.1. Raising cultural awareness**

The unit is built around a crisis communication scenario in a private company, a situation familiar to public relations professionals. Classwork begins with a case study of a discrimination controversy at a large U.S. company. From a didactic point of view, as shown by Lyu (2023), case studies are an innovative and motivating teaching method conducive to active and task-based learning.

In the first session, students read about the case and discuss it from different perspectives to understand the socio-cultural context in which the crisis took place. They discuss the racial context in the United States, the behavior of the employees, the company's response and the media coverage of the incident.

In the second step, students apply Hofstede's (1984; 2011) theory of cultural dimensions to analyze how cultural factors influence stakeholders' perceptions and responses to the crisis. According to Mandela (2024), the six dimensions of national cultures in Hofstede's model contribute to strengthening PR professionals' cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication skills. A simplified and interactive version of Hofstede's model was used for classwork. In groups, students were instructed to navigate an online country comparison tool (The Culture Factor, n.d.) based on Hofstede's model and compare their understanding of the case with possible responses in different cultural contexts.

#### **4.2. Developing intercultural and pragmatic competence**

In the next two sessions, the students refined their exploration of the link between culture and communication. First, they had to compile and present a press review on another corporate crisis involving a cultural conflict. They had to pay special attention to the company's response, its positioning in relation to the injured group and the communication strategies used to protect the brand image. Special emphasis was placed on the naming of social groups, particularly the shift from neutral to culture-sensitive terms, which showed the company's intent to defuse tensions and rebuild trust with its customer base.

The students then learned about the rhetorical structure and textual characteristics of press releases through an inductive approach linking words and communicative goals. They were able to identify distinctive features, such as the importance of a concise and effective introduction (the lead), the presentation of key facts in an objective and structured way, and the use of quotations to enhance credibility. They also distinguished between informative and promotional elements.

The result of this second phase was the collaborative compilation of a list of terms and phrases drawn from the materials, used either to inform or to persuade. The students were able to note, for example, the alternation between third-person and first-person self-reference: third-person in the descriptive passages, then first-person in the quotations. The use of the first-person personal pronoun "we" was also associated with the company's desire to appear united and to reconnect with its customers. Finally, a series of adjectives, superlatives, quantifiers and adverbs, intended to intensify or positively evaluate the situation, were linked to the promotional elements and distinguished from the informational parts, written in a more neutral journalistic style.

### 4.3. Building domain-specific discursive skills

In the third stage, students applied what they had learned and tried their hand at professional writing, which, according to Hyland (2002), is "how individuals align themselves with the socially shaped identities of their communities" (p. 1091).

The final step was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, the students reviewed the case introduced at the beginning of the course. They collaborated to produce a brief metalinguistic analysis in which they were required to state their communicative goals, link them to linguistic forms, and then explain how these words and phrases either simply mirrored the context or altered it to present it in a new light.

In the second phase, each student of the group drew on the pragmatic elements they had previously identified to draft their own press release. In the manner of public relations professionals, they had to demonstrate their ability to craft a text tailored to a given social context, addressed to an audience highly sensitive to issues of racial inequality and organized according to the standards and conventions of writing in the specialized field.

## 5. STUDENT OUTPUT AND FEEDBACK

The evaluation of the students' productions revealed a number of positive points, as well as further food for thought. The preparatory work in the form of metalinguistic analysis was successful in over a third of the pieces, with the communicative objectives clearly stated and linked to the corresponding linguistic forms and the identification of these forms by means of their grammatical category. Some productions were less successful, but a large majority of the students interviewed informally at the end of the course confirmed the relevance of this intermediate stage, which not only helped them to prepare for writing, but also had a positive impact on the stress generated by the individual assignment.

Two aspects deserve further reflection: First, there remain significant discrepancies between students' levels of proficiency, particularly in their use of the basic linguistic system. To address this, a self-correction and peer-correction stage could be integrated into the process. Second, although the initial questionnaire helped to identify the students' backgrounds, needs and expectations, it is difficult to conclude that professional experiences or prior domain knowledge significantly contributed to the development of their cultural and pragmatic competencies. However, all of the students interviewed confirmed that they were familiar with communication techniques that resort to information and promotion, since these techniques are also applied in other fields, such as political communication, which is part of their curriculum.

## 6. CONCLUSION

English for media and communication offers a rich field for studying the cultural component in ESP in its socio-cultural, communicative and specialized aspects. The model suggested in this paper relies on a three-step approach designed to raise students' awareness of the roles that culture plays in professional communication. This approach could be applied to other fields, such as business English, where communication is governed by specific discourse conventions and intercultural considerations. It may also



be relevant to other areas of the humanities and social sciences that interact with society and its groups, such as politics, education or law, among others. Scientific and technical fields, although less directly concerned with social interaction, have their own intercultural needs arising from high levels of international collaboration and exposure to culturally diverse audiences. The unit presented here, and the tentative modelling avenues outlined in the paper, illustrate that the cultural component of ESP underpins and links all stages of language teaching and learning, from the initial attention paid to learners' identities and needs to their effective communication in work-related tasks.

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