Enhancing foreign language communication skills in international business environment

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Abstract. The article analyzes the peculiarities of enhancing written communication skills in the interethnic environment of transnational corporations. The authors explore the rhetorical and pragmalinguistic features as well as the linguistic realizations and strategies used by Russian business communicants in writing business letters in English and contrast them to the samples of business letters of native English speakers. The paper proposes recommendations for preparing managerial personnel for international business interaction in the workplace through integrating authentic models and contexts into training strategies.

1. Introduction
Modern globalization processes changing the world economy structure, close intertwining of national economies, geo-economy and its infrastructure emergence are accompanied by a rapid growth in the rates of capital and productive resources transfers, labor migration, and establishing a significant number of international or transnational corporations.

Business communication with current and potential partners, competitors, consumers and the public is the basis of any enterprise effective operation. In the context of a transnational corporation, communication in a multilingual setting becomes multi-polar where interpersonal professional communication among employees is of particular importance for the financial viability of the company.

The executives of a transnational corporation when creating their own corporate culture should take into account the national specificity of a country where it is located. In this case, of particular value is an expert in the field of intercultural communication who trains managers and employees of international companies to work in a multicultural environment as well as acquaints them with the values and behavioral norms of another culture and conducts training sessions on communication in an interethnic group and on keeping business documentation records in a foreign language. In the course of cross-cultural adaptation trainings, the current or potential employees of transnational corporations are inculcated with social and personal skills necessary for interacting with people from other cultures in a non-native language [1]. Thus, a foreign language is becoming an orientation tool in modern technological world and a link for multicultural and interdisciplinary thinking formation, its knowledge being a significant individual and professional characteristic of a modern person [2].

The issues of achieving communication environment stability in a company are set by international organizations, public and private educational institutions, and the business community. The Council of Europe, in particular, launched a number of projects, such as ELAN (Effects on the European Language Skills in Enterprise 2005-2008); Dylan (Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity 2006-2011), aimed at identifying problems in the field of foreign language professional communication of employees of small, medium and large businesses. According to the survey, “11% of respondents (195 SMEs) had lost a contract as a result of lack of language skills <…> and at least 50% of respondents believed that they would need additional language skills in the next three years. <…> As for large enterprises, English is more extensively used as an intermediary language than was
the case with SMEs, possibly reflecting its use also as a corporate language in many multinationals” [3].

Other studies also confirm the paramount importance of English which has become the official language of the business community in the world today being used in 85% of international organizations [4]. Some scholars have gone as far as to propose the term “English as lingua corporativa”, i.e. English as a corporate language. According to them, communicating in English enables companies to integrate their branches in all regions of the world, successfully compete in world markets and attract the best specialists [5]. However, the level of proficiency in the common corporate language is not always adequate to the requirements of a communicative situation [6]. Researchers draw attention to the fact that “the issue of mastering special vocabulary often becomes critical in situations where a discussion in English takes place and one has to make important decisions for the company. Insufficient knowledge of professional vocabulary does not enable the discussion participants to defend their position in a foreign language, and as a result, no serious factors can be taken into account” [7].

Possible solutions to the communication problem in an interethnic environment of a transnational corporation include the Council of Europe analysts’ recommendations to use such language management approaches as recruiting native speakers, adapting websites, use the services of translators and interpreters [8]. A more important aspect of settling this issue, in our opinion, is the enhancement of foreign language culture among “in-corporate” employees.

Multinationals in Russia have successfully applied a staff training scheme under the Corporate Training program. As it is obvious from business experience, modern labor market requires not merely translators and interpreters, but highly qualified specialists with near-native foreign-language proficiency. Corporate employees are offered educational programs, such as “Foreign Languages in Professional Activity”, “English for Successful Business”, “Business Translation Course” [9].

In higher educational institutions of the Russian Federation, senior and master students, as well as employees of international companies are offered “English for Special Purposes” (ESP) training programs in “Business Foreign Language”, “Business Communication”, “Business Correspondence and Documentation in English”, “Business Language and Speech Culture”, “Fundamentals of Business English”, “Foreign Language of Business and Professional Communication”, “National Mentality and Language of Business Communication”, “Business Contacts in a Foreign Language” and some others.

Obviously, such a diversity of training programs for professionals speaking a business foreign language is predetermined by the complexity and versatility of business communication in international companies where communicators’ interaction is required at several levels: external, internal and interpersonal. Communication can also be oral (e.g. negotiations, consultations, meetings) or written (e.g. contracts, agreements, all types of business letters). This paper dwells on identifying specific features of written business communication.

2. Intercultural business communication environment and its features

Intercultural business communication today can be viewed as a special interaction environment. It comprises a special language and conventions, its own social hierarchy arising as a result of business-to-business communication. Such an environment is characterized by much greater social ambiguity – both due to its dynamics and rich communication opportunities.

According to J. Stock [10], to succeed in modern business conditions one should manage complex communication processes in any of its fields. The socio-cultural environment of a globally operating business consists of a number of components: language, education level, religion, values, technologies, social organization, political techniques, infrastructure development level and regulation systems. Each component, both independently and in combination with others, can affect the activities of managers in different ways. For instance, language differences can cause difficulties in compiling documents, which describe techniques and procedures and formulate strategies for moving products both within and between individual countries and regions.
It is critical to keep in mind that on intercultural soil conflicts most frequently arise between top and middle management of Russian businesses, acquired or established by foreign companies. Such conflicts have major similarities and follow almost the same scenario. Expats are usually the heads of such businesses while the middle management has Russian roots. It is between these two groups of managers that intercultural misunderstanding arises most frequently, that is, communication and behavioral barriers are built.

In old days cultural differences were believed to be a barrier and interfere with communication and joint activities. However, today astute business leaders believe that by properly managing national cultural differences, they can be turned into sources of additional resources, rather than be potential problems. Many of them assume that cultural diversity increases the competitiveness of a multinational organization. However, failure to properly use it can result in intercultural conflicts and communication disruptions. Ignorance of the cultural characteristics of a host country translates into numerous problems, although it does not affect all the company departments. The manager does not have to master cultural knowledge in full, but is supposed to have a clear idea of the basic theories of culture and the major problems of this phenomenon. Cultural concepts in the form of complementary and mutually enriching tools for studying the national and cultural characteristics of individual employees should be considered as increasing the efficiency of their work and the firm’s activities as a whole, ensuring the national-cultural environment within the latter [11]. A study of the fundamentals of cross-cultural written communication will contribute to improving the efficiency of the company and its competitiveness in the market.

3. Peculiarities of business English letter writing
Contacts with English-speaking countries form the basis for business communication in multinationals, with English being used as a means of international interaction. In this respect, Russia is of a great interest as it can boast the abundance of natural resources, strong agricultural and industrial potential, relative political stability and dynamic markets development.

Establishing ongoing mutually beneficial relations with foreign partners primarily assumes comprehensive training of highly qualified experts for local businesses [12]. Consequently, there is an ever-increasing demand for English-speaking professionals. It is worth mentioning that knowledge of business English has become the fundamental requirement for both white-collar and blue-collar positions.

One of the most critical fields of the English language use is international business correspondence. While establishing and maintaining their interaction with foreign companies, business partners tend to face challenges and pitfalls related to the following: intercultural differences, becoming obvious only after mastering various ways of writing business correspondence taking into consideration the national-cultural conventions of communicants [13], [14], [15] [16]; some cross linguistic differences in writing styles and strategies [17], [18], [19]; sufficient understanding of business writing culture across various languages [20], [21], [22].

Thus, particular value and topicality of studying business texts and correspondence in international business communication based on the primary use of English is hardly disputable. On the one hand, one should be aware of cultural differences and the strife to maximize the effectiveness of business communication. On the other hand, those compiling business documents in English seek certain variety in writing styles, emphasizing the culture-specific traditions of the communicants [23]. Therefore, one of the major purposes of this paper is to reveal the pragmalinguistic and rhetorical features and the linguistic strategies applied by Russian business communicants in writing business letters in English and to contrast them to those of native English speakers. The results obtained will enable to elaborate recommendations for preparing future managers for international business interaction in the professional settings through integrating authentic models and contexts into training effective writing strategies. This requires addressing the following: identifying rhetorical and pragmalinguistic peculiarities of business correspondence of Russian and English-speaking managers; explaining diverging business letters writing strategies between native and non-native speakers;
integrating authentic writing strategies into the course of English for Specific Purposes at Russian universities to train future business personnel.

4. Method, data and analysis procedure
The current paper dwells on the sales promotional letters written by university students taking the English for Business Purposes Course at Volgograd State University (Volgograd, Russia) as compared to authentic sales letters of the USA and the UK-based native English speakers. The cross-cultural variation in business letter writing presupposes applying contrastive text linguistic and pragmalinguistic procedures. According to Connor [24], contrastive rhetoric studies rest on contrastive linguistic studies of texts that examine, compare and contrast the ways of texts generation and interpretation across languages and cultures applying written discourse analysis methods. The contrastive text analysis in the present paper involves analyzing rhetorical structures and their linguistic implementation (e.g. linguistic features).

The pragmatic character of business correspondence manifests itself in politeness and persuasion strategies (e.g. formality, indirectness, the delayed introduction of purpose in requests, and excessive politeness, etc.) and some culture-specific discourse patterns. Its linguistic implementation in our corpus includes lexical, syntactic and semantic features viewed in relation to moves with authentic examples. In this study, moves and steps form are the units of the analysis. According to Upton and Connor [25], moves are semantic or functional units of texts, identifiable through their communicative purposes and certain linguistic boundaries typical of the moves. Bhatia [26] sees moves as ‘rhetorical instruments that implement a sub-set of specific communicative purposes associated with a genre’. Swales stresses that recurrence and typicality of particular moves in genre-specific texts enable viewers to recognize these texts as exemplars of the same genre [27].

The research corpus comprises 116 sales letters, including 78 sales letters written by VolSU students (business and finance majors) and 38 authentic sales promotional letters of native English speakers, collected between November 2016 and March 2018. As for the students’ English language writing proficiency, over 70% of them reported they could write in most cases, but occasionally needed some help, while 20% of the students did not experience any difficulty in writing.

Data were collected through the use of a scenario describing a business situation for students. The respondents specified what they would mention in a sales letter to promote the product or service of their company.

Scenario: Imagine you work for an agricultural company in Russia. Write a sales letter to promote your company to your potential British customers, so that they could become your customers in future. You may want to consider the following points: the way you address your potential customers; the major advantages and benefits of your company; tools you will use to persuade your customers.

The scenario subsequently asked students to provide additional information about the problems/challenges they faced while writing the sales letters in English, the ways to cope with them, and the strategies they use to make their letter more effective and clearer for the potential customers.

Numerous researchers apply Bhatia’s move analysis [28] to reveal the specificity of cross-linguistic business correspondence. This method has enabled to identify rhetorical features in business correspondence in English and Chinese [29], English and Thai [30], English and Taiwan [31] business correspondence. The analysis implies seven moves in each sales promotion letter including three compulsory moves and four optional ones [32] (see table 1):

**Table 1. Bhatia’s Move Analysis of Sales Letters**
In our view, Bhatia’s move analysis proves to be the most reliable research method, capable of demonstrating peculiarities in the business correspondence of native and non-native speakers. Therefore, following Bhatia’s procedure, the authors studied the texts applying the method of analyzing rhetorical structures (e.g. moves, structural representation). As for the experimental research, the analysis undertaken has revealed some peculiarities. The limited availability of the letters has resulted in insufficient number of sample letters. Such factors can interfere with summarizing our results about international sales promotional letters both for native speakers and non-native speakers. However, despite the fact that our research was limited only to sales letters, we assume similar research can also be done into other categories of business correspondence. The topicality and importance of the further research in this sphere is hardly disputable as it could also be carried out in the occupational environment to define whether there are similar cultural distinctions in particular letter-writing techniques.

5. Findings
This section of the paper presents the results of native and non-native speakers’ sales letters analysis with the emphasis on rhetorical moves and their linguistic implementation. Following Bhatia’s move analysis [33], cross-cultural variations are found from contrastive rhetorical perspectives to identify differences found between the promotional writing styles of Russian and native English speakers.

The authors selected two sample letters, most typical of native and non-native speakers’ writing styles respectively.

Sample 1. Sales Letter by a Native Speaker of English

From the desk of Jane Watson
March 5, 2016
Ms. A. Prokopjeva
18 Novosibirskaya Str., apt.
1514
Moscow, Russia

Dear Ms Prokopjeva,

Achieving the highest standards of security has always been top priority for Citibank, as we are among the first Banks in Sweden to introduce chip debit cards very soon.

Following the launch of MasterCard Chip cards, Citibank will cease issuing new and renewing existing traditional Cirrus, Cirrus Maestro and MasterCard bank cards. Also, renewed cards will be issued as MasterCard Chip cards, except if the Customer notifies Citibank in writing at least two months prior to the expiry of the existing bank card that they no longer need it, in which case the card service of the Bank will no longer be used together with additional services such as our CitiPhone Banking telephone customer service and the Citibank Online internet banking service that are available exclusively to card holder Customers.

With the launch of MasterCard Chip cards, the visual design of the debit cards of Citibank will be modified to replace the current appearance of them.

Move 1 – Establishing credentials
Move 2 – Introducing the offer

(i) Offering product or service
(ii) Essential detailing of the offer

Move 3 – Offering incentives
Move 4 – Enclosing documents
Move 5 – Soliciting response
Move 6 – Using pressure tactics
Move 7 – Ending politely
Please also note that in case of a Chip card, in addition to the magnetic stripe, the chip integrated into the front of the card also contains the data of the card and the card holder, which is a much safer method of storage of these data than the magnetic stripe, hence also makes it safer to use the card.

We are pleased to inform you that if your company sponsors 6 or more staff for the MasterCard Chip cards, we will offer you a discount of US$100 per person.

For your convenience, I enclose a reservation form which should be completed and returned directly to me.

If you have any questions concerning the use of smart cards, please visit our website at www.citibank.hu or call the Citiphone Banking phone customer service on 06-40-24-84-24.

Your response is required by 3/30/01: To qualify for no fee balance transfers at a rate as low as 0% - plus the benefits shown on the reverse side – mail your Acceptance Form today.

Thank you very much for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,
Jane Watson
Managing Director

As is clear from the sample above, this letter has all seven moves which replicates Bhatia’s results [34], identifying moves typical for sales letters written by native English speakers. The following letter is written by a student, non-native speaker of English.

Sample 2. Sales Letter by a Non-native Speaker of English

The Republican Product Corporation
Myasnitkaya str., 14/1
Tel: +7-7051198807
November 7, 2017

Dear Customers!
Our company is engaged in processing grain on the most modern mill equipment, we have a large number of the most modern agricultural machinery: “John Deere”, “Amazone”, “Catros” etc.

We give special attention to quality of grown-up wheat and barley. We professionally are engaged in seed farming, and our seeds of several grades of wheat buy many companies for improvement of own crops.

For more details you may call us today for a Free Quote on +7-7051198807. Additionally you can view our quality furnishings on our website at www.agroholding.com. Our website also lists our current specials – there are even greater savings to be made!

As a Free Gift to you we have enclosed the Agroholding Corporation pen containing our website address and contact information along with our complete catalogue for 2012. If you have any further questions, please contact me directly on +77758268792.

Mrs. Krivosheeva.

As you can see, some differences from the previous sample are obvious. There obligatory Moves 1, 6 and 7 are missing. The writer finalizes the letter with Move 4 and Move 5 which are found in the same passage instead of a polite ending. We-orientation is also extensively used by the student.

The remaining letters’ analysis focuses on each move in Bhatia’s procedure [35]. The frequency of occurrence of each step was calculated on the basis of the total number of units analyzed, and presented as a percentage for both corpora. For example, Figure 1 below presents the results of move
analysis of the both corpora. An interpretation of the results will follow, with each move being dealt with individually.

Figure 1. Analysis of rhetorical moves in the sales letters by native and non-native speakers.

It cannot escape our notice that Move 2 appears in every letter while Moves 4 and 6 occur occasionally while Moves 3 and 5 cannot be found in almost 50% of the letters. In accordance with Bhatia’s findings for his Singaporean data, Offering Incentives is a culture-specific feature of South-Eastern Asia. The compulsory Move 5 is missing in 60% of Russian university students’ letters. It may be attributed to the fact that native English speakers’ business texts seek some “feedback”, that is the aspiration of a sender to stress the importance of the addressee’s response and, thereby to encourage them to respond, thus raising the probability of repeated contact. In contrast to other cultural backgrounds, the addressees and senders in the English business culture are normally individuals who account for a considerable share of sales letters and requests’ recipients. In Russian business communication, the addressees are frequently legal entities and organizations or those who speak on their behalf. The most important parts of business texts include repeated contacts between communicants, and the sender does not commonly use additional tools to ask for “feedback”. Meanwhile, 45% of the letters contained Move 6, which is pervasively typical of European cultures.

6. Discussion and implications

The results of contrasting business texts of English and Russian communicative cultures representatives provide some evidence that the collected sales letters reveal both similarities and differences in all the aspects and text levels in question. The differences are indicators of cultural specificity of sales letters texts. The possible diverging features of the contrasted business texts are inherent differences in terms of their graphical organization as well as orthography and punctuation formatting. These differences provide the information of both the genre-stylistic and national-cultural character. Thus, it is worth noting that in some collected sales and promotional letters university students used exclamation marks addressing their potential customers, for instance, “Dear Customer!” in accordance with Russian salutation conventions. For business English texts, the presence of salutation is obligatory, the forms of which may vary depending on a degree of acquaintance of addressees, the frequency of contacts between them, low or high social distance and their professional status. Thus, one should meet the requirements of greetings and a form of ending the letter. Business English letter etiquette encompassing the salutation “Dear Mrs. Jonson” requires the form “Yours sincerely” at the end, and a greeting to the addressee or to the group, whose names are unknown: “Dear Madam” or “Dear Sirs” require “Yours faithfully”. One more etiquette rule is an address to a female business partner without referring to her marital status and preference of the form “Ms Hartford”.

Another peculiarity lies in the fact that non-native speakers’ greetings are more formal which provides some evidence in favour of foreign business partners’ willingness to progress to a more
friendly level resulting in some misunderstanding. However, Russian business professionals can appear to be interested in neither mutual cooperation nor use of a basic official style and a cold and unfriendly tone.

The above mentioned findings lead us to conclude that teaching linguistic and cultural peculiarities of sales genres will assist future business people gain deeper insights into purposeful business communication. In addition, business correspondence training should address specific linguistic forms and strategies used in each letter. Thus, integrating more authentic materials in teaching business writing within ESP courses might result in higher foreign language proficiency in naturally occurring professional setting and raise cultural competence of communicants in the context of global business and communication.

7. Conclusion

The results obtained confirm the crucial role of the English language in written business discourse in Russia. The analysis of business letters samples shows (a) significant differences in writing strategies applied Russian university students taking the course of English for Business Purposes and native speakers in terms of communicative, pragmatic, rhetorical, graphical and genre-stylistic aspects; (b) greater adherence to the conventional writing style in native English business correspondence as compared to non-native speakers; (c) non-native speakers’ unawareness of their foreign partners expectations and the cultural context in which their letters would be received.

These conclusions support the findings of several studies (cf. [36]). Thus, sociocultural structures lie at the heart of language structures which means overcoming the language barrier is not sufficient to maintain effective business communication between representatives of different cultures. Such state of affairs calls for breaking a cultural barrier. The presented study provides several reasons for communication failures in business letters: (a) mixing different national and cultural standards in the structure and language of sales letters as well as features of different functional styles in one text; (b) combining several communicative tasks; (c) relatively low English language proficiency of business letters authors (spelling, grammar, lexical and stylistic errors).

The results substantiate the need for teaching business communication for non-native speakers aimed at developing skills in writing business letters for English language learners to enhance the efficiency of professional business correspondence. The findings can shed some light on the prospects for further research into the language of intercultural business communication. The research contributes to the theory of languages for specific purposes, teaching a language of business communication, as well as to raising business actors’ awareness of intercultural competence for the development of business contacts on the global scale.

The major results of the paper may serve as recommendations for training business correspondence to students majoring in Management, Economics, Finance and related fields: to allow sufficient number of hours to explore the peculiarities of writing business letters in English; to pay special attention to the knowledge of intercultural business communication; to consider, in more detail, the structure of a letter; to emphasize pragmatic factors exemplified in the appeal to potential customers and polite ending of the letter.

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