MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS PROPOSAL STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE

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The Major Research Paper is submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Professional Communication

Ryerson University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

DATE

Abstract

This study attempts to identify some best practices for developing and delivering business proposals in different cross-cultural environments. Interviewing seven international business people, analyzing proposal documents and reviewing relevant literature has resulted in the discovery of some commonalities in the proposal process, which do not line up with theoretical assertions in all cases. Findings suggest that business people appeal to potential clients and partners through methods of cultural and linguistic accommodation, and these strategies emerge informally through personal experience.

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3.0 Introduction

Business today is increasingly interconnected and the most successful companies are operating multinationally. International trade for Canada has grown in value from $67,734 million USD in 1980 to $452,167 in 2011 (WTO Stats). Commercial communication has become an international occupation, and lucrative relationships are increasingly cross-cultural. Success in business depends upon making successful proposals to new clients and partners. Thus, it is important to understand how to develop business proposals that will be successful in different cultural contexts.

This project compiles the insights of 7 people based in Canada who have experience in proposing new business ventures to potential partners and clients in different parts of the world in order to learn some practical strategies for developing, delivering and modifying business proposals for different cultural audiences.

I began with a survey of business textbooks and literature on cross-cultural communications. Most of what is available in cross-cultural business textbooks in Canada and the United States draws from cultural profiles that were introduced by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980), who essentially profiled different cultures by applying dualistic characteristics to them (such as masculine or feminine, individualistic or collective). Academics have taken these cultural descriptors and developed reasonable business communications strategies based on cultural generalizations.

However, I found that in practice my research participants did not apply standardized strategies to prepare and deliver culturally sensitive proposals. Instead, each person learned on-the-job, and her or his own set of strategies emerged. My research participants' experiences confirmed some academic theories – such as the difference between America's more aggressive approach in contrast the tendency of Asian businessmen to be more subtle – and they also found other useful strategies that do not appear in academic literature, like localizing their client list and appealing to the client's appreciation of luxury. Effective strategies of cultural and linguistic accommodation emerged informally from my participants' efforts to understand and appeal to potential clients and partners.

2. Literature Review

This study is by nature interdisciplinary since it involves the study of business, oral and written communications, and culture. The tradition of cross-cultural business communications inspired my research, while English for Specific Purposes literature and Move Analysis inspired my methodology. Simplified English gained significance after my research participants introduced to me the important role that English plays as a common second language in inter-cultural business environments. Together, these perspectives serve to inform and introduce my own primary research and analysis.

2.1 Cross-cultural business communications literature

Hofstede (1980, 2001, 2005) and Hall (1976) significantly influenced international business communications in the 1980s, because they recognized culture as a defining factor in business practices. Hall (1976) introduced the concept of high and low context cultures, and Hofstede categorized cultures using five dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long/short-term time orientation (Hofstede 1980, 2001, 2005). He essentially mapped out people's approach to business depending on their nationality. For example, he proposes that American businesses portray a higher level of masculinity than Chinese businesses, because American businessmen are known to be more competitive and assertive. Hofstede's research has been adopted by other business communications theorists, and taught to business students around the world.

When I was introduced to Hofstede's theories in a cross cultural business course, I was critical of the assumption that everyone in the same nation would share uniform cultural beliefs and behaviors, and I found that I was not the first to criticize Hofstede's cultural theories. Trompenaars (1995), for example, suggested that Hofstede was viewing business cultures from an Anglo-Saxon lens, and that his theories only served to enforce western business practices (Trompenaars,1994;). Several theorists (Ailon, 2008; Dimaggio, 1997; Nasif et al., 1991; McSweeney, 2000) have also suggested that Hofstede's theories are flawed because he makes too

much of national cultures and does not adequately consider individual personalities, or the influences of the employing organization, the type of industry, person's gender, etc., on values and behaviors. The critical response to cultural stereotyping in business practices has highlighted a need to rethink cross-cultural business theory.

In my research, I explore how culture affects business communication, but I must caution that it remains very important to not only profile national culture, but also consider other influences that shape attitude, values and beliefs. Generally, the participants involved in my study recognized that stereotypes are problematic, but they still believe that they are helpful in forming business strategies.

2.2 English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research is a relatively broad and practical field of study, which uses text and genre analysis to develop ideas about how language is used in different genres. This literature informed my approach to researching the genre of cross-cultural business proposals. ESP literature covers many different contexts, such as academic English, technical and scientific English, etc., including the use of English in proposal writing. It makes use of a methodology that analyzes texts for word choices, grammar, discourse and genre, among other elements, and its findings are used to explain how English is used.

Connor (2004) presents a useful review of the ESP literature. She reviews the history of intercultural communications research, most of which is based on text analysis methods. She draws on the social text analysis methods developed by Bazerman and Prior (2004) and Bhatia (1993), and she ties them together with Flowerdew's (2002) contrastive rhetorical theory of how language is organized differently in different cultures. Connor advocates for expanding research methodology beyond text analysis to include a comparison of individual texts with a larger cultural corpora, as recommended by Hyland (2000). She also recommends interviewing writers to add qualitative data to the text analysis, including communication via telephone or face-to-face meetings.

Indeed, Connor draws together the work of many theorists to develop her ideas and methodology. She refers to the changing, more dynamic definitions of culture as presented by Halliday (1994) and Atkinson (1999, 2003, 2004). She highlights the ethnographic approaches to discourses, Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) concept of discourse communities, and Barton, Hamilton, and Ivaničˇ's (2000) theory of situated literacies. Finally, she integrates theories about cultural accommodation strategies presented by Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991). Together, these theories provide an interdisciplinary analysis of intercultural rhetoric.

Connor and Upton (2004) put their theoretical orientation and ESP methodology into practice. They analyze text in proposals written by NGOs, governmental and academic institutions. The authors analyze direct-mail letters, invitations,

newsletters, case statements, grant proposals, and annual reports to identify the following elements of a proposal: territory, gap, goal, means, reporting previous research, achievements, benefits, competence claim, importance claim, and compliance claim. Their analysis is directed by an initial hypothesis regarding which lexical and grammatical features are used in more effective proposals. Connor and Upton separate positive features from negative features, and then quantify their use. The findings support their hypothesis that writing emphasizing interaction and interpersonal involvement is more effective in proposals than writing that focuses on producing information. The article also comments on narrative features and the level to which arguments are overtly expressed. The study concludes: "grant proposals are highly informative; they are expository in nature even though they may include stories; they are non-situated as texts; and finally, they are persuasive, if not argumentative, in nature" (Connor & Upton, p. 251). Connor and Upton's work is more focused on fundraising than proposing business relationships in the multinational private sector, but it still presents a solid background to the field of proposal text analysis.

2.3 Simplified English (SE)

Simplified English (SE) offers a proposed method of accommodation. SE is a growing and interdisciplinary area of study, which started in the area of optimizing engineering and technical language, and now is being applied more widely to optimize communication. The term refers to a restricted selection of words and

syntactical rules that are meant to make technical speaking and writing more easily understood. According to Shubert, Spyridakis, and Holmback (1995), Simplified English is particularly useful in increasing the understanding and efficiency of Second Language English speakers. SE has not to my knowledge been studied in the context of cross cultural business proposals, but could explain what my research participants said about using clear and simple English in multi-lingual business environments.

2.3 Move analysis

Swales (1985, 1990) developed the move analysis technique, which is meant to reveal genre-specific features of specific communication genres. He studies how information is organized in specific genres, and also how specific genres include text features like grammar and punctuation, and the use of different types of words – nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc His method includes noting which rhetorical strategies are included in which sections of the text. Typically, move analysis is applied to several dozen documents of the same genre – such as Jenkins' and Hinds' 1987 study of business letters – in order to develop some conclusions regarding how language is typically used in a certain genre. My study will not have access to enough cross-cultural proposal documents to come to any definitive conclusions; nevertheless I utilized some elements of move analysis to analyze documents in my case studies, drawing attention to elements such as: word choice, the placement of text and visuals, and the selection and formatting of documentation.

3. Methodology

This research takes a three-pronged approach, including a literature review of what has been said about cross-cultural business proposals in the past, as well as conducting interviews and analyzing proposal documents provided by my research participants. I then conducted a grounded theory analysis of the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), which is a qualitative research method of discovering theories through analyzing data. I made use of document analysis and insights from interviews to conduct case studies, which review how research participants' strategies materialized in their proposal experiences.

3.1 Interviews

I interviewed seven people, all of whom had some experience proposing their business ventures to potential partners or clients in more than one cultural environment. I selected my participants through a snowball technique, whereby I asked all of my personal connections for references, and then asked participants for references. The interview protocol asked general questions about preparing and delivering cross-cultural business proposals (see Appendix A for more details). I also encouraged participants to explain how they modified their communications to adapt to each cultural environment.

3.2 Participant Profiles[1]

Mr. Khan

Mr. Khan has worked in various industries and countries, including: helping his father with business operations in his home land of Pakistan, then working for an international chocolate bar manufacturer in England, then employment as VP of an international student's association in Montreal, Canada, and finally working for an international bank based in Toronto, Canada.

Mr. Carter

Mr. Shaun Carter is Indian-Canadian and has been employed as a research professional for over six years, the last year and a half of which has been with an international smart phone manufacturer, which currently partners with over 400 carriers in all the major regions.

Mr. Al-Jazari

Mr. Al-Jazari is an engineer based in the Middle East and Africa. He has been working for almost 5 years with a Dubai-based engineering firm that specializes in green design, and has built several world class hotels.

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[1] Participants' names have been changed to protect confidentiality

Mr. Cohiba

Mr. Cohiba is a Chinese-Canadian who has owned and managed various companies in the Information Technology sector for over 10 years, serving the markets of Canada, the United States, Europe, China and other Asian markets.

Mr. O'Donnell

Mr. Odysseus owns a business marketing energy services door-to-door in Canada and the United States. The business has grown substantially since its Canadian launch in 2006 – now with over 250,000 customers – and has since acquired an American marketing company to facilitate its expansion.

Ms. Kolnoa

Ms. Kolnoa is a self employed film producer with 20 years experience. She is from Israel, and has worked for the past 8 years in Canada. She has put together co-productions with various international partners, and has proposed her projects to funding agencies and partners around the world.

Mr. Von Damme

Mr. Von Damme works for an international head hunting company. He is Waloon, and based in Belgium, working with Flemmish and Waloon people, primarily in English. His job includes salary negotiation and presentations to companies who may wish to use his company's services.

3.3 Document Analysis

I requested that my research participants share their documents to see how their ideas materialized. I applied a simplified form of move analysis to review the use of words and visuals in a power point presentation, flyers and a standard written business proposal. I was not able to collect enough documentation to make any conclusive results, but I included some results in my case studies.

4.0: Commonalities in cross-cultural business proposals

My research participants revealed commonalities in their business structures and proposal processes, and explained their efforts to accommodate the potential client or partner in order to create positive feelings toward their proposals. Specific types of accommodation included cultural and linguistic accommodation. The following section outlines how participants' businesses were structured in order to support the proposal process, and what was typically involved in their proposals.

4.1 Business structure

In this project *business structure* refers to the framework that a business has in place to manage human resources, business operations, and the standards that govern proposal development and delivery. When I asked my research participants about

how their businesses were structured to handle proposals, most believed that their

company did not have any recognized set of practices to structure their proposals.

Ms. Kolnoa explained her lack of methods as a result of the diversity of her projects.

She explained that she realizes her "projects through tailor work. I rarely repeat the

same scenario."

Despite a lack of entrenched business structures, some standards were in place to

streamline the development of proposals. For example, Mr. Al Jazari writes his

engineering proposals according to international standards set by the FIDIC

International Federation of Consulting Engineers. Mr. Cohiba also makes use of

Canadian legal standards in all of his international IT solutions proposals. As he

explained: "we haven't changed it because we want to make sure that [it is] legally

correct on our side as a Canadian company."

Certain trends emerged in the set up and leadership of businesses with multiple

offices. As Mr. O'Donnel described, his business has 16 sales offices and each one

"gets built by an appealing personality, an individual, a strong leader." Mr. O'Donnel

speculated that each office leader develops a following based partly on "that leader's

culture, racial background, etc., and so [employees] tend to stick with folks like

them". Indeed, as Mr. O'Donnel explained, "you walk into any one of [the sales

offices] and [staff] are homogenous in that office." Mr. O'Donnel's insights suggest

that larger organizations are segmenting their staff culturally, producing

homogenous working groups within an organization that is on the whole more

culturally diverse. Mr. O'Donnel's company operates only in Canada and the United States, but other international companies such as the Human Resources recruiting organization employing Mr. Von Damme also naturally create sub cultures. Mr. Von Damme's office is based in Belgium, and therefore its employees are predominantly from the Waloon and Flemmish communities local to that region. It seems as though while global organizations have a diverse set of staff, offices tend to group up along culturally homogenous lines.

Mr. Von Damme described the international structure of his company as "Glocal," whereby an international brand adapts to the local context. This term emerged in the 1980s and has been credited to Robertson (1994). It has been adopted by many international organizations as a method for managing global operations, including Mr. Von Damme's HR recruitment company. "We have an international strategy that applies locally," explained Mr. Von Damme. Local people answer each tender, and they are backed up by a team in London that helps do some bid management. The business strategy is global, but the application and modifications are local.

Sourcing local labour and expertise helps customize the global brand for a local business climate, as per Glocalization. The value of hiring local staff to make local proposals on behalf of an international brand was emphasized by nearly all of my research participants. Ms. Kolnoa explained that she relies on local partners to pitch her films to funding agencies in their own territories, and Mr. Cohiba also noted that

he refers to Chinese partners to advise on Chinese proposals and present them to potential clients in China.

Mr. Khan repeated his experience working with local affiliates in his work with an international chocolate producer. "Usually there is a business head in that region," he said. This person would help with local market research and advising on proposal strategies, as well as providing warm introductions to local clients or partners, and even developing and delivering the company's proposals. Mr. Khan explained how local business executives could be useful, suggesting that they could "speak to that guy [to ask questions like] 'Ok, this is what we found from our studies. Do you agree, or not?' I find that to be a good approach […] you don't want just imposing ideas or assuming." Mr. Khan emphasized the potential risks of imposing foreign ideas on a local market, and the value of developing proposal strategies collaboratively with local staff in order to moderate that risk.

Although participants did not believe that their businesses were structured in a way to better appeal to different cultural audiences, they, in fact, had developed some useful strategies. For instance, several adopted this "Glocal" business approach, one that strategically hires local advisors and sales people to develop cross-cultural proposals. Business leaders who are unfamiliar with foreign standards can apply some international or western standards in the way that they structure their proposal, and then depend on the expertise of regional partners and employees to tailor that proposal to the context. This type of structure creates stability by

appealing to international standards such as FIDIC, while also allowing for flexibility based on the recommendations of regional staff.

4.2 The proposal process

Despite the relatively small size of my research sample, an analysis reveals some trends in how the average proposal is developed and delivered. My definition of the proposal process includes not only the written proposal as it is delivered to a potential client or partner, but also the development and delivery of the proposal. Most participants included the following steps in their proposal process:

1. Research
2. Approaching the client/partner
3. Explanation of product/service offering
4. Legal Regulation
5. Relationship Building

Nearly all participants included all of these steps in their explanation of their proposal process, though they were not always accomplished in the same order. Relationship building in particular can come earlier or later in the process, and market research can be ongoing following the initial agreement. Nevertheless, this process provides a basic structure on which changes can be made to adapt to the needs of each particular proposal situation. As Mr. Cohiba explained, there are some

underlying expectations of process that guide every proposal, but these elements promote flexibility in the international context.

4.2.1 Research

Customizing a proposal for a particular audience begins with some quality research. All the business people I interviewed agreed that research into the target market was an essential part of preparing a proposal, even though it was not covered in the academic literature on cross-cultural business. In order to direct the proposal toward each audience, a writer must first understand that audience, what problems they are faced with and what use they may have for the product. Most participants indicated that market research was the very first thing to do in preparing a proposal, though some suggested that further research could be done following an initial meeting with the client.

One research participant, Mr. Carter, is employed specifically in the task of researching markets in order to inform product design and prepare business managers for what to expect from each client before delivering a proposal. Although the other participants echoed his insights, his interview provided the most comprehensive insights into the research process. Mr. Carter indicated that research was important in two main areas: learning about the culture and social aspects of the market that would affect the audience's attitude toward the proposal, and also understanding the physical and structural aspects of the market that may affect the

use of the product or service. The goal is to identify trends in each market and between markets, which will inform larger internal business strategies regarding how to adapt the pitch to appeal to the buyer.

According to Mr. Carter, ethnographic research helps to understand the society's cultural basis. This research includes profiling the market's language, religion, and lifestyle choices. Mr Carter also suggests researching the particulars that people may consider when deciding whether to buy a product or service. This would include pricing, quantity and quality expectations. Mr. Carter provided an example of the socio-cultural element he would be looking for in his research for the smartphone industry:

> How users perceive a given brand of a different type of device in that market compared to another, how users perceive different features compared to another region.

It is also essential to research the technology and infrastructure available in the region. This would include utilities, transportation, materials available locally, and whatever other technological requirements of the product or service. For instance with regards to the smartphone industry Mr. Carter noted:

> We work and operate in some markets that have a very high mobile phone penetration and have the most advanced networks and have an audience of

potential customers who have the wealth to purchase and continue to

purchase our products, versus maybe some developing markets where cost is

a much greater constraint, network infrastructure is a greater concern, and

we might not have exactly the same shape of opportunities.

In the above example, research may indicate to what extent each market is capable

of supporting smart phone technology. Mr. Al-Jazari, explained how research can

actually influence his engineering designs and change his offering in order to suit

the needs of the client. Since his client lived in a country that experiences energy

shortages, Mr. Al Jazari focused his engineering expertise on creating energy

efficiencies in the design.

The utility company is not giving them enough power […] at the same time

they want to reduce the cost of the utilities, because diesel is very very

expensive in Africa, so they want to reduce the cost of the diesel, and they

want to recover the heat from the generator […] so we gave him a system

that explain, like, we're going to recover the heat from the diesel generator to

him the heat for a hot water system, and all of this cuts cost.

Research adds value to the proposal process further when it is integrated into the

proposal. According to Mr. Al-Jazari, a proposal can benefit from the audience

knowing the extent to which their needs are understood. In Mr. Al Jazari's proposal,

research is featured in the first 2-3 paragraphs in order to impress upon the audience that "it shows that we did our homework for this project".

Finally, research is especially useful when dealing with new or emerging markets. A solid understanding of the market opportunities and risks can give a company the "edge on your competitors in those growing or emerging markets," said Mr. Carter. A more informed company will be able to move into a new market first and clear hurdles more quickly than their competitors.

4.2.2 Approaching the client/partner

The way in which initial contact is made with a potential client or partner is important in setting a tone for the relationship. These participants believed that some cultures require a warm referral, and some desire an in person meeting. Some expect to see formalized documents up front, while others prefer to begin the relationship with an informal conversation. The initial approach must be tailored to the cultural context and the desires of each individual client in order to be respectful and maximize the chance of continuing the proposal process.

4.2.3 Explanation of product/service offering

Explaining a product or service to a buyer is usually a two-part job, involving both oral and written proposals. A review of American and Canadian business textbooks (Adler, 2002; Cooper et al., 2007; Cheesebro et al., 2010; Griffin & Putstay, 2007) suggests that the following could appear in a written business proposal.

1. Cover letter/email correspondence

2. Table of contents

3. Introduction, abstract, executive summary

4. Background, context

5. Statement of the problem. Reference to Request For Proposal

6. The plan, method

7. Self-evaluation measures, monitoring

8. Benefits

9. Risks

10. Schedule

11. Budget

12. Staffing, qualifications

13. Request for authorization

14. Tables, figures, illustrations

15. Flyer, pamphlet

16. Poster, billboard

17. Presentation slides

18. Swag: pens, t-shirts, book marks, etc.

19. Website: front page, about us, project description, etc.

20. Video

21. Social media activity

22. Traditional media clippings

However, none of my research participants included all of these elements in their written proposals. As Ms. Kolnoa said, "not even one project can cover the checklist you attached". Instead, participants told me that they included a few select components in their proposals, those that were required by their company or the application requirements of the agency they were proposing to.

Participants often presented their proposal using different media than the textbooks would suggest. For instance, the larger organizations employing Mr. Von Damme and Mr. Khan used power point in their proposals. This method harmonized the written and oral elements of the proposal to allow for an interactive explanation of the proposal. Mr. Von Damme also mentioned the importance of the company website for promoting the brand. Other elements his company used were pamphlets and yearly HR research reports. Mr. Cohiba included some western standard elements in his IT solutions proposals, such as an executive summary and statement of the problem to be solved, as well as a statement of the plan, deliverables and budget for the project. Other participants like Ms. Kolnoa included none of the above

components in her proposal, but instead she writes up a treatment of her film projects that essentially details the script. Likewise, Mr. O'Donnel made minimal use of written materials in his proposal to American partners in his business expansion. His proposal mainly consisted of informal meetings, and then the lawyers drafted a contract stating the decided upon business agreement.

Altogether, my research participants did not make use of the multitude of documents suggested by business textbooks. However, they usually did explain their company's product or service offerings using a more concise combination of written explanations and an oral presentation. The combined experience of my research participants would suggest that the use of documentation in proposals depends on the audience, and should be kept simple, including only what the potential client or partner needs in order to make a decision. One may conclude that American business textbooks suggest a comprehensive and document-heavy method, while in practice business professionals tend to use minimal documentation in order to simplify the process. In practice, less documentation may be actually better, as suggested by Simplified English theories that I will return to below.

4.2.4 Legal regulation

Several participants indicated that legal regulations provided some structure for their proposals. Mr. Cohiba used Canadian legal standards in his agreements with Chinese and Pilipino clients. As he explained, "you want to show them not that you

don't trust them but simply that you are trying to follow the law". Mr. O'Donnel

relied on lawyers to formalize the final agreement with his American partners. Mr.

Al Jazari made use of the FIDIC framework in drafting his engineering proposals,

and Mr. Khan has been restrained by industrial regulations regarding disclosure in

his most recent job as a stockbroker.

In the cases of Ms. Kolnoa and Mr. Cohiba, often the structure of their proposals was

defined by the recipient's in house regulations. This occurred when they were

submitting a proposal to a much larger and more entrenched organization. As Mr.

Cohiba explained larger institution like banks impose their master agreement and

their own outline. "In those approaches it becomes very rigid and very legal," he

said. Mr Cohiba said that he prefers "to impose the standard where we can, so that

at least we have control over what we are trying to convey, and if they tell us

otherwise, then we have to follow what they ask." Using his own standards and

practices gives Mr. Cohiba the flexibility to represent his company in a way that

accentuates benefits and manages risks.

My research participants' experience taught them that legalizing an agreement is a

culturally sensitive element process that involves some flexibility. It helps to follow

a global industry standard such as FIDIC, or apply the standards of the strictest

country in with the business operates. It is preferable to control the format of

proposal documents and agreements whenever possible, but a company must also

be prepared to modify its legal methods to make a potential client or partner more willing to come to an agreement.

4.2.5 Relationship building

In contrast to legal regulations, relationships are personalized and informal elements of the proposal process, but they are just as important in creating lasting bonds between business partners. However, each research participant brought relationship building into the process at different stages. Ms. Kolnoa suggested starting a proposal by meeting informally with someone for a meal and discussing their interests before pitching them on a project. Mr. Cohiba also emphasized the importance of getting a warm referral to start the proposal process with a personal connection, and then building on the relationship by following a formal business meeting with a second less formal meeting for lunch. Mr. Von Damme, on the other hand, down played the importance of relationship building, saying that he may build a relationship with a new client only after the business is discussed and they are able to come to an agreement.

4.2.6 Process: Conclusion

A business proposal is not simply one document explaining the business opportunity. It is a process that involves research and preparation, an initial approach, oral and written explanations of the business opportunity, relationship

building and legally formalizing the deal. Each step in this process presents opportunities to accommodate the client or partner's beliefs and interests. Generally, textbooks recommend a western-style set of protocols for proposals that are extensive and ethnocentric. In practice, the proposal process is often less focused on written documents and more fluid and responsive to the client's needs.

5.0 Cultural accommodation strategies

Proposal strategy involves ensuring that the receiver of the proposal feels positive toward the person making the proposal. The participants in my study provided insights into how different cultures can be accommodated throughout the proposal process, and how these methods result in more successful proposals. Giles, Coupland and Coupland (1991) studied ways in which people adapt their behaviors to be more like the people they are speaking to, in an effort to accommodate them. They noted communication strategies like changing one's accent, the speed of speech and wording. The body of cross-cultural business communications literature pioneered by Hall and Hofstede focuses on profiling different business cultures in order to prepare Western business people for cross-cultural interactions. The purpose of this literature is also to facilitate accommodation based on the audience's culture. Below, my research participants share their own accommodation strategies for different cultural audiences, including: listening, emphasizing cultural affinity, localizing the client list, showing off, contracts, being more or less aggressive and competitive, and building relationships.

5.1 Listening

These participants reported that the most common and important method of accommodating different cultures is to simply be open to learning their needs by listening. Being attentive to the person who is receiving a proposal provides the proposer with information about the person they are speaking to, such as their preferences, demands and expectations, and how they are responding to the proposal. Mr. Von Damme explained how listening is important in his work:

> "What we did is just listening to what they need, really understand why they need to work with us […] and see what you can offer to them. "

By listening to the input of potential clients, the proposal can be adjusted in order to better appeal to them. The connection between active listening throughout a presentation and modifying the proposal to accommodate the listener is not addressed in cross-cultural business communications literature, but my research participants insisted that it is a great strategy in practice. The key to cultural accommodation is knowing how cultural elements affect the receiver's perception of a proposal and remaining aware of the client throughout the proposal process.

5.2 Emphasizing cultural affiliation

Several research participants described situations in which they leveraged their relationships with a client's culture. For example, Mr. Von Damme and his employer appealed to cultural commonalities in their pitch to an Italian company when his employer told the client that his wife was from Italy. Mr. O'Donnel also appealed to cultural affiliations in Vancouver when he hired a team of Chinese sales representatives to approach potential Chinese clients. Mr. O'Donnel attributed their success to the cultural commonality they shared with clients, and suggested that this commonality may build trust. On the other hand, Mr. O'Donnel did not experience the same success when employing Eastern European sales reps in Eastern European neighbourhoods in Canada. He was not sure whether this was due to weaker ties among the Eastern European community, or if appealing to cultural affiliation just does not work in every case.

5.3 Localizing the client list

Sometimes companies include in their proposals a list of clients that they have worked with before. This is another case in which participants said that the proposal could be adapted to make it locally relevant. Mr. Von Damme recommended that a client list should be edited for each proposal in order to include clients that are local to the new potential client, so that the client recognizes the companies and is able to see that the proposing company has worked

successfully in the region with familiar companies. As he explained, "I'm not sure our client in Belgium would be […] as convinced [by a list of international clients as they would by] the list of companies we are working with in Belgium.

The value of a client list is in its ability to offer the company credibility. It proves that the company has experience working with other clients. Localizing the client list will appeal to the potential client by listing names that are more likely to be known by the reader, and so a local client list will have more credibility.

5.4 Contracts and commitment

Some of my participants believed that some cultures are less comfortable signing contracts. Mr. O'Donnel pointed out that his energy sales company was very successful in signing five-year term supply contracts with clients in Canada, but American clients were much less likely to commit to his service for a long term. He followed the advice of American staff and abandoned the long-term commitment in that market. Mr. O'Donnel suggested that in a more capitalist market, clients expect more freedom of choice between service providers, and as such they are less comfortable making a commitment to any one supplier.

While business communications literature emphasizes the importance of using standard contracts, my research participants suggest that some flexibility in legalizing the agreement is an important part of cultural accommodation[2].

5.5 Luxury and showing off

Every local market is different, and some participants have different ideas about the importance of money and class. Mr. Khan, Mr. O'Donnel and Mr. Al Jazari all spoke about the differing expectations of glamour and luxury around the world. Mr. O'Donnel thought that in his Canadian business, it is important for him to project an image of wealth and success, in order for his employees, partners and clients to view him as the head of a successful business. Showing off could be a sign of credibility and it exemplifies the opportunity to thrive in business. Mr. O'Donnel believed that wearing expensive clothes, driving an expensive car and living in an impressive home was less important in the United States, but from his experience in Dubai he believed that the Middle East was even more concerned with status and luxury than Canada. Mr. Al Jazari confirmed these beliefs in what was important to his Middle Eastern clients:

[2] In my own experience, for example, I have reverted to Memorandums Of Understanding – a less formal and binding contract – in order to maintain some written expectations while avoiding formalities that may be perceived as impersonal or insulting by my business partners.

> If the client is from the Middle East, he likes [an] iconic project, […] kind of
>
> like my suit is Versace or Armani, so in the building service […] I have an elite
>
> gold building.

Mr. Al Jazari's understanding that his Middle Eastern clients value luxury influences his proposals to people from this culture. He will emphasize what is elite and luxurious about his construction design, in order to appeal to that mind set, just like Mr. O'Donnel will make an effort to arrive at business meetings in style. He does so out of respect for the people he is going to meet, to show that he is serious and successful. My participants are pointing out a culturally specific attribute in regards to the Middle East that has also been discussed in sociological research but not in cross-cultural business communications literature, to my knowledge. Nevertheless, it seems that some stereotypes do apply, such as the value of prestige in the Middle East.

5.6 Assertiveness versus passiveness

The work of Hofstede (1983) on masculinity in culture has been much cited in reference to the continuum of assertiveness vs passiveness in different business cultures. Three of my participants talked about the attitude adjustments that need to be made depending on the level of assertiveness expectations of their potential client. Mr. Khan, Mr. Cohiba and Mr. O'Donnel all agreed that some cultures are more

assertive than others. The three men found Americans to be generally more aggressive in their business communication style, and likewise they appreciated a stronger proposal. On the other hand, Mr. Cohiba found that he had to soften the language of his proposal documents and all his communication for a potential client in the Philippines, in order to accommodate that culture's discomfort with an aggressive approach.

> In the Philippines we tend to soften the language a little bit so that it's not as assertive sounding or as objective or cold, but rather more warmer in its appeal.

Mr. Cohiba's adjusted the language of an IT solutions plan for a Philippino buyer. He described Asian culture as "very non-conflicting," and suggested that in the cultural context of his proposal, it was appropriate to make an attitude adjustment and change the wording in the proposal.

> How do we turn the language? We soften it a little bit. For example, instead of saying that they've got a problem and this is what they'd like to solve, we work in such a way that it's not really their problem it's just one of those things that have to be addressed and they it will benefit them. We emphasize the benefits, we emphasize the possible results that could occur from it without really addressing that they have a problem.

In this case, the proposal recipient was a hospital administration, who was responsible for meeting certain standards to get accreditation, and so Mr. Cohiba turned his proposal to focus on how he could ensure that the hospital standards would be met, and his services would make the hospital healthier and more efficient by reducing the risk of infections.

Mr. Cohiba described specific changes he would make to an America-bound proposal when adapting it to an Asian context, saying that he would change the sentence 'you have a problem' to 'there is an opportunity and a challenge that you're facing.' Mr. Cohiba described how in a more aggressive proposal it is preferable to "hit it head on," whereas in an Asian context the same language might feel "almost like slapping it in their face". An attitude adjustment was needed to stay relevant and respectful.

Mr. O'Donnel was challenged with accommodating the American culture when he approached them from the relatively less assertive business culture of Canada. He struggled with American counterparts when his business expanded into the United States, reflecting that at first he was shocked by the Americans' more outspoken manner of speaking in business negotiations.

> I think the biggest thing I learned when dealing with the Americans was not
> to take offence that some of the time they would just sort of shut down
> an idea with some sort of absolute. You would realize afterwards that it's

not that they are trying to be rude, it's just how they deal. They're like, "nope,

that one's not good; let's just move on to something else!

Mr. O'Donnel is describing an attitude toward business that seems rude and ruthless

to a businessperson from a culture that encourages good manners and emotional

reflection, but in order for this mild mannered Canadian to succeed in the American

business world, he had to adapt. I asked Mr. O'Donnel how he dealt with conflicting

situations in his American business deals, and he said:

Most of the time by conceding and letting them figure it out, to be honest. I

would say, 'I don't think that's the most effective way to deal with it,' and

then let them run with it and discover for themselves that that wasn't going

to work.

Mr. O'Donnel was up front and voiced his opinion, but he did not force his American

partners to do it his way. Instead, he let time prove him right. One could say that he

found a passive-aggressive middle ground. The cross cultural business

communications literature (Adler, 2002; Cooper et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 2007) and

the business people both cite important differences between what Hofstede would

call the masculinity or femininity of cultures, and they note that it affects business

attitudes.

5.7 Competitive versus positive product focus

Mr. Khan and Mr. Cohiba noted that different cultures respond differently to a proposal that emphasizes competition versus one that focuses positively on the product. The value of competition in a business proposal could also be related to Hofstede's masculinity theory. Mr. Khan noted that the more aggressive American culture prefers a business proposal that emphasizes the value of an offer in relation to its competitors. Mr. Khan related his experience in the candy manufacturing industry:

> In America, […] I would say, "how is [A's] product better than [B's]?" […] It has to be a competitive advantage kind of presentation, as to why are we better than those guys? It's relative. In Asia, […] it's more of an absolute isolation [in the presentation of] our product.

Mr. Khan believed that the less competitive attitude he encountered in Asia may have been because there was less competition in those markets. This may have been the case in his industry. Mr. Cohiba attributed the difference in comfort with competitive analysis to culture, and made an effort to accommodate his Asian proposal recipients by focusing on the benefits of his service, rather than how it compared to his competitors.

A good business proposal needs to be designed in a way that is places it strategically on a spectrum from aggressive to passive, competitive to simply good on its own. Profiling the audience to find out their preference should be included in the initial stages of research, and this knowledge can then help frame the proposal in a way that better accommodates the audience.

5.8 Relationship building

Whereas cross-cultural business communications literature focuses on the importance of relationship building in a limited number of cultures – eg. Asia, the Middle East[3], my research participants believed that relationship building is equally important in all cultures. Typically, the company making a proposal will court their potential client by mixing in social time with business meetings, so that both parties in the negotiation can get to know each other better before committing to a business deal. Mr. O'Donnel related his experience meeting with his new partners in the United States several times to discuss the deal. Canadian representatives of Mr. O'Donnel's company visited the American offices and invited their American counterparts up to Canada for meetings, where in addition to talking business, "we had dinners with them and that kind of thing." He noted that these social occasions were much more common in the early stages of proposing the business venture and

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[3] High- vs. low-context culture profiling by Edward Hall and reinforced and supported by Hofstede

beginning work together, in order for all the parties to get to know each other "on a personal level".

Ms. Kolnoa, a film producer, claimed that relationship building "is always important." She said that her method is to always meet a potential funder or partner "and have a general conversation about [their mandate]" before pitching her film idea. She never would hand a film proposal to someone who she is meeting for the first time, and she suggested that these initial conversations help build trust and respect that lends credibility to her proposal. Furthermore, it gives her a chance to better understand what the person is interested in, and then she can tailor her proposal to fit their interests. Ms. Kolnoa cautions young film makers who are eager to pitch a project to "just hold your horses a little bit" and not try to jump into the proposal too fast, and first establish relationships with key partners.

Only one of my research participants – Mr. Von Damme, based in Belgium – did not believe that relationship building was especially important in his industry (HR recruitment), though he still recognized that "once the business is talked and discussed," then people may want to go out and socialize together. Despite my prodding, none of my participants stated unequivocally that some cultures find relationships to be more important than others. Rather, most believed that business people from all different cultures tend to be outgoing and appreciative of the relationships built in business.

5.8.2 Warm referral

Two of my participants emphasized the importance of initially contacting a new client through a mutual connection. Interestingly, both of these participants had significant experience working with Asian cultures. Mr. Khan and Mr. Cohiba both reported asking their social connections based locally to the potential client to make initial introductions. Mr. Khan stated that "randomly contacting another company to propose [is] very, very rare. They would always go for a warm introduction." He believed that this approach reduced the perceived risk of the business venture, and ensured that no one was wasting their time. Mr. Cohiba suggested that warm introductions make the potential client more receptive to a proposal. When a proposal target has never heard of the proposing company, it is difficult for the proposal to be viewed as credible. Leaning on the credibility of a mutual connection helps to smooth the way toward a better reception.

5.8.3 Eating together

I asked my participants how they would go about building relationships, and they most often referred to meeting clients for lunch or supper. Ms. Kolnoa presented a more or less typical description of these relationship building activities when she said "we meet for lunch, we meet for breakfast [...] Many of my encounters are not in offices."

By contrast, Mr. Cohiba's process was more formal. His usually started with an introduction and a preliminary business meeting and "subsequent to that I will normally ask for a second meeting and ask them for lunch." This second meeting is when the parties would take time to "get acquainted," and understand each other's larger objectives beyond the specific business deal at hand. Eating together would serve as an opportunity to learn about each other's general goals and preferences.

Since it is not always obvious what kind of meal would be appropriate for a given client, Mr. Khan and Ms. Kolnoa suggested asking the person what they would prefer to eat, and then simply facilitating the meal. There were some universal rules suggested, like that it is safer to bring an Indian to a restaurant that has good vegetarian options, and one should generally not take a Muslim to a bar. However, the main goal of these relationship-building activities is to entertain the clients, put them at ease and get to know them better, and so whether this is done at a farmer's market or a strip club, it is a useful strategy as long as it fulfills these objectives.

5.8.4 Offering extra benefits

According to these participants, offering extra benefits to clients in the process of proposing a business venture is tricky, and changes depending on the context. In some cultures, giving gifts is perceived as good hosting and a representation of good faith, while in others it can be understood as corruption and could even be illegal. For example, Mr. Al Jazari related that it is typical for him to give gifts such as an

iPhones or other relatively high-value items to his African clients, whereas this would be seen as inappropriate in Dubai. He suggested that this difference is because Dubai is Americanized, and so receiving such products may seem more like a cheap bribe, and would be equally unacceptable in the United States.

Mr. Cohiba had another example of providing extra benefits in the form of offering to host the foreign client in Canada. He described how he might offer a client something extra in order to build the relationship:

> I think it is important to extend hospitality and to be able to show that you can actually do what you say. So if I said something like 'if you come to Canada, I will make sure to have my assistant take care of all of your arrangements, that you can be rest assured that if there is anything you need while in my area, we will ensure that things go smoothly for you, even if it's not related to our business.'

Mr. Cohiba extended hospitality to his Chinese and Philippino clients in order to prove his credibility as a business partner and thereby strengthen his relationship with them. Such a kindness would be appreciated by many business clients, but not all. In the American context, he is much more careful about offering extra benefits "because we don't want to be seen as sort of bribing, so we don't want to say things that seem like I am trying to buy your friendship."

Caution is needed with regards to gift giving in any country that has strict laws governing corruption, and any situation in which the client is a government agency or some other highly accountable entity. However, in a context where hosting is highly valued and gift giving is seen as a sign of respect and good faith, then it can be an effective strategy to cater more fully to a client's desires.

5.8.5 Relationship-based versus rational decision making

There is a wide spread belief among Western business people - from Canada, the United States and United Kingdom, etc. - that Eastern business people (From China, Japan, etc.) care more about the people they are doing business with than the rational value, or profitability of a business venture[4]. Hofstede (1984) suggested that relationships are more important in the Eastern world because these societies are more "collectivist," while western cultures are more "individualistic." This belief was reflected by some of my participants including Mr. Khan, who said:

> People from Hong Kong and people from Japan and Korea, I found them to be more outgoing […] They would expect hosted […] You have to work extra for that, to make them happy.

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[4] Orientalizing the non-western cultures by emphasizing their focus on context and relationships was a common assumption of cultural profiling included in most of the business communication textbooks I reviewed, such as Adler (2002) and Cooper et al. (2007).

My interview participants compared the importance of building a relationship versus expecting the proposal audience to make a rational, impersonal business decision. Despite voicing many beliefs about cultural business attitudes, no solid trend emerged in this area. If anything, participants agreed that both the relationship built between business partners and the practical value of the business venture were both necessary in the proposal, regardless of the cultures involved. This conclusion stands in contrast to Hofstede's cultural theories regarding individualism versus collectivism, which state that relationships are more important in some business cultures (eg. Asian) than others.

6.0 Linguistic accommodation practices

Accommodating multi-linguistic business environments involves, in my research participants' experience, a strategic use of language. Linguistic accommodation does not play a large role in cross-cultural business communications literature. Tips about slowing down and speaking clearly do appear in some business communication textbooks[5], but my research participants did not learn about the value of linguistic accommodation from books. Their experience presented a strategic use of Simplified English in cross-cultural business proposals.

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[5] Cheesebro, O'Connor & Rios. (2010) Communicating in the workplace. USA: Pearson Education
Guffey, Rhodes & Rogin. (2008). Business communication: process and product. 5th Canadian Edition. Canada: Thompson Canada Ltd.

6.1 Use of English

Due to many factors, including British colonialist history and the aggressive

expansion of American multinational corporations, English has come to be the most

commonly used language in cross-cultural business deals. In Mr. Von Damme's

experience working in Belgium, although the population's first languages are

predominantly French (Waloon) and Dutch (Flemmish), most of his business

documents and presentations are done in English. He attributes this to the cultural

divisions in Belgium, suggesting that English is valued in his country as a common

language: "it's like the neutral ground." Mr. Von Damme also reported using English

in a proposal he made to a Spanish client. He admitted that even when he made an

effort to speak in his client's language, he would still slip back into English when the

terminology was more technical or tricky.

Mr. Khan also related his experience speaking English in the Middle East and India:

> Being able to speak English is a sign of elitism, is a sign of being educated, is a
>
> sign of being cool! They have recognized that English is the business
>
> language. Period.

Mr. Khan's insights into the influence of English are echoed by other business people

who have observed how English works as a common language internationally. Mr.

Cohiba related that when he prepared a proposal for a client in the Philippines,

there was no need to translate the documents because people in the Philippines speak English.

6.2 Accommodating an English Second Language environment

It is always important to make the client feel comfortable and positive when delivering a business proposal. In a situation where the documents and presentation are in English, and the client is not a native English speaker, then the proposal must use Simplified English to be easier for the client to understand. Literature on Simplified English would suggest that a more carefully chosen selection of words can help facilitate understanding (Chevrak et al., 1996 Shubert et el., 1995**)**. Simplified English is based on restricting the selection of words and using clear and consistent syntactical rules to make technical speaking and writing more easily understood[6].

To accommodate reduced speaking ability, the proposal should not expect too much of its audience. Mr. Khan noted that he always likes to make his proposals interactive, asking for continuous feedback from his audience, but he found that this was less successful with his Asian clients. This reaction may be because of a lack of understanding, or a need for increased time to reflect before answering, or maybe because they are uncomfortable with being called upon for answers.

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[6] . I have found that Simplified English is a particularly useful strategy in clarifying business proposals in multi-linguistic or ESL environments.

Research participants also simplified their spoken texts, or presentations. Because it is usually more difficult for people to understand their second language, long presentations can be exhausting to the listener. As Mr. Von Damme explains, "if I do a 45 [minute] or one hour speech, you know it will require more energy and more attention" from the listener. Mr. Khan related his experience working with British businessmen, and his perception was that they talked too much.

> They would talk too much, way too much. I found they would just keep on describing a situation unnecessarily.

Again, in a situation where the listener is struggling to keep up with the flow of conversation, it is better to keep wordiness to a minimum. Regardless of the medium – emails, contracts, business plans, posters, presentations, negotiation, etc. – the amount of words used should be equal to the level of comprehension of the listener. Mr. Khan cautions against "writing way too much," and advises people not "to be too verbal," when speaking with non-English cultures. He believes that using PowerPoint in a presentation helps. Perhaps this is because it draws out the key words being used, without filling up too much space with paragraphs of text. As he says, "Sometimes those guys can get lost in writing."

Second language English reading skills can be accommodated generally by keeping documents short, using plain wording. Mr. Von Damme explained how he modifies head office documents from England to the second language context in Belgium.

> Here in Belgium, people are not very native [English Speakers], so sometimes when documents come from England [...]if you use a fancy wording, you may not be always understood.

Mr. Von Damme believed that vocabulary was very important for facilitating the business communication, and so it should be understandable. Simplified English use in proposals could facilitate understanding and help make the deal. However, the style of writing and vocabulary is also an element that changes depending on the context.

There are, however, exceptions to the "simpler is better" rule. Several of my research participants noted that clients from France preferred much longer more poetically written documents. This was the case for Mr. Khan, who worked with marketing copywriters in France to develop attractive prose to adorn their candy bar wrapper. The filmmaker Ms. Kolnoa agreed, noting that the French prefer a lot of writing. Mr. Khan believed that language is more appreciated for its marketing value in France than it is in countries such as India and China, where clients prefer to get straight to the point. This may be because the value added through beautiful descriptive language is lost when people simply do not understand the complicated

wording. Also, Mr. Khan suggested that developing markets in Asia may be less concerned about using marketing language in their business deals simply because their markets are less developed and this type of artful selling through words is less common.

6.3 Using the audience's language

When approaching a potential client of partner who does not speak English, it is always appreciated if the person making the proposal makes an effort to speak a little of their audience's language. Mr. Von Damme discussed at length the value of being multilingual in his country of Belgium, where at least three languages are commonly used. He related his experience speaking Dutch – his third language - to his Dutch counterparts at the office, and he admitted to making many mistakes in the language, but said that his colleagues respected him for making the effort.

Mr. Khan noted a similar positive response when he uttered a few words of Spanish to a Spanish client:

> They get excited! Same thing goes for a person from, you know, anywhere! If you are in China and you say something like, "hi, how are you?" [in Chinese] something to make them feel , "this guy made the effort."

Mr. Khan recommended that if a businessperson intends to expand into certain countries over a long period of time, then he or she would be well advised to learn the language, as it would definitely help build those business relationships. "They appreciate the fact that you're taking the time to build the relationships. It's just a sign of respect for them." Again, when it comes down to it, a proposal should always make its audience feel comfortable and positive, and making an effort to speak the audience's native language is a good strategy to have this effect.

Several research participants discussed the value of translating documents into the audience's native language. This can be a good strategy because it accommodates people linguistically and ensures their understanding, but it is also, as Mr. Cohiba described, "one of the key risk areas, because you want it to be translated properly". It is not always easy to find high quality translators, and if company representatives making a proposal do not understand the other language, then it is difficult to check that the meaning has transferred correctly. This is especially important in legal contracts, when a poorly translated word can completely change the expectations and responsibilities involved in the deal.

Although translation is risky, it is also often necessary in business, and Ms. Kolnoa emphasized the importance of working in multilingual teams to facilitate quality translation.

I am experienced enough in my career to know that […] any official document that [must] go for another rewrite [by] somebody that is a native speaker […] So I just always put it in my costs to hire and work in collaboration with others.

6.4 Use of visuals

In the case that language may be misunderstood, visuals can anchor the meaning of a proposal. Literature (Messaris, 1996; Scott, 1994) in visual rhetoric emphasizes the importance and uses of visuals in business propositions and advertising, though this strategy has not been discussed in cross-cultural business communications or cultural accommodation literature. Nevertheless, my research participants found visuals to be useful in facilitating understanding in cross-cultural, multi-linguistic environments. Mr. Khan and Mr. Von Damme made use of PowerPoint when presenting their proposal, in order to include more visuals, while Mr. O'Donnel provided his sales people with flyers that also integrate pictures and graphs with the text in order to represent his service in a way that was more visually appealing. Mr. Khan emphasized the importance of "product marketing," or presenting visual representations of the product, so that the viewers can see for themselves what they are buying, even if they do not understand all of the words. "Just the fact that they can visualize [the product]," Mr. Khan explained, "they are able to much more see what is in it for them."

Mr. Von Damme brought up the importance of making visuals locally relevant. Since his company is based in the UK, he is often supplied with promotional materials that feature pictures of British public figures. "The picture will less resonate here in Belgium," he explained, and suggested that a picture of a celebrity speaking in front of his company's logo would be better received in Belgium if it featured a local personality.

6.5 Appeal to numbers

Besides words and pictures, numbers and graphs also play an important role in presenting a proposal. "Numbers, I find, is a universal language," Mr. Khan asserted. "Everybody under the sun knows numbers". Therefore, including more well organized budgets and graphical representations of expected revenues or other numerical depictions of the benefits of the business venture can be an effective way to get a point across without overly relying on words. After all, as Mr. Khan suggested:

> They are here to make money and so are you. The idea is to present that proposal as mutually beneficial. Numbers speak that language very easily. Graphs do that very easily.

6.6 Dealing with misunderstanding

Despite best efforts to make a proposal in a way that the audience understands, there is always room for misunderstanding. Business communications literature (Adler, 2002; Cooper et al, 2007) warns of this problem, but provides little advice on how to deal with it. My research participants suggested a few ways to remedy misunderstandings. Mr. O'Donnel found it important to make sure that his clients understood the terms of their arrangement because his industry is heavily regulated by the Canadian government. In order to meet government expectations, Mr. O'Donnel initiated a telecommunications system whereby each face-to-face proposal is followed up by a reaffirmation telephone call that confirms that the client understands the key components of the agreement. The telephone check follows a carefully structured script and it is recorded.

Mr. Khan used a less formalized technique, but still with the same aim of ensuring that all parties understand the terms of the agreement and he documents this understanding. Mr. Khan would simply follow up any face-to-face meeting with an email. He believed that some cultures always say yes in person. This is supported by research (Hofstede, 1980; Hall, 1976) that that has observed a tendency among Asian cultures to say a polite yes in person when they really mean no[7]. However, when communicating by email, a paper trail is created that confirms any agreement.

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[7] Hong Seng Woo, Celine Prud'homme, (1999) "Cultural characteristics prevalent in the Chinese negotiation process", European Business Review, Vol. 99 Iss: 5, pp.313 - 322

Also, the non-synchronous nature of email communication gives people time to reflect and respond when they are confident of their answer.

I found that my research participants developed their proposals to appeal to the special interests of their audiences – which were learned through extensive research – and when delivering their proposals, they accommodated their audiences culturally and linguistically. Below, this case study exemplifies how some of these strategies materialize in real proposal experiences.

7.0 Case studies

All of my research participants gave examples of specific instances in which they prepared and delivered business proposals to diverse cultural audiences. The following is a case, which illuminates how their strategies were put into practice. Another two cases are offered in the Appendix. These cases make use not only of participant accounts in interviews, but I also analyze proposal texts to find out how strategies materialized in real proposal experiences.

7.1 Case 1: Human resources recruitment services proposal

Mr. Von Damme provided me with a power point presentation that he made specifically for a proposal to an Italian businesswoman who was interested in his HR recruitment agency's services. The PowerPoint consisted of 8 slides, including 5

pictures and frequent use of the company's logo. The PowerPoint also made

consistent use of their brand's identifying colour. Throughout the presentation,

slides remained simple, with minimal wording in order to explain the service

offering as quickly and clearly as possible.

The following is one of the most complex slides in the presentation, which is still

quite simple.

SLIDE 4: PANEL OF SERVICES

This PowerPoint slide is well organized to represent everything that the

recruitment agency can do for the client, without using too much text. The proposed

services are visually categorized, and the services themselves are named in short

form, and any further explanation would be in spoken English, despite the fact that

neither party was a native English speaker.

The use of English as a second language by himself and his audience likely explains

why Mr. Von Damme has simplified his slides. The way that English is used then

must be accessible to both the presenter and the audience in a proposal situation when neither party has a full grasp of the language. It is important to keep the wording to a minimum, using Simplified English to get core ideas across, without going into too much detail in writing on the PowerPoint slides.

He went on to explain how the spoken elements of the proposal brought together other strategies of cultural accommodation and relationship building.

> The meeting was in English, despite the fact that she was Spanish. But again, she was not English native, and neither we were, see what I mean? That's what happens in Europe, and that happens in a less, um, in a minor extent in America.

The proposal was anchored by PowerPoint slides, which provided short-form points of reference for the presenter to speak to. Layered over this information exchange was the social experience that presented an opportunity for Mr. Von Damme and his employer to develop a working relationship with the potential clients.

"We talked about what they did, and how, yeah, about Spain, and my boss tried to, like, emotionally link with her [...] I don't know, for some reason he said 'yeah my wife is half Spanish, and I've been working..' Yeah, the way he brought that is like, 'yeah, in the past I used to work for a Spanish company that's called blah blah blah...' and, you know, there you go..." Mr. Von Damme

This - the boss's reference to his Spanish wife and his experience in Spain – is an example of using cultural affiliation to build a business relationship. Altogether, Mr. Von Damme has used Simplified English, visuals, cultural accommodation and relationship building in this proposal in order to succeed in acquiring the Spanish contract.

8.0 Conclusion

Initially, every businessperson I interviewed believed that he or she did not have enough experience or strategies in place to provide insights into how to succeed in cross-cultural business proposals, but then as they began to discuss their experience I was able to tease out very many strategies that these people had used and recommended to others. My research participants had not established any formalized methods adapting proposals to different cultural contexts, but they had developed strategies through experience. Rather than these business people and their organizations putting into practice any kind of rigid institutional rules or applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions, they developed their own strategies of cultural and linguistic accommodation.

It seems that what is going on in my research participants' businesses is that the training necessary to succeed in cross-cultural business environments is being

regularized rather than *regulated*. Schryer, Lingard and Spafford (2007) differentiate these terms in their literature about how medical professionals learn to communicate. They explain:

> *Regulated* appears to mean practices that are externally controlled, whereas *regularized* appears to signal a kind of order that emerges out of a range of diverse practices.

Schryer, Lingard and Spafford (2007) suggest that regularized practices are methods that emerge from people's experience in various different situations, and that these practices are more participative in their origination and more flexible in their use. All of my research participants have regularized cross-cultural business proposal strategies in their organizations – without many of them even noticing the process, because it is informal. People naturally are developing tactics that work out of their experience with trial and error in the real business world. My task here has been to collect these strategies in their random stages of development.

 It is clear that these participants have some shared areas of commonality in terms of the proposal process: development and delivery. Two main types of strategies also emerged from my participants' experience: cultural accommodation and linguistic accommodation. All of these proposal strategies were aimed at making the audience feel comfortable and positive about the proposal, while strategically appealing to their interests, values and beliefs.

Culture was found to be one of many influential factors in determining what makes an audience interested in the proposal, but so was the individual's personality and the organization's mandate. Hofstede prescribed specific cultural dimensions to each nation, but in practice I found that his characterizations did not always line up with reality. My research participants always recommended getting to know a target client, partner or market from scratch, through thorough research and relationship building. Cultural accommodation strategies emerged from using insights into the audience's specific preferences and concerns to strategically appeal to them.

English revealed itself as another significant scene of cultural accommodation. Linguistic accommodation through the use of Simplified English proved to be extremely helpful in facilitating communication in international business environments, because it makes proposals more accessible to multi-lingual and English Second Language audiences.

Finally, when adapting proposals from one context to another, it is also important to be consistent. Mr. Cohiba highlighted this point by advising that the topics discussed in an initial business meeting must line up with what appears in written materials, and even how he interacts with the client socially. Accommodating the audience is a useful technique in proposals, but it must not come at the expense of a business's global brand identity or either person's integrity. Adaptation is necessary in international business, but so is being genuine.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

I am researching how cultural influences affect the beginning stages of forming business relationships. I want to talk to people who have proposed their business projects to potential partners in other countries, such as yourself. I will also be collecting proposal documents and online presence to discern word choice, writing structure, strategies of cultural convergence. I want to start by asking you some questions about how you adapt your proposals depending on cultural contexts. If you have any questions for me, please feel free to ask at any time. If you don't want to answer one of my questions, that is fine as well.

How long have you been employed doing business proposals, and how would you describe your job description?

What are the main written components that you typically work with in a business proposal?

What different cultures do you work with?

Could you give me an example of something that you know is important to a particular cultural audience?

Do you modify the written and oral parts of your proposal depending on the culture of your audience? Can you take an example from your past experience to explain?

Could you give me an example of an instance in which you made a proposal to a potential client or partner outside of your organization, who lives in a different country and/or belongs to a different culture?

In the act of delivering your proposal – I am referring to your oral presentation - is there anything that you might say in a certain way in your presentation, to better appeal to your audience?

When presenting your proposal, do you include relationship-building activities? What are the main relationship-building activities involved? Relationship-building activities could include going out dinner, asking about the person's family, greetings, etc.

Do these activities differ according to different cultural contexts?

Does your company have a typical method for developing business proposals to suit a cultural context? If yes, how does it work?

Are there any ways in which you think your company's way of adapting proposals to cultural context could be improved? If yes, how and why?

Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to add?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Case 2: Energy supply sales

Mr. O'Donnel's company started reselling fixed-price energy supply contracts in Canada, and then adapted his proposal to attract clients in the United States of America. In Canada, the company's strategy is to approach potential clients at-the-door, where sales agents present very flexible proposals and make use of documents provided by the company. This pitch is followed up by a carefully scripted phone call with the client to confirm the agreement, which the company does for Canada's relatively strict regulations on the industry.

The company partnered with a local reseller in America, and gathered information from them about the American market that informed significant changes in their proposal. In a response to Americans' discomfort with contracts, the company abandoned the five-year commitment in that market, but maintained it in Canada. The company also developed two different sets of flyers for Canadian and American sales agents.

American documents are shorter than the Canadian ones: only two pages to Canada's five. The page is no more text than visuals, with 6 pictures appearing in the American documents, and 11 in Canada's. The American documents stress financial benefits, referencing money 10 times and making repeated claims of the "competitive" nature of the service. Canada's documents made reference to money or pricing 19 times, and included three graphs representing energy usage and costs. Canadian documents referred to money differently, describing their package as

 "low-priced" in contrast to America's "competitive" price. Canadian documents also made several references to environmentalism and "going green," which American ones did not. Canadian documents even included a feature on local benefactors of the company's programming, which included a picture.

Mr. O'Donnel and his partners successfully appeal to many different cultures and they are now aggressively expanding in two different countries. Their sales agents regularly pitch their contracts to many different kinds of people, and they have no formal training in cross-cultural business communication. Their strategies emerge from insights gained on-the-job.

Appendix C: Hotel construction bid

In Kampala, Uganda, a successful business man was interested in building a five star hotel. The business man – let us call him Hajji – was born in Northern Sudan, but had owned several large businesses in Uganda and Kenya for the past many years. Hajji released a request for proposals to construct the hotel, and he received 15 written proposals, including one from the engineering and construction firm employing my research participant, who we can call Mr. Al-Jazari.

Mr. Al-Jazaari is a young engineer who for the past five years has worked with a Dubai-based engineering firm that specializes in "green design". They take on large-scale projects, and have built several world-class hotels. In Mr. Al-Jazaari's words:

> So [Hajji] said "you proposal sounds good to me, but you guys need to fly here in 24 hours and meet me in person," and that was the thing for us to go to Uganda. So we booked the flight, the next day, me and the CEO. We met him in person, and he told me "ok I read your proposal. Explain it to me."

The meeting was successful for several reasons. Mr. Al-Jazaari made an effort to accommodate Hajji culturally in his proposal. This involved understanding Hajji's needs, and which Mr. Al-Jazari understood to be Middle Eastern and more so African.

For example," Mr. Al-Jazari explained, "if I am tackling a client who is in Dubai and he is rich, my proposal will be basically a commercial proposal, where I put the best engineering system, and this system which will last a long time, the best in the market, [inaudible] but if I am approaching clients in Africa, they think about money first and then they think about the issue. So for them, I tackle, I talk to them about operational saving, how much they will save.

This is exactly what Mr. Al-Jazari did when he met Hajji. He explained the costs involved in a way that highlighted the plan's efficiency, because he understood that from Hajji's perspective, quoting costs in hundreds of thousands of American dollars could seem preposterously expensive to an African client.

We gave him a proposal of almost $300,000 to do only a design, and for a client in Africa, to tell him I am going to do him a design for $300,000, he won't understand it, because for him a design is a piece of paper, so why should he pay $300,000 for a piece of paper? [...] we told him if you adopt our system, there is a cost saving in terms of the construction, and there is an annual saving of $600,000 of utility expenses and other expenses, and then we continue that you only need $300,000 as a design tool. So for him, he looked at the savings, cost savings, the capital cost, the operational cost, and then he was convinced.

Mr. Al-Jazaari's explanation of the proposal included insights into the relationship building process overlaying the discussion of the proposal's content. Mr. Al Jazaari explained the importance of eye contact

Since he was an African client, usually Africans, they don't trust the proposal as a... they need to have an eye contact. They need to see you in person.

Mr. Al Jazari went on to explain why eye contact was important, and how it affected the power dynamics in the proposal. Furthermore, Mr. Al Jazari made an effort to accommodate Hajji by empowering him and flattering his authority.

So, for me I was talking to him, and then whenever I had a strong eye contact with him, Mohammed doesn't like it, he doesn't like a strong eye, I don't know he thinks I am superior to him or I know too much, so for me, I am trying to let him, I talk technical, and then I ask him a question, and then I say "yeah, great, you understand it." So I show him that he's an expert because from the first minute, I knew that he wants to act like he knows everything.

So engineering wise, he liked that information, so I gave him a dose of technical information in an easy way, he understood it, and then he tried to explain it to me, even though I was the one who explained it to him.

[…] he started speaking, repeating what I had said to him technical, and starting [inaudible] And saying "yeah yeah you are absolutely right.\

Mr. Al Jazari's strategy to give Hajji credit (perhaps more than he deserved) was a successful strategy.

"From then on, he said "I think you guys know what you are doing," and then "I think we are speaking the same language,"

In our interview, I asked Mr. Al Jazari what he meant by "speaking the same language," because I had found in my research that finding commonalities with the client is vital to succeeding in a proposal. I even wondered if Mr. Al Jazari was referring to the language they were speaking (English and Arabic), but then he explained that the common language was money.

"I was saying the same language, we were speaking money language […] If I didn't tell him "this system is saving you this amount of money" or whatever, he wont be interested […] so we were speaking the same language, money language, with [Hajji]. He cares about money first, and then what's happening to his building. "

Mr. Al Jazari used a standardized American format called Fidic to write his proposal, but then he tailored his written proposal to suit Hajji. This meant that he had to know the man he was speaking to, and know what was important to him.

> "I understand that he cares about the money, and then he wants to be the top guy in terms of technically. He wants to explain the technicalities to me, even if I am his consultant."

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