

# Problem-Based Learning in an Intercultural Business Communication Course

## Communication Challenges in Intercultural Relationships in Internationalizing Small- or Medium-Sized Enterprises

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Teachers of intercultural business communication may want to consider using problem-based learning (PBL), an instructional approach that places learners in problem-solving situations, that is, students are presented with messy and complex real-life problems that provide a context for learning concepts and developing skills. This article describes how ill-structured communication problems that emerge in intercultural business relationships in internationalizing small- or medium-sized enterprises are used to provide a context for learning. It explains how these problems are tackled by learners through the implementation of PBL in four stages: problem identification, information acquisition, information analysis, and problem resolution. Finally, it discusses the reactions of the students, external participants, and instructors to the PBL approach.

**Keywords:** *problem-based learning; problem solving; intercultural business relationships; small-sized enterprises; medium-sized enterprises; course design*

**B**usiness communication instructors who are interested in exposing students to real situations in intercultural business environments may want to consider incorporating problem-based learning (PBL) into their instruction. PBL is an instructional approach that places students in problem-solving situations (Barrows & Myers, 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1996) so that they can

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acquire the necessary knowledge base and skills to solve the problems they encounter (Barrows, 1986, p. 481). This approach engages students in active, team-based collaborative learning. Interest in the use of PBL in management education is growing, as educators are trying to overcome the gap between theory and practice. Criticized for providing business education that is unrealistic and based more on academic research than on what is important for succeeding in business, management educators are adopting instructional approaches such as PBL, experiential learning, and service learning (Coombs & Elden, 2004, pp. 523-524). These approaches aim to develop learners' abilities to apply content knowledge to real situations encountered in the workplace.

But the use of PBL in intercultural business communication (IBC) instruction is limited. To develop learners' IBC skills, instructors have most often adopted approaches such as experiential learning, case-based learning, and service learning. *Experiential learning*, based on Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle, integrates both theory and practice, enabling students to learn by "doing" (Cheney, 2001, pp. 91-93; Du-Babcock, 1996, pp. 30-32; Kalfadellis, 2005, p. 42). *Case-based learning* (Varner, 2001, pp. 102-103) instills in learners the connection between culture and business (see DeVoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002, p. 75, for their discussion-based approach). And *service learning*, which has attracted recent attention, engages learners in intercultural activities that address community and human needs (Fielding, 2003, p. 113; Shirvani, 2003, p. 153). But changes in international business environments triggered by globalization and new technologies require people who have skills in dealing with complex situations in intercultural business environments. Even though PBL centers more on solving complex problems than do these other active learning approaches, its use in teaching IBC is still in its infancy.

Organizations operating in highly competitive intercultural business environments have to cope with unpredictability and uncertainty. In addition, managers in such environments have to deal with the complexities of establishing and maintaining relationships that are crucial to business success. Within such intercultural business relationships the types of problems that emerge are mostly ill-structured, complex, and abstract. Consequently, finding solutions to such problems becomes a prime concern for organizations that are competing in international markets. For example, interacting partners may have divergent perceptions of business goals that reduce their ability to face competition. Therefore, the person who is able to reconcile these differences not only can strengthen the business relationship but also can contribute to resource creation.

According to Jonassen (1997), *ill-structured problems* are vaguely defined, have unstated constraints, and may include multiple viable solutions and solution paths. Well-structured problems, in contrast, are clearly defined. All the elements of the problems are known, and a preferred solution process exists. Ill-structured problems, however, have some elements that are either unknown or unclear. In addition, these problems may have more than one acceptable solution. Consequently, tackling ill-structured problems requires different intellectual skills and problem-solving processes (Shin, Jonassen, & McGee, 2003).

In PBL, an ill-structured problem initiates learning. Students are presented with an ill-structured problem that requires the use of higher order intellectual skills to solve it. The problem occurs in a real organization and reflects an actual situation or professional practice. Such exposure to actual complex problems in real organizations, as opposed to simulated cases or situations, offers learners the opportunity to access relevant experts and practice, which in turn contributes to their acquisition of domain-specific knowledge and development of appropriate problem-solving skills.

In this article, I describe how I implemented the PBL approach in an IBC course. Starting with an overview of PBL, I look at communication challenges in intercultural business relationships in general. Then I describe intercultural relationships in internationalizing small- or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and explain why these SMEs provide a suitable context for PBL. Next I describe the IBC course and the different stages involved in implementing PBL. Finally, I present an evaluation of the course, including students' and external participants' perceptions about the approach, as well as my perceptions as course instructor.

## **An Overview of PBL**

Applied extensively in medical fields since the 1960s, PBL is a teaching and learning strategy that is now embraced by educators and trainers in other professional disciplines, such as engineering, the sciences, nursing, psychology, and management. It is regarded not only as an instructional approach but also as an educational philosophy for designing curricula. Engel (1991), for example, focused on the integration between disciplines as an essential feature for choosing course contents in PBL programs.

Drawn from constructivism, PBL is a learning approach in which learners construct their knowledge actively by raising their own questions, generating and exploring their own mental models, and building representations that

organize their experiences (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992, p. 135). PBL focuses on ill-structured problems that individuals encounter in real-life situations or professional practice. Learners are given such problems to solve without receiving any prior knowledge that might help them fully understand and address the problem. Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) pointed out that "learning results from the process of working toward the understanding or resolution of a problem" (p. 18). Thus, problems serve to stimulate learning, motivating learners to identify and research the concepts and principles that they need to know to tackle problems (Boud & Feletti, 1997, pp. 23-33). In small groups, learners work on a problem by sharing what they know and determining what they need to investigate. They also share the responsibility of seeking and acquiring new information through independent study. In group discussions, learners build on their existing knowledge, question their assumptions about their reality, and synthesize their knowledge into appropriate mental models as they acquire new knowledge. Further collaboration helps them to identify viable solutions through their creative and critical thinking.

In this learning approach in which learners assume an active role, the educator or trainer relinquishes the role of information transmitter and takes on the role of facilitator (Woods, 1996). Educators design problems and tasks to develop the learning outcomes appropriate to learners, help direct students' thinking, and consider other contexts in which the skills and content knowledge that students acquire in solving a particular problem may be transferred.

The goals of PBL are to help learners to (a) think critically to analyze and solve complex, ill-structured problems; (b) develop skills for effective collaboration with peers; (c) evaluate and use learning resources; and (d) use content knowledge and intellectual skills to become continual learners (Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001). In PBL, more than in other active-learning instructional approaches, the problem is the center of attention. This problem, according to Duch (1996), must engage learners, challenging them to justify their reasoning and actions. It should also be complex enough to require learners to work with others in a team.

The communication challenges that arise in intercultural business relationships are well suited for PBL. The problems and complexities involved in establishing and maintaining such relationships are a major concern for organizations that need international business partners to play an active role in the global market. To effectively manage these relationships, communication between interacting partners should be appropriate. And to achieve such effective communication requires an understanding of the challenges that affect this communication.

## **Communication Challenges in Intercultural Business Relationships**

Globalization and the search for new competitive advantages force organizations to expand their business beyond their national borders. Lacking the necessary resources or management skills to operate effectively in many countries, they must form intercultural business relationships to achieve their goals.

If such relationships are effective, they derive added value or resources and an increase in competitiveness as a result of the close cooperation and coordination of the interacting partners' work. To reach that point, however, the partners must establish trust. Such trust occurs progressively as the partners' relationship develops and evolves through different phases (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Through frequent and timely communication, partners demonstrate their reliability and integrity to the relationship, initiating trust. As communication increases and the level of trust grows, organizations are more willing to commit to the relationship and to work toward shared long-term goals (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Thus, the relationship creates a resource that is valuable, unique, inimitable, and nonsubstitutable. And, as Barney argued (1991), having a resource that is valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and without a strategically equivalent substitute allows an organization to develop and maintain competitive advantages. Griffith, Myers, and Harvey (2006) further argued that interorganizational linkages themselves could be a source of competitive advantage. Consequently, effective relationships are viewed as key strategic resources because they provide an organization with a unique resource-barrier position in the marketplace (p. 3), that is, the resource is a source of differentiation that allows the organization to benefit from above-average returns.

But for these relationships to be successful, effective and appropriate communication is essential (Monczka, Callahan, & Nichols, 1995, p. 57), a task that is not easy to achieve. The interacting partners in intercultural business relationships are from different countries and different cultures. Thus, the messages these partners exchange (written or spoken) should be carefully planned so that they respond to the expectations and concerns of their respective audiences. The message sender, for example, needs to assess the social and cultural distance that exists between the partners. Using that knowledge, the sender then needs to decide what adjustments in communication behavior are necessary to move closer to the cultural norms and preferences of the receiver.

According to Mohr and Nevin (1990), three aspects of communication behavior are important in relationships: the quality of the communicative

interaction, the form of information sharing, and the extent to which both parties jointly engage in planning and goal setting (pp. 36-37). To assess the distance between the interacting partners, an analysis of the factors that affect the communication is essential. The interaction of these factors forms the complexity that the sender of the message must handle. Both external and internal factors related to the type of intercultural relationship affect the communication (Harvey & Griffith, 2002). Specific external and internal factors are

- national cultural differences
- organizational cultural differences
- level of economic development
- regulatory environment
- technological know-how
- business goals
- specific communication goals and processes (how they interact and the informal rules that govern their interaction)

Depending on the level of complexity that exists (high or low), the originator of the message decides what action to take regarding the direction, frequency, modality, and content of the communication (i.e., what communication strategy to adopt to ensure effective and appropriate communication).

A change in any of these external and internal factors affects the other elements in the communication environment that influence the participants' communication behavior. Given that changes and uncertainty are a constant in business, and problems resulting from these changes are often unpredictable and ill-defined, with no clear-cut solutions, participants need to continuously reassess the factors that influence the communication so that they can adjust their communication behavior to the specific environmental conditions. Thus, learners who aspire to work in an intercultural business environment need to understand the factors that affect the communication behavior of the sender and receiver of a message and be able to assess the influences and manage the interaction of these factors.

### **Intercultural Relationships in Internationalizing SMEs**

Organizations enter international markets through various modes, such as exporting, licensing, nonequity strategic alliances, joint ventures, and wholly owned subsidiaries (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986). Because SMEs

have limited financial and managerial resources (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994) however, they often adopt strategies, tactics, and operational methods for globalization that are different from those of larger enterprises (Prater & Ghosh, 2005, p. 163). Exporting, a low-commitment entry mode, is still a primary foreign market entry mode favored by SMEs (Leonidou & Katsikeas, 1996). More and more SMEs, however, are striving to have an international presence by venturing into high-commitment entry modes such as contract manufacturing and joint ventures (Lu & Beamish, 2006, p. 463).

The international presence of SMEs is greatly facilitated by their use of network relationships (Oviatt & McDougall, 2000). These relationships help SMEs to access local market knowledge, obtain business information (Chetty & Patterson, 2002, pp. 72-73; Coviello & Munro, 1995, p. 50), and establish contacts (Turnbull, Ford, & Cunningham, 1996). In establishing their international presence, SMEs have to ensure that these network relationships they form with foreign partners are smoothly handled. Credibility—building and maintaining trust through frequent, timely, and appropriate communication—becomes a crucial factor for the effectiveness of these relationships.

The communication challenges that SMEs face in these relationships vary according to the type of relationship and the market entry mode. An SME involved in exporting through an agent does not face the same challenges as does an SME involved in a high-commitment entry mode. Whereas the interaction between the exporting SME and its agent may be limited to routine aspects, the interaction may be more complicated in other types of relationships. For example, in subcontracting relationships, the concerns that bind the players center on the quality of the products, amount of time it takes for the product to get to the market, and flexibility of production. In dealing with these issues, the respective partners in the relationship may exhibit different attitudes and behavior because perceptions of concepts (e.g., of *quality* or *delivery time*) can vary from culture to culture. In such cases, more interaction is necessary to iron out differences and establish trust.

### **Internationalizing SMEs as a Context for PBL**

Ill-structured problems that occur in intercultural business environments are difficult to tackle by using only traditional theoretical teaching methods. But learning experiences that create the opportunity to work on real situations—such as those experienced by organizations active in intercultural business environments—can help learners develop the necessary competencies to be able to solve ill-structured problems. Faced with a range of choices, I have

found that internationalizing SMEs provide a suitable context for learning IBC through a PBL approach. An important feature of PBL is the design of the learning environment, which needs to reflect the complexity of the environment in which learners are expected to function at the end of their learning experience (Savery & Duffy, 1995). By incorporating an internationalizing SME into the learning environment, the learner is exposed to the communication challenges with which SMEs wrestle.

To capture the complexity that SMEs face, learners need the help of relevant experts who can provide information about the required documentation and practices. An important aspect of PBL is that “students learn (not just the information but also the manner and technique) from being on the periphery of competent practitioners going about their business” (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 50). Most SMEs are owned and managed by the founders (Schuman & Seeger, 1986), so learners can obtain most of the necessary practical knowledge by working directly with them. Generally, in SMEs, the owners are personally responsible for a wide range of foreign links, dealing with foreign partners at all levels and in all departments whenever the situation requires it (Jarman, 2001, p. 2). Learners can observe owners’ management behavior and communication practices and thereby assess the relative importance of intercultural relationships in comparison to the relationships that the SME has with other stakeholders. Learners can also observe how owners’ communication behaviors change when they deal with foreign partners.

To understand the differences in communication behavior that they observed, learners will endeavor to relate this practical knowledge (knowledge gained from experience) to objective knowledge (theory and concepts). For example, their investigation of national cultures will lead them to concepts or studies such as Hofstede’s (1980) study about national cultural dimensions, which they can use to analyze the differences in the communication behavior they observed. In other words, learners are placed in internationalizing SMEs to observe, understand, and try to solve the communication challenges that occur within existing intercultural business relationships. The ill-structured problems that arise from these intercultural business relationships provide the context for learning. Within this context, learners develop both content knowledge and skills by implementing the PBL method. Learning is facilitated by a successful PBL environment; however, for this environment to be successful, all players must be aware of what is expected of them. Instructors, learners, and external participants from the SMEs need to clearly understand the learning objectives and organization of the IBC course.



## The IBC Course

The IBC course is offered as a core course to 4th-year students in the School of Applied Languages at Bilkent University, in Turkey. The students in this school follow a unique program, popular in European universities, that combines languages with a particular specialization. Students specialize in banking and finance and accounting studies in conjunction with three languages: English, French, and Turkish. Graduates from this program pursue their careers in financial institutions, exporting firms, or other internationally related areas. Whether in financial institutions or internationally oriented organizations, these graduates, because of their language background, find themselves in situations in which they must interact with people from other cultures to carry out business tasks. Thus, this IBC course prepares these Turkish students, who have had limited intercultural encounters, to recognize, understand, and manage the effects of culture on communication activities in business relationships between foreign partners in specific business contexts.

### Course Learning Objectives

The purpose of this course, then, is to use PBL to provide students with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to develop communication strategies, which will ensure that their communication in intercultural business relationships is appropriate and effective. Toward that end, the course has the following learning objectives for students:

- to demonstrate an understanding of the specific context in which IBC takes place, the type of business relationship, and business goals
- to identify the degree of alignment between business goals and communication goals and describe the current communication practices of interacting partners
- to compare national cultures and assess cultural influences on the behavior of interacting partners
- to compare organizational cultures and assess cultural influences on the behavior of interacting players
- to assess the degree of cultural and social compatibility between interacting partners
- to acknowledge the influence of external factors on communication strategies and the need for adaptability

## Course Organization

The IBC course is taught to senior students who are familiar with teamwork and problem solving from previous business communication courses offered in their junior year. The average class size ranges from 40 to 50 students who attend the course for 15 weeks. Driven by the PBL approach, this course involves students in the real problems of an internationalizing SME that require their interaction with both external participants at the SME site and the classroom instructor. Students are assigned to teams of four to six members, depending on the number of students enrolled in the course.

## Team Setup

First, the instructor appoints a team leader for each team. The instructor chooses the team leaders based on the leadership characteristics (e.g., the ability to raise and address problems, interpersonal competence) that they demonstrated in business communication courses that they had previously taken. The team leader, in turn, selects the other team members, choosing students who have a diverse set of skills, such as the ability to carry out research and to establish contacts.

Team members, acting as senior communicators, meet with the actual manager at the SME site as many times as is necessary to obtain the information they require. These meetings occur outside scheduled classroom times. Simultaneously, scheduled classroom time is allocated to the four different stages in the PBL approach: problem identification, information acquisition, information analysis, and problem resolution. During these stages, team members interact with the instructor, submit short reports, and receive extensive written feedback from the instructor. Students also interact and collaborate with other individuals in their team and hold regular meetings chaired by the team leader to discuss the problem-solving situation.

## Team Tasks

Each student team must carry out a series of tasks. First, the team must select and contact an SME. For the initial contact with the selected SME, students write an introductory letter that explains the assignment and the tangible results that will benefit the SME. This letter also clearly describes the tasks that the manager of the SME is expected to carry out, such as helping to identify a problem for the team to consider, attending the team's presentation, reading its report, and meeting and communicating with the team.

Second, with the approval of the SME manager, the team must identify and describe in detail the intercultural communication problem (see Appendix A). Through exchanging information and closely collaborating with each other, the team and the manager identify and describe the intercultural communication problem that the SME and its foreign partners are experiencing. Subsequent meetings take place on a regular basis. The number of meetings is determined by the team, depending on the complexity of the problem-solving situation.

Third, the team must submit a formal business report with clear recommendations to the SME manager, the primary audience. The instructor also receives a copy of the report. Finally, students must deliver a professional presentation to the SME management team (i.e., the SME manager and usually two of the manager's colleagues who communicate with foreign partners) showing how a communication task can be performed in a culturally sensitive manner.

The manager of the SME is the external participant in this PBL course. This person meets regularly with the students on an as-needed basis. During these meetings, the manager works with the students to identify and describe an intercultural business problem and makes arrangements for them to observe the workplace practices and to interview employees at the SME site. The manager also provides students with documentation, such as faxes, letters, and e-mails, that the SME has exchanged with its partners. And the manager reads the report submitted by the students, assists at the students' presentation, and provides feedback.

## **Instructor's Role**

The instructor's role in this course is, initially, to brief students about the course and its deliverables, explaining the major aspects of PBL and stressing the students' roles as active learners. The instructor outlines the learning outcomes of the course and provides students with a list of references to guide their investigation. During scheduled classroom time, the instructor interacts with students to facilitate their progress as they move from one stage to another. During these sessions, the instructor checks that the problem is properly formulated, directs thinking by asking questions, and provides written feedback to the short reports students submit at each stage. Finally, the instructor assesses the students' formal business report and presentation, taking into consideration the feedback provided by the external participants.

## Stages in Implementing PBL

The PBL method is implemented in this IBC course in four stages: identifying the problem, acquiring information, analyzing information, and resolving the problem.

### Stage 1: Identifying the Problem

In the first stage, students identify and describe the problem that they need to solve in collaboration with the SME manager. This problem focuses on an issue that the SME is currently wrestling with in communicating with its foreign business partners. Problems identified generally cover a range of issues relating to the operational activities of the SME. For example, in the two sections of the IBC course, comprising 40 and 47 students, respectively, a total of 22 teams were formed, with each team encountering a different problem-solving situation. Here is a breakdown of the 22 local SMEs that worked with the student teams and the various types of problems these SMEs faced:

- Thirty-eight percent of the SMEs were involved in direct exporting or in establishing their own subsidiaries or manufacturing units abroad and, thus, faced problems with their partners from countries such as Romania, Russia, and Bulgaria concerning misconceptions about working practices and divergent views on costs, pricing, quality standards, and sales.
- Thirty-two percent of the SMEs were working under subcontracting agreements in the textile sector with multiple client firms from Germany, France, the United States, and Britain and faced the challenge of adopting new technologies and practices.
- Twenty percent of the SMEs were exporting through agents and distributors mainly in Germany, Syria, Iran, and Turkmenistan and looked for ways of increasing their bond with these agents and distributors.
- Ten percent of the SMEs were high-tech companies responding to unsolicited orders through the Internet and faced the challenge of building network relationships with businesspeople from different countries to respond quickly to opportunities around the globe.

Exposed to the SME-specific issues and challenges, learners, with the help of the SME managers, use the collected information to identify the intercultural communication problem that their teams would try to solve. Here are some typical intercultural communication problems that the teams identified:

- Does moving to a more advanced stage in the subcontracting relationship with German and U.S. textile and apparel partners necessitate a convergence in values and beliefs (see Appendix A)?
- Are cultural challenges a barrier or a boon in establishing a factory in Romania?
- Can adopting information and communication technologies act as a catalyst for closer cooperation with a German distributor?
- What are the cultural challenges involved in overcoming the problems of being a new small foreign subsidiary in the Ukraine?
- Can a better understanding of cultural differences influence levels of trust and commitment and thereby motivate Iranian agents to place orders more consistently?

After identifying the problem, the student teams organize their ideas and prepare to analyze the problem. According to the principles outlined by Gijsselaers (1996), the team starts the analysis by attempting to understand the broader nature of the problem. To that effect, the team makes a list of points and questions that need explanation. Then team members hold a brainstorming session to find explanations to the points listed and to ascertain if any of them have prior knowledge about the subject. In this session, students are encouraged to make assumptions and then debate them. Those assumptions that all members agree on are then documented and retained for investigation. The instructor directs students' thinking by asking questions such as these: Which parts of the problem require an explanation? What issues are identified and which ones are most important? Will a list of questions on the issues identified be helpful? The instructor also asks open-ended questions to encourage discussion and reactivate previous knowledge, as well as questions to help them develop assumptions. At the end of the session, the team leader submits to the instructor a summary of the discussion and the list of points and assumptions that the team made. The instructor asks the team leader further questions, if necessary, to ensure that the points raised are within the scope of the intercultural communication problem.

At the next meeting, the team leader then reviews and discusses these points with the other team members and they prepare a revised and final list. This list helps them determine what needs to be investigated. Once the final list is completed, the team discusses and identifies key issues of the problem and organizes, classifies, and groups the different explanations. The team leader ensures that the list is clear about what is known, what is vague, and what needs to be investigated. The team members agree on the learning objectives for each issue that needs investigating, taking into account the learning outcomes of the course. After the members agree on the tasks that need to be performed to carry out the investigation, the team

leader allocates a task to each member. Finally, the members discuss the resources available and the time allotted for completing the tasks. The instructor interacts with the team members to help them define the scope of the problem-solving situation, asking questions such as these to guide them: What are the most important aspects you need to investigate? What crucial point should be understood? Is it a controversial issue? What resources are you thinking of using? The instructor ensures that each student has been assigned a task that will involve the student in independent study. At the end of the session, the team leader submits a short report summarizing the discussion, including a chart that shows what is known, what is vague, and what needs to be investigated. The instructor checks the team's objectives and tasks to make sure that they are relevant to the intercultural communication problem, asking the team leader questions aimed at redirecting the team when necessary.

At the following meeting, the team leaders of the groups that have completed this stage successfully give a minipresentation to the class and exchange ideas.

## **Stage 2: Acquiring Information**

In the second stage, students engage in individual study to acquire both practical and objective information that is embedded in the intercultural communication problem. Students focus on the task they have been assigned. For example, one student may have been asked to compare the communication practices of the SME (the who, what, where, when, and how) with those of the foreign partner whereas another student may have been asked to inquire about the intercultural business relationship (type, length, stage, level of trust and commitment) and the partners' respective business goals. Acquiring information about the national and organizational cultures may be the responsibility of yet another student whereas ascertaining the social distance between partners would be the responsibility of another student.

Whatever task the student is assigned, each student seeks to acquire practical knowledge (knowledge gained from observation and involvement) related to the assigned task. Each student also seeks to obtain the objective knowledge (theory and concepts) necessary to understand the underlying principles that explain the assigned task. The students decide for themselves how to manage their own task requirements. To obtain practical knowledge, the students prepare their own questions, arrange meetings with the SME manager, and spend time on-site to observe practices relevant to the task. To obtain the necessary objective knowledge embedded in the problem-solving

situation, they carry out research by consulting the list of references that the instructor gave them at the start of the course. After reminding students about this list, the instructor provides information on additional sources that they can use, such as journal and newspaper articles and books. The SME manager interacts with the individual students, providing answers to their questions and helping them to acquire practical knowledge. Occasionally, students, depending on their task, can assist during discussions between SME managers and their foreign partners and observe live communication behavior.

Students individually submit a short report to the instructor summarizing their findings. The instructor checks these reports to see if students have acquired sufficient objective and practical knowledge and whether they have adequately used the resources. Through questioning, the instructor directs students to reassess their initial assumptions and understanding by using their recently acquired information.

### **Stage 3: Analyzing Information**

During the third stage, team members share the information they have gathered for analysis. In doing so, the students evaluate the resources and reassess the intercultural communication problem as they try to solve it by applying and synthesizing their new knowledge.

In the classroom, students share the information they have collected individually, relating objective knowledge (Beamer & Varner, 2001; Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars & Humpden-Turner, 1998) to practical knowledge. Team discussions center on synthesizing this knowledge to solve the communication problem. For example, team members compare the interacting partners' national and organizational cultures to assess their degree of cultural compatibility. The instructor verifies that each student has attained the course objectives thus far and describes short example cases that demonstrate how objective knowledge can be used to analyze different intercultural communication problems. In addition, the instructor provides guidelines for writing the report.

### **Stage 4: Solving the Problem**

In the fourth stage, students attempt to solve the problem and then submit the results. After analyzing the information, students generate possible solutions to the intercultural communication problem, evaluate these possible solutions, and agree on the most pertinent solution. Then they prepare a list

of recommendations related to this proposed solution. The team members collaborate on writing a formal report with clear recommendations, which they submit to the SME manager and the instructor two weeks prior to their presentation. In this way, the SME management team has the opportunity to see the tangible results from the students' work.

Two weeks later, members of the SME management team are invited by the student team to a presentation held in the classroom. In this presentation, students demonstrate how a communication task can be carried out in a culturally sensitive manner. The task most teams decide on is to design a Web site for online communication between the SME and its partners and customers. In designing a Web site that is culturally appropriate, students use their acquired knowledge of cultural differences and of the level of cultural compatibility between the SME and its partners. As a result of this knowledge, students are more sensitive in selecting their choice of content, information layout, images, and colors for the Web site. In their presentation to the SME management team, students explain their choices and indicate how these meet the foreign partners' expectations and preferences.

Finally, students discuss and reflect on what they have learned from their close collaboration with the SME manager concerning communication within intercultural relationships. The course concludes with a final assessment based on a different problem in a different setting that requires students to transfer the concepts and knowledge that they have learned to a new situation so that they can use the competencies that they acquired in the course.

## **Evaluation of the Course**

Despite students' apprehension about using the PBL approach at the end of the course, most of them acknowledged the benefits they had derived from it. They felt that they would be able to retain and apply what they had learned and thus felt more confident in their ability to solve intercultural communication problems in a business context. To gain further insight into students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the PBL approach, I prepared a questionnaire to obtain their feedback (see Appendix B). In the following subsections, I discuss the findings from that questionnaire as well as the external participants' perceptions and my perceptions as the instructor of the course.

### **Students' Perceptions**

The questionnaire asked students to respond to different types of questions: Likert scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended. Of the 87 responses obtained



from the students in both sections of the course, only 53 were valid (i.e., 34 were unusable), yielding a valid response rate of 61%.

The questionnaire included a total of 13 questions: 5 questions focused on students' IBC knowledge (questions 1-5 in Appendix B), 2 questions concerned their interactions with the SME (questions 6-7), and 6 questions centered on the effectiveness of PBL (questions 8-13).

Questions on IBC ("yes" or "no" and open-ended) sought to identify whether students had any prior knowledge of the subject, whether they considered skills in this area to be important in their professional career, and what they understood about communicating effectively in intercultural environments. In response to the question about whether they considered IBC skills to be important to their careers, 81% of the students considered IBC skills to be important (question 1 in Appendix B). Most of the students left the open-ended question about communicating effectively in intercultural environments unanswered (question 5), but of those that commented on this question, 26% agreed on "being aware of cultural differences."

Questions about students' interactions with the SME asked students to rate the reaction of the SME manager to their project (question 6 in Appendix B) and to state whether the SME accepted, rejected, or implemented their recommendations (question 7). Responses to the first of these questions indicated that 42% of the students felt that the reaction of the SME manager was favorable, 46% believed that the reaction was neutral, and 12% thought it was unfavorable. Responses to the second of these questions indicated that 68% of the students' recommendations were accepted but not implemented, 12% were rejected, and only 20% were accepted and implemented by the SME.

Six questions sought to rate the effectiveness of PBL in terms of increasing students' learning and interest in the subject. Open-ended questions asked students to comment on the contributions of team discussions to learning, the time needed to find information, and their ability to solve problems related to IBC as a result of learning. The results showed that 88% of the students rated the method as effective whereas 12% disagreed (question 9 in Appendix B). A further investigation as to why 12% of the students rated the approach ineffective indicated that they spent too much time finding information (question 11). Only 66% of the students felt motivated by the approach (question 10), yet 80% expressed confidence in solving IBC problems as a result of the course (question 13). Time spent on research and difficulties with group work were the problem areas for students (questions 11-12).

## External Participants' Perceptions

I asked the 22 external participants from the different SMEs to evaluate the students' reports and presentations. The reports focused on four aspects:

- the communication environment of the company
- the type of intercultural relationship and associated risks
- the impact of cultural differences on communication
- the appropriateness of the proposed intercultural communication strategy

According to their evaluations, the SME representatives found that the impact of cultural differences aspect of the reports was the most useful, with 68% of the representatives judging this aspect as very relevant. But only 30% of them agreed with the communication strategy proposed by the student team in the report.

The SME representatives evaluated the presentations on their effectiveness in reaching the intended target audience and the appropriateness of their Web designs. All 22 managers considered the cultural Web site designs very relevant, which was not surprising because most of these SMEs did not even have a Web site. For these SMEs, the students' Web sites serve as prototypes for further improvement and eventual publication on the Web.

## Instructor's Perceptions

Even though the students' responses show that the method is effective in learning and developing the required skills, some teams experienced difficulties that prevented them from benefiting fully from this approach. Two areas of concern were the frustration felt by these teams in directing their self-learning and the internal conflicts team members had to solve. Uncertain about how to engage in research, students sought structured guidance. Although I gave them some direction by specifying the course objectives and providing reading material, it was clearly not enough to orient them. Because, for these students, learning means receiving and taking in the knowledge that is imparted by the instructor without questioning the authenticity or reliability of that knowledge (Beamer & Varner, 2001), they lacked initiative and were reluctant to carry out research or even to meet with the external participants. Consequently, my challenge, as instructor, was to reduce their frustration by addressing both their cultural perception of learning and their uneasiness with the PBL approach.

To avoid conflicts within groups, appointing a good team leader who possesses problem-solving skills and interpersonal competence appears to be

very important. Overall, the teamwork was harmonious, indicating that the team leaders I had chosen were appropriate. But some students were dissatisfied with their fellow team members because their respective responsibilities were not clearly defined, which suggests that more time is needed for effective team building.

These concerns aside, the benefits students seemed to gain from this experience outweigh the difficulties they experienced. Students reported that they could understand and retain IBC concepts better because they researched and had direct contact with these businesses. Students also stressed that the on-the-job training element in the course motivated them to conduct more research about the subject. Additionally, the opportunity to produce tangible results motivated them to show their abilities to potential employers. One student summed up the PBL experience as follows:

Investigating different SMEs doing business with different companies in different countries offers the rare opportunity to the whole class to learn about other situations and different cultural challenges. Implementing another method would make the course boring, uninteresting, and hard to follow.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions**

The PBL approach used in this IBC course integrates learning with practice in real organizations (internationalizing SMEs). Educators wishing to use this approach face a number of challenges such as the following:

- designing the course carefully based on clearly defined learning outcomes
- establishing contact and close cooperation with representatives from external organizations in selecting appropriate problems
- focusing the course on ill-structured problems in these organizations
- ensuring that the activities and tasks engage learners in independent study that will lead to their understanding of course concepts

Inevitably, concerns abound throughout the implementation of the approach. For example, are the relevant concepts emerging? Are the students on a path to a problem solution that is viable? Is the problem challenging enough? Is the practical knowledge acquired from the external organization appropriately linked to the problem? Finding answers to these questions will help educators committed to using PBL to further improve the approach.

More effort is needed to identify and formulate appropriate and challenging problems to focus on in IBC courses. In this particular IBC course, problems

were limited to those in intercultural business relationships in internationalizing SMEs. Problem areas can be extended to include marketing relationships or intercultural business relationships in large companies. Armed with a good problem, educators can expect learners to benefit from the PBL approach by acquiring specific subject knowledge and by developing specific skills that are highly valued by employers, such as teamwork, report writing, and communication skills.

## Appendix A

### Example of an Ill-Structured Problem

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*The problem: Does moving to a more advanced stage in the subcontracting relationship with German and U.S. textile and apparel partners necessitate a convergence in values and beliefs?*

A large number of Turkish SME subcontractors and suppliers are involved in textile and apparel manufacturing, consumer electronics, and production of automotive parts and components, working with large enterprise partners, such as the Gap, YSL, and Peugeot.

Initial subcontracting relationships formed by these SMEs were founded on cost advantage. But changes in the business environment resulting from intensified competition from more players, technological breakthroughs, and greater sophistication of consumer demand are altering these relationships. Nowadays, more importance is given to nonprice attributes of competitiveness such as design and quality, reliability, and delivery scheduling that require the transfer of more advanced knowledge and technology together with very close interactive feedback (online and in real time) from the SME partners.

This is the situation the SME is currently experiencing. But in this context, do the partners' forward-looking attitudes to upgrading and business vision match? Can the absorption of new innovation and practices be expected as a matter of course? Would the creation of a base for common understanding of values and motivations contribute better to the relationship success?

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire

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*To assess the effectiveness of teaching methodologies in Intercultural Business Communication (IBC), your responses are valued. Please tick the appropriate boxes or write in the spaces provided.*

1. Do you consider IBC skills important in your professional career?

Yes

No

2. What according to you are the IBC skills a person should have?
3. Did you have any prior knowledge of IBC before this course?  
 Yes                       No
4. Which of the following contributed most to building more information about IBC? (Tick only one)
 

Direct contact with SME representatives	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understanding of the type of relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>
Web site design	<input type="checkbox"/>
All of the above	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. What do you understand about communicating effectively in an IBC environment?
6. Please mark an X on the scale to indicate the reaction of the SME representative to your project.  
 Favorable                       Neutral                       Unfavorable
7. Were your recommendations to the SME (Tick only one)
 

Rejected	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accepted Not Implemented	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accepted and Implemented	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Rank the following in order of importance for determining IBC strategies (1 = *most important*, 5 = *least important*)
 

Cultural differences	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business goals	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication goals	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>
Economic development	<input type="checkbox"/>
Legislation	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Rate the effectiveness of the method used to learn about IBC (problem, direct contact with organizations, teamwork; 1 = *least effective*, 5 = *most effective*)  
 1                       2                       3                       4                       5
10. Did the method of learning used increase your interest in the subject?  
 Yes                       No
11. How much time did you spend on finding information?
12. How do team discussions help you in learning?
13. Do you feel confident enough in solving problems related to communications as a result of the course?  
 Yes                       No

If No, explain why

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