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Guest Editor Dr Robert O'Dowd

Original Research

Successful international communication

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A key concern of international businesses of today is how they can manage communication across borders, especially when using English as a lingua franca. With the massive development of international business with international supply chains, multinational teams, virtual distributed teams, international joint ventures and mergers and acquisitions access to English allows entry to the world's Executive Club. This paper explores what successful communication in international organisations involves and offers strategies that business English and management trainers can use to improve communication in multinational teams and with clients and partners. The principles and good practice suggestions included in this paper will be helpful to teachers and trainers working with business schools and companies helping students and managers to work with international staff in their own country or abroad, providing practical tools and advice that can be put into practice in training and at work.

KEYWORDS: *Business English, international business, ELF, teamworking, building international relationships, leadership, conflict management*

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1. INTRODUCTION

As Crystal (2012) wrote in 2012, an estimated 375 million people speak English as their first language but non-native users of English speak it as a second or foreign language. Within the 'non-native' users there are many different varieties of English spoken in addition to the most commonly recognised varieties, British and American English. Increasingly, in a global economy people are using the English language to communicate using English as a lingua franca, or ELF (Seidlhofer, 2004). Even the terms 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' can be called into question. We are all users of different varieties of English, even within our own countries according to regional accent, grammatical usage and vocabulary and idioms. So, what is the best route to successful international communication in English?

2. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS VIA ELF

2.1. Strategies for using ELF successfully

ELF is the use of the English language to communicate between people of different mother tongues. It is different from the varieties of 'simplified English', such as Nerriere's (2004) 'Globish', which reduces core vocabulary to 1500 words to

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allow basic business conversation, or Ogden's (1930) 'Basic English', which has an 850-word core vocabulary list. ELF involves not just attention to language used but also to how we exchange information and opinions. I have listed 10 strategies people can employ to help them be fully comprehensible when using ELF (Chong, 2018). These are particularly important for native speakers and expert English users communicating internationally in English.

Using ELF in a group with a mixed level of proficiency in English demands a certain degree of adaptation. Below are some strategies that can be used (Chong, 2018).

Speak clearly. This means being clear in your mind about what you want to say before you open your mouth and speaking clearly and not mumbling. Also important is not trailing off at the end of a sentence, thinking your interlocutor knows what you mean. They often don't but are too polite to say so.

Slow down. You may not notice how fast you speak. Your speed may increase when you are excited or nervous and you may mumble or talk giving your interlocutor no time to think or respond. It is better to slow down, stay slowed down, enunciate clearly and maybe record your voice so you can hear how fast you speak.

Avoid over-complicated language. Try to avoid colloquialisms and slang or, if you do use them, try and explain in a less complicated way.

Avoid too many cultural references. These can be confusing and take time to explain. This takes away from the point of the conversation. Some people might understand the cultural references but others don't and may feel excluded as a result.

Be careful with jokes. The British sense of humour is notoriously ironic and can be seen by many as rude and sarcastic. If you do tell a joke make sure it doesn't come across as being offensive, and that it doesn't depend too much on understanding a play on words or a cultural reference.

Active listening. One of the most important skills in any dialogue, active listening involves listening not just to the words used but also the feelings expressed in saying them. Active listening is

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about empathy; taking time to listen, asking people for their opinions, not interrupting and trying to involve everyone in the group. Your ability to listen actively can be an immense boost to the self-confidence of the person you are talking to.

Asking for clarification. It is perfectly reasonable to ask for clarification if you haven't understood something but the way you ask may cause the person you are asking to lose face by suggesting they weren't clear enough. Better to take the responsibility on yourself by asking, ‚Can I check I've understood?' and then presenting what you understood they said. It's more polite and gets better results.

Paraphrasing and summarising. It's important to be explicit and make your point clear, without causing offence. Give reasons and examples to support your point also matters and be prepared to find different ways of expressing your point to make sure it is clear.

Learn to accommodate different communication styles. If people have a different communication style to yours it is easy to get the wrong impression about them. It is important not to judge people on how they speak and to think how you can adapt and maybe tailor your own language communication style to suit them better.

Respect. Finally, it's all about empathy and respect. It's important to recognise that even if people can speak English correctly they may have a different style of communication. Avoid criticising and correcting others' use of English, show kindness and encouragement and above all be respectful of other's feelings. Speaking a language not your mother tongue can be a challenge and should be respected.

2.2. Building relationships across cultures

Spencer-Oatey (2008) defines culture as *'a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and baha-*

'The ICE-BREAK model is simply an acronym and it describes eight steps one can take to efficiently build an initial relationship'

vioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the meaning of other people's behaviour' (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 1-8). Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) describe intercultural interaction competence as the ability to communicate and behave effectively with people from other cultural groups and the ability to handle the psychological demands that arise from such interactions (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

2.3. The ICE-BREAK model

One of the concepts trainers and teachers can use show how to break the ice when meeting someone from another country is to use the ICE-BREAK model (Chong, 2018). The ICE-BREAK model is simply an acronym and it describes eight steps one can take to efficiently build an initial relationship.

I Introduce. Introduce yourself to the other person. This may benefit from a bit of prior research into how people from other cultures introduce themselves, whether they are casual or formal and how they present and receive business cards.

C Comment on a mutual area of commonality. This might be the weather, the event you are attending or the environment you are both in. Small talk is light and casual conversation and may be longer of shorter depending partly on cultural norms.

E Encourage. Find ways of inviting your interlocutor into the conversation. Asking their opinion after you've made an initial comment is often an excellent way of doing this.

B Balance questions and comments. It's important to preserve balance between asking too many questions or stating too many opinions, which may put your conversational partner off.

R Reveal something about yourself. When your conversational partner makes an observation, it is good if you can relate that to your own experience. For example, *'I see what you mean. I had that experience once. I was …'* By responding in this way, you let them know your feelings, beliefs and attitudes and build trust by showing who you really are.

E Express curiosity and interest. This means commenting positively on what you hear and can encompass a number of responses such as emotion (*'Really? That's amazing!'*), curiosity, *('What happened next?'),* feelings, *'(How did you feel about that?'),* solidarity *('I would be really upset),* and appreciation *('Congratulations. You did really well').*

A Ask open-ended questions. It is best to avoid 'Yes/No' questions such as *'Are you working for…'* and to ask open questions beginning with phrases such as *'Tell me …'* as in *'Tell me about your organisation'.*

K Keep your answers short and simple. Remembering the acronym KISS is a very good way ensuring you don't bore or overwhelm your conversational partner.

ICE-BREAK is an excellent way to ensure you make a good impression on people you meet at a conference or networking event. It is also useful to reflect afterwards on a meeting, go through the ICE-BREAK stages and decide which ones you did well and which ones you can improve on.

3. TEAMWORKING AND ELF

3.1. Recognising communication styles

One of the key characteristics of our global economy is the diversity of teams. Any team, whatever the nationality or mix of nationalities, contains different types of character but in multi-national teams or virtually distributed teams it can be even more notable.

One of the issues faced by team members and in particular by team leaders is how to identify the key characteristics and find ways to manage them to optimise communication and cooperation. Below are 14 styles of communication. Each style compares two opposites. Used often in communi-

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cation training sessions to promote reflection and self-awareness, trainees are asked to look at the 14 styles and work out which ones fit them most appropriately and where they feel most comfortable (Chong, 2018).

1. Complex / Simple
2. Competitive / Cooperative
3. Concise answers / Expansive answers
4. Direct / Indirect
5. Distanced / Close
6. Emotional / Factual
7. Expressive / Serious and contained
8. Fast-paced / Slow-paced
9. Focused on detail / On the big picture
10. Passive / Assertive
11. Past-oriented / Present/future-oriented
12. Relationship-oriented / Task-oriented
13. Silent listener / Active listener
14. Structured / Flexible

Of course, each of us is different, influenced by the cultures of the communities we belong to, our upbringing, our life experience, and our education. Nevertheless, if we can identify our own communication style and compare it with others we deal with we can learn to work with them and overcome the prejudice that might arise from having to work with colleagues or clients whose styles we may not initially be at ease with.

3.2. The DISC model

A framework that can help our understanding of different communication styles is the DISC model of personality types. This was developed in the 1920s by Marston (1928) and then turned into an instrument for assessing communication styles of potential employees by Merenda and Clarke (1965). It divides communication styles into four basic traits as (Figure 1).

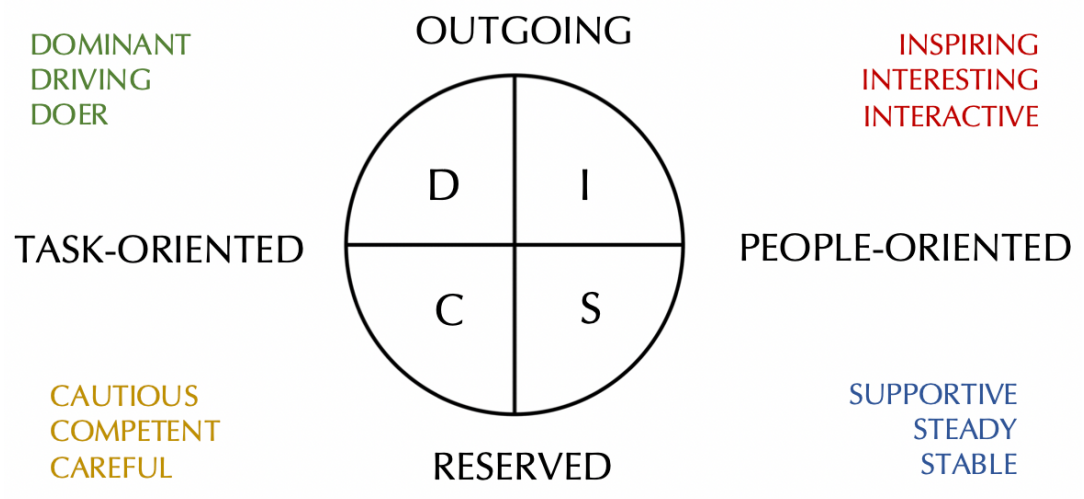

Figure 1. The DISC model

The four capital letters in the quadrant stand for different personality types.

D Dominant – a driver of communication, results oriented, to the point and decisive.

I Influence – inspirational, people oriented, outgoing and demonstrative.

S Steady – supportive, sincere, dependable.

C Conscientious – cautious, competent, valuing accuracy and expertise.

We are a mixture of personality traits but many individuals tend to prefer one style over others and this can influence how they communicate. Dominant personalities tend to drive communication quickly towards a particular goal or result. Influencers tend to be more expansive in their communication style, enjoying working with people. Steady personalities are slower and methodical in their communication style while conscientious persona-

lities tend to focus on evidence and to be relatively slow-paced, fact-led communicators (Chong, 2018).

Below is a description of some effective ways of working with the different communication styles.

Communicating with the Dominant style:
– show admiration;
– get to the point quickly;
– let them take control of the conversation;
– be structured and systematic;
– avoid deviation from the topic;
– demonstrate competence.

Communicating with the Influencing style:
– praise and recognise achievement;
– be relaxed and sociable;
– value small talk;
– smile;
– show emotions;
– turn what you want to say into a story;
– avoid too much detail.

Communicating with the Steady style:
– show interest;
– ask for help or support;
– express support;
– show appreciation;
– ensure clarity;
– create a safe, warm atmosphere;
– allow time to adjust to changes;
– avoid confrontation.

Communicating with the Conscientious style:
– allow thinking time and listen;
– provide facts and details;
– establish your credibility;
– don't pretend to be an expert if you are not;
– be structured and systematic;
– use established routines and frameworks to present new ideas;
– don't press for action.

3.3. Face and time

All managers and team members have to deal with issues of time and we know that some team members are strict time keepers and others are more relaxed. Even more important is the issue of 'face', often defined as personal dignity. Gaining, giving and losing face is important in all cultures but particularly so in China, Japan and Korea and other parts of Asia.

As a team leader it is important to support international team members and there a number of strategies you can usefully employ to 'give face' to teammates (Chong, 2018):

– ensure all team members have a chance to speak if they wish;
– ensure team members feel they have been heard (comment in person or via email);
– voice appreciation and encouragement but be careful about singling people out;
– be sensitive when giving feedback, check if should it be public or private;
– be sensitive about refusing invitations, tasks;
– focus disagreement on the proposal, never on the person making the proposal;
– avoid shouting, personal attacks or emotional disagreements in front of others;
– don't neglect the minority, leave anyone out;
– be aware of geographical locations skills and cultural backgrounds of the team;
– be aware of different levels of proficiency in English and avoid making people feel incompetent or embarrassed by their difficulty in expressing themselves.

3.4. Trust

Ultimately a successful team depends on trust between team members and team leaders. Trust means we can rely on people. Lack of trust creates fear, suspicion and leads to team and project breakdown. A key element in creating trust is transparency. However, there is always the danger of the 'illusion of transparency' as psychologists describe it; in other words, the assumption that because I know why I am doing something everyone else shares my knowledge. This is often not the case, especially in international teams. The list below suggests some strategies for building team trust and confidence:

– get to know each team member, both personally and professionally;
– find out their interests, their skills and communication styles;

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– in Virtual Distributed Team meetings allow time for 'get to know you' chats;

– be prepared to ask questions and clarify if you don't understand;

– encourage team members to learn from each other continuously and efficiently;

– offer constructive feedback and learn to accept feedback gracefully at all times;

– avoid an 'us and them' mentality and encourage inclusivity and a shared team identity;

– update, discuss communication processes;

– don't be afraid of disagreement, welcome every idea as a worthwhile contribution, even if the idea is not entirely accepted;

– anticipate possible cultural disagreements and discuss what is acceptable and appropriate;

– schedule regular meetings to update on developments and keep team members up to speed on broader project and management developments.

4. LEADERSHIP

4.1. High and low power distance managers

Leadership communication is a key issue in international management. As a manager you are expected to organise the team, give instructions, motivate the team and give feedback, both positive and developmental. Most importantly your job is to get things done. How do managers do it?

McGregor (1967) distinguished between two broad categories of manager, who he described as X and Y. X managers tend to be more autocratic and directive whereas Y managers tend to be more consultative and participative. McGregor's (1967) analysis broadly coincides with Hofstede et al.'s (2010) high-power distance and low-power distance cultures and is further developed in Lewis's (2018) *When Cultures Collide*.

4.2. Points to note in a new work environment

When starting in a new international work environment it is useful to check how decisions are made and communicated, how hierarchies and team relations operate and how managers approach and complete tasks. Below are some of the questions you can ask to obtain clarity on each topic (Chong, 2018).

'Meetings are one of the central rituals of any organisation, and how meetings are run and managed is often a key criterion of organisational competence'

Decision making. Who usually makes decisions? The manager, the manager with the employees or the employees? Who does the manager consult with before taking decisions? How are they consulted? Face-to-face, meetings, virtual communication? Are decisions taken according to a consensus? If so how is the consensus reached? Are decisions reversible/changeable?

Hierarchies and relationships. How many levels of decision-making hierarchy are there in the organisation? Is the manager's door 'open' to team members? How visible are managers on the 'shop floor'? Do managers work alongside their staff or separate from them? Do managers spend time with their team after working hours? Is it acceptable for employees to bypass their team leader and contact higher executives directly?

Tasks. Is the manager expected to provide clear direction for the team? Are instructions specific? Is there space for improvisation and creativity? How involved are the managers in daily operations?

4.3. Managing meetings

Meetings are one of the central rituals of any organisation, national or international, and how meetings are run and managed is often a key criterion of efficiency and organisational competence. Meetings procedure is influenced by national, regional and company culture but some key actions can be taken to motivate multi-national employees by promoting inclusivity and encouraging their contribution. The list below offers some suggestions:

– allow time for participants to prepare before the meeting; circulate the agenda or explain the topic so they have time to think about it;

– some employees may want a group pre-meeting to brainstorm ideas and work out a common approach;

'In order to give effective feedback most organisations suggest the Hamburger approach, also known as the feedback sandwich, where the bun or the bread suggests positive feedback and the 'meat' in the middle suggests points for improvement and development'

– in a meeting, divide participants into smaller groups to avoid putting individuals on the spot;

– consider an opinion box to which employees can contribute before the meeting; the cards are then collected, read out and discussed but contributors benefit from anonymity;

– encourage a co-operative atmosphere; there's no such thing as a stupid idea;

– appeal to the goals of the group.

4.4. Feedback

An all-important part of management and leadership is giving constructive feedback. Dweck (2008) distinguishes between a growth mindset (believing that any ability can be developed by putting in time and effort) and a fixed mindset (believing that you're either good or aren't good at something and that your qualities are fixed and cannot change). In order to give effective feedback most organisations suggest the Hamburger approach, also known as the feedback sandwich, where the bun or the bread suggests positive feedback and the 'meat' in the middle suggests points for improvement and development. Some managers can be very strict, almost bullying even, in giving negative feedback and some forget the 'bun' altogether and just focus on the 'burger' (negative criticism). This too is influenced by national and regional cultural background as well as personal style.

If you want to avoid the 'bun' and also avoid causing offence many managers recommend the SBI tool, standing for Situation, Behaviour and Impact. Developed by the Centre for Creative Leadership, it focuses on facts and observation not emotion and judgement. The SBI tool has four steps as described below.

Situation. Define the situation, the setting and the context.

Behaviour. Describe the behaviour observed (without emotion).

Impact. Outline the impact of the behaviour.

Next steps. Reflect on the feedback and offer suggestions for improvement.

Some of the development questions you can ask include the following:

– What happened?

– Why might this be a problem?

– How can we stop it happening again?

– How can you solve it if it happens again?

– What do you think you can improve on?

– How do you think you can develop this?

– How can I help you improve on this?

– What support might you need in future?

In conclusion, the key to successful feedback is not to focus on the past but 'feed forward' into the future (Goldsmith, 2012).

5. PERSUASION & CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

5.1. Push and pull model

Negotiation is at the root of successful business and therefore another key issue in international communication. What are the different styles you are likely to encounter and what is the best way to deal with them?

The 'push' style focuses on presenting your point of view and giving reasons and examples to persuade your interlocutor you are right. You 'push' the other person to accept your position. The 'pull' style aims at reaching a common agreed position with the interlocutor by asking what they want and agreeing together on a way forward. Tardanico (2011) identified five styles of persuasion.

Asserting, i.e. firmly insisting you are right in the face of opposition.

Convincing, i.e. using data, evidence and reasoning to get others to agree.

Negotiating, i.e. discussing terms and conditions and making compromises to reach agreement.

Bridging, i.e. using interpersonal skills to create strong bonds and collaboration.

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Inspiring, i.e. sharing your vision and enthusiasms and inviting others to invest in your goals.

Negotiators don't stick to one style but adapt and adjust according to the stage they are at in the negotiation and how their interlocutor is reacting.

5.2. Holistic and analytical styles of thinking

Another factor in persuasion and influencing is the style of thinking, in particular the need to set the context before you say what you want or wish to achieve. The need to set the context first is typical of much Asian communication while the west tends to be more analytical, particularly the so-called Anglo-Saxon countries (Bertalanffy, 1968).

This way of thinking has been illustrated in the analysis of portraits taken by westerners and easterners. Analysing Facebook photos taken by Americans and comparing them with photos taken Taiwanese, Singaporeans and people from Hong Kong, Huang and Park noted that

The American photos focused on faces with details of smiles and expressions whereas the East Asian photos focused more on background environment than on the faces (Huang & Park, 2013).

Masuda and Nisbett (2001) in an experiment describing a short video clip found that Japanese participants tended to focus on the background of what they saw while Americans tended to focus on objects in the foreground. Holistic thinking tends to see the connections and interdependencies between the environment, the circumstances, the people, their relationships and the tasks, all of which impact upon one another. Analytical thinking tends to focus on the individual parts, analysing each item separately from its environment.

5.3. Deductive and inductive reasoning

Meyer (2014) distinguishes between two types of reasoning which she describes as principles-first (deductive reasoning) and applications-first (inductive reasoning). She argues that Anglo-Saxon countries tend more to practical applications based on inductive reasoning (examine the facts and then work out the principle) whereas continental Europe tends more towards deductive reasoning (identify the theory and then put it into practice). This often causes problems in international negotiations, where deductive reasoning (principles first) conflicts with inductive reasoning (applications first).

5.4. Causes of conflict

With cultural differences in negotiation and communication it is not surprising that conflict can arise. Bell (2002) identified eight prevalent sources of conflict most commonly encountered in the interaction of negotiating parties: resources, styles, perceptions, goals, pressures, roles, personal values, government and official policies.

5.5. Dealing with conflict

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) posited two dimensions of conflict as assertiveness and cooperativeness and identified five modes of conflict management:

– competing: asserting your point of view and being unwilling to compromise;

– accommodating: sacrificing your own point of view to keep the peace;

– compromising: finding the middle way;

– avoiding: withdrawing to avoid conflict;

– collaborating: negotiating to find a win-win solution for both parties.

The TKI instrument as it is known is one of the most popular instruments used in analysing methods of conflict resolution and cultural researchers have aimed at identifying particular instruments commonly used by particular cultural groups, notably Asia, the US and Canada and Australia (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Lee & Rogan, 1991; Brew & Cairns, 2004).

It is difficult to generalise, however, as individual personalities and the context of the conflict may differ. Nevertheless, a number of cultural issues may arise, for example:

– team vs individual (the US is seen as more individualistic whereas Asia is seen as more collectivist);

– power distance (much of Asia is seen as hierarchical whereas the US, Canada and Australia place great stress on equality and delegation of responsibility);

– task orientation vs relationships (the US, Canada and Australia are seen as task oriented whereas Asia is perceived as much more relationship-oriented);

– long-term and short-term orientation (Asia, especially China, tends to think more long-term solutions, whereas much of the West thinks in terms of short and mid-term solutions);

– apologies and the use of silence (In Asia apology is seen as a way of expressing humility and accepting shame when things go wrong whereas in other parts of the world it might be seen as a sign of weakness; silence is an important negotiation tool in East Asia and is seen as a way of showing respect; in other countries it might be seen as disapproval or detachment from the issue under discussion).

However, as said above, it is important to take individual and professional culture into account when considering these issues.

5.6. Communicating in a conflict situation

Finally, what can you do to resolve conflicts when they arise? There are a number of things to watch out for when in a conflict situation, which, if handled correctly, will help you resolve the problem.

Avoid negativity. Remember the Hamburger area. Always think positive first.

Avoid over-generalising. Saying, *'You always do this'* or *'This is always happening'* just makes the situation worse.

Avoid presenting feelings as facts. If you feel something say how you feel, don't accuse your partners in communication.

Avoid applying past examples to the present.

Avoid emotional words and adjectives.

Avoid personal criticism, focus on the problem.

Avoid feeling defensive and retaliating.

Avoid interrupting. Listen.

Listen to what is said. Acknowledge others' feelings in order to resolve the situation as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Think forward. Don't get stuck in the past.

Using these strategies will help you resolve conflict issues much more successfully.

'In 2004 the Council of Europe initiated the INCA Project, INCA standing for Intercultural Awareness Assessment, directed by Professor Byram of Durham University in the UK, that identified six qualities of a competent international manager and assessed them at three levels: basic competence, intermediate competence and full competence'

5.7. A.D.A.P.T

The key to working internationally and with multi-national teams is to develop your adaptation skills. In 2004 the Council of Europe initiated a programme to define the qualities of a good international manager. It was called the INCA Project, INCA standing for Intercultural Awareness Assessment and it was directed by Professor Michael Byram of Durham University in the UK. The INCA project identified six qualities of a competent international manager and assessed them at three levels: basic competence, intermediate competence and full competence (Intercultural Competence Assessment, 2004). The six qualities are:

– tolerance of ambiguity (patience);

– behavioural flexibility (adaptability);

– communicative awareness (interpersonal skills);

– knowledge discovery (interest in people);

– respect for otherness (inclusivity);

– empathy towards other cultures and languages (empathy).

In his ground-breaking work on emotional intelligence, Harvard psychologist Goleman (1995) identified ten key skills, some of which were also recognised by Byram. They are:

– self-awareness and the ability to reflect;

– curiosity: finding out about 'the other';

– mindfulness and perceptiveness;

– open-mindedness and non-judgementalism;

– patience and tolerance of ambiguity;

– emotional strength;

– interpersonal skills;

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– core communication skills;
– flexibility and accountability'
– sense of identity and objectives.

How can we simplify these concepts to create usable strategies that trainers and international executives can use? The key issues are recognising differences in culture and encouraging reflection and actually adapting behaviour.

The DIE model, taught by Milton and Bennett in their workshops at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s consists of three steps (Bennett et al., 1977). They are:

D Describe. Describe what is happening and what the differences are from your own behaviour.

I Interpret. Examine the possible reasons for that behaviour.

E Evaluate. Examine your own feelings about what is going on.

Following the author's own research into good practice in training this paper proposes an alternative model which both encourages reflection on the intercultural difficulty encountered and offers an action plan for an efficient and thought-through response. It uses the acronym, A.D.A.P.T. The letters stand for:

A Awareness: be aware of how you feel.

D Don't judge: don't jump to conclusions.

A Analyse: examine the reasons for the difference in opinions or conclusions.

P Persuade yourself: explore how to adapt.

T Try: adapt your behaviour.

Tomalin and Nicks (2014) used the 80/20 principle to suggest that a 20% adaptation of behaviour on your part can achieve an 80% positive response from the other side. In other words, small incremental changes in your behaviour can achieve major improvements in business relations.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored management theory and good practice in working successfully with employees from different countries and cultural backgrounds. In my research I have found numerous examples of management problems and both good and bad practice which we do not have space to deal with here but are included in my book *Successful International Communication* (Chong, 2018). The principles and good practice suggestions included in this paper will be helpful to teachers and trainers working with business schools and companies helping students and managers to work with international staff in their own country or abroad, providing practical tools and advice that can be efficiently put into practice in training and at work.

There is no question, as the world becomes more international, not less, that understanding and applying the principles of culture and communication, teamworking, management and leadership and persuasion and conflict management will be more and more part of our working lives and our training.

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