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>

Reinventing Ourselves: Collaborative Research Initiatives Between Singapore & US Business Schools

To show how coordinated activities involving shared assessment instruments and results between two business schools, one in Singapore, the other in the US/Midwest, have helped faculty shift their research and teaching from a focus on language to an emphasis on communicative competence in English for the global workplace.

by

Michael Connor

NANYANG BUSINESS SCHOOL, SINGAPORE

Priscilla S. Rogers

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Irene F. H. Wong

NANYANG BUSINESS SCHOOL, SINGAPORE

LEADING IN THOUGHT AND ACTION

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Michael Connor

Nanyang Business School, Singapore

Priscilla S. Rogers,

University of Michigan Business School, Ann Arbor

Irene F.H.Wong,

Nanyang Business School, Singapore

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Michael Connor, Nanyang Business School, Singapore
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Irene F.H.Wong, Nanyang Business School, Singapore

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Introduction

Lingua Franca was a pidgin, a simple and specialized language used by numerous language communities around the Mediterranean, between the 13th and 19th centuries, for the purpose of doing business. It evolved as a medium for business communication, subordinating its speakers' respective languages to the requirements of trade and commerce (Corré, 2003). Now, of course, we can use the name of this dead language to historicize various imperial, commercial, or cultural ascendancies and declines, recognizing how and why Greek, Latin, Yiddish or German were once *linguae francae.* The term is not an absolute one; we can acknowledge different modern *linguae francae* in, say, Russian or Swahili.

If the original *lingua franca* emerged as a result of the gradual, contingent merging and negotiation of various interested parties to expedite business, contemporary business communication needs to meet a very different agenda. It must accommodate rapid developments in international politics and business, increasingly complex communications networks (built by increased flows of people, goods and capital), all enabled by and in turn demanding sophisticated communications technologies. The pidgin used by Mediterranean traders had no grammars, lexicons or style guides, but to ply today's trade routes effectively, business people might well feel the need for some specialist back-up on the communication front.

The emergence of English as the latest *global* lingua franca has accompanied globalization itself, and whilst linguistic studies find rich questions here, the political, economic, cultural, social, and technological implications are much broader. Where once in Asia, Europe, and other multi-language locales, the academic study of such topics as International Business English and business communication may have tended to focus on language learning, increasingly communication is the primary issue. More than ever before, the micro-dynamics of language have to be understood within broader problematics of context and application. Always pragmatic, with strong rhetorical emphases, such academic study is now faced with extra challenges in keeping itself relevant and rigorous. Business communication needs re-invention to interrogate these new contexts and applications, through research findings and teaching innovation.

Disciplinary and Institutional Challenges

Before globalism captivated so much of our attention, as it must today, and before technology became commonplace enough to enable this, business communication research was uniquely challenging. More than many other academic disciplines, business communication is an interdisciplinary field, a state that its research is expected to reflect (Locker, 1994; Forman, 1003; Rentz, 1003). At the same time, as a field, business communication has a history of unevenness. Institutional support was and remains unstable, for example. Research may be encouraged under one academic administration but not another; PhD programs are not commonplace, although some are emerging in Europe; and business communication programs are not always housed in the same type of school, disciplinary unit, or department, hindering the development of theoretical common ground, journals, scholarly networks, and external impact. Is it any surprise that business communication has been regarded by some as a skill-based subject rather than a field requiring research (Daniel, 1983)? No wonder Hagge (1986) called business communication an orphaned discipline.

As might be expected, business communication has been defined and redefined by many researchers for a good number of years (e.g., Argenti, 1996; Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999; Charles, 1998; Graham & Thralls, 1998; Locker, 1979, 1998; Munter, 1983; Reinsch & Lewis, 1993; Limaye, 1993; McLaren, 1998; Reinsch, 1996; Rogers, 1996, 1999, 2001; Shelby, 1993; Smeltzer, 193, 1996; Sutcliffe, 1998; Tan, 1998; Trosborg, 1999, Yli-Jokipii, 1998). Such self-reflexive scrutiny is consistent with disciplinary invention and reinvention. Now, with the emergence of English as the latest global lingua franca, and increasingly complex technology and communication networks, reinvention, rather than an option, appears to be a necessity if business communication is to remain relevant. At the same time, resources that are taken for granted by academics in more traditional disciplines remain unavailable for many business communication researchers and teachers around the world. So how can we expect to meet these old and new challenges?

Meeting Research Challenges: Collaboration of Singapore and US Faculty

This research note describes a three-year and continuing collaboration between faculty at two schools in very different locales, Nanyang Business School (NBS**)** at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore, and the University of Michigan Business School (UMBS) in the United States. Anxious for relevance but overtaxed with institutional obligations and limited resources, the idea of joining forces emerged via discussions at Association for Business Communication conferences, with some early collaboration (e.g. Tan, 1998; Rogers, 1998) demonstrating the benefits of exploiting differences and pooling resources. Learning about differing contexts and problems, sharing assessment instruments, coordinating data collection, and conducting joint research have greatly enlarged faculty global perspectives, affecting all in different and positive ways. Looking back on what has seemed at times like a potpourri of activities (it has been less systematic and more evolutionary at times than some may have liked), NBS and UMBS faculty are beginning to enjoy some research outcomes, related teaching innovations, and to experience changes in individual perspectives on international business communication and its contemporary lingua franca.

UMBS and NBS business communication faculty came to this collaboration with some shared academic challenges but from quite different vantage points. In the US, business communication has emerged within the Anglo-American academic context, using English as a native language. Whilst the Singaporean academic context is modeled on the Anglo-American one, and English is the language of instruction (the lingua franca connection between the two locales), the native-language context is much more complex, with four official languages and a unique colloquial English, "Singlish."

Convening a Research Think Tank for Foundational Work

Our collaborative research officially began in September 2000, during the sabbatical visit of one of us at NBS and, related to this, the formation of a Research Think Tank consisting of NBS and UMBS faculty. The purpose of the Think Tank was to conduct background research and discussions on issues related to measuring communication effectiveness. Meeting regularly, both virtually and sometimes face-to-face in Singapore and in the United States, Think Tank members investigated assessment instruments used for business school admissions and placement in Asia and the US, studied performance assessments used by the Consortium of European Management Schools (CEMS) in Europe and a handful of US business communication programs, and became familiar with literature on assessment relevant to communication for business education.

Work via the Research Think Tank became the foundation for joint performance assessments with our respective student populations, each school employing the same piloted case prompts, rigorous protocols for blind, holistic scoring, and analytical tools (Rogers & Rymer, 2001) to provide feedback to students and administrators. Analyses of these data generated a number of research questions, including the following:

- Why did the UMBS evaluation team award higher scores on "task fulfilment" than the Nanyang team when assessing Singaporean student responses?
- If, as assessment results indicate, Singaporean students demonstrate greater skill expressing deference than their US counterparts, yet are less successful communicating the assigned task, an area where US students excel, then what tools might be developed to better prepare both populations for the global workplace?
- Why are NBS and UMBS holistic evaluations so similar, despite contrasting locales; what fundamentals do business communication faculty share, despite cultural differences?

Some of the procedures and outcomes addressing such questions are described below.

Focusing on Assessment from a Communicative Perspective

Conceptually, one of the best decisions early on was to focus the collaborative activities on performance assessment. How better to examine core issues from quite different cultural, political, and institutional perspectives than to examine the criteria and methods used to determine business communication effectiveness? Working together on assessment prompts and evaluation criteria reinforced the belief that there is an inherent connection between how we evaluate and how we approach business communication, including the nature of significant research questions (e.g., communication effectiveness versus language correctness) and acceptable methodologies (e.g., blind readings with

multiple evaluators versus the analysis of a single expert researcher). Collaborating on the assessment of written responses to workplace scenarios, forced examination of evaluative inclinations—were criteria related to the *communicative* complexities foremost; how might decontextualized language skills be coloring the evaluations?

Procedurally, it helped that UMBS faculty had already researched and developed an assessment program in business communication, while NBS was becoming aware of an increasing demand for assessment procedures related to communication, both in its business constituency in the Asian region, and in terms of the development of its own business-education curricula.

Actually, as one of the major university-level professional schools in Singapore, NBS participates in a highly regarded national assessment program, the Qualifying English Test (QET). This assessment has focused on competency in English language rather than communicative performance, however, and there was some eagerness on the part of NBS faculty to shift to performance assessment. Rather than evaluating language itself, as a function of its user, and rather than applying absolute standards for measuring things like errors, coherence, and reasoning, it was seen as desirable to become more concerned with an awareness of social context, particularly that of the workplace. In contrast to the QET and assessments using essays with no particular context (such as the Graduate Management Admissions Test Analytical Writing Assessment), case-based performance assessments, like those used at UMBS, ask test-takers to respond to situations they are likely to face in the workplace, such as critiquing power point slides at the request of a superior, or pointing out flaws in an analysis.

NBS and UMBS faculty conducted the first joint case-based assessment in January 2001. This assessment yielded a corpus of 636 responses from NBS and 329 from UMBS. At the end of the semester, NBS students participating in the "pre-test" also took a "post-test" involving a similar case-based prompt, much like the post-test used at the sister institution. From then to now, NBS and UMBS continue to share assessment prompts, procedures, responses, and empirical data in the form of holistic and analytical scores and an informal agreement invites faculty at either site to use these data.

Producing a Steady Stream of Research

NBS/UMBS assessment activities and follow-up efforts by various faculty subgroups have prompted a steady stream of research outputs. This research has drawn on the quantitative and qualitative data evolving from the assessment procedures. Scoring data yielded quantitative comparative information about specific communicative processes (e.g., orientation to task, structuring communication for coherence) and enabled systematic sample selection for several studies. Meanwhile, analyses of the written responses themselves provided qualitative results—e.g., identifying themes related to cultural issues, such as the possible influence of local national perspectives on faculty evaluations, including preferences for deference or assertiveness markers.

It should also be noted, however, that research projects have evolved quite slowly and deliberately, in part because collegial feedback has been solicited via presentations at the research sites and Association for Business Communication (ABC) conferences in the US, Europe, and the Pacific Rim, by publishing working papers and ABC Proceedings, and by testing some of the research results in undergraduate, MBA, and Executive

Education teaching. Feedback has proved invaluable in revising research, moving it closer and closer toward journal submission. Just this October the first collaborative journal publication emerged, a study titled the "Re-conceptualizing politeness to accommodate dynamic tensions in subordinate–superior reporting" in the *Journal of Business & Technical Communication* (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003).

Below, a sampling of other research projects suggests the range of projects underway and the channels employed to move them from draft to journal submission:

> 1. "The assessment craze in Singapore: What is the relevance for business communication training?" a panel at the 3rd ABC European conference in May 2001 with two European colleagues, Wolfgang Obenaus and Anna Kankaanranta joining two of us and Jane Thomas from UMBS.

> 2. "Measuring tone: Asian and U.S. writers' approaches for critiquing a superior's work," presented at the 66th ABC conference in November 2001 by two of us, Jane Thomas from UMBS, and Mian Lian Ho from NBS.

> 3. "Evaluation across cultures: National perspectives explain differences between Singaporean and US evaluators," a study by one of us and Colin Clark, an instructor and Ph.D. candidate at NBS, which is published in the October 2003 *ABC Conference Proceedings*.

> 4. "Organizational voice: Explicit factors enabling assimilation and participation," a study proposing a theoretical construct intended to complement genre theory, by one of us but influenced by the NBS/UMBS collaboration and responses at conferences with feedback on its iteration as University of Michigan Business School Working Paper #03-001(http://eres.bus.umich.edu/web/wpchoose.html) informing the revision for journal submission in progress.

> 5. "A communication framework for subordinate reporting: Facilitating organizational assimilation and participation," follow-up work resulting from the November 2001 ABC presentation which was revised, published as a University of Michigan Business School Working Paper, revised yet again, and which is now under journal review.

Developing a Research Stream: Digging Deeper and Using Complementary Data

As the above sampling may suggest, collaborating on a area like assessment, which comprises a core concern in our field, namely effectiveness in business communication, can invite not just one research project, but many. It provides a corpus of responses to workplace scenarios that can complement other data sets for more layered and complex analyses; it leads researchers to dig deeper, with one project generating yet another in an effort to find answers to the surprising questions that emerge when diverse faculty evaluate together.

Digging Deeper

An example of digging deeper is a study titled "Communicating deference and contribution: How successful are Singaporean and US soon-to-be new hires?" which is slated for presentation at ABC's Asia Pacific Region conference in Auckland, December 2003. It builds on earlier research, which revealed that upper-level undergraduates at NBS and UMBS lacked sophistication reporting the completed task (contribution) and expressing deference in their written responses to superiors. Singaporean students were more adept at expressing deference but had difficulty contributing by providing the information requested, particularly when that information was potentially face-threatening to the receiver. The reverse was true for the UMBS students. Following-up on this finding, the current project seeks to understand these differences and involves close linguistic and rhetorical analyses of an outlier sample (responses receiving the highest and lowest analytical scores on deference and contribution).

Using Complementary Data

It has also been valuable to couple samples from the growing assessment corpus with other data. For example, research examining politeness, recently published in JBTC (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003), analyzed a series of samples drawn from the assessment responses of the inexperienced undergraduates assessed at research site schools. But this study also involved analyzing a corpus of all the e-mail between MBAs (quite experienced in the workplace) and their faculty supervisors over the course of their seven-week in-company projects. Analyses of these two populations, who were also writing in two quite different environments (one responding to scenarios in a controlled environment, the other reporting via email for over a two month period) revealed dynamic tensions that may occur as subordinates try to maintain a sufficient degree of politeness while reporting to superiors.

Changing Teaching

Collaboration on performance assessment has also changed teaching. At NBS, pre- and post-assessments are now a regular component of the undergraduate course, Business & Managerial Communication. This move was encouraged by NBS administrators hoping to document and measure student progress over the 13-week semester, the emphasis on measurable outcomes being one cornerstone of many business schools. Comparing students' pre- and post-course writing performance has managed to keep faculty "on their toes," sometimes raising questions about why improvement is not greater and what might be done to change this.

NBS faculty have also revised their curriculum, with a greater and more meaningful focus on assessment, not just of student progress, but also as a skill that students acquire as part of their lifelong learning process, much like at UMBS. After students' assessment responses are scored by faculty, these responses are returned to the students who wrote them. Students are then introduced to the four analytical tools—task, coherence, reasoning units, and error interference (Rogers & Rymer, 2001). The tools help students de-construct the written responses and provide them a vocabulary with which to analyze and critique. Referring to these tools continuously throughout the course, students learn to evaluate their own and each other's writing effectiveness based on the success of the communicative interaction between reader and writer. Students are also taught how to use such tools in wider applications, as part of a repertoire of analytical and critical skills required in business situations.

At UMBS, this collaboration has encouraged a reinvigoration of the undergraduate communication assessment program, which years ago tackled many of the same ambitious goals as those recently undertaken at NBS. Over time, however, the UMBS program had become a little sleepy. Now UMBS faculty are considering how the undergraduate assessment program might be revitalized, particularly to increase students' cultural and international awareness. The UMBS/NBS collaboration also provided impetus for the addition of a new MBA elective course titled "Communication for the Global Manager" (See "Courses" at http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/programs/bmc).

Finally, both schools have benefited from developing case prompts. Until recently, the case scenarios used as prompts for the assessments were supplied by UMBS colleagues and adapted collaboratively to fit the Singapore situation so that students in NBS could more readily identify with the characters and the context. Indeed, growing comfort with case prompts as tools to bring business contexts into the classroom may have contributed to NBS faculty becoming more open to traditional case writing, an activity in which they are actively involved at this time, with at least one case under journal review. On the other hand, UMBS faculty have learned more about issues that are relevant (and irrelevant) to international business communication cases, and have produced one authentic regional case, titled *Intercontinental Resort Bali*, which is available through The Asian Business Case Centre at Nanyang Business School (asiacasecentre@ntu.edu.sg).

Training Other Subject Specialists to Evaluate Communication

Collaborative assessment activities have also increased the visibility of the business communication faculty. Like many business schools around the world, NBS and UMBS are placing greater emphasis on inter-personal, team-building, and critical thinking skills. Assessing communication skills has become extremely important not only in these schools' communication courses but also in other business courses, such as those taught in the Division of Strategy, Management and Organization (SMO), in which the NBS business communication faculty are located, as well as project courses at UMBS for which business communication faculty work hand-in-glove with accounting, marketing, operations, and finance faculty to evaluate the communication deliverables produced by MBAs doing in-company projects.

One example of the impact of business communication assessment initiatives is the faculty training recently requested by the Head of SMO to help NBS faculty in business-subject areas better assess the effectiveness of their students' written assignments. The SMO faculty training sessions were run collaboratively, with faculty from both NBS and UMBS. In these sessions business school faculty were introduced to evaluation methods, criteria, and tools for scoring (e.g., Rogers & Rymer, 2001). Post-training feedback suggested that faculty found the evaluation procedures and tools useful for providing students feedback on their writing in business courses, like strategy and organizational behavior. But, perhaps more significantly, these training sessions provided an opportunity to demonstrate the nature of business communication—the primary purpose being not to catch errors in English, but rather to provide students with frameworks and tools to help them manage their workplace writing and speaking so that they might communicate more effectively.

Another by-product of this training was that faculty teaching business-specific courses (e.g., Human Resources and Consulting and Compensation and Benefits) began to realize that the assignments they set students were not communicative in nature, but "essayist," requiring de-contextualized responses. Faculty instructors tended to rely on objective categories and scoring grids when evaluating, instead of functioning as readers seeking to understand writer intent in a dynamic communicative text. Through training, faculty began to see the value of creating "real tasks" for their students, making the intended reader explicit so that students could base their writing decisions on who the writing was for, be it the professor or characters in a case.

Becoming More Interdisciplinary

Finally, just as NBS and UMBS faculty in business-specific subjects have been realizing the communicative dimensions to their fields as a result of assessment training and evaluations in project work, communication faculty have been made increasingly aware of the need to become more conversant with these other fields, particularly given the long-declared interdisciplinary nature of business communication. Admittedly, interdisciplinary work is conducted at the margins of institutional infrastructures, and support for research to develop it is difficult to sheet home to specific disciplinary/departmental loci. Still, it must be pursued. Interdisciplinary perspectives garnered through interactions with other faculty about evaluation have more clearly indicated the specifically communication-related dimensions to their fields, suggesting possibilities for future research. Indeed, this discourse has been a kind of lingua franca, given our very different origins.

Conclusion: Opportunities and Challenges

Observing the cultural and institutional differences in the course of the collaboration described here, NBS and UMBS faculty now have a keener sense of emerging global business communication imperatives. NBS has benefited from UMBS experience with assessment instruments, and the latter has learnt from the former more about the sharp end of training contexts where people are adapting to English as, indeed, a lingua franca. More than linguistic, the issues in these contexts are more broadly cultural.

For NBS, the shift from testing language skills to testing communicative performance in context remains critical. The Singapore situation, with its emphasis on Standard English as vital to the nation's economic agenda, has always tended to place expectations on the business communication curriculum that its primary role is to produce proficiency in English. Indeed, this is an extra challenge faced at NBS; many of its students *do* need to improve their English language skills. The faculty has thus been striving to meet this demand, as well as to fulfill its professional brief (as faculty attached to the business communication discipline, within a business school), which is to research and teach the complexities and intricacies of communication in business contexts as is also the case at UMBS.

Research fields are expanding. At NBS and UMBS, as faculty (not just business communication faculty) become more involved in assessing the wider range of soft skills associated with communication, it is evident that more research is necessary to isolate measurable factors to be assessed, and it is clear that these are indeed very much

communication-related in the broadest sense. For example, what exactly needs to be observed to measure the productivity, or otherwise, of interactions between the various agents meeting to negotiate complex compensation and benefits issues in a firm? In "Compensation and Benefits", an "assessment center" task, or case, is set up to explore just these issues. As a result of the increased scope, NBS business communication faculty now have on communications issues in the broader sense (enabled by the collaborations elaborated here), their input in the design of such assessment processes is increasingly valued in these more business-specific topics.

An exemplary challenge has emerged from joint attempts to reinvent a pedagogical focus on assessment, which originated in a language-testing context, into a means of collecting and interpreting empirical data for business communication research. Many business communication faculty have experienced the methodological rigor required to convert teacher evaluations into empirical textual analysis as a cost in the economy of teaching rather than a benefit in the economy of research. By maximizing the synergies of research and teaching in the research orientations described here, the intent is to merge these economies more. Collecting empirical student communicative performance data, for example, can facilitate teaching needs analyses and serve a means to measure teaching effectiveness. Similarly, by collecting objective evidence of teaching effects, business communication faculty are essaying the materials and dynamics, the grammars and styles, of the future business *lingua franca*. From looking at the minutiae of language use, faculty are shifting to see the big picture of global communication.

Finally, the collaboration described here may serve as an instructive model of how the different pressures faced by researchers and teachers from very different institutional and cultural settings, and their responses to them, can produce fruitful options for moving forward into a shared environment, as the world of globalized business communications is surely becoming. From assessing writing ability in English as written in US universities, to designing assessment centers for evaluating the effectiveness of multi-cultural teams in international business negotiations, the NBS/UMBS collaboration has generated a common thinking on research and pedagogical issues, and a business communication lingua franca in which the English language, whilst important, is not actually the main issue.

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