

SOCIOCULTURAL ISSUES IN ESP WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Modern interdisciplinary approaches to communication have highlighted that this area stretches beyond the mastery and proficient use of vocabulary items or the separate study of culture. In contemporary settings, successful and persuasive communication also requires the speakers' and the recipients' ability to handle various cultural challenges, spawned by cultural diversity. The first part of this paper tackles several definitions of culture and discusses the interconnections between language and culture; it also presents some significant implications entailed by a sociocultural approach to effective communication in ESP - English for Specific Purposes contexts. The second part of this study analyses two instances of ESP written communication, in order to highlight the sociocultural elements that permeate the respective professional messages and stress the necessity to pay due attention to the factors that can contribute to the improvement of communication in professional contexts.

Keywords

Communication, professional contexts, ESP – English for Specific Purposes, written communication, sociocultural approach

1. Introduction

The literature focused on ESP teaching, learning and implementation in authentic contexts has undergone constant transformations over the last decades. An interesting development in this regard is represented by the researchers' and practitioners' interest in the interconnections between the specialized content of ESP texts and their somewhat hidden sociocultural elements. The present paper also aims to explore these relationships and underline the key role played by sociocultural factors in successful ESP communication.

For the purpose of this article, the presentation of the multifaced nature of the term “culture” (as tackled in the literature) and the discussion of its connection with language were considered necessary. Moreover, the theoretical part also makes a brief foray into the realm of sociocultural approaches to reveal some of the factors that can influence the efficiency of communication in ESP settings. The case study examines two emails – examples of ESP written communication – to illustrate how sociocultural elements shape the messages, and to highlight the necessity to focus more on strategies that can contribute to the improvement of written communication across various ESP settings.

2. Literature review

Dictionaries generally define culture as “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time”, or “the attitudes, behaviour, opinions, etc. of a particular group of people within society” (*Cambridge Dictionary online*). Similarly, *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries online* define culture as “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group”.

In the context of globalization, however, we can no longer talk about culture in the singular. Modern societies have an accentuated multicultural nature, which the *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries online* define as the presence of “people of several different cultures (beliefs, languages, customs and traditions, etc.)”, and the *Cambridge Dictionary online* describes as encompassing “people who have many different customs and beliefs”, and as “relating to a number of different cultures, esp. to the traditions of people of different religions and races”. Nevertheless, these dictionary definitions offer only a superficial understanding of culture and fail to capture the intricacy and multidimensional nature of this concept.

As far as the literature focused on defining the concept of culture is concerned, scholars have proposed a wide range of interpretations that reflect the concept’s dynamic, multifaced and context-dependent nature. For instance, according to Hall (1976), culture can be properly understood only by its active participants. The scholar explains that, initially, newcomers mainly notice overt behaviours and that, over time, the fundamental beliefs,

values, and thought constellations that trigger those specific behaviour patterns are sequentially revealed.

While Kramsch (1998: 10) conceptualizes culture as “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings”, Samovar *et al.* (1998: 36) attempt to furnish a more encompassing definition, envisaging culture as follows:

“the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.”

This definition highlights that culture has a socially constructed and inherited nature. Since it is transmissible across generations, the aforementioned authors argue that culture is learned and consequently becomes automatic and subconscious. Moreover, this definition places greater emphasis on the intangible heritage of a community (cognitive and normative aspects, behavioural and social structures), with material products mentioned only at the end of the list of elements that constitute culture. It also draws the attention to its collective nature, as it arises from the efforts and experiences of a group over time.

Both Peterson (2004) and Lee (2009) distinguish culture into two broad categories: Big “C” culture and little “c” culture. The former encompasses prominent themes, i.e., architecture, classical music, geography, history, legislative framework, literature, political matters, social standards, fundamental values, and reasoning processes (Peterson, 2004). In contrast, the latter refers to everyday aspects of life, including more ordinary and minor elements such as perspectives, preferences, stance, body language, spatial behaviour, attire, dress styles, food, and hobbies (Peterson, 2004). In his turn, Lee (2009: 78) further elaborates that little “c” culture captures “the invisible and deeper sense of a target culture”, encompassing mindsets or convictions and underlying assumptions.

Among the plethora of theoretical approaches to defining culture, it is worth highlighting the work of Baldwin *et al.* (2006). These authors explore the historical metamorphoses of the meanings assigned to the term “culture”, and compile over 300 definitions of this somewhat elusive and flexible term. They present a comprehensive multidisciplinary framework that spans a wide

range of academic fields, emphasizing that culture cannot be confined to a single domain or perspective, as its vast meanings stretch across a broad myriad of disciplines.

Baldwin et al. (2006) propose several interesting ways of approaching the varied definitions of culture, i.e., the historical trajectory of the term; a content-based analysis structured around seven major themes (“structure, function, process, product, refinement, power/ ideology, and group membership”) along with their subthemes; and a series of conceptual models derived from these themes (Baldwin et al., 2006: xvi). The first group of definitions encompasses structural, functional, and process-based perspectives, which delineate culture as consisting of “structures and processes that serve a variety of functions” (Baldwin et al., 2006: 67). The second group includes definitions that tackle the relationships between culture and power relations, ideology and group identity. The third group contains those definitions that envisage culture in relation to products and refinement.

Shaeda Isani (2025) explains that due to its complex, multifaced nature, the term “culture” is difficult to define. This scholar tackles culture against specialized (ESP) backgrounds, and delineates it as a unique concept that interweaves linguistic conventions, professional standards, and contextual comprehension, which influences communication and patterns of behaviour in a wide array of professional domains. Isani (2025) also explains that it encompasses specialized terminology and elements that are usually typical of a certain genre, but also social and cultural norms, perspectives and expectations that delineate relationships and interactions within the respective society. Her perspectives on specialised ESP culture are grounded in anthropological and ethnographical sources. Furthermore, in her research, she examines the ways in which members of a community carry out tasks, collaborate, communicate and develop within their specialised settings (Isani 2025). Other researchers, such as Barron (1991), also examine the connections between culture and specialized languages in their works. This scholar presents culture as a system for processing and conveying information, highlighting its functional link to ESP and education Barron (1991: 176):

“Culture is an information-processing system which has links with education, and ultimately, therefore, with ESP, because it involves the transfer of information in a factual system, the purpose of which is to produce fit members of society.”

Thus, culture contributes to people' metamorphosis into competent members of the society, as it plays a key role in the dissemination of shared knowledge and practices.

A pivotal conceptual representation of culture belongs to anthropologist Edward Hall (1976), who developed the “iceberg” model, which envisioned culture as an iceberg. From his perspective, just as only a small portion of an iceberg is visible above the water, with the bulk of its mass lying beneath the surface, culture too consists of visible elements (i.e., the conscious portion of culture encompassing behaviours and artefacts) supported by a far larger, underlying structure – which stands for the subconscious portion of culture, which comprises the convictions, principles and thought structures that shape behaviour. This conceptual representation of culture suggests that there is more to culture than meets the eye, as its visible elements are mere manifestations of its invisible ones (Hall, 1976). This iceberg metaphor also pinpoints to the need for careful effort to comprehend the patterns of behaviour and thought of individuals from various cultural settings, since the visible aspects of their culture do not always reveal the underlying foundations of that culture.

Based on Hall’s “iceberg” (1976) and Hofstede’s “onion” (1991) conceptual representations which explain the surface-level and foundational components of culture, Isani (2025) seeks to render the concept of “specialised culture” as more practical by categorizing its traits into observable and non-observable dimensions. In her view, instances of the observable dimensions are represented by “institutional edifices and architecture, dress and behavioural codes, gestural rites and rituals, etc.”. She further provides more specific examples:

“The idiosyncratic way lawyers in Britain live, speak, behave, act and dress are well-documented observable traits specific to the culture of the English law community.”

As far as the non-observable dimensions are concerned, these encompass the following elements:

“institutions, norms, beliefs, values, practices, socio-professional organisation of the community, etc., as well as the knowledge, evolution, ethics, legends, heroes and villains, the darker sides of a professional community and the current issues it faces.” (Isani, 2025)

In addition, technological developments and globalization have triggered increasingly multicultural environments, which made researchers such as Atkinson (1999) and Sercu (2002) to militate for the need to recognize and address diverse, intricate cultural identities when introducing foreign cultures in language education, and when determining how learners are encouraged to reflect on their own stance in relation to the target language. Learners should acquire linguistic-cultural competence through foreign language education in order to meet the challenges involved in negotiating cultural meaning during interactions with people with diverse cultural environments and to develop a deep understanding of their own culture (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). Apart from mastery of the use of English, successful interactions in multicultural settings dominated by market competition also involve the adaptability to cultural needs and particularities, the strategic use of resources, and the implementation of the latest technologies (Nădrag, 2024).

3. A sociocultural approach to written communication

Communication – as a field of study – is inherently marked by interdisciplinarity, which mirrors the complex nature of communication as a process (Nădrag, 2011), and its wide variety of configurations, spanning from spontaneous, unpredictable informal conversations to elaborate speeches and pre-established discussions in formal meetings (Ionițiu, 2022). Professional (and even personal) success requires a steady preoccupation to model confident, competent and engaged individuals who exhibit respect for cultural and social diversity regardless of the environment they are exposed to. In order to enhance linguistic-cultural competences, sociocultural approaches to language learning and teaching should be implemented. These approaches tackle, among other matters, the symbiosis between language, communication, culture, background and identity, and envision language learning as “inherently embedded in and shaped by situated social actions” (Hawkins, 2004: 6).

The sociocultural theory originates in Vygotsky's research (1978), which conceived learning as a social phenomenon entailed by social interactions. According to the literature, learning is more than a cognitive process focused solely on the acquisition of academic content; it also has a social dimension that may be modelled by the interactions between students and teachers, as well as among students. Thus, apart from the language skills and knowledge already acquired at home, the learners' capacity to be emotionally, socially, and motivationally involved is equally important (Hawkins, 2004). In other words, they must demonstrate the capability to adjust to new classroom expectations, implement the social skills required to contribute meaningfully in classroom communication, and display the self-confidence and initiative necessary to work diligently.

Sociocultural research conceives language as a situated phenomenon that is constructed and employed within social and cultural settings. The creation of meaning relies on more than just language; it also involves knowledge of the communicative context and nonverbal communication, which conveys messages about people's social identities, attitudes, intentions, etc. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interactions trigger the learning process, as it also involves the negotiation of novel concepts and language. Thus, in order to boost the learning process, activities and tasks should focus more on social interactions, requiring language use and collaboration.

Moreover, sociocultural scholars explain that newly taught information is always related to previously acquired knowledge. The educational context is inextricably connected to the sociocultural environment and to the learners' knowledge, insight and personal histories – all of which are deeply intertwined with life paths and developmental journeys and are actively drawn upon when participating in interactions (Hawkins, 2004). Therefore, in order to motivate learners, teachers should present content and tasks that make sense to them. Moreover, teachers should be aware that students do not always share the same perspectives and/ or experiences. To bridge these gaps, Gonzalez *et al.* (2005) suggest that teachers should become acquainted with their students' communities, beliefs, and distinct perspectives on the world, and include these elements into their teaching practice as well. Attention should also be paid to the school environment, as its elements can convey diverse messages about learners'

current and potential identity patterns, as well as their sense of belonging to that environment, which can in turn impact their academic success (Hawkins, 2005; Toohey, 2000).

Since “the sociocultural theory places emphasis on the role of social interaction and collaborative performance in learning and cognitive development” (Alqasham, 2022: 2), the researchers in this field recommend the implementation in the teaching process of those activities that furnish learners as many opportunities as possible to communicate and interact in order to express their wishes, intents and necessities.

Learning a second or foreign language is a complex process as it involves, in fact, the exploration of distinct social languages embedded in cultural belief systems and contextual meanings (Hawkins, 2004). Research in the field has demonstrated that understanding the ways in which these elements operate in foreign or second language learning triggers the improvement of speakers’ proficiency and communication skills (Gee, 1998). For this purpose, emphasis should be placed on students’ knowledge and identity patterns in connection within their learning environment. Hawkins (2004: 6) notices the key role played by teachers in this regard, as they model their students’ identities, influence their lives both in formal and informal educational environments, and thus contribute to some extent to significant social metamorphoses. Based on this idea, the scholar recommends teachers to implement inclusive activities that meet their learners’ needs. Another interesting perspective belongs to Hyland (2013: 95), who explains that written communication permeates all aspects of life and is central to the activity carried out in institutions and organizations; such activities include, among many others:

“educating students, keeping records, engaging with customers, selling products, demonstrating learning and disseminating ideas.”

In their turn, Hu1 and Chen (2022) profess that enhanced ESP writing skills provide individuals with opportunities to participate in, and contribute to the development of internationalized professional communities and that they are also able to enrich their research in various professional areas. For instance, written communication skills play a key role in experience exchange and dissemination of research findings through a vast array of documents, from books and academic articles published in specialized journals, to work-

related texts, such as reports, minutes and emails. The aforementioned authors explain that ESP writing should not be tackled only in terms of linguistic accuracy; the choice of an appropriate genre and writing style should also be taken into account, as they are based – among many others – on contexts, targeted readership and sociocultural practices. In this regard, Hyland (2013: 96) notices that “different languages seem to have different ways of organizing ideas and structuring arguments”, and that the socio-cultural context impacts the individuals’ choices in terms of semantics and syntax, and also affects their language comprehension. In line with these observations, Paltridge and Starfield (2013: 96) assert that:

“In recent years, the field of ESP has become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which texts are written and responded to by individuals acting as members of social groups.”

Moreover, when discussing about the connection between culture, society and specialized terminology in ESP, Vişan (2018: 81) states the following:

“It is generally accepted that concepts are not necessarily bound to specific languages, but the cultural and social background of the human beings who generate the concepts and the environments in which they are used affect the way they manifest themselves in any given situation.”

Thus, the aforementioned scholar stresses the idea that concepts – although universal to some extent – depend on cultural and social contexts when it comes to their expression and interpretation. In ESP writing, the emphasis falls upon the development of competences in targeted academic and/ or professional contexts. Thus, the practices of text production and response – implemented by individuals as members of diverse social groups – are very important in ESP, implying that writing varies and that it is employed to achieve specific aims and interact within communities. Hyland (2013: 96) notes that the notion of community has become central to the development of writing skills, being influenced by novel perspectives. Therefore, ESP is no longer regarded in the literature as an isolated cluster of language items, but rather as inherently connected to communication and to the processes whereby texts are produced and employed (Hyland, 2013: 96).

As previously implied, since each professional discipline has its own culture, ESP written communication stretches beyond linguistic accuracy or grammatical correctness, bearing the imprints of the socio-cultural contexts that model it. For example, medical ESP is characterized by objectivity, precision and ethical sensitivity, while business ESP focuses on persuasive clarity, audience orientation and strategic politeness. These contexts influence key aspects such as the organization of ideas, the structure of arguments, the presentation of information, citation practices and the linguistic devices employed to convey politeness and professionalism. Such features can be observed, for instance, in the use of modal verbs to express caution or politeness, as well as in intertextual and citation practices. Thus, writing proficiency in ESP entails knowledge and awareness of the values, norms and rhetorical conventions that characterize the specific discourse community. When these conventions are not appropriately followed in the target language, the resulting text may be perceived as impolite or unprofessional, regardless of its grammatical accuracy.

4. Case study

This section is dedicated to a brief analysis of two short emails extracted from an ESP book, i.e., Catrin Morris's *Flash on English for Tourism*, ESP Series, Eli, 2012. This analysis will focus on the influence of socio-cultural factors, revealed by aspects such as language use, tone, structure, and communicative purpose in the context of English for tourism. It is noteworthy that the first email is dedicated to external written communication (the email is sent by the representative of a tourism department to its partner – probably a representative of the municipal administration), while the second is an instance of internal written communication (the manager of a tourism company addresses the travel agents).

Table 1. Corpus

Email 1 (source: Morris, 2012: 14)	Email 2 (source: Morris, 2012: 47)
“Dear Sir/Madam, As you know our town is twinned with yours and we are currently working on a joint project to promote tourism in both	“Dear Colleagues, As competition increases from DIY online holiday bookings, we are asking all our travel agents to come up with some new

<p>towns. I am writing to you to find out about the local transport services available. I am preparing a leaflet with information for our residents about what local transport to expect on arrival in your town and I would like some help from you.</p> <p>We would like to know what public and private hire transport is available; how much it costs on average; whether it is convenient and reliable for getting around town and visiting tourist attractions and any other relevant information.</p> <p>Please could you write back to me as soon as possible with as much detail as possible?</p> <p>Kind regards</p> <p>John Humphries Tourist information officer”</p>	<p>holiday destinations and activities in each area. We would like you to make a short list of five: one sports based; one staycation idea; one cultural holiday; one recreational holiday; and one other of your choice. Please write a brief paragraph describing each one and email it to me ASAP.</p> <p>Best wishes,</p> <p>Tony Good European Manager Dream Travel”</p>
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Source: Table processed by the author of this study, based on Morris, 2012: 14; 47

The communicative purpose of the first email is to request information about transport services from a representative of the municipal administration in a partner town, which evidences the professional nature of the communication. Thus, the register is formal and polite, in line with the context of inter-institutional correspondence, reflected by elements such as: neutral salutation (“Dear Sir/ Madam”) – which reveals that the sender does not know the recipient’s name; polite request structures and forms (“I am writing to you to find out...”); use of modals to convey a respectful tone that accompanies the respective requests: “I would like some help from you...”, “Please could you write back to me...”); standard closing formula for balancing professionalism with politeness (“Kind regards”). It may be inferred that this tone aligns with English politeness conventions, characterized by indirectness, courtesy and cooperation, which mirrors the socio-cultural expectations set by professional communication.

In terms of discourse and rhetorical structure, the first email reflects a structure typical of professional communication. In the beginning, it creates the context, which focuses on the collaboration relationship between the towns (“our town is twinned with yours”, “a joint project to promote tourism

in both towns”). Then, the sender clarifies the reason for writing, which is then followed by an organized list of specific information requests that are content-focused and conveyed in a polite manner. The email ends with a closing request for timely response (“Please could you write back to me as soon as possible”) and a professional sign-off. This logical structure characterized by clarity and politeness reflects the genre conventions in ESP written communication at institutional level.

Furthermore, socio-cultural elements such as collective and cooperative orientation, politeness strategies, shared understanding of formality and the cultural norms of written professionalism are evident in the first email. These are reflected by the emphasis on collaboration typical of institutional discourse (e.g., the adjective “joint”, the possessive “our”); indirect questioning structures and modality typical of English professional communication (“I would like some help”, “Please could you”), which mitigate imposition and place emphasis on deference; lack of colloquial language. The writing style suggests the existence of a mutual professional framework between municipal officers on similar positions, evidencing intercultural professional register and awareness of institutional hierarchy, characterized by respect, conciseness and cross-cultural readability.

The first email is thus an instance of formal, cooperative and polite ESP written communication that reflects discourse conventions typical of professional English in institutional and intercultural contexts. Not only is writing grammatically correct, but it is also modelled in accordance with the norms of the (professional) socio-cultural context in order to achieve specific communicative goals.

The communicative purpose of the second email – sent by the manager to the travel agents within the company – is to request contributions (i.e., holiday destinations and activities in five areas) so that the tourism company could keep up with market competition. Thus, the email falls into the category of ESP for Business and Tourism, as the communication is focused on coordinating professional tasks and encouraging the employees’ initiative.

Compared to the first email, the register of the second one is semi-formal, typically of intra-organizational communication. This is reflected by elements such as: horizontal politeness and team inclusion, expressed by the

greeting “Dear Colleagues”, the pronoun “we” and the possessive “our”; the direct, time-sensitive style characterizing corporate communication (“we are asking”; “email it to me ASAP”); the balance between formal and informal structures (“DIY online holiday bookings”, “come up with some new holiday destinations”). Since the sender of this message is a manager who addresses his subordinates, the tone – although collaborative – is also infused by authoritative nuances, which is typical of a leader in a team-oriented culture.

As far as the structure of the second email is concerned, the task-oriented discourse pattern can be noticed, which is specific to workplace instructions. First, it delineates the situational contexts, which is characterized by a sense of urgency and rationale: “As competition increases from DIY online holiday bookings...”. Then, the sender provides task details, ensuring clarity (“short list of five”; the enumeration of the five categories; “write a brief paragraph describing each one”). The email ends with a closing directive (“email it to me”), a deadline (“ASAP”) and a closing remark (“Best wishes”). Politeness (“Please”) is interwoven with efficiency and time sensitivity, suggested by the deadline. Therefore, this structure is typical of the business communication genre, being characterized by clarity, call for action and responsibility.

A key element of the professional discourse that can be identified in the second email is the reference to hierarchical but collaborative relationship between the sender and the recipients of the message, suggested by the addressing formula “Dear Colleagues” and the use of the first-person pronoun in the plural form, “we”; this combination softens managerial authority, which is specific to Western corporate norms that focus on inclusivity and teamwork. The message has a direct nature (as it is task-oriented and time-pressured) moderated by politeness (due to the verb “please” and the closing remark “Best wishes”), which reflects the collegial courtesy typical of English business communication environments. Shared professional context and cultural norms of efficiency and initiative are also made evident through the assumed background knowledge (highlighted by the specialized terms “DIY”, “online holiday bookings”, “holiday destinations”) and the expectation for creative input (suggested by the verb “come up with”, and the adjective “new”). These elements reflect several key professional values in corporate tourism, such as innovation, accountability and independence.

Therefore, the second email is characterized by genre awareness, and discourse and sociolinguistic competence, as the sender employs a format that is adequate to professional collaboration and teamwork, and structures the information in a logical and efficient manner. Moreover, the email mirrors the rules of managerial written discourse, which is typically permeated by an authoritative yet cooperative tone. Therefore, this email is a typical instance of organizational ESP communication between a manager and his/ her subordinates. Collaborative hierarchy, teamwork, indirect politeness, goal-oriented pointedness are socio-cultural norms that permeate this text and that are also specific to English cultures. Furthermore, the structure and tone of the email emphasize its alignment with institutional culture and workplace dynamics.

5. Conclusion

The importance of languages for specific purposes in general, and of ESP in particular, in the development of professional practices has been discussed in the literature and made evident in practical settings. The analysis of these two emails demonstrates the connection between language and culture in ESP written communication, as the use of certain structures, tones and words is influenced by specific socio-cultural and professional settings. Efficient communication may be hindered by misinterpretations, conflicting norms between source and target languages and cultures, limited exposure to authentic texts in target (specialized) field, and tensions between the writer's personal identity and the need to conform to the norms of the target discourse. Therefore, successful, competent and persuasive writing requires more than knowledge of appropriate language use; it also demands sociocultural awareness, which contributes to successful, sensitive and authentic communication, in diverse social and professional environments.

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