



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Modeling on the Criteria of Chinese Business English Majors' Business Communication Competence

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ABSTRACT

With increasing globalization in the business arena, the phenomenal growth of international business has created a heavy demand for intellectuals with international business communication competence. Business communication competence, as one of the paramount competences business English majors should acquire and the particular embodiment of competitiveness, is of vital significance not only in personal development, but also in enterprises management, just as Liu (2012) claims “[e]ffective business communication is the lifeblood of every organization, and a key to success in one’s career”. There is, nevertheless, no universally accepted model for what excellent business communication competence should consist of up to now. Hence, the overriding aim of the present study is to identify Chinese business English majors’ communication competence relevant to the contemporary communication environment. Identification of these skills should aid business communication educators and students in addressing practical concerns in their teaching and learning. The unified model to be put forward covers four kinds of core competence, i.e. English competence, fundamental business knowledge and skills, excellent intercultural communication competence, and luxuriant humanistic quality, together with three other skills, which are also indispensable, including scenario analysis competence, outstanding technology-mediated communication competence, and non-verbal communication competence.

Key words: Business communication, Chinese business English; model.

Available Online: 31st January, 2015.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and significance of the study

With China furthers its reform and opening-up policy after having joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the continuous integration of the world economy, international business activities are becoming increasingly frequent. Under such circumstances, the demand for talents with international business communication competence is also ascending correspondingly. In compliance with the increase in demand, many colleges and universities in China begin to set up Business English (hereafter shortened as BE) major. As of September 2013, 146 colleges and universities have established BE BA Program with a trend of rapid growth, since the Ministry of Education approved the establishment of the first BE BA Program in China in University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) in April 2007 (Zhong, 2014:129). Since BE is a newly emerging major, there is no finalized national teaching standard for the curriculum design. And the same thing occurs to the criteria of excellent business communication competence—one of the most important competencies for BE majors. Consequently, the establishment of the model of excellent business English communication competence, to be served as a yardstick for the course design of BE BA Program, is in urgent need, which makes this study necessary and worthwhile.

1.2 Definition of key terms

1.2.1 Communication

Communication is ever-present in our day-to-day life, but when it comes to the question of what communication exactly is, there is no consensus thus far. Samovar, Porter & McDaniel (2009:12) notes that Dance and Larson once had “a canvass of the literature” and on it found 126 definitions 30-plus years ago, which, since then, has been enriched largely. And after isolating the commonalities of those definitions, they three present us with an all-encompassing one which claims “human communication is the process through which symbols are transmitted for the purpose of eliciting a response”.

Symbols transmitted through communication can be either verbal or non-verbal. And verbal messages can be further categorized as oral and written, while non-verbal messages can be subdivided into gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body behavior and the like (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009: 12).

Furthermore, communication requires a sender, a message, and a recipient, even though the receiver can be absent or be unaware of the sender’s intention to communicate at the time of communication; thus communication can occur across vast distances in time and space. In addition, the communication process will never ends until the receiver gets a correct understanding of the sender’s message as the sender intends. In other words, “transmission itself is not communication, but the conscious perception of signals at the receiver’s end is essential for communication to have taken place” (Beamer, 1992)

1.2.2 Business communication

As for the definition of business communication, just like that of “communication”, it is still open to discussion. And Conrad and Newberry (2012) made a review on the definitions of business communication.

Business communication is the sending and receiving of verbal and non-verbal messages within the organizational context (Murphy, Hildebrandt, & Thomas, 1997; Ober, 2001; Roebuck, 2001). Hanna & Wilson (1998) expanded on this definition, indicating business communication is a process of generating, transmitting, receiving, and interpreting messages in interpersonal, group, public, and mass communication contexts through written and verbal formats. Hynes (2005) stated effective business communication is the key to planning, leading, organizing, and controlling the resources of the organizations to achieve objectives, and it may be formal and informal in nature. Argenti (2007)

discussed the functional aspects of business communication and found that over half of the heads of corporate communication departments oversee business communications functions that include media relations, online communications, marketing, special events, product and brand communications, crisis management, employee and internal communications, community relations, and product and brand advertising. The expanse and importance of business communication underscores the need for business academia and business management to collaborate in preparing business majors for the workplace. (as cited in Conrad & Newberry, 2012:112-120).

Communicating effectively extends across the whole spectrum of business, and is highly valued as “employers in all occupational fields place greater value on employees’ communication skills than they do on their technical skills” (Wardrope, 2002). Effective communication is significant for business people in and among organizations in order to perform the basic functions of management, i.e. planning, organizing, leading and controlling. “Effective business communication is a building block of successful organizations”. In other words, communication acts as organizational life blood (Liu, 2012).

1.3 Business English

In the present study, the term “business English” has two connotations. On the one hand, it denotes the major of Business English, which is abbreviated as BE; on the other hand, it indicates English language especially related to international trade, which can be regarded as a variant of international English. It is a kind of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and can be considered as a specialism within English language learning and teaching. It may be learnt by many non-native English speakers for the purpose of doing business with people from English-speaking countries, or with companies located outside the English-speaking countries, but who nonetheless use English as a shared language or lingua franca.

2.0 Literature review

In April 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education approved the establishment of the first BE BA Program in China in University of International Business and Economics (UISE), and formulated *The Teaching Requirements of Business English BA Program* in 2009; in which specific requirements for BE majors’ knowledge and skills were proposed: the talents cultured should be capable of engaging in business, trade, management, finance and foreign affairs in English in international environment, be equipped with solid English language skills, broad international vision, international business knowledge and skills, the basic knowledge and theories of economics, management and business law as well as those of other related disciplines, be in possession of humanistic quality and intercultural communication competence (Chen & Wang, 2009:5-6). Xiao & Guo (2009:151) pointed out the foundation of, conditions for, and the key to successful business communication, respectively, be an excellent observer with the ability to use different non-verbal communication skills, be an excellent listener with the ability to understand the information correctly and be an excellent speaker with the ability to express him/herself appropriately. Wang (2010:119) claimed that talents of BE major should not only be endowed with excellent communication competence in English and comprehensive business knowledge and skills, but also be able to engage in foreign trade and economic work with an innovative mind. Besides all those mentioned, Liang (2010:130-131) identified two key aspects which should be taken into consideration in the cultivation of international business communication competence. On the one hand, solid language competence of business English, which covers English competence and business knowledge and skills, should be nurtured; on the other hand, business communication competence and intercultural communication awareness, that is the accurate understanding of the pragmatic meanings of the two parties of communication, should be fostered so as to avoid pragmatic failures in business communication.

Furthermore, Conrad and Newberry (2012) probed into the communication skills that management experts, leadership theorists, business education professionals, communication skills researchers, and

business development writers consider to be the most important ones in business organizations under the framework proposed by Ober (2001), Angell (2004), and Roebuck (2001), who “have authored college undergraduate business communication skills textbooks and have determined that business communication skills fall into three basic categories: organizational communication skills, leadership communication skills, and interpersonal communication skills”.

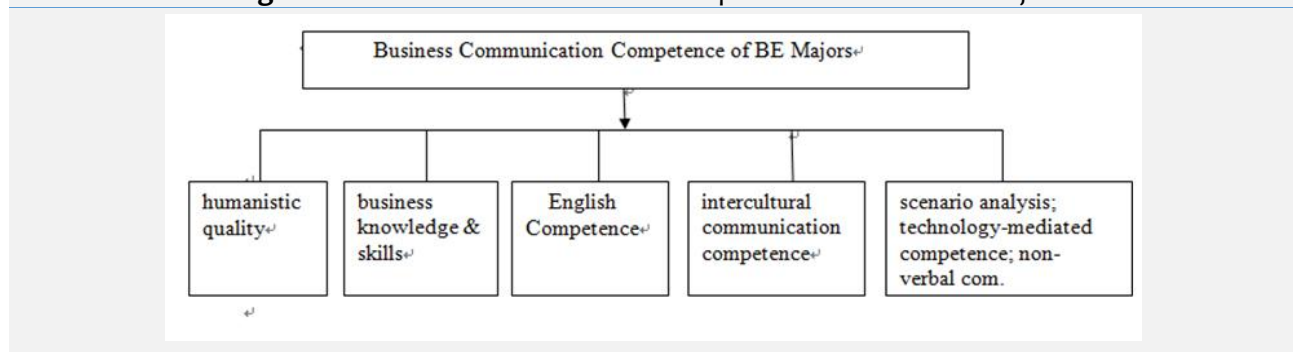
..Organizational communication skills are those skills an organization uses to effectively communicate with all stakeholders both inside and outside the organization; leadership communication skills are those skills that allow leaders in an organization to effectively communicate with employees and key external constituents through the employment of communication methods, such as stories, metaphors, openness, and strategic dialogues with the aim to create trusting and supportive relationships among colleagues and staff; interpersonal communication skills are those skills that allow members in an business organization to effectively communicate to constituents in or out an organization on a personal, intimate, and one-to-one basis, exchanging thoughts in face-to-face verbal and non-verbal contexts by sharing information, providing feedback, or simply maintaining a social relationship (Conrad & Newberry, 2012)

Undoubtedly, what the scholars have achieved is definitely meaningful and significant, inspiring and thought-provoking. Judging from what has been discussed above, nevertheless, most of the scholars just vaguely describe the skills that business English talents should possess instead of defining a specific criterion of excellent business communication competence and an overwhelming majority of them are not so comprehensive and suitable to the contemporary communication environment. Consequently, after synthesizing the viewpoints of many scholars, this paper sets out to put forward a model with regard to the criteria of excellent business communication competence of Chinese BE majors of the contemporary era.

3.0 The model of excellent business communication competence of Chinese BE majors

Our model of business communication competence of Chinese BE majors is proposed as follows:

Figure 1: Business Communication Competence model of BE majors



The model consists of English competence, business knowledge & skills, intercultural communication competence, humanistic quality, technology-mediated communication competence, *scenario analysis skills* and non-verbal communication competence. Among them, English competence is of paramount importance, and then follow business knowledge & skills, intercultural communication competence, humanistic quality, and the others. Each of the components will be illustrated below.

3.1 English competence

English language, serving as the language medium of cross-cultural business communication, is the primary requirement for BE majors to be excellent in business communication. The importance of English language competence has been evidenced by numerous scholars. Wardrope (2002:64) conducts a research about department chairs’ perceptions of the importance of business

communication skills among 1850 department chairs at four-year institutions in the US with a 5-point scale (1=not important, 5=critical). He discloses that written communication skills were rated highest with a skill composite rating of 3.92, followed by cultural literacy skills 3.90, technology-mediated skills 3.76, interpersonal skills 3.75, listening skills 3.62, team/group skills 3.57, and finally oral communication skills 3.52. Moreover, among the written communication skills, the four highest rated was using correct grammar, with an individual rating of 4.46, followed by writing effective reports, letters, and memos 4.28, 4.08 and 4.06 respectively. And there is one point that should not be neglected: two oral communication skills—making oral presentations with an individual rating of 4.43 and using good pronunciation 4.04—are also rated highly, “although oral communication skills fared less well in the composite score”. Taken together, among all the 37 individual skills, the five highest rated skills are using correct grammar 4.46, making oral presentations 4.43, writing effective reports 4.28, writing effective memos 4.08, writing effective letters 4.06 and using good pronunciation 4.04.

Still, a study by the National Commission on Writing (NCW, 2004) alleges that a significant proportion of firms report that only one-third or fewer of their employees, current and new possess the writing skills that organizations value. The NCW study also estimates that \$3.1 billion per year is spent by firms on remedial training in writing. Last, the NCW study notes that a vast majority of firms assess writing skills when considering hiring and promotion decisions. And regarding oral communications, Maes, Weldy & Icenogle (1997) embrace the idea that oral communication is one of the top three competences that are integral in succeeding in a managerial position (as cited in Conrad & Newberry, 2012:112-120).

The high values attached to the writing and oral communication skills, the requirement of the using of correct grammar, along with the vast amount of money spent on writing skills training and the assessment of writing skills when considering hiring and promotion decisions strongly evidence that high English language proficiency is indispensable in acquiring excellent business communication competence.

Besides the “linguistic competence” stated above, students also need to cultivate their English “communicative competence”, a notion originating from those criticisms raised by the Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence. And it was Hymes (1972), an American anthropologist and sociolinguist, who first proposed the notion and suggested the substitution of Chomsky’s linguistic competence into a wider concept, that of communicative competence, which would also include social and referential aspects of the language. It refers to the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom. It also refers to whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible, feasible, appropriate, and in fact done.

Afterward, Canale & Swain (1980) put forward four basic components of communicative competence: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Linguistic competence stands for the ability to understand the grammatical rules of a language and to form grammatically correct sentences; for it refers to the ability to master the knowledge of language itself, it is disconnected with cultural background. Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to know when and where, to whom to use these sentences appropriately or to use different linguistic variants in appropriate contexts. Discourse competence means the competence of achieving coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written text; and finally, strategic competence refers to the ability to use communicative strategies to handle breakdowns in communication; it can be a complementary tool people use when communication misunderstanding occurs.

Besides linguistic competence which has been discussed above, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence appear to be particularly significant in intercultural business communication, since people involved in cross-cultural communication are deeply rooted in the cultural backgrounds they are raised, which are stored as some kind of ROM “read-only memory”, they can be retrieved and used, but they cannot be written over. The specificity and the strength of cultural assumptions endow people from different cultural backgrounds with different thinking patterns, different interpretations

of the same utterance and so on. Therefore, communicative failures are more likely to happen in intercultural communication contexts than in intra cultural communication contexts. Then, to avoid communicative failures, the two communication parties should be equipped with sociolinguistic competence, and in case communicative failures occur, strategic competence should come in handy to compensate for the breakdowns.

Therefore, apart from acquiring the vocabulary, grammar and the five basic skills—“listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation”, or the linguistic competence, communicative competence of also of prime importance for BE majors to avoid communicative failures, and in the end to reach successful and effective intercultural business communication.

3.2 Fundamental business knowledge and skills

Liang (2010:130) noted that business English, with English as its medium and business knowledge and skills as its core, is a kind of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP is English associated with a specific profession, course or purpose. It has two main characteristics: first, it has a clear purpose and target, applies only to a specific occupational area, such as business; second, it is equipped with special content, namely, specialized knowledge. That is to say, business English is the employment of English in business contexts, and it is a goal-oriented, applied course with a strong emphasis on practicability. Consequently, during the learning of business English and the cultivating of business communication competence, students should develop solid English language competence on the one hand, and master business knowledge and essential business skills on the other hand. Only by doing so can they acquire an excellent business English communication competence and achieve effective communication in business activities.

Fundamental business knowledge and skills can be subdivided into two parts: business knowledge and business skills. Business knowledge refers to the knowledge related to economics, finance, business management and international business law and so on. Business skills are those skills such as the writing of business letters, reports, proposals, memos, e-mail, instant messages and other business documents, and business negotiation, etc.

Liang (2010:130) argued that in business English, many frequently used words are encoded with new meanings while still keeping their original meanings, and which might easily lead to failure in understanding and using them. For instance, “future” normally means “the time that will come after the present or the event that will happen then”, but “futures” means “goods or shares that are brought at agreed prices but that will be delivered and paid for at a later time”; the most familiar meaning of ‘return’ to us is “to come or go back from one place to another”; however, “returns” means “the amount of profit that you get from something” in business English; likewise, “margin” and “advise” normally refer to “the empty space at the side of a written or printed page” and “to tell somebody what you think they should do in a particular situation” respectively, but in business English, they mean “profit margin” and “officially tell somebody something” respectively.

In addition, different business documents may have different specific requirements in their writing. The mastery of these is also very important to successful business communication.

3.3 Excellent intercultural communication competence

The interaction of culture and communication is so pervasive that separating the two is virtually impossible. The way one communicates, from the language to the nonverbal signals, is influenced by the culture in which one is raised. Communication can never be exempt from external influence—it does not take place in a void. Consequently, all human interaction will be, more or less, influenced by social, cultural and physical contexts in which it occurs.

In a large part, every culture “specifies the appropriate communicative behavior within a variety of social and physical contexts by prescribing rules that dictate correct deportment for specific communicative situations.” When communicating with members of one’s own culture, the interlocutors depend on the “internalized cultural rules that stipulate the appropriate behaviors for specific communicative situations” (Samovar, et al., 2009: 229). These rules enable them to communicate effectively and successfully without deliberately thinking about what rules have been or should be employed, since they are a product of people’s socialization and enculturation and can be invoked unconsciously. However, when it comes to intercultural communicative situations, everything is profoundly different.

In business contexts, for instance, once an intercultural business activity has been arranged, efforts should be made to adapt to the behavior pattern of the host culture. In the United States, equality is one of the most important cultural patterns, and it is even proposed that the United States was built on the principle that “all men are created equal”, thus, Americans tend to be informal, and usually first names will be exchanged but for the addressees are very senior figures or in very formal situations.. On the contrary, the Chinese business community is more formal than that in America, and people are more inclined to use titles, such as last name + titles and full name + titles, which mirrors their attention paid to hierarchy and the ingrained thought of official standard, the residue of more than 2000 years of feudalism.

Intercultural communication competence is “the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, cultural differences and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture, and the accompanying experiences of stress” (Kim, 1991, as cited in Samovar et al., 2009: 314). It is multi-dimensional in nature, entailing not only a body of knowledge about different cultural facts, but also the power of perceiving and interpreting cross-cultural encounters in their complexity, and handling the accompanying experiences of stress.

Yang & Zhuang (2007:16-20) proposed that intercultural communication competence can be subcategorized into global mentality, cultural adaption competence, and intercultural communicative knowledge. Global mentality refers to intercultural awareness and thinking, while the former means one’s perception about themselves, their native culture and foreign cultures. Perception about themselves, or self-awareness, is the understanding of one’s own personality, ability, values, etc, and it directly affects one’s attitudes towards communication. And the latter one, the intercultural thinking ability, covers the ability to analyze, synthesize, compare and generalize various cultural phenomena. It is conducive to the understanding of cultural differences and solving of cultural conflicts in intercultural communication. The second component, cultural adaption competence, is the competence to adjust personal actions according to cultural characteristics; it exerts an immediate influence on the success of intercultural communication. The last one, intercultural communicative knowledge, which plays an immediate impact on the accuracy of information transmission in intercultural communication, signifies the knowledge of either verbal or non-verbal cultural factors, such as values, social customs, history and religion, with values being its core.

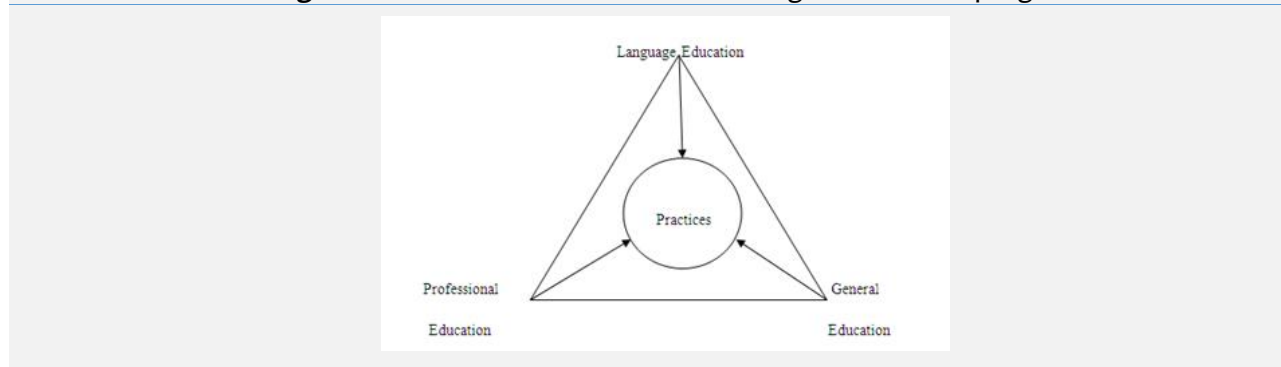
3.4 Luxuriant humanistic quality

Previously, influenced by the ideas of pragmatism and the pressures of examination-oriented education, professional knowledge acquisition and skills training were that much of a concern in schools in China, while the emphasis on the enhancing of humanistic quality had been far from enough (Zhong, 2014). However, the development of modern economy and society appeals for innovative intellectuals with comprehensive knowledge, healthy personality, and the ability to meet the needs of social developments, which requires the education of not only natural sciences, but of humanistic and social sciences. And the spirit of the third plenary session of the eighteenth Central Committee of the CPC explicitly pointed out that on deepening comprehensive education reform, we must fully implement the Party’s education policy, strengthen students’ social responsibility and improve their humanistic

quality. Humanistic education has become one of the essential parts in education reforms for one thing, and one of the indispensable criteria in the assessment of higher education for another.

Wen (2014:123) proposed a common curriculum framework of English-based BA programmes in China.

Figure 2: The curriculum framework of English-based BA programmes



In this framework, three modules: language education, professional education and general education constitute a triangle, with practices being the center of it. Language education here aims to cultivate students' English-Chinese bilingual competence and intercultural competence. Professional education, taking business English as an example, aims to enrich students' professional knowledge and skills in economics, business management, finance, etc., while general education offers students with knowledge in humanistic, social as well as natural sciences, it involves courses like literature, history, culture, philosophy, arts, aesthetics, and so on. And it is aimed at broadening students' knowledge and improving their humanistic quality. She noted that in the cultivation of qualified English-based personnel who can stratify the demand of modern society, humanistic education should be an indispensable part in today's English-based BA programmes education. Hu (2014:111), in addition, also pointed out the necessity for English departments of universities to tailor their teaching programme to local and national needs to cultivate English majors with humanistic quality, high-level language competence as well as innovative spirits.

“Humanistic quality mainly refers to the spiritual state of a person, and the integration of qualities such as political thought, psychology, cultural, business and physical quality and so on” (Zheng, Deng & Zhou, 2012: 17). The improvement of humanistic quality can not only promote the formation of healthy personality, but also to the learning of professional knowledge, which will ultimately facilitate students' development in an all-round way. Zhang (2012:434) approved that humanistic quality education could effectively promote college English education, for it is able to enhance the learners' language competence and cultural awareness. And humanistic quality education “internalizes the outstanding culture into a relatively stable internal quality and cultivates their rational knowledge of world, society and individuals, which promotes national cohesion and solidarity” (Zheng, et al., 2012: 17).

When stepping into society, university graduates should, first of all, be a well-rounded person. By regarding English as their communication medium, business knowledge and skills as knowledge body, and penetrating humanistic quality cultivation throughout the whole process of learning, can BE majors in China exploit their advantages and communicate their value to the full.

3.5 Three other important competences

In addition to the four kinds of core competences mentioned in the preceding, scenario analysis competence, technology-mediated communication competence together with non-verbal communication competence also play a vital role in the construction of excellent business communication competence in the contemporary era.

Communication is a dynamic process, it is not fixed. "The process nature of communication means that much can happen from the beginning of the conversation to the end. People may end up at a very different place once the discussion begins." (Samovar, et al., 2009:15). For this reason, scenario analysis, or named as 5W1H method (why, who, when, where, what and how), which means choosing different communication methods under different circumstances, can be of prime importance in the achievement of successful communication (Huang 2006:17).

With the speedy development of Chinese society, the revolution in the field of science and technology has brought about substantial changes in every regarding of human life, and provided more choices and platforms for business communication; "the scope, scale, and substance of business communication are undergoing a sea change as the result of recent developments and emerging uses of communication technologies" (Jackson, 2007). Many business people find they are in a world of teleconferencing, information gathering and sharing via intranet and internet. The students who are comfortable with these new methods and technologies will be of great advantages in business communication (Liu, 2012) and the acquisition of excellent business communication competence.

"Nonverbal communication is an indispensable and all pervasive element in human behavior." (Samovar, et al., 2009:195). Research has indicated that we use nonverbal communication more than 80% of the time (Liu, 2012). And in most cases, nonverbal messages, which tend to arrive before verbal ones, can greatly influence the proceeding of the communication. It is even reported that in an employment interview, it is often the first several seconds that counts the most, that is, the employer can know whether an employee is the right person before he/she has the opportunity to make a self-introduction. Moreover, people intend to believe nonverbal messages rather than verbal messages when the two contradict each other. Since in verbal communication, one may deliberate the wording and means of expressions consciously, while "the preponderance of nonverbal messages" (Samovar et al., 2009: 197) can be transmitted even without the interlocutors' awareness of them, as thus, nonverbal messages appear to be more credible. In addition, the study analyzing the relative contribution of verbal and non-verbal signals in naturalistic situations (Michael, Salter, Nicholson, Williams, & Burgess, 1970) evidenced that non-verbal cues had 4.3 times the effect of verbal cues. People are, consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally, inclined to make important judgments and decisions concerning the information conveyed nonverbally.

"Nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver" (Samovar et al., 2009: 197). The nonverbal stimuli can be divided into two "compressive categories: those that are primarily produced by the body (appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, smell, and paralanguage), and those that the individual combines with the setting (space, time, and silence)" (Samovar et al., 2009: 201).

Nonverbal communication behavior, which plays a paramount role in successful communication, is also influenced by various factors, like cultural background, socioeconomic background, etc. and varies with different cultures. As students of BE majors, learning about the alliance between culture and nonverbal behavior will help them to improve the manner engaged in intercultural business communication and enable them to gather clues about underlying attitudes and values (Samovar, et al., 2009).

4.0 Conclusion

Communication is an art. The art of communication has, however, often been taken for granted or neglected for its all-pervasiveness in everyday life. Nevertheless, business communication competence, acting as the lifeblood of an organization and the cornerstone of personal development, can by no means be overlooked. The understanding, instruction, and acquisition of these key competences proposed in the present study, covering English competence, business knowledge and skills, intercultural communication competence, humanistic quality, together with scenario analysis

competence, technology-mediated competence and non-verbal communication competence, can improve the often underrated art of communication, which is the common thread weaving throughout every working day. And more importantly, the uniform model is of guiding significance to the curriculum design of BE BA Program and the improving of the teaching quality and by association, the outcome of it. Moreover, although the business communication skills identified in this paper do not cover all the communication skills important in international business environment, the designated ones do provide a compelling framework for understanding and acquiring the salient skills perceived to be vitally important in business settings.

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