Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Social Sciences
ISSN: 2284-5747 | e-ISSN: 2458-1054
Covered in: ERIH PLUS, CEEOL, J- GATE, CrossRef, CrossCheck, Google Scholar, Ideas RePeC, Econpapers, Socionet, KVK, WorldCat, ICI Journals Master List - Index Copernicus.

2023, Volume 12, Issue 2 pages: 48-63 | doi: https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenss/12.2/91

Exploring Cultural Competence in Business English: Bridging the Gap between Traditional Language Learning and ESP Teaching

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Abstract: *In today's globalised business world, effective communication and collaboration across cultures are crucial for success. Cultural competence, the ability to understand and navigate cultural differences, plays a vital role in achieving this. However, traditional language learning approaches often fail to adequately prepare learners for the cultural challenges they will face in professional contexts. English for Specific Purposes 'ESP' teaching, on the other hand, is well-suited to address this gap by integrating cultural content and skills into language teaching. This paper will explore the importance of cultural competence in Business English and discuss how ESP teaching can bridge the gap between traditional language learning and the needs of the business world. Precisely, the paper will aim to define cultural competence and its importance for Business English learners. It will also outline the challenges and opportunities for integrating cultural content and skills into ESP teaching. Additionally, it will answer the following question: How can ESP practitioners design and implement practical learning tasks to promote cultural competence in their students? The paper will conclude with a summary of the key findings and recommendations for ESP practitioners and syllabus designers.*

Keywords: *Business English, cultural competence, ESP teaching, intercultural communication, language learning.*

How to cite: Mebitil, N. (2023). Exploring cultural competence in business English: bridging the gap between traditional language learning and ESP teaching. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Social Sciences, 12*(2), 48-63. https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenss/12.2/91

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1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the ability to communicate effectively across different contexts and cultures has become a must for professionals who seek to respond positively to the specific requirements of different settings. This global phenomenon has been linked to the accelerated process of markets' globalisation, the widespread presence of multinational corporations, and the continuous exchange of information and services across international boundaries. In this line of consideration, successful business interaction cannot be achieved through a mastery of the language alone; a deep understanding of the cultural aspects is also required. This latter is often referred to as 'cultural competence'.

The globalised business world is often known for the need to fulfil different business tasks across different countries in an easy and accessible way. To succeed in seeking new diverse markets in different countries with different cultures, norms, and communication styles becomes the professionals' new concern. Effective cross-cultural communication becomes the key to success in international business, negotiations, and global markets. Yet, misunderstanding of different cultural aspects can have a negative impact on the success of business operations. At this level, acquiring and consolidating the cultural competence of business professionals and even learners seeking to start a career in business is a must.

Cultural competence, the ability to understand and navigate cultural differences, ensures effective communication and collaboration across different contexts and cultures. Yet, a gap between traditional language learning and the need to communicate effectively across different cultures has been identified. In other words, traditional approaches to foreign language learning often stress the need to achieve an adequate level of language proficiency that enables learners to communicate based mainly on grammatical and linguistic knowledge while neglecting the cultural aspect of the language. This latter often constitutes the first reason for failure in international communication, as learners and professionals who acquired the language skills following traditional approaches often fail when they face real situations where the cultural aspect is clearly present in those professional contexts. At this level, traditional approaches to foreign language learning often fail to bridge the gap between language learning and language requirements used in globalised business contexts.

To meet this end, English for Specific Purposes 'ESP' teaching can be considered as an adequate solution. This latter can be explained by the fact that ESP is an approach to language teaching where all the decisions to

content and methods are based on the learners' reasons for learning (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). In other words, ESP aims to address the main needs and expectations of learners belonging to different contexts. It also aims to design its courses based on the specific requirements of those contexts, such as Business English. At this level, it can be stated that ESP teaching focuses on successfully integrating both aspects into language learning, including cultural and language skills, hence presenting itself as a suitable approach to tackle the current lack of cultural competence in traditional language learning.

This paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the importance of cultural competence in Business English contexts while exploring the role of ESP teaching as a facilitating tool that bridges the gap between traditional language learning and the needs of the business world. It also aims to define its importance for Business English learners. It also seeks to outline the challenges and opportunities for integrating cultural content and skills into ESP teaching to offer practical recommendations for both ESP practitioners and syllabus designers on including practical tasks that promote cultural competence among Business English learners. Additionally, it seeks to answer the following questions: How does ESP teaching bridge the gap between traditional language learning and the business world's requirements while considering the relationship with cultural competence in language acquisition? How can ESP practitioners design and implement practical learning tasks to promote cultural competence in their students?

This paper provides valuable insights for professionals in Business English teaching and international business. It contributes to the existing research and literature as it:

- Enhances the quality of language teaching while addressing existing gaps in language teaching approaches.
- Equips learners with the needed knowledge to function adequately in their target settings.
- Highlights the need to improve intercultural communications and collaborations among different professionals.
- Provides ESP practitioners with practical syllabus and courses that effectively integrate the cultural component in Business English context.
- also opens the door for further research in ESP teaching, cultural competence, syllabus and course design.

2. Literature Review

In foreign language learning, cultural competence holds the lion's share. This concept often refers to the ability to understand and navigate cultural differences. It is the cornerstone of effective communication and collaboration across different contexts and cultures. It goes beyond basic language proficiency and includes an awareness and understanding of others' cultural norms, practises, and views within their target language.

In this regard, Byram (1997) views cultural competence as possessing the requisite information, attitudes, and abilities that enable individuals to comprehend and engage in effective interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In other words, the comprehensive nature of cultural competence underlines the following dimensions: cognitive dimension 'knowledge', affective dimension 'attitudes', and behavioural dimension 'skills'. To move further, Chen and Starosta (2000) believe that in language learning, cultural competence goes beyond a basic acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. According to them, it refers to individual's ability to fully understand and interpret cultural nuances, non-verbal signs, and to modify one's communication style to suit diverse cultural environments. It is, in fact, a vital element in the success of cross-cultural communication.

To sum up, the acquisition of cultural competence in language learning is an essential skill that comprises a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components that contribute to understanding others from diverse cultural backgrounds and interacting with them, particularly within the field of language use. The process entails identifying and comprehending cultural nuances, adapting communication methods, and acquiring of knowledge of the products, customs, and viewpoints of the target culture.

Despite the historical popularity of traditional approaches to language learning, they still face a number of difficulties as they often rely on dictating grammatical rules. These latter have a negative impact on the acquisition and use of language in authentic situations. Joining this idea, scholars outline the following challenges associated with these approaches:

Traditional language approaches have been criticised for not being able to provide learners with the needed skills to practise the target language in real situations. In this vein, Rivers (1981) points out, "traditional language learning methods tend to focus on abstract language rules and structure, leaving learners ill-prepared to function effectively in authentic, communicative contexts" (p. 47).

They have also been criticised for prioritising grammar over communication. In this regard, Chomsky (1965) claims that they "create

learners who can analyse language but struggle to converse and communicate effectively in the target language" (p. 109). This latter is considered as a serious issue for foreign language learners who must communicate effectively in the target setting.

They also neglect the cultural context of the target language. Garcia (2017) points out, "cultural elements are frequently side-lined in favour of linguistic aspects, hindering learners' ability to understand and adapt to cultural nuances in language use" (p. 235).

They disregard the use of technology, which is considered as an essential parameter in today's world. Warschauer (1996) stresses the need to "integrate technology to enhance language learning, a dimension many traditional approaches fail to explore" (p. 08).

Traditional approaches to language learning are known for being prescriptive, repetitive and rigid. These latter often lead students to lose their motivation. In this vein, Dorney (2001) believes that "traditional approaches may stifle learner enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation to master the language" (p. 141).

All in all, the neglected elements are essential for today's globalised world, where motivation, technology, culture and communication skills are needed to equip learners with the needed skills and competences to fulfil different tasks and achieve career advancement. ESP is believed to be an adequate solution to overcome the already-mentioned challenges. ESP is an approach to language teaching that considers learners' needs and expectations, either in academic or professional contexts. It emerges as a response to traditional language learning approaches that prioritise proficiency in language, including grammar, over the learners' ability to function adequately in their target settings. It focuses on language as a means of communication in specific disciplines (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). It devotes the lion's share to developing learners' ability to use language in practical situations such as medicine, law and business. This latter could be achieved by applying needs analysis, a crucial element in ESP teaching.

To determine the specific linguistic and communicative needs of learners in professional and academic contexts, according to Jordan (1997), is a must in ESP teaching. The different needs of learners belonging to different contexts lead to the emergence of different fields within ESP teaching. According to Strevens (1988) "ESP teaching is an umbrella concept, encompassing various subfields, including English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and English for Science and Technology (EST)" (p. 40), each of these fields need to tailor specific courses that need specific type of instruction. To sum up, ESP

teaching that aims to respond positively to the learners' needs, including communication, can be regarded as an important approach that bridges the gap between the shortcomings of traditional language learning approaches and the needed skills of learners in different contexts, including the cultural one.

One of the approaches in ESP teaching is integrating cultural content and skills, mainly due to the importance of culture in ESP. It is believed that language cannot be separated from its culture and if learners need to be prepared effectively to function adequately in their target settings, it is indispensable for them to be aware of others' cultures and their use and impact on the target language. At this level, it can be stated that learners should be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication within the target setting, besides the different etiquettes and the sociocultural norms of those contexts. To offer a general overview of the target language's culture enables learners to understand how language is used and its impact when it is associated with its culture.

In ESP teaching, the importance of integrating cultural content and skills can be summarised as follows:

- It ensures effective communication among learners, professionals involved in different contexts.
- It enables learners to be aware of cultural differences and avoid misunderstanding. Joining this idea, Kramsch (1998) reveals that it promotes "an awareness of cultural differences, an ability to tolerate ambiguity, and a readiness to suspend judgment" (p. 57).
- It helps students to be involved in authentic situations. In other words, by acknowledging the cultural aspect of language, learners can use language more authentically and proficiently within professional environments.
- It promotes respect, i.e., it does not only "facilitates smoother interactions but also helps in building stronger, more meaningful professional relationships" (Kim & Kim, 2019, p. 142)

In brief, incorporating cultural content and skills within ESP teaching acknowledges the mutually beneficial connection between language and culture. It provides learners with the essential cultural skills for efficient communication, professional achievement, and global proficiency.

One of the major sub-disciplines of ESP is Business English. Pickett (1989) states that Business English "is a technical language defined by the activity, occupation subject and situation" (p. 05) of its users. It is often described as the direct outcome of globalisation and people's need to

communicate effectively to fulfil business tasks, and the dynamic role played by English in international trade. Cultural competence is regarded as a vital parameter to fulfil different tasks, including chiefly business communication and interaction among professionals. It is, in fact, the key to cross-cultural differences. The importance of cultural competence in Business English can be summarised as follows:

- It serves as an assisting tool in communication, which enhances collaboration. According to Ding (2013) "When professionals understand the cultural nuances and communication styles of their international partners and clients, they can build trust, facilitate smooth interactions, and establish stronger business relationships" (p. 122).
- It helps in avoiding misunderstanding among professionals. Ward (2016) believes that "the lack of cultural competence can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and even offense, potentially jeopardizing business deals or relationships" (p. 67).
- It opens the door for international exchanges and for professionals who seek to have a career growth. Kim & Slocum (2008) explain that "understanding and adapting to local customs and preferences enable businesses to tailor products and services effectively, making them more competitive and appealing to international consumers" (p. 238).
- It promotes leadership and management. In this vein, in multinational corporations, managers should be "culturally competent to guide diverse teams and navigate complex international business environments. Cultural competence enables them to make decisions that are culturally sensitive and well-received" (Lau, 2016, p. 291).
- It reduces risks. In other words, cultural competence helps "organisations anticipate and mitigate risks associated with operating in diverse cultural settings. It minimizes the chances of legal or ethical dilemmas that may arise due to cultural misunderstandings" (Gudykunst, 2017, p. 111).
- It contributes to building a positive reputation of the corporations' professionals belong to. This, in turn, contributes to "the development of a strong brand image and can lead to greater customer loyalty and trust" (Rugimbana, et al., 2013, p. 62).

In summary, cultural competence in Business English is crucial due to its ability to improve communication, prevent misinterpretations, allow

market expansion, aid in effective leadership, minimise risks, and establish a favourable brand reputation. In the context of a globalised company landscape, possessing cultural competence is not only advantageous but an essential requirement for achieving long-term success.

3. Methods

A mixed-methods approach is used in this study. It combines both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. It is believed to be the most adequate approach to explore and shed light on the importance of cultural competence in Business English and its integration within ESP teaching. According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2018), a mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation leading to understanding the research question from different angles. In this case, understanding the cultural dimension from different perspectives, including that of ESP practitioners and their Business English learners.

In this study, the questionnaire administered to Business English learners is considered quantitative. It aims to collect data related to learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of cultural competence and whether it impacts their actual and future careers. The semi-structured interview with ESP practitioners working in Business English context is considered as the qualitative component. It aims to explore ESP practitioners' perspectives, experiences, and strategies they adopt to ensure an effective integration of cultural content and skills within ESP teaching. Data gathered from both sources are analysed systematically. The findings collected from quantitative and qualitative approaches are integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the need to integrate cultural competence in Business English teaching. As a final element, the use of a mixed-methods approach is advantageous. Still, it has its limitations that are acknowledged throughout this study.

Below is a comprehensive overview of various data collection methods used to gather the needed information. In the first phase of this research, quantitative data were gathered through a questionnaire administered to forty Business English learners enrolled in their second year Masters at the Commercial Sciences department of Mustapha Stambouli-Mascara University, Algeria. The use of a questionnaire was motivated by the fact that it allows for assessing how Business English learners perceive the importance of cultural competence in Business English, besides its impacts on their career growth. The questionnaire was divided into four rubrics: learners' profile, learners' perception of cultural competence, self-reported cultural competence, learners' challenges, and learners' expectations.

In this study, a probability sampling method was used. The random selection technique is believed to be the most adequate as it is used to ensure that each member of the population had an equal chance to participate in the study. It allows for sample representativeness and, later on, for the generalisation of findings.

In the second phase of this research, qualitative data were gathered through a semi-structured interview with three ESP practitioners working at the Faculty of Economics, Commercial Sciences and Management Sciences of Mustapha Stambouli-Mascara University, Algeria. The semi-structured interview was mainly selected because it allows for a deep understanding of the importance of cultural competence from the angle of the language teachers involved in Business English context. Their attitudes, perceptions, experiences, besides the adopted approaches and strategies related to cultural content and skills to fill the gap between traditional language learning approaches and Business English learners need to acquire cultural competence. The interview was divided into the following rubrics: teachers' profile, their perception of the importance of cultural competence, the difficulties they face in incorporating it, their teaching methods to bridge the gap, and the effectiveness of their approaches in promoting cultural competence, besides their suggestions.

For teachers, a non-random selection technique was used. This could be explained by the fact that including all the three teachers working at the faculty may shed light on the perceptions, practices and recommendations for future ESP researchers working in the same context. As a final consideration, data gathered from different sources were analysed, reported and discussed below.

4. Results and Discussions

This research aimed to explore the importance of cultural competence in Business English context from the angles of Business English learners as well as ESP teachers. The research findings provide numerous substantial insights. Data collected from Business English learners' questionnaire revealed that the informants were adults aged between 21 and 30 years. They were enrolled at the commercial sciences department as second year Master students. This means they are adult learners who should be aware of their needs and share the same context, i.e., Business context.

The second rubric was related to their perception of the importance of cultural competence in Business English context. In this vein, the entire sample agreed upon the importance of this latter in their context. Business

English learners are aware of the vital role of cultural competence in ensuring effective professional communication. The learners' strong awareness of the importance of understanding and navigating cultural differences in the business context can be regarded as a first stone in Business English tailor course for a successful career development.

Despite their strong awareness of the importance of cultural competence, learners reveal that their courses need to incorporate the cultural elements effectively. In this regard, 50% disagree with the statement saying that their Business English courses integrate cultural competence. This result revealed that their expectations regarding the integration of this important competence still need to be met. 80% of the learners also agreed that they are not well prepared to navigate across different cultures. This revealed that the Business English course does not only meet their expectations but also does not prepare them effectively while equipping them with the needed knowledge and skills to function adequately in different cultural contexts. This latter needs further consolidation in future courses. It needs to be taken seriously by ESP practitioners to avoid the negative impact it may have on the learners' future careers.

Informants in their third rubric revealed that they are not sure of which area of cultural competence they feel most confident with. This important result suggests several insights into different elements, including their inadequate preparation, and lack of specialisation, which need further improvement. In other words, the lack of clarity among Business English learners who are aware of their needs to incorporate culture in their Business English learning can be regarded as an essential parameter that needs careful consideration from both elements teachers and learners to ensure an academic and future professional career growth through an effective self-reflection.

When asked about the kind of challenges they faced or may face, all the informants agreed upon the following issues:

- The lack of language proficiency, especially at the level of listening and speaking skills;
- The lack of communication skills;
- The lack of business etiquette;
- Misunderstanding of others from different cultures.

The above-mentioned issues are a serious obstacle for Business English learners who need to communicate effectively across cultures and perform different business tasks, including negotiation and decision-making. They can also be a foundation for a Business English course that aims to

overcome these issues in a highly structured way. At this level, a course that includes ethics, etiquette in business, negotiation and conflict resolution, leadership and team management, global awareness, IT knowledge, and effective cross-cultural communication is believed is of worthy significance for Business English learners.

As for their expectations, informants stressed the need to learn within a meaningful context 'authentic' situation. They also expected that the Business English course would devote more efforts to practical case studies and simulations where they can gain and consolidate their knowledge. They also expected that the content of the course would help them increase their self-confidence while using the English language within their academic and professional contexts. As a final element, informants associated the acquisition of cultural competence to better work opportunities, that they aspired for.

Data gathered from the semi-structured interview unveiled significant findings. Results showed that the three language teachers working at the Faculty of Economics, Commercial Sciences and Management Sciences of Mustapha Stambouli-Mascara University, Algeria, have different teaching backgrounds and qualifications; two have Master's degree; one in English for Specific Purposes and the other in Didactics, with three years of teaching experience at this department. The third has a doctorate in British Civilisation with more than ten years of teaching experience in the same department.

The findings indicated that the first two teachers are newcomers to the field, while the third teacher has significant experience. This suggests that the novice status of the first two teachers, due to their lack of experience, could be seen as a potential obstacle for both the teachers and their students. Additionally, there is a related issue concerning their areas of expertise; only one teacher is recognised as an ESP specialist due to his academic background, holding a Master's degree in ESP. In contrast, the others are considered General English instructors working within an ESP context. This situation may have a negative impact on their performance as ESP practitioners who should know how to manage well and incorporate different elements, including culture, within the target situation.

Results gathered from the second rubric in this interview, i.e., ESP teachers' perception of the importance of cultural competence, indicated that the three language teachers are fully aware of the importance of cultural competence in an ESP context. This latter is regarded as an essential parameter that may contribute to setting a positive environment where various cultural aspects can be explored and reflected upon. This could also be perceived as a positive element in developing courses that aim to facilitate intercultural communication, reduce misunderstanding, and avoid tensions

and conflicts. It is also seen as a positive step towards responding positively to Business English learners' needs and expectations.

When asked about the key differences between traditional language learning and ESP teaching, one of the informants stated that "we were taught grammar, linguistics, phonetics and not culture", another informant said that "we were not aware of the existence of different contexts and the need to address the requirements of every single context, we have discovered this once started teaching in ESP context". The third informant stressed on the need to conduct a needs analysis before starting teaching "which is an absent parameter in traditional language learning approaches". Teachers were also asked about the role of ESP in teaching cultural competence. All the informants agreed upon the fact that ESP teaching is more context-specific. This latter leads to the design of courses that fit the particularities of this context. For them, ESP teaching offers a meaningful context where the target culture is explored, and cultural competence is promoted.

As for the kind of difficulties language teachers face when incorporating cultural competence in a Business English context, informants' answers are summarised as follows:

- The lack of training;
- the lack of time;
- the absence of a practical syllabus that should be offered by the administration;
- the limited exposure to authentic situations;
- the issue of balancing language, content and culture.

To sum up, addressing these challenges requires comprehensive professional development, curriculum support, and pedagogical strategies tailored to the unique demands of teaching cultural competence in a business context.

In order to address carefully the already mentioned issues and bridge the gap between traditional language learning approaches and the needs of Business English learners to incorporate cultural elements within their context, the informants were asked about the different teaching methods and strategies they incorporate. In this regard, they mentioned the use of different exercises where they stimulate real-life situations to promote intercultural communication via role-plays. They also revealed the use of open discussions where they select different topics related to cross-cultural communication issues and provide learners with ethics and possible solutions to overcome these issues. They also mentioned using online resources due to the lack of time and limited exposure to authentic situations.

These insights suggest a practical approach to promoting intercultural understanding and cross-cultural communication among Business English students. The informants' selected teaching methods reflect a holistic approach to fostering cultural competence in their students. They engage learners through practical exercises, encourage open discussions on cross-cultural issues, and leverage online resources to overcome the limitations of time and exposure to authentic situations. These strategies collectively contribute to preparing Business English students for effective intercultural communication in the globalised world of business.

As a final connotation, teachers were asked to provide suggestions for other ESP teachers who would like to improve cultural competence instruction. They insisted on having formal training before being involved in the ESP context. They also suggested that teachers should be open-minded and flexible to adapt to different teaching contexts. They advised other teachers to create their teaching networks to help each other. For them, collaboration with other members from the same professional community is a key concept in ESP teaching. It helps them overcome issues and design a practical syllabus that incorporates ESP learners' needs and expectations.

Results from the different sources revealed that both parameters, i.e., teachers and learners, are fully aware of the importance of cultural competence in Business English context. Cultural competence should not be perceived as an additional element in language teaching but as a central focus of ESP practitioners and their learners. Recognising the challenges, they face either to communicate effectively in cross-cultural contexts for learners or to have a practical syllabus besides authentic materials that contribute to establishing a simulated context for teachers are regarded as important steps towards reviewing teachers' practices that should fit their learners' needs and expectations besides their own needs as ESP practitioners.

Despite teachers' efforts to incorporate different teaching approaches and strategies in Business English context to promote cultural competence, many learners felt that their courses were falling short in this aspect. Open discussions, the simulated contexts and the use of a limited type of authentic materials remain insufficient to raise their self-confidence, foster cross-cultural communication and achieve better job opportunities. Therefore, the need for practical teaching approaches and syllabus in Business English that take into consideration the important role played by IT devices as a facilitating tool to cross different nations and cultures is perceived as a must to better prepare learners for the cultural complexities of the global business world.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrated the vital importance of cultural competence in Business English context. It revealed the different challenges associated with traditional language learning approaches, besides the significant role of ESP teaching in effectively bridging this gap. In today's globalised business world, cultural competence is the cornerstone of professional success as it is no longer considered an additional element to the mastery of language. As ESP practitioners, we must respond to the call to action by developing tailored syllabus that integrate effectively cultural competence into language teaching. We can help ESP students negotiate cross-cultural relationships efficiently by including practical simulations, authentic materials, role-plays, etc. Encouraging cultural self-reflection, open debate, and facilitating interaction with diverse cultural perspectives should also be taken into serious consideration. By adopting these strategies, we equip our learners with the needed skills and knowledge they seek to function adequately in their actual and future contexts.

This study contributed significantly to the need to incorporate cultural competence in ESP teaching. Still, a number of limitations should be acknowledged for the credibility of the study. The sample size is regarded as the first parameter. This study was conducted with a limited group of Business English learners and ESP teachers. It provided valuable insights that cannot be generalised to a larger Business population operating in different contexts and holding diverse perspectives. These latter can be perceived as the second parameter. In other words, different contexts, including local, regional and international, differ in terms of cultural components. ESP teaching needs to adjust its courses to fit those contexts' particularities to integrate cultural competence effectively. The third parameter is related to the time factor; for a practical exploration of different aspects of the cultural component, a long-term project can be considered an important suggestion.

To address the above-mentioned limitations, further research is needed. Researchers could use a larger population, diverse contexts and different research approaches and tools to gather the needed data. They may also compare and contrast different cultural contexts to offer a broader understanding to their learners. Researchers can also deal with the different available assessment tools and strategies and how assessing cultural competence may help their learners to function adequately in their target settings. Adopting these future directions opens the door for us, the ESP

practitioners, to update our knowledge and practices to equip learners with the needed knowledge and to meet their needs and expectations.

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