

Integrating Language Learning and Culture into an ESP International Marketing Course Syllabus

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Abstract

Among the uncontrollable elements of international marketing education in English are those linguistic, communication and cultural components which decidedly inform discourse and decision-making about marketing activities, but which are difficult to find a balance among in a semester syllabus. In the globalised world, it is not enough to be familiar only with the geographical, economic, legal, infrastructural or social environments of the country in which one wishes to undertake marketing activities. One should not forget that individuals are different, too. This difference originates from our culture and culture determines communication in all its forms. Add to this the layer of communication in a second language and the understanding of how international marketing activities should be handled abroad becomes even trickier. Practice often proves that geographical closeness of the foreign market does not always equal to cultural closeness. It may happen that our product, because of cultural reasons, can be more easily sold in a faraway country instead of in any of our neighbouring countries. The paper explores the integration of the myriad of uncontrollable elements introduced above into a course syllabus for non-native learners of international marketing through English.

Among the uncontrollable elements of international marketing education in English are those linguistic, communication and cultural components which decidedly inform discourse and decision-making about marketing activities, but which are difficult to find a balance among in a semester syllabus. (Compare MISHAN, 2005) In the globalised world, it is not enough to be familiar only with the geographical, economic, legal, infrastructural or social environments of the country in which one wishes to undertake marketing activities. One should not forget that individuals are different, too. This difference originates from our culture and culture determines communication in all its forms. Add to this the layer of communication in a second language and the understanding of how international marketing activities should be handled abroad becomes even trickier. Practice often proves that geographical closeness of the foreign market does not always equal to cultural closeness. It may happen that our product, because of cultural reasons, can be more easily sold in a faraway country instead of in any of our neighbouring countries. The paper explores the integration of the myriad of uncontrollable elements introduced above into a course syllabus for non-native learners of international marketing through English.

We begin with a discussion of those components which either directly or indirectly affect the syllabus. Elements which must be included in any syllabus include how the environment of international marketing is built up of at least three circles. The inner circle involves the domestic controllable elements, actually they are firm characteristics such as the 4P (product, price, placement and promotion). This circle constitutes the marketer's decision area. The second circle involves the domestic uncontrollable

elements, such as competitive structure, economic climate, legal/political forces. These elements have some effect on foreign-operation decisions. These two circles are continuously present in the everyday marketing activity of a company. Depending on in how many foreign countries the company is operating in, from direct/indirect export activity through importing input to having subsidiary companies almost all over the world, the company will have one or several outer circles for each foreign partner country. Students learn how uncertainty is created by the uncontrollable elements of all business environments and each foreign country in which a company operates adds its own unique set of uncontrollable factors. These outer circles involve the foreign uncontrollable elements, such as economic forces, competitive forces, level of technology, structure of distribution, geography and infrastructure, political/legal forces and last but not least cultural forces. Thus, the more foreign markets in which a company operates, the greater the possible variety of foreign environmental factors with which a company has to contend. Frequently, a solution to a problem in country market A is not applicable to a problem in country market B (I01). In other words, students learning international marketing subjects in English as a second language are going to need massive vocabulary building, in order to function in class, as well in preparing independent work.

Added to the discussions of what defines international marketing is the realm of culture. This element is vital for all students, as its influence will govern day-to-day marketing activities on the job following graduation. Therefore, understanding the culture of the prospected partner country is utilised during business meetings, negotiations, both oral and written business correspondence, and summarising in any step of the marketing activity. In international business, the impact of language on such business functions as international marketing and international management are prevalent and common. However, it may also be argued that the impact of language has been trivialised. International marketing texts abound with examples of inappropriate literal translation of product names and slogans: Fried-chicken franchise KFC entered the Chinese market in the late 1980s and immediately put its foot in its mouth. The fast food chain had accidentally translated its slogan "Finger-lickin' good" to a not-so-appetizing phrase: "Eat your fingers off." American brewer Coors has a similar problem with a slang phrase which could not be translated so easily. Coors tried to replicate the success it had at home by introducing its "Turn It Loose" campaign to Spain, However, when translated into Spanish, an expression that is commonly interpreted as "Suffer from diarrhoea" was accidentally used. Of course, sales did not take off, as intended. Swedish vacuum cleaner maker Electrolux mistranslated its English slang when it introduced its products to the United States. In attempting to focus customer attention onto the great suction power of its vacuum cleaners, the company's advertising campaign used the slogan "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux." Auto giant Ford found that, in Belgium, appealing to customers with a dead body in every car is not the best way to sell an automobile. Hoping to focus consumer attention on its cars' excellent manufacturing, Ford launched a campaign using its slogan: "Every car has a high-quality body." However, when translated, the slogan actually read, "Every car has a high-quality corpse". Moreover, is not always the messaging that gets marketers in trouble in international advertising: even the product name can get lost in translation. When car manufacturer American Motors launched its new midsize car — the Matador — in the early 1970s in Puerto Rico, it quickly realized the name did not have the intended meaning of courage and strength. In Spanish,

matador means "killer," which, in a place filled with hazardous roads, did not instil a great deal of confidence in potential drivers. (Compare LANSKY)

Unfortunately, the influence of language on international marketing for students learning the subject in a foreign language has received little attention, excepting in pointing out the blunders highlighted above. Much of the international marketing and, indeed, international business, literature reflects a common view that language is an incarnation of culture, which leads to the relegating of special purpose language learning as an element of international marketing education to a subheading of the topic: 'culture'. When language learning is not seen within this rubric, L2 learning is still often limited to its impacts on cross-cultural communication issues.

ESP and CLIL courses react to the internationalisation processes affecting the job market and the field of education. Within the field of international marketing, language appears in a variety of publications, although few focus exclusively on its impact. Predictably, those that do argue that personal unaccustomedness with using a foreign language in one's daily work activities constrains that person's ability and preparedness to interact with those operating in foreign markets using the foreign language. This hesitancy or even inability naturally contrasts with the comparative ease of functioning in foreign markets where a familiar language, native or learned, is used. Published research also indicates that language familiarity is particularly important for smaller companies to survive in the increasingly globalized markets. (FRITZ J. et al., 2012)

One of the problems in seeking to generalize the impact of language on a field such as international marketing is that language skills are competencies possessed by individuals, not by organisations. Thus, the foreign language ability of an economic organization is essentially the language abilities of its employees. Few companies conduct regular audits of their employees' language competencies and those employees lacking solid L2 competencies are not necessarily going to volunteer informing their management of this lack. This, among other factors, makes it hard to obtain relevant data. (WIWCZAROSKI et al., 2005)

English has grown into the most commonly used commercial language, becoming, in many cases, the *lingua franca* of international business. In topics included in our syllabus, students will learn about and discuss whether the adoption of a corporate language enables internal communication or whether it simply creates more problems. Students must understand that in marketing, just by shifting the focus of cross-language issues to the local store level, one can better access and communicate with actual customers. Language is the key to marketing, whether the product is made and sold within the same culture or made in one country and sold in another one on the other side of the world. This is because, as students learn, language reflects different assumptions one can make about one's customer base. One often fails to grasp how elements such as time, attitude to accomplishment, religion or social hierarchy must be both addressed and expressed in product names, slogans and catchphrases used in marketing communication.

Foreign language knowledge is vital to being able to get these elements right the first time. A company's reputation and investments are on the line and mistakes are difficult,

if not impossible, to correct in today's world of instant news and social media. One has only to look at the journals devoted entirely to this (e.g., *Cultural Management: An International Journal*, *Global Business Languages*, *Journal of Language for International Business*, *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*). HOLDEN (1989), writing about languages of "marketing value" notes how a "...reluctance to learn foreign languages," can "... engender an indifference and, worse, a blindness to the importance of other countries' languages as languages of business communication ... " (1). He also notes that a language barrier "... affects the businessperson's capacity to interpret other cultures and therefore other markets" (5). Unquestionably, having the ability to speak and understand the language of a host country allows working expatriates to adjust to living in that country and to engage in more meaningful interactions with inhabitants of that country. A key topical article in the *European Journal of Marketing* warns that "When a foreign language is not understood sufficiently well it acts as a barrier to establishing ... closeness to the market, and it is for this reason that language differences are significant in international marketing ... " (SWIFT, 1991: 38). LONG's 2005 needs analysis of foreign language discusses this point at great length.

Because foreign language knowledge is so vital to business and especially, in our case, international marketing, we needed to explore how the function of a foreign language within this field might be included in our syllabus. Instructive here is HOLDEN's (1989) classification of languages according to their function. All categories of his classification include some form of the word market. The categories are:

- Languages of market contact (a lingua franca used in cross-cultural interactions, but perhaps not the mother tongue of either party or even widely known in the market);
- Market languages (languages of industrial and economic activity and languages of some end-users of products, even if not an official language of the state);
- Languages of marketing value ("official" languages in countries with high involvement in international business which generate new scientific and technical information).

One international marketing textbook used in the English-speaking world provides a justification for language study: CATEORA and GRAHAM's *International Marketing* reminds students that "the importance of understanding the language of a country cannot be overestimated" (2005: 109) and "language may be one of the most difficult cultural elements to master, but it is the most important to study in an effort to acquire some degree of empathy" (2002: 106). Indeed, class discussion often demonstrates how advanced foreign language competency is more important than mere passive understanding of the *jist* of what is being said. Communication involves getting an intended message to an intended recipient in the way it was originally intended. Much has been published in this element and its impact on intercultural communication. (Compare WIWCZAROSKI, 2011)

The language component in an international marketing course shows students both the obvious and subtle cultural differences that languages convey in marketing communications. It also shows that marketing messages cannot always be directly

translated, not even using the most state-of-the-art assistance. As only one example, Google Translator between Hungarian and English produces translations in either direction which are far from intelligible. As illustrated previously here, in translating from English to another language, the idea behind the intended message to be translated must sometimes be communicated in a more indirect way, i.e. one that is appropriate to the culture of the target market. One exercise we use shows students that the translation of a marketing message from one language to another, including of course the element of one culture to another, is neither easy, nor a straightforward, process.

We have not forgotten the cultural element of our course. The ever-increasing level of world trade, opening of markets, enhanced purchasing power of customers and intensifying competition all have allowed and even forced marketers to expand their operations. The challenge for the marketing manager is to handle the differences in values and attitudes, and subsequent behavioural patterns that govern human interaction, on two levels: first, as they relate to customer behaviour and, second, as they affect the implementation of marketing programmes within individual markets and across markets. For years, marketers have been heralding the arrival of the global customer, an individual or entity that would both think and purchase alike the world or region over. These universal needs could then be translated into marketing programmes that would exploit these similarities. However, if this approach were based on the premise of standardisation, a critical and fatal mistake would be made. Overseas success is very much function of cultural adaptability: patience, flexibility, and tolerance for others' beliefs. To take the advantage of global markets or global segments, marketers are required to have or attain a thorough understanding of what drives customer behaviour in different markets, and to detect the extent to which similarities exist or can be achieved through marketing efforts. In expanding their presence, marketers will acquire not only new customers but new partners as well. These essential partners, whose efforts are necessary for market development and penetration, include agents, distributors, other facilitating agents, and, in many cases, the government. Expansion will also mean new employees or strategic alliance partners whose motivations will either make or break marketing programmes. Thus, understanding the hot buttons and turnoffs of these groups becomes critical. In the past, marketing managers who did not want to worry about the cultural challenge could simply decide not to do so and concentrate on domestic markets. In today's business environment, a company has no choice but to face international competition. In this new environment, believing that concern about culture and its elements is a waste of time often proves to be disastrous. Understanding culture is critical not only in terms of getting strategies right but also for ensuring that implementation by local operation is effective. Cultural differences are the subject of anecdotes, and business blunders may provide a good laugh. Cultural diversity must be recognised not simply as a fact of life but as a positive benefit; that is, differences may actually suggest better solutions to challenges shared across borders. Cultural competence must be recognised as a key management skill (CZINKOTA – RONKAINEN, 2001).

What do we mean by culture? Culture gives an individual an anchoring point – an identity – as well as codes of conduct. Of more than 160 definitions of culture analysed by Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, some conceive of culture as separating humans from nonhumans, some define it as communicable knowledge, and some see it as the

sum of historical achievements produced by humanity's social life. All the definitions have common elements: Culture is learned, shared, and transmitted from one generation to the next. Culture is primarily passed on by parents to their children but also by social organisations, special interest groups, the government, the schools, and the church. Common ways of thinking and behaving that are developed are then reinforced through social pressure. Geert Hofstede calls this the "collective programming of the mind". Culture is also multidimensional, consisting of a number of elements that are interdependent. Changes occurring in one of the dimensions will affect the others as well. Culture can be defined as an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns that are distinguishing characteristics of the members of any given society. It includes everything that a group thinks, does, and makes – its customs, language, material artefacts, and shared systems of attitudes and feelings. The definition there encompasses a wide variety of elements, from the materialistic to the spiritual (CZINKOTA – RONKAINEN, 2001).

In Western languages 'culture' commonly means 'civilization' or 'refinement of the mind' and in particular the results of such refinement, like education, art, and literature. This is 'culture in the narrow sense; 'culture one'. Culture as mental software, however, corresponds to a much broader use of the word which is common among social anthropologists: this is 'culture two'. In social anthropology, 'culture' is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting referred to in the previous paragraphs. Not only those activities supposed to refine the mind are included in 'culture two', but also the ordinary and menial things in life: greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, making love, or maintaining body hygiene. Turning back to Hofstede again, culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. It is a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes. Culture should be distinguished from human nature on one side, and from an individual's personality on the other (102).

The study of culture has led to generalisations that may apply to all cultures. Such characteristics are called cultural universals, which are manifestations of the total way of life of any group of people. These include such elements as bodily adornments, courtship, etiquette, family gestures, joking, mealtimes, music, personal names, status differentiation, and trade. These activities occur across cultures, but their manifestation may be unique in a particular society, bringing about cultural diversity. The sensitivity and adaptation to these elements by an international firm depends on the firm's level of involvement in the market and the product or service marketed (CZINKOTA – RONKAINEN, 2001). As almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time, people unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to different levels of culture. For example:

- a national level according to one's country (or countries for people who migrated during their lifetime);

- a regional and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic affiliation level, as most nations are composed of culturally different regions and/ or ethnic and/or religious and/or language groups;
- a gender level, according to whether a person was born as a girl or as a boy;
- a generation level, which separates grandparents from parents from children;
- a social class level, associated with educational opportunities and with a person's occupation or profession;
- for those who are employed, an organizational or corporate level according to the way employees have been socialized by their work organization (102, FALKNÉ, 2008).

Having examined the elements which require the integrating of language learning, communication and culture, we now turn to a description of the intended course itself:

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International Marketing for International Students

Course description:

This course provides a comprehensive study of the nature of the behaviour of economic organizations in relation to their marketing activities in a global environment. This course will emphasize the cognitive processing perspectives of decision making within ethical marketing, both locally and internationally. The course also explores the attitudes, perceptions, preferences, and buyer/seller behaviour in the globalized marketplace. Assignments will focus on real-world application of international marketing principles and practices and examine the challenges of meeting customer needs *vis-a-vis* those in e.g. the horizontal and vertical chains of a given business sector.

Moreover, this course examines various promotional tools used to sell products and services in the communication mix, including advertising, sales promotion and publicity. A wide variety of marketing-related concepts are introduced and discussed, including advertising planning processes, determining advertising and promotional goals and objectives, control and evaluation of advertising and promotional programs, and regulatory issues. In all areas to be covered, appropriate English language skills and vocabulary will be integrated into the syllabus.

Course Purpose:

Marketing provides students with the opportunity to examine all aspects of the marketing mix. The content of this course envisions with the following program outcomes:

1. To provide students with the ability to appraise the threats and opportunities of conducting business in globalized markets.
2. To provide students with the ability, in English, to evaluate a company's marketing strategies and make recommendations, as well as formulate and make strong arguments in their support.
3. To provide students with the ability to access and evaluate relevant information in English, in order to guide business decisions.

Learning objectives:

By the end of this course, students will:

- 1) Have gained cohesive, substantive perspectives on the conceptual and managerial nuances of the business marketing field.

- 2) Be able to compare and contrast domestic and international marketing techniques and strategies in English.
- 3) Understand the internal and external variables which influence the development and execution of business marketing strategies in the international environment.
- 4) Learn about the elements of the marketing management process, the basic components of marketing programs, and the interaction of marketing with other functions of the organization.
- 5) Understand the role of marketing managers and how to apply marketing concepts to a wide range of management and international situations in English.
- 6) Acquire analytical skills to define marketing problems, identify opportunities, and interpret their implications for decision-making in a global marketplace.
- 7) Apply both qualitative and quantitative tools to marketing problems.
- 8) Develop practical English communication skills by using persuasive arguments in support of well-grounded marketing actions.

The course purposes and objectives outlined above are directly linked to their development as skills and competencies using English as the language of communication. In order to achieve this secondary, yet focal, aim, the course syllabus itself had to be integrated in such a manner which would ensure steady and regular practice in the usage of new marketing tools by the students. The integration of English teaching and international marketing is not new outside Hungary, as several available textbooks attest. In modified form, below is our own adaptation of a syllabus recommendation from ROBINSON's *Cambridge English for Marketing* (2010), one of the leading such textbooks:

Describing your skills and qualifications	Discussing marketing tasks using verb-noun collocations
Culture: Collective Society vs. and Individual	Reading and discussion
	Assignment: Presenting yourself professionally
Talking about what an organization does	Asking about a person's characteristics, skills, responsibilities and experience
	Assignment: analyze a marketing job advert
Culture and organizations	Reading and discussion
Describing the role of marketing within an organization	Explaining and giving examples; querying; showing understanding
	Assignment: Compare a good and a bad example of English marketing/advertising for a Hungarian product
Identifying stakeholders	Collocations with <i>stakeholder</i>
Culture and Gender: Cultural consumer typology	Reading and discussion
Outlining a marketing plan	Common marketing acronyms
	Assignment: Use the bad marketing example from the previous assignment and develop an improved plan

National vs. regional cultures and the phenomenon of identification with products	Reading and discussion: the case of the <i>Hungaricum</i>
Carrying out a marketing audit and three types of analyses	Describing trends; Terms and verb forms used in analyses
	Assignment: Make a SWOT analysis for a Hungarian company's product or service
Setting marketing objectives	Verb-noun collocations used in marketing objectives
	Assignment: On the basis of your SWOT analysis, draft a program of marketing objectives to improve the position of the product or service you have chosen
Generation X? Generation Z?: age and consumer cultures	Reading and discussion
Writing a marketing strategy	Using demonstratives to connect ideas in writing
	Assignment: Discuss your marketing strategy in an in-class presentation
Social class, microcultures and marketing	Reading and discussion
Presenting and giving feedback on concepts	The language of concepts Words and verbs expressing positive and negative feedback
	Assignment: Critique the marketing strategy for a plan you heard in class.
Explaining research	Verbs to describe market research
Culture and special interests: the Organic and Green movements and consumer culture	Reading and discussion
Discussing possibilities	Vocabulary for discussing hypothetical situations: modal verbs
	Assignment: Write a summary of your ideas for moving your selected Hungarian product/service onto a chosen foreign market.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In a world of rapidly globalising business, Internet electronic proximity and politico-economic association, the ability to interact successfully with foreign partners in the spheres of commercial activity, diplomatic intercourse and scientific interchange is seen as increasingly essential and desirable. Being familiar with the unique combination of language, communication and culture which inform modern international marketing practices and activities will only make the marketing graduate more effective on the job. While it may indeed be difficult to find a balance among the many diverse elements which form the course we envision in its semester syllabus, the realities of modern business make each one of them an invaluable source of knowledge. In the globalised

world, as the complexity of the discussion here has shown, it is not enough to be familiar only with the geographical, economic, legal, infrastructural or social environments of the country in which one wishes to undertake marketing activities. International marketing activities are a form of business requiring business acumen, diplomacy and forethought. Practice often proves that entering a foreign market is not always as easy as it looks from the outside. Any course syllabus in international marketing should therefore prepare the student for the cultural immersion that may await one with an international assignment. The success of our products abroad, because of cultural reasons, can be more easily facilitated, even in a neighbouring country, through proper preparation. The paper explored the integration of the myriad of uncontrollable elements introduced above into a course syllabus for non-native learners of international marketing through English and leaves open the question as to how to best continue to improve such syllabi in reaction to future economic change.

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