Cross-cultural factors in the teaching of ESP for Accounting in Portugal: some implications of a content-based approach

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that cross-cultural factors can influence the teaching of ESP, focusing on the case of ‘Inglês Técnico’, a compulsory third-year course taught at ISCAL (Lisbon School of Accounting and Administration). First, the typology of cultures developed by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980) is outlined and related to the teaching of ESP. Next, various aspects of teaching English for Accounting in Portugal are analyzed in the light of the above-mentioned theoretical framework, with reference to two course books and materials adapted from periodicals. Although these didactic and authentic materials are rich in specialised terminology, they often refer to concepts and realities of the English-speaking countries. It is argued that learners’ cultural background sometimes interferes in their comprehension of information in the target language. The experience of teaching the above-mentioned course has also proved that students’ understanding of ESP materials can be affected by assumptions related to the local economy. Thus, attitudes to taxation, investing or declaring profit, play an important role in the students’ ability to understand ESP materials.

Key words: cross-cultural factors, content-based instruction, English for Accounting

Introduction

Many ESP courses taught at a tertiary level in Europe adopt a content-based approach. In this regard, ISCAL (Lisbon School of Accounting and Administration) is no exception. Elements of content-based instruction have proved suitable in the course of ‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL because all students major in the same subject, Accounting. Thus, the ESP syllabus is fairly focused and based on two course books (Financial English and English for Business Studies by MacKenzie), as well as articles adapted from periodicals (The Financial Times and The Economist). Although these didactic and authentic materials are rich in specialised vocabulary, they often refer to concepts and realities of the English-speaking countries.

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of some cross-cultural issues underlying the teaching of English for Accounting in Portugal, drawing on the case of ‘Inglês Técnico’ at ISCAL. It aims to show that cross-cultural factors can influence the teaching/learning process, i.e. learners’ cultural background interferes in their interpretation of information in the target language. In order to provide a theoretical framework for the discussion, the paper outlines the typology of cultures as developed by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980). Next, various aspects of teaching English for Accounting in Portugal are analyzed in the light of the above-mentioned theoretical framework.

Culture and ESP

What is culture? According to anthropologists, there are over 164 different definitions (Schneider, 1995: 25). We can view culture as an iceberg (Figure 1), in which the tip is...
visible and the foundations are hidden. Behaviours and artefacts can be easily observed but they are rooted in a deeper level of values and beliefs held by a certain culture, which in turn reflect its underlying worldview.

Language and culture are closely intertwined. If we were to place language on one of the levels of the pyramid, it would come on the top but its roots go deep into the lower levels. Thus, language reflects the world of its users (beliefs in human nature, relationship with nature, time, human activity, social relationships, greetings, forms of address, space and so forth.). Language use depends on the cultural background of the user. So learning a foreign language implies learning about the culture of its native speakers, which is no less relevant in the context of ESP.

… if a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e. is grammatically competent) a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency but to boorishness or ill-will. (Thomas, 1983: 96-7)

Some of the results of the research conducted by anthropologists like Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980) are highly relevant for ESP professionals working in different cultural contexts. Hall’s distinction between ‘high context’ and ‘low context’ cultures is useful because it summarises how people in a given culture relate to each other. The figure below outlines the characteristics of these two kinds of culture.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1.** Three levels of culture. Adapted from Schein (1984) as cited in Schneider (1995: 25).

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2.** Extremes of the cultural continuum. Based on Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980).
At the low end of the cultural continuum there are Scandinavian countries like Sweden or Denmark, whereas at the high end we find China, Korea and Japan. Since this paper is about teaching ESP in Portugal, let us apply this distinction to our case. The English-speaking countries like the US and the UK are placed towards the lower end (Kim et al., 1998), whereas Portugal’s position is in the middle, but closer to the higher end. This cultural gap, although small, is sufficient to affect the ESP classroom. The following section will focus on the experience of teaching English to third-year students of accounting at ISCAL (Lisbon School of Accountancy and Administration).

Teaching English for Accounting in Portugal

The ‘high’ versus ‘low’ context described above is clearly visible in routine classroom procedures. The most obvious example concerns forms of address. Many students, including those with a good command of English, overuse the third person singular (the polite form of address in Portuguese) and professional bare titles (e.g. ‘teacher’), which sounds unnatural to native speakers. The English ‘you’ corresponds to three forms of address in Portuguese ‘tu’, ‘você’ and ‘senhor / senhora’, which can be replaced by any professional bare title like ‘professor / professora’, ‘engenheiro / engenheira’, ‘doutor / doutora’ and so forth. The use of proper names in formal contexts in Portuguese is uncommon, including teacher-student or colleague-colleague relationships. Although students quickly get used to being called by their proper names in class, they find it difficult and unnatural to start addressing their teachers by their proper names, even using surnames and titles. Most of them stick to the direct translation of ‘professor(a)’ as ‘teacher’ and avoid even the use of ‘you’ in teacher-student dialogues and conversations. On the other hand, the frequent use of ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ by the teacher asking a student to read a text or answer a question can be amusing to Portuguese students. This clearly demonstrates a cultural gap due to the importance of social hierarchies in formal contexts.

Teaching materials published in the English speaking countries are based on their values and principles. Texts and exercises refer to realities that are typical of the English-speaking world and may cause misunderstandings of a non-linguistic kind. Apart from the ‘low’ and ‘high’ context distinction, there seem to be other factors at work.

Today, the world is driven by economic forces. In the context of teaching English for Accounting, this widely accepted fact has proved highly relevant. The structure of the local economy appears to be an important factor in determining the degree of understanding on the student’s part. In fact, to a certain extent, the economy is linked with and reflects local culture and mentality. For example, the Portuguese economy is highly dependent on the state, which is by far the biggest shareholder in the largest listed companies (EDP, PT, CGD, etc.). Besides, the state is the major client to many privately-owned businesses (e.g. motorway maintenance, hospital management, the building industry). The general public does not have a significant participation in the shareholding of Portuguese listed companies. Annual reports produced by local listed companies tend to be fairly large volumes, written in formal, heavy prose and full of figures (for example, reports produced by major banks like Caixa Geral de Depósitos and Millennium). They are very different from the glossy brochures, written in
accessible style and illustrated with colourful graphics, which some English-speaking companies send to their shareholders or potential investors.

According to the data collected by the Instituto Nacional de Estatística in 2003, small and medium-sized firms account for 99.6% of Portuguese companies and provide 75% of jobs (IAPMEI). This fact determines the kind of training given to accountants, many of whom end up doing jobs largely related to bookkeeping and taking care of taxes like VAT, social security and corporate and individual income taxes. A smaller number of accounting graduates are employed by big accounting multinationals like KPMG, Ernst & Young, Deloitte & Touche or PWC, and can eventually work as statutory auditors or business consultants. Others obtain posts in financial departments of large companies. To a large extent, there is still a common belief that accounting and bookkeeping are essentially the same thing. As one third-year student at ISCAL wrote in his essay on ‘The status of the accounting profession’: ‘… when we talk about accounting, people think that we are talking about bookkeeping’ (Student A, class 311A, 2005/2006 essay). In fact, when asked to list new concepts learnt in the course of ‘Inglês Técnico’, 12 out of 62 third-year accounting students mentioned the difference between bookkeeping and accounting. On the other hand, other students believe that accounting profession is gaining a higher reputation, as the quote below illustrates:

We get training in almost every area, so we are capable of doing more than bookkeeping. We can be the right arm of every business company, providing advice to the owners on how to face the market. I also know that in Portugal we are still a little behind most European countries. Here we can’t give so much advice because a lot of companies in Portugal are small companies, where the owner doesn’t tolerate advice because he is in charge. So we must conquer our space in Portugal, it is up to us to demonstrate the infinite value of the accounting profession. (Student B, class 314, 2005/2006 final test)

Clearly, this claim is another proof of a large power distance and the importance of hierarchies characteristic of ‘high context’ cultures.

Recent financial scandals, which started in 2001 with the collapse of the American energy provider Enron, renewed interest in the accounting profession, especially in the English-speaking countries. Many articles dedicated to investigations of accounting fraud and new accounting regulations have appeared in The Financial Times and The Economist over the past five years. This material has proved extremely useful for teaching and evaluation purposes, namely adapting texts for reading comprehension. In general, students have little difficulty in answering more specific questions about the content of these texts, e.g. the purpose or consequences of new regulations, comparing figures and so forth. However, in the last five years, a substantial number of students have manifested the same surprise at their first contact with the information about accounting fraud outside Portugal. Their main question has been: why did Enron and other companies inflate profit if they would have to pay more tax?

“To impress the shareholders”’, - the answer to this question may seem obvious to someone who belongs to a culture where the general public invests in stock markets, which is the case, for example, in the US. In the economy where small and medium-sized firms are struggling to survive in the market, the usual practice is to minimize the amount of declared profit in order to avoid tax. In fact, this is often the major skill that potential employers value in an accounting professional.
This attitude has become so “common sense” that it can become an obstacle to students’ comprehension of information in the target language. This is the case not only with the reading comprehension of texts adapted from periodicals, but also with some texts designed for ELT purposes. Thus, the text on ‘Financial Statements’ in *Financial English* by MacKenzie states: ‘Negative items on financial statements such as creditors, taxation, and dividends paid are usually printed in brackets thus: (5200)’ (1995: 22).

Sentence 5 in the TRUE / FALSE reading comprehension exercise to the text reads: ‘5. Ideally, managers would like financial statements to contain no items in brackets’ (MacKenzie 1995: 23). This question has proved the most difficult one for the students of ‘Inglês Técnico’ since the text was introduced in the syllabus in 2001. Whereas the other nine questions generally yield correct answers, with an acceptable failure rate, sentence 5 has been causing confusion to a vast proportion of students. In my experience of the past five years, in different classes of approximately 20 people, only 1 or 2 manage to answer the question correctly, i.e. to label the statement as FALSE. In general, students support both the correct and the incorrect answer with reference to the same statement cited above. However, the vast majority immediately react to the mention of ‘taxation’ and conclude that a good manager should avoid paying tax at all costs, which is why statement 5 is TRUE. These students ignore the other two items, especially ‘dividends’, which implies the satisfaction of shareholders and a good reputation of the company in the market. It is little wonder that many are puzzled when confronted with news about companies like Enron or Parmalat, which declared high profits while making loss and going bankrupt.

It seems that students with a lower command of English are more likely to be influenced by local cultural assumptions. The examples below have been taken from their essays on ‘Financial scandals and the accounting profession’, which formed part of the final test. The original texts have been corrected so that they are more comprehensible but the ideas have been left intact.

In most companies fiscal evasion is made by the management board who “propose” to the accountant to make “changes” in the accounts to “help” the company and the managers to survive. (Student C, class 312A, 2005/2006 final test)

Financial scandals and the accounting profession are related because a large part of the scandals have been caused by fraud, i.e. companies don’t pay tax or they practice tax dodge. (Student D, class 321, 2005/2006 final test)

It is cheaper to pay a fine than to pay corporation tax to the state. (Student E, class 314, 2005/2006 final test)

Taxation *per se* is another area where students’ doubts are not uncommon. The textbook *English for Business Studies* by MacKenzie contains a unit on this topic. This unit includes excellent exercises and texts focusing on names and classification of taxes (direct/indirect, progressive/regressive), different ways of tax avoidance and tax evasion, tax havens and tax shelters, and so forth. Although nearly all concepts and realities mentioned in the unit exist in Portugal, some students do not manage to associate some of the knowledge acquired in the English course to what they have learnt in other degree subjects. Thus, according to a survey conducted among 62 students of ‘Inglês Técnico’ (See Note 1), just about half (30) reported that they learnt the distinction between progressive and regressive taxes during the lessons of ‘Inglês Técnico’. Although no one has problems understanding the logic of progressive taxes such as income taxes (IRS and IRC in Portugal), regressive taxes such as VAT (IVA)
are not referred to in Portuguese as ‘regressive’ but as ‘fixed’ (fixo) or ‘blind’ (cego). Some students and even law teachers have argued that there are no regressive taxes in Portugal. However, after seeing the proportion of tax in relation to income, they stop disagreeing. It seems that the avoidance of the word ‘regressive’ in the definition of tax has to do with the level of directness and explicitness in the discourse, which determines a ‘high’ or ‘low’ context. The English-speaking texts appear to be more explicit in calling things by their own names. There is no need to argue that “fixed” taxes like VAT or stamp duty should be called ‘regressive’ in Portuguese, but the understanding of the logic of taxation makes it easier for students to form their views on the subject and to develop the topic, for example, in an essay or in a debate about the fairness of taxation.

Investment banking appears to be another concept that students acquire in the course of ‘Inglês Técnico’. Thus, 41 out of 62 students reported that they had not been aware of the distinction between commercial and investment banking. Once again, this fact can be accounted for with reference to the local economy. Banking is a highly competitive and advanced sector of the Portuguese economy but most Portuguese banks are universal, i.e. they combine the services offered by the two kinds of banks mentioned above. Unfortunately, the text in English for Business Studies does not make a reference to this fact, saying only that: ‘In some European countries (notably Germany, Austria and Switzerland) there have always been universal banks combining deposit and loan banking with share and bond dealing and investment services’ (MacKenzie, 1997: 70). On the other hand, investment banking is related to stock markets. As mentioned above, the main shareholder in Portugal is the state, so investing in shares or bonds is not common among the general public. This may explain why so many accounting students are unfamiliar with investment banking.

Thus we can see that local cultural assumptions have an impact on the learners’ understanding of information in English not only in the case of adopting authentic materials but also in the case of using ready-made ESP course books such as English for Business Studies and Financial English.

Concluding remarks

This paper has argued that learners’ cultural background has an impact on their ability to understand information in the target language. Since the paper has focused on teaching English for Accounting in Portugal, it has also demonstrated the role played by cultural assumptions related to the local economy such as attitudes to investing or declaring profit. Apparently, economic forces have become strong to the extent that they are influencing ESP classrooms. This paper has sought to avoid any value judgement. The main purpose has been to draw attention to factors that are not always contemplated in ESP teaching, such as the distinction between ‘high context’ and ‘low context’ cultures as presented above.

These factors need to be taken into consideration by ESP professionals when preparing or adapting authentic materials for teaching purposes. It seems that even specifically designed didactic materials like course books English for Business Studies and Financial English, which are meant to be used all over the globe, include texts and exercises that transmit realities of the English-speaking countries. However, this should
not be perceived as a constraint but rather as a challenge and an opportunity to use the ESP classroom as a space to involve students in exploring the culture of the target language, while focusing on their core subject, Accounting.

References


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Notes