

A Probe into International Business Etiquette in the Context of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: Etiquette is an ethical and socially acceptable behavior regarding professional practice or action among the members of a profession in their dealings with each other. A global business continues to expand, the critical element of a successful business outcome may be the appreciation and respect for cultural differences. International business etiquette is a habitual form and behavior which are shaped in people's long-term business activities. Good etiquette not only leaves good impression to others, but also makes business communications far more harmonious than expected. This paper sets about probing international business etiquette in the context of intercultural communication, mainly discussing and summarizing the etiquette in business meet, marketing, negotiations, gift giving and receiving as well as customs and taboos concerning etiquette, with the purpose of presenting beneficial implications for business personnel and Business English learners.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; international business etiquette; manifestations; implications

1 Introduction

As a symbol of modern civilization, etiquette is a cultural accumulation and spirit wealth of all the nations in the world. It is the most important representation of human's civilization as a kind of moral criterion, and the reflection of civilization, civilization degree and social fads for a nation, an area and a person. Understanding etiquette is the foundation for business communication.

Business etiquette is a habitual form and behavior. It is shaped in people's long-term business activities. The core of business etiquette is a kind of behavior criterion which is used to constrain our everyday business activities. Good etiquette not only leaves good impression to others, but also makes business communications and transactions far more successful than expected.

2. The Relationship Between Intercultural Communication and International Business Etiquette

2.1 Perceiving Intercultural Communication

Inter-cultural communication (ICC) is an encompassing term. Hu Wenzhong gives a simple definition: "It is a communicating course of different people with different cultural background"^[1]. It not only refers to the communication between individuals of diverse cultural identification but also to the communication between groups of diverse cultural identification^[2]. As the term suggests, ICC occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. More precisely, ICC is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems

are distinct enough to alter the communication event^[3].

Inter-cultural communication occurs when people of different ethnic backgrounds discuss ideas and tasks in a language rather than their native tongue. With the sharp increasing and expansion of global business, productive ICC has become more and more important. Successful ICC is effective, frequent and simple, and also respects the cultural viewpoints of all participants.

2.2 Understanding Business Etiquette

Business etiquette is fundamentally concerned with entering into relationships based upon courtesy and politeness between business personnel, and especially a means of maximising your potentiality by presenting yourself positively^[4].

Etiquette is not only the widely used word, but also one of the understandable words. Business etiquette is a kind of norm which people with different economic behavior in business activities should adhere to^[5]. Whenever two people get together, their behavior has effects each other, and then etiquette will be born at the right moment. Generally, business etiquette is a behavior standard and activity programs when people do business with others in business world, including two aspects—etiquette and ceremony.

2.3 Intercultural Communication and International Business Etiquette

Business etiquette is a habitual form and behavior which are born from people's long-term business communication. Etiquette exists everywhere. International business cannot do without etiquette. When people do

business, success mostly rests on etiquette, especially in intercultural communication. In intercultural business communication, the first impression is very important, which leads to a later communication successful or not. Thus, etiquette plays an important role during the whole communication. To a great extent, intercultural communication depends on etiquette, and etiquette adheres to the behavior in intercultural business communication. Today, more and more multinational companies are founded, thus intercultural business communication becomes an important part in company's routine work. "A company becomes a company you want to do business with because of the people who work in it, so business etiquette has a very definite relationship to the bottom line"^[6].

Good etiquette brings good business. The first step to do business well is to learn etiquette in the context of intercultural communication.

3. The Manifestations of International Business Etiquette in the Context of Intercultural Communication

3.1 Etiquette in Business Meet

With the development of China's economy, international business activities have become frequent. During June 2001, for example, the United States imported over \$11.5 billion from China and Japan alone^[3]. If enterprises want to go out, business activities are indispensable. At this time, one person's etiquette represents the whole image of his enterprise. In order to make intercultural business communications better, etiquette training and education become more and more important. When people do business, the first time they meet will impress each other deeply.

3.1.1 Business Attire and Appearance

A good impression can never be far from appropriate appearance. "Good packing" is the first step to refract etiquette. "If you look feeble-minded and wear untidy clothes, nobody will believe you are the representative of a powerful company, even if you give an extravagant speech"^[7]. Wherever he is, his clothing should always be clean, well dressed and tidy, and preferably be in a style which fits the local culture, in other words, the style which makes his host comfortable.

A businessman will dress properly. If he wears a dark suit, white or blue shirt and a colored tie when he meets other businessmen in an office or a restaurant, he also will pay attention to his shoes. In Argentina, people

evaluate someone's attire starting with the quality of their shoes.

It is appropriate for a lady to wear a tailored skirt and jacket or dress that comes to the knee. Women need to be particularly careful about the use of high shoes and low cut dresses. And the shoes cannot be too high, three centimeter is suitable. In Muslim and the rural areas, such clothing is not encouraged. Wearing such clothes will embarrass the host and often result in a lot of disturbing starting.

Business attire is conservatively dressed in stylish clothing. To the French, dress indicates social status or level of success. Though France is widely considered the fashion source of the world, business dress for women should be simple and elegant, not flashy.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. This old saying can be applied to any country even today. When doing business with an Egyptian, be prepared to do certain things slightly different from what they are used to, but some things will remain the same. Here is some information on doing business with associates in Egypt. While it is not necessary to dress in the Egyptian style, it is necessary to pay attention to Egyptian norms of modesty when choosing business attire, especially for women. Men should wear a jacket and tie. Shorts are not acceptable in public for men or women.

In business activities, the unified standards of men's hair are clean and neat and frequent haircuts. Hair cannot be too long. At the same time, men often contact with irritant food like smoke and wine, so they should pay attention to keeping breath fresh.

Women's hairstyle should be nice and elegant. When attending business event, ladies should wear light makeup instead of heavy makeup or without makeup.

3.1.2 Dining Rules

Though each culture has its own peculiarities when it comes to dining customs, some basic dining etiquette tips are workable in most countries. Abiding by these rules, business people can get better in continuing their business in the following days. Here are some seat etiquette tips: Do not sit down before customers come, because the seat is important. The seat near the door is given to the customer with the lowest status, the opposite seat usually given to the customer who is important. There are some basic dining etiquette tips: Place napkin on the lap only after everyone has been seated, which should be clean and be put one by one at the same distance. Never begin eating until everyone has been served unless being invited to do so by the host. It is common in Europe, Asia and Africa for diners to keep the same flatware throughout a meal. Do not point or gesticulate with your knife while being engaged in conversation at table, which is considered extreme rudeness and lack of

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manners. If you are not sure how to eat something, leave it or watch how others eat and imitate them. When you eat something, do not make a sound. Always taste your food before adding any seasonings, including salt. Your serving staff is responsible for replacing table items that have fallen on the floor. Simply ask for a replacement.

3.1.3 Topic Choices

Taboo topics like age, money, religion and marriage are “forbidden zones” for westerners; some other topics are also unwelcome. For example, if a Chinese says to his American friend, “You look a bit pale. Have you had a good rest?” or “You have a cold. Put on more clothes.” or “Drink more water.” and so on, his friend may feel uncomfortable and even annoyed, because these words sound too protective and parental.

Acceptable topics range from hobbies, sports and jobs to TV programs and holidays outing, which will be quite safe for both easterners and westerners.

If a person meet a stranger in Britain, starting a conversation with the weather will always be appropriate. For example, he or she can say: Lovely day, isn't it? Good weather, isn't it?

3.2 Etiquette in Business Marketing

As economy is being rapidly globalized and integrated, the influences of business etiquette in modern businesses and their marketing become greater and greater. For business personnel, appropriate etiquette not only reflects the quality of people's cultivation and ability, but also reflects the cultural quality of his enterprise in another way. Business personnel participate in business activities, and occasionally solve the problems between two companies, while business etiquette just plays an auxiliary role in it.

3.2.1 Initial Contact

First impressions play such a significant role in people's interaction. Knowing how to behave properly for the first encounter is very important. Here are some fundamental points:

1) Smiling. Always smile and have a friendly disposition. Approaching and looking at the other person with smile, that is, shows respect to the other party.

2) Shaking Hands. If you shake hands, you should neither give a “bone crushing” grip nor make a handshake like a “dead fish”. If the other side is a woman, wait for her to extend her hand first. Maintain eye contact when shaking hands but avoid staring because it may be interpreted as aggressive act.

3) Bowing. Using the traditional bow or other greeting gestures is acceptable if you can do it right. Even with such gestures, a person may shake hands afterwards. Please note that a bow is not a sign of subservience but a sign of respect and greeting.

4) Standing up. If you cannot stand up, you should show your intention to do so, or try your best to stand up. Whether you are a lady or a gentleman, you should follow this rule.

3.2.2 Business Cards

Business cards are an internationally recognized way of offering detailed personal contact information. Business cards are generally exchanged at the beginning or the end of an initial face-to-face contact. People will not like to see business cards in pockets, and business cards should be kept clean and presentable. Sometimes, if the person whom you give your business card to is a senior or superior, you should use both hands to present. It is also bad manners to write on a business card in front of the person who presents the card.

3.2.3 Shaking Hands

“Shaking hands is an expression of trust and respect, and it is a good way to show your greeting in business marketing”^[8]. Shaking hands politely and properly is very important. You should know when to shake hands. It will be embarrassing if you do not know the right time to shake hands. The good time to shake hands will be: When you are introduced to others and when you say goodbye to others; when the visitor come to your office; when you go out to meet your business partners or clients; when you attend the receptions or parties and when you take leave.

Social handshaking is used in business marketing where people meet for the first time or have not seen for a long time. When you are introduced to somebody, either of you may extend the hand first. You should remember not to hold on to the other person's hand or his arm. If the person you are meeting seems to back off, do not force a handshake. If the people you meet do not respond to your offer to a handshake, just withdraw your hand, smile and say “Hello”. For Japanese people, making physical contact always remains an uncomfortable experience, so shake hands only when a Japanese person offers his hand.

Greeting with a handshake for men in Egypt is okay, a man, however, should not extend his hand to an Egyptian woman. Wait for her cue. If she extends her hand, a handshake is appropriate. This is in reverse for American women. Do not extend the hand to an Egyptian man, but shake hands if a man offers his hand.

Be polite but do not be overly friendly upon first meeting French associates. A “fast friends” attitude will be met with suspicion, so a brief handshake is expected upon meeting and parting.

3.3 Etiquette in Business Negotiation

Whether the enterprises win in the international competition or not is determined by the level to international

business negotiations. Business negotiation are the process through which two parties move from their initially divergent positions to a point where the agreement may be reached^[9]. Business negotiations are an important part which constitutes the core competitive ability in the enterprise. In the fierce market competition, if a company wants to win the superior position in international business, besides the competitive products, business negotiation is the key of judging the success of the enterprises' international trade, also the etiquette occupies an important position which cannot be replaced.

3.3.1 Etiquette in Greeting and Send-off

Greeting etiquette and send-off etiquette are important parts of the etiquette in business negotiation. Greeting etiquette creates an opportunity to enter into a good relationship with the other party from the very beginning and the send-off etiquette may pave the way for future cooperation. There are three points for us to know: Firstly, determine the level and size for greeting and send-off; secondly, know well about the arrival and departure time; thirdly, prepare for the reception.

When greeting Frenchmen, maintain eye contact and be aware that eye contact from your French associates may be more frequent and intense than you are accustomed to. Do not be intimidated.

3.3.2 Business Meeting Etiquette

Meeting is an important activity in business negotiation. Business meeting is an arena where lack of etiquette can have negative effects. By improving your business meeting etiquette you accordingly improve your chances of success. According to Neil Payne^[4], there are ten etiquette guidelines for formal meeting:

- 1) Prepare well for the meeting, as your contribution may be integral to the proceedings.
- 2) Dress well and arrive in good time. Your professionalism is reflected in both.
- 3) Always remember to switch off your phone.
- 4) If there is an established seating pattern, follow it.
- 5) Acknowledge the chair and other participants in the introduction or opening remarks.
- 6) When discussion is under way, it is good etiquette to allow senior figures to contribute first.
- 7) Never interrupt anyone, even if you disagree strongly.
- 8) When speaking, be brief and ensure what you say is relevant.
- 9) Always address the chair unless it is clear that others are not doing so.
- 10) It is a serious breach of etiquette to divulge information to others about a meeting.

3.3.3 Language and Communication

In face-to-face communication, try to be natural while at the same time be aware of inter-cultural issues. Adhere to these general guidelines when conversing with

someone from another culture. The suggestions are as follows:

- 1) Avoid discussing politics or religion unless the other person initiates the discussion.
- 2) Avoid highly personal questions.
- 3) Avoid any actions, even subtle ones, which could be perceived to mean you believe your culture does things better than another.
- 4) Keep your communication simple and straightforward.
- 5) Avoid slang, jargons, and figurative expressions.
- 6) Enunciate words carefully and speak somewhat more slowly when communicating with those who speak English as a second language.
- 7) Introduce frequent feedback to determine whether the listener has understood.
- 8) Resist the temptation to interrupt the speaker before the message is complete.
- 9) Keep the conversation positive. Avoid asking questions that would imply criticism.
- 10) Avoid telling ethnic jokes because of the attending someone.

3.4 Etiquette in Gift Giving and Receiving

Proper gift giving and receiving are an important part in international business. Gift giving is not only a kind of reflecting the etiquette, but also a kind of conveying the feelings^[5]. It contributes to the establishment and promotion of business relationships between the two sides. When communicating with foreigners, giving gift is necessary, which is an approach to transfer feelings, make friends and enhance the friendship between each other.

3.4.1 Gift Giving

In many cultures it is appropriate to bring small gifts when a person is invited to enjoy hospitality. In Northern Europe a suitable gift is flowers or chocolates for the hostess. In France, a bottle of wine could be interpreted by the host as an insult, for it seems that he does not serve good wine. In Germany, roses and chrysanthemums are not considered appropriate. Roses are for lovers, and chrysanthemums are for funerals. In Japan, gifts are important. Twice a year, on New Year's Eve and in July, people present gifts to work associates, family members, friends and partners. These two times coincide with the payment of the twice annual bonus. In America, it is typical to ask whether one can bring anything when invited to a social occasion. The hostess would say no if she knows the guest very well. The institution of potluck dinners where everyone brings a dish is unheard in Europe.

3.4.2 Gift Receiving

In America, the recipient of a gift is expected to open the gift right now upon receiving it. Otherwise it would

be rude. On the contrary, the Japanese and Chinese persons do not open gifts while the giver is around. This would be very rude because of the potential loss of face for the giver and even the receiver if the gifts are not exactly right. If you are not certain, the best approach is to refer to the custom of your culture and ask if it is acceptable to open the gifts. Most people understand what customs are in different countries. They may find them strange, but they will appreciate what the foreigner asks.

4. Customs and Taboos Concerning International Business Etiquette in the Context of Intercultural Communication

In business activities, understanding customs and taboos concerning international business etiquette in the context of intercultural communication contributes to reducing misunderstanding, gaffes, collision and hurdles which are caused by cultural differences, thereby improving the effect of communication.

4.1 Customs

Americans tend to place more emphasis on punctuality than people in many places do. You are expected to be ready at the time agreed upon if someone is picking you up at your residence. When invited to someone's home, you are expected to arrive within five or ten minutes after the scheduled time, but never before that time. When you plan to meet someone at a restaurant, a theater, or some other places where reservations have been made, it is very important to arrive at the agreed time. Many Americans feel that arriving late for social events or appointments indicates a lack of respect for the person who is kept waiting.

An American's typical symbol of hospitality is the cocktail party. The goal at a cocktail party is to meet as many people as possible. Nobody expects to get into deep discussion. In fact, it would be rude to monopolize any one person. One makes small talk and "works the room" exchanging business cards and phone numbers so as to get into contact with others later and establish future business relationships.

In France, a good rule of thumb is to treat people the way you want to be treated, and this is no exception. Here are some helpful points to get you on the right track. Be patient during negotiations. It is common in this situation for the French to interrupt or completely change the course of the discussion in mid-way. Your associates are also likely to be very direct and probing, engaging you in lively discussion and debate. Do not be rattled or defensive, as this is simply the natural course that will bring them to a decision about you and your business. Be prepared to have to schedule another meeting or simply wait for a final decision. Business hierar-

chy is very important, and only top executives can make final, important decisions. You will likely meet with intermediaries and be required to wait some time for closure of a deal, as every detail will be closely scrutinized before a decision is made.

In Egypt, Ideas of "personal space" among Egyptians are different than those in Western cultures. People of the same sex tend to stand much closer, while those of the opposite sex will stand farther apart. Resist the urge to move away, which may offend your associate. Learn about the names of the people you will be meeting ahead of time, as names are easy to be confusing. Make sure you understand the full names and know how to address each associate by the time you meet. Make small talk before doing business, and keep to safe subjects such as sports and positive Egyptian citizens and accomplishments. Personal relationships are important in this culture, and business proceedings are unlikely to be effective unless your associates know and appreciate you. Be patient with interruptions while meeting. It is very common for Egyptians to receive phone calls or visitors during appointments, and it should not be considered a slight. Use hand gestures sparingly, preferably not at all, to avoid inadvertently offending. A thumb up sign, for example, is considered offensive in Arabic world.

4.2 Taboos

Taboos are practices or verbal expressions which cannot be accepted by a society or culture. Taboos are often rooted in the beliefs of the person who has a specific region or culture and passed down from generation. In Arabic countries, for example, it is considered taboo to ask about the health of a man's wife.

4.2.1 Taboos in Morocco

A majority of Moroccans believe in Islam, the rest believe in Christianity and Judaism. They almost don't drink and smoke. They may not take off their shoes when entering the house until the host agrees. They often invite guests to drink tea for three times. It is considered rude if the customers thank. They taboo the number 13 as many other westerners do, also they taboo white. Because white stands for poverty. The women in Morocco can only eat eggs secretly. If they eat egg before their husbands, it will be considered as an ugly act to be blamed^[5]. You can greet the host's wife when you see her, but do not show too much kindness, and even shake hands first. On the other hand, you'd better not add too much on something that the host keeps, he would send it to you according to social practices. Moroccans taboo pork and pig products, so you remember not to send gifts concerning pig when visiting morocco.

4.2.2 Taboos in Japan

1) Shoes. This is a very famous taboo, and while many people are aware of it, few of them understand it.

The taboo of wearing shoes indoors is a strong one, and it should not be broken. Attempting to step into someone's home or onto the Tatami Mats with shoes will get you yelled at by everyone around. Do not do it. Always remove your shoes and place them properly. The thought of sitting on a floor where people walk disgusts them.

2) Walking and eating. This is a big taboo, but it won't get you yelled at. You will get many stares and frowns, and will be avoided, however. Walking with eating is considered rude. This stems from the days when food was scarce. It is believed that food should be respected, so walking with eating is not respectable.

3) Touching things in a person's house. When visiting someone's house, you are not to touch anything. That is considered rude. Do not help yourself to food or a drink. They are not yours. Simply ask permission first. This is also applied for the bathroom. Do not simply use someone's bathroom. It is considered a personal and private location.

4) Touching. This does not happen in Japan. People do not touch. If you bump into someone, simply say "Sumimasen" and continue on. Touching someone will startle him and likely scare him off quickly.

4.2.3 Taboos in Thailand

In Thailand, shoes are removed before entering any establishment, including bars and stores. While in the main cities there are some places that will forgive those who wear shoes indoors, if you see a huge pile of shoes outside the building, follow suit and remove your own.

If you have a strong opinion on something which has to do with the king or Buddha, it's best to keep your mouth shut. The Thais have a strong view of their king, and talking down about him or any authority will land you in a very hot seat with the locals.

If you try to kiss a Thai in public, you will be culturally schooled very fast, so be prepared and keep your urges under control.

4.2.4 Taboos in England

Do not greet people with a kiss; we only kiss people who are close friends and relatives. Avoid talking loudly in public. It is impolite to stare at anyone in public. Privacy is highly regarded. Do not ask a woman her age. It is considered impolite to ask a woman her age. Do not pick your nose in public; we are disgusted by this. If your nostrils need debugging, use a handkerchief. Avoid doing gestures such as backslapping and hugging. This is only done among close friends. Do not spit. Spitting in the street is considered to be very bad mannered. Do not burp in public. Do not pass wind in public. Do not ask personal or intimate questions. You should not do the following things when eating:

1) Never lick or put your knife in your mouth, it is impolite to start eating before everyone has been served unless your host says that you don't need to wait.

2) Never chew with your mouth open.

3) No one wants to see food being chewed or hear it being chomped on. It is impolite to have your elbows on the table while you are eating.

4) Do not reach over someone's plate for something; ask for the item to be passed. Never talk with food in your mouth.

5) Never use your fingers to push food onto your spoon or fork.

6) Never pick food out of your teeth with your fingernails.

5. Conclusion

The above discussions show that international business etiquette is a quite complex and profound issue. How to let business activities go well? How to communicate with the people from different cultures, especially abide by business etiquette? Etiquette is an ethical and socially acceptable behavior regarding professional practice or action among the members of a profession in their dealings with each other. A global business continues to expand, the critical element of a successful business outcome may be the appreciation and respect for cultural differences. International business etiquette is a habitual form and behavior which are shaped in people's long-term business activities. Good etiquette not only leaves good impression to others, but also makes business communication far more harmonious than expected, so this paper here sets about probing international business etiquette in the context of intercultural communication, mainly discussing and summarizing the etiquette in business meet, marketing, negotiations, gift giving and receiving as well as customs and taboos concerning etiquette, with the purpose of presenting beneficial implications for business personnel and Business English learners.

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