This very useful addition to the English for Specific Purposes literature on English for medical professionals comprises four items: a student’s book, a teacher’s book, two audio CDs and a DVD. It is grounded in two commonly accepted healthcare principles. The first is the need for effective communication; as the Director of Clinical Training at the Auckland District Health Board recently pointed out, ‘85% of doctoring is communication’ (Johnston 2008). The second is that quality care requires an approach to communication that takes into account the patient’s perspective and perceptions of the presenting complaint (Silverman, Kurtz and Draper 2005). While Good practice shares the first precept with other recently published books on communication in medical contexts (eg Glendinning and Holström 2005; Glendinning and Howard 2007), the second is more in evidence in this text than in any of the others. Two groups of medical professionals are potential users of Good practice: medical students or recent graduates who are learning English at the same time as they are developing their knowledge of medicine, and qualified, experienced immigrant doctors.

While accessible to both groups, this book caters specifically to the needs of the latter and assumes a good knowledge of medicine. It would be suitable both for self-study and classroom-based teaching.

Good practice is divided into three main sections. The first provides a brief introduction to the five basic components of communication in the medical context: verbal communication, voice management, non-verbal communication, active listening and cultural awareness. Like the rest of the book, it focuses clearly on communication and brief linguistic explanations are kept free of specialised terms. The opening section is followed by nine units that aim to develop language and communication skills for the various stages of the doctor–patient interview, from initiating the consultation through the information-gathering phases (presenting complaint, histories and examination) to giving and explaining the diagnosis, planning treatment and closing the interview. The final two units in this section explain how to deal with sensitive issues and how to break bad news to the patient. The third and final section of the book is again quite short, comprising three units on communicating with challenging patients, the elderly, children and adolescents.

The student’s book incorporates a number of innovative features, including:

- short Think about tasks asking the student to reflect, activate prior knowledge or self-evaluate strengths and weaknesses
- Patient speak boxes listing colloquial and lay-medical terms
- short quotations from experts in medical communication skills illuminating aspects of the unit topic
- Cultural awareness boxes explaining Western cultural norms and asking students to reflect on and discuss practices in their own cultures
- Communication skills boxes pointing out appropriate strategies
- Out & about boxes requiring observation and reflection in healthcare contexts that students may be working in
- Likert scales at the end of each unit for students to evaluate their progress.

Some of these features form part of the sequence of tasks in each chapter, while others appear in small coloured boxes in broad side margins. The use of different coloured boxes, prints and fonts for each type of feature makes each one readily identifiable: in a book at this advanced level, the variety of content available on each page seems to me quite acceptable.

Role play cue cards, answers and tape scripts
for the two audio CDs are located at the back of the student's book. The teacher's book provides teaching notes and a task-by-task answer key, additional language notes and recommended reading for the teacher on aspects of patient-centred communication skills, as well as authentic, photocopiable one-page or two-page articles from medical journals and textbooks to promote further discussion on the theme of the unit. The fourth item in the set of materials is a DVD of authentic-type consultations showing the five phases of the medical interview (e.g., presenting complaint, planning treatment, breaking bad news). There are also interviews with two different patient categories: challenging patients and children.

Compared to other English for medical professionals texts, Good practice has a number of valuable strengths, including the inclusion of information on many aspects of patient-centred care and the opportunities it provides for students to learn key communicative skills. While the spoken dialogues that accompany the book are briefer, and more bland and straightforward, than their unscripted equivalents, they are simulated authentic in that they incorporate:

- different types of requests (e.g., If you don’t mind, I’ll take a few notes/We’ll come back and talk about the arthritis later, if that’s okay with you)
- questions (e.g., I wonder if you could tell me in your own words what’s been happening/And your joints – you’re not suffering from achy joints?)
- phrasal verbs (e.g., My arthritis has been playing me up/It flares up every so often)
- lay-medical language commonly used in healthcare contexts (e.g., I’ve been having these hot spells/OK, I’ll give it a go).

A variety of accents including regional British, Australian, American, and some non-native speaker voices are represented. The five longer DVD consultations, while still smoothly fluent, are not so thoroughly scripted and therefore sound more authentic. The aim in both audio and DVD texts is clearly to achieve a balance between authenticity and comprehensibility for teaching purposes. However, teachers will need to point out to students that, in these somewhat sanitised models, elements of actual discourse such as pauses, hesitations, false starts, grammatical errors and general imprecision have been minimised. The often quite distressed, fearful, confused, depressed and angry emotional states of the patients often found in real medical interviews have also been suppressed.

I strongly recommend this book, with the proviso that there is still something of a gap between the discourse of Good practice and the sophistication and subtlety of the language overseas-trained doctors need to master for the oral component of their professional exams (Wette and Basturkmen 2006). It would be suitable for doctors approaching or already at the level of English language proficiency (IELTS 7.5 for New Zealand, OET Grade B or IELTS 7.0 for Australia) required for re-registration.

References


Communication across cultures: Mutual understanding in a global world


Reviewed by Denise Gassner

Communication across cultures is an academic reference for undergraduate and graduate students. It is also intended for use by interdisciplinary researchers with no specialised knowledge of linguistics. The research areas touched on in this book are pragmatics, discourse analysis, politeness and intercultural communication. Materials included in this book have been used as a resource by one of the authors (Bowe) for the past ten years in her teaching of these subjects at Monash University in Melbourne and at Monash University campuses in Malaysia and South Africa.

The book consists of 11 chapters. Each chapter covers a key topic of current interest in the field of intercultural communication. The main critiques that have been put forward by researchers on some of the theories explored in the book are presented, as are recent studies in several areas. The research presented here covers work done internationally, as well as studies conducted in Australia. This makes the book relevant to both the international student studying in Australia and local students alike. Each chapter ends with a concise summary of the topics discussed in the chapter and an extensive review section. The latter consists of a list of important key terms used in individual chapters (eg speech acts), key ideas (what one should know after having read a chapter), focus questions suggesting hands-on tasks using the newly acquired knowledge, research analysis tasks, and a research exercise, and ends with some suggestions for further reading.

The first chapter introduces the term culture and traces its development from its earliest uses to how it is used today. This serves as a good introduction to the underlying theme of this book, and the topics discussed in more detail in the following chapters are presented briefly. In the second chapter, the authors provide an overview of the research on speech acts by Austin (1962, 1970), Searle (1969) and Grice (1975). Austin's (1962) paper How to do things with words outlines his work on 'communicative intent, form and effects of utterances' (p 9) and is the basis for much research. Grice (1975) is well known for his work on the expectations adult English speakers have of conversations. He claims that the four maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner govern expectations on language and resulting interpretations. These four maxims are tied together by a general principle, the cooperative principle. The critique of Grice's work for its Anglocentric approach is also discussed in this chapter, and Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory is suggested as a possible alternative approach. In relevance theory, the four Gricean maxims are reduced to one super-maxim, the maxim of relevance. This theory claims relevance to be the key in determining how inferences are drawn in conversations. The work of the Australian researcher Clyne (1994) is also presented in this chapter. He proposed a revision of the Gricean maxims for intercultural communication.

Chapter 3 introduces Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness phenomena. Face, face-threatening acts and politeness strategies are the three basic notions of this major approach. The authors also discuss a key problem that they see with this model. It is generally thought that the model was principally concerned with strategies in the context of face-threatening acts but interaction does not only consist of such acts. The concept of face is derived from Goffman's work (1955, 1967) and the general English perception of 'being embarrassed or humiliated' (p 27). Other approaches to politeness are discussed; for instance, Wierzbicka (1972, 1985, 1991, 2003) describes the meaning of words and illocutionary acts using lexical primitives. Cultural scripts (Wierzbicka 1994) is the term she introduced to refer to her technique of describing cultural norms using natural semantic metalanguage. Recent approaches in cognitive linguistics explain how cultural schemas are represented in an individual's knowledge. Sharifian's (2004) work in cognitive linguistics, on the representation of culture, is also introduced in this chapter. In his work he shows how a cultural schema like sharamandegi (being ashamed) is evident in a number of speech acts in the Persian language (Farsi).

Chapter 4 focuses on speech acts across cultures. Research on requests, complaints, apologies and the acceptance of an apology is presented and the
work of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Patterns project (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989) is introduced. This major study looked at speech act realisations in eight different languages. Australian research comparing apologies in Australian English with apologies in Malaysian-Chinese and apologies in central European languages also feature in this chapter. Furthermore, recent research on the gender factor in relation to politeness across cultures is discussed. Hobbs (2003), for instance, found that the use of positive politeness did not appear to be related to status or gender but, rather, to the role an individual enacts in an interaction. The authors conclude by quoting Smith’s (1992: 57) research, which claims that it is too simplistic to say that women are more polite than men, since a ‘multistrategy phenomenon is at work’.

In Chapter 5 the analysis of conversation introduces the work of Schlegloff (1968) on conversational openings and the work of Sacks, Schlegloff and Jefferson (1974) on the turn-taking system in conversations. Sacks, Schlegloff and Jefferson (1974) found that most conversations consist of pairs of utterances, which they call adjacency pairs. Adjacency pairs are composed of two parts that have several characteristics. One crucial feature is that the first part of an adjacency pair requires the second part of the pair to be uttered. The different topics explored in this chapter include greetings and leave-takings, turn-taking across cultures, repetition as back-channelling in intercultural communication, functions of laughter, joking and conversational routines. Research work on European languages such as Italian and French, as well as Asian languages, Mexican Spanish, Australian and American English, is discussed.

Chapter 6 introduces the topics of power relations in interactions and stereotyping. Hofstede’s study (1980, 1983, 1991, 1998) on national cultural differences is introduced and a critique of the Western bias of this model and the value judgment in its terminology is presented. However, Hofstede’s model has been useful in explaining the influence on power relations of social, cultural, political and economic factors. The second part of this chapter explores different studies on stereotyping. Scollon and Scollon (2001: 87) describe stereotyping as ‘the process by which all members of a group are asserted to have characteristics attributed to the whole group’. According to Tajfel (1982), people tend to categorise themselves positively as the in-group (at the centre) and others negatively as the out-group (outside) in order to create pride and self-esteem.

Naming and addressing is the focus of Chapter 7. Brown and Gilman’s (1960) T–V distinction is introduced. The symbol T stands for tu (Latin), the symbol V for vos (Latin). These symbols are used to differentiate the familiar (T) and the polite (V) pronouns in a language. Recent changes in the languages, where this distinction exists, are also presented. Research by Kretzenbacher (2005), for instance, shows that the T–V distinction in German has disappeared in communication on the Internet, with only T being used. Also, changes can be observed in the honorific forms in modern Japanese that are now used less strictly according to the authors. An interesting topic one might not have expected to find in a book on intercultural communication is the discussion of cultural differences in writing explored in Chapter 8. The linearity principle, an important feature of English written discourse, is explained and compared to the digressive feature of German academic register. Also, features of written discourse in Arabic and Japanese are explored, as well as letter writing.

Chapter 9 discusses the difficulty of achieving pragmatic equivalence in translating or interpreting. Much of this chapter focuses on the Australian perspective and advice is given on interpreting and translating in the business context. Victor (1992), for instance, suggests using the following techniques when speaking to business partners for whom English is a second language: rephrasing frequently, repeating key ideas in different words and using written support, since the spoken knowledge of these L2 speakers might be weaker than the written knowledge. This chapter also introduces the topic of advertising, which is a challenge for intercultural communication because the values used in advertisements vary between cultures. For instance, translating an English advertisement for pet food into Mexican Spanish would be difficult, since, apart from the difficulty of achieving pragmatic equivalence in the Spanish version, the concept of pet food would have to be introduced into this culture.

Intercultural communication issues in professional and workplace contexts are presented in Chapter 10. Different expectations in
intercultural business encounters and the resulting miscommunication are described. The norms of a culture need to be observed in order to avoid such miscommunication. Béal’s (1990) study on differences between native speakers of French and native speakers of Australian English shows how two sets of sociolinguistic rules can lead to problems in intercultural communication. Béal found that ‘different conversational forms to minimise the threat to the face of the hearer when making a request’ (p 158) were chosen by French and Australian speakers. Other workplace contexts discussed include medical and legal practices. This chapter also provides a good introduction to communication issues of Australian Indigenous clients in the courtroom. Pauwels, D’Argaville and Eades (1992) found that Aboriginal people do not use direct questions to find out significant information, whereas in Western courtrooms using direct questions is common practice.

The final chapter, Chapter 11, presents research on successful intercultural communication. It has been shown that individuals from different cultures can draw on creative discourse strategies in order to construct common ground in intercultural communication. One strategy is, for instance, the use of repetition for various functions in discourse to avoid miscommunication. Turn-sharing is another strategy in intercultural communication used to construct discourse together. Also, the theory of accommodation in intercultural communication is explored. Giles’s (1977) communication accommodation theory explains social motivations for speakers to adjust their speech to the language conventions of the hearer. The notion of conversational needs, developed by Coupland et al (1988), has been included in this theory.

In general, this academic reference provides an excellent and detailed introduction to intercultural communication and various issues related to such communication. The key research on the topics discussed is introduced, critique of the research is presented and recent studies in some areas are included. Important tables of original research have been reprinted and the authors have also included additional user-friendly tables. However, in order to fully appreciate these discussions, some existing linguistic knowledge might be needed. Therefore, interdisciplinary researchers without previous knowledge of linguistics might find this introduction challenging, since the presentation of the different theories is quite dense.

The languages discussed include European and Asian languages, as well as different varieties of English, for instance, Australian English and Aboriginal English. The Australian research presented should be helpful for international students or anybody who wishes to conduct research in Australia. However, the emphasis on the Australian context may be too prominent for use in Europe or the United States. The organisation of the book is excellent, with further reading suggested at the end of each chapter for the interested researcher. The review section for students also includes exercises that should prove valuable for group discussions. The presentation of key terms in the review section will be helpful for non-native speakers and native speakers alike.

Applying knowledge to solve different exercises and some suggested small-scale fieldwork for students are included in this section and make this book interesting for work in tutorials. However, when using this reference as a self-study book, it might be difficult to fully appreciate the review section, since no answers to the questions are provided. Often it would be impossible to provide answers because students are asked to use their own knowledge of other languages in order to respond.

To conclude, this volume would be most useful for students attending tutorials or seminars. Furthermore, researchers who already have some background knowledge will find that the good general overview on the topic of intercultural communication is useful.

References


