

Can a “You-attitude” involve true empathy in global business communication?

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Abstract

This study aims to present a conceptual paradigm for global business communication research, with special reference to the empathic concept of “you-consideration” as an important tool in effective cross-cultural communication, in contrast to the non-empathic “you attitude.” In order to develop this study the following basic precepts of cross-cultural business communication are introduced and discussed: (1) Linguistic capability and communication competency are different things, (2) Linguistic skill alone does not guarantee effective business communication, and (3) Westerners and Asians have different communication styles. The American-born “You-attitude” is bound to fail in cross-cultural communication because such communication is only “decoration.” A “You-attitude” generally means that a sender chooses words and phrases in such a way that the messages to be conveyed are more likely to be received. It is concerned with styles of expression and is mostly a technique for manipulating people with carefully chosen words and phrases. It inevitably fails to reach the other person in a sincere spirit of true empathy.

Introduction

A “You-attitude” is not concerned with close personal identification. Concerned as it is only with styles of expression, it is merely a technique for manipulating people with carefully chosen words and phrases. The problem is that a “You-attitude” is bound to fail in cross-cultural communication – because such communication is only “decoration.” It inevitably fails to reach out to the other person in a sincere spirit of true empathy. In other words, “You-attitude” is merely an intermediary between self and other; the differences between the two actually remain as before. The intention of the sender of the communication remains self-centered – with the goal of making the other person yield to the sender’s interests, rights, and assertions.

In contrast, a “*You-consideration*” (Ozaki, 1996) is a mental attitude that attempts to suppress self-centered judgments. With a “*You-consideration*,” the sender attempts to keep criticism, observations, and analyses to a minimum. The sender of a communication thus attempts to transcend all forms of opposition, enmity, and conflict that might arise. At its highest level, the sender and the recipient become (in a sense) “one.” The spirit of “*You-consideration*” is

required for effective empathic cross-cultural business communication.

In discussing business communication across cultures, the problem arises of differing concepts, translations, and values, because language and definitions are specific to particular cultures. For example, important cross-cultural differences in meaning often become lost in translation. Speakers of a particular language often make assumptions about what is universal based on their own inability to imagine doing without a certain concept or adopting a different one, and translations are unable to reflect these fundamental conceptual differences.

Both Western and Asian businesspeople inevitably face problems of misunderstanding stemming from the differences in their cultural backgrounds and in fundamental conceptualizations. They will need to learn techniques to avoid awkward miscommunication problems that will be directly related to costs and successes of international business and management. This study will provide assistance for international businesspeople and yield practical steps for them to solve problems. It will also provide researchers and teachers of global business communication with practical guidelines for effective business English and communication teaching.

You-Attitude : Its Concept and Problems

When teaching “Doing business with the Japanese” at Doshisha Business School’s Global MBA course in summer, 2011, I asked the class, consisting of ten students from nine countries, if they understood what this statement implied :

- They have recently bought a condominium of 150 m² in Azabu, Tokyo.

None of them noted that this statement implies “They are extremely rich.” Many of them, including a student from the UK, didn’t know what “condominium” was, and an American student could not imagine what an area of 150 square meters looks like. None of them was familiar with the average size of an apartment in Japan, which is about 80 to 100 square meters. All of them, of whom none had lived in Tokyo before, were unfamiliar with the place “Azabu,” which actually is one of the wealthiest residential areas in Tokyo, where embassies, consulates, private houses of diplomats, and rich people are located.

If put into BELF, business English as a lingua franca, which is ideal for cross-cultural and global business communication, the original statement should be written as follows :

- They have bought an apartment of 150 m² in Azabu, an upper class residential area in Tokyo. Given that the average size of an apartment in Japan is about 80 to 100 square meters, they

must be very wealthy people.

Suppose that the audience were all Koreans, the statement then should be translated into the following for them to get a clear picture of its meaning :

- They have bought an apartment of 45 pyung in Azabu, an upper class residential area like Apgujeong-dong, Kangnam, Seoul. Since 25 to 30 pyung is the average size of a Japanese apartment, it is quite a large apartment. They must be very wealthy people.

Authors of business English textbooks often suggest that writers should give facts without making their own interpretations or drawing conclusions ; by reporting facts you can let your readers make their own judgment. However, as these examples clearly show, in the case of global or cross-cultural communication it can't be always true.

In the study of communication the gap between the expert and non-expert is called “ignorance distance.” Global business communication in English is full of such communicative gaps, where the expert may be referred to as a native and one not an expert as a foreigner. There are lot of things existing in a given culture with which a native is familiar, but the same things and ideas can be classified as unique for a foreigner because he or she is not familiar with the local culture, mindset, religion, and so on.

Even if he or she uses a common language such as English, discourse that exemplifies you-attitude may fail to convey the writer's idea, wish, and consideration of others when communication takes place across nations and cultures. The writer may lack sufficient knowledge of the reader's point of view and perspectives because of the ignorance distance between himself or herself and the receiver of the message. Before we discuss these issues that make our intercultural business communication difficult, let us see what “You-Attitude” is and what problems it may cause when and if it is used as a principle for today's global business communication.

Locker (1995) defined “You-Attitude” as “a style of writing which looks at things from the reader's point of view, emphasizing what the reader wants to know, respecting the reader's intelligence, and protecting the reader's ego.” The purpose of communication is to create a common purpose and understanding that transcend the barriers that exist between the self and the other. As Evald (1985) observed regarding sales communications :

Information and image communicated between sender and receiver become, in communication, commodities to be exchanged between seller and buyer. Both the seller and the buyer find value in the information and the image ; then communication starts. Both are on equal footing ; neither one

is a winner nor a loser. Both can share in the common benefits from genuine communication.

Ewald and Van (2003) posit three features that represent you-attitude as a convention of business discourse. These features include “specialized pronoun use, preference for positive wording, and emphasis on reader benefit. The purpose of this three-fold strategy in conventional business discourse is to decrease reader resistance while simultaneously increasing reader cooperation. The goal is to facilitate the reader in acting positively on the recommendations, requirements, or requests presented in the message. In direct-mail packages, that action constructs the reader as consumer.”

Furthermore, Rodman (2001) introduces two guidelines proposed by Locker and Reep as follows, first with Locker’s :

- Focus not on what you do for the reader, but on what the reader receives or can do. In positive or neutral situations, stress what the reader wants to know.
- Refer to the reader’s request or order specifically.
- Don’t talk about your own feelings unless you’re sure the reader wants to know how you feel.
- Don’t tell readers how they feel or will react.
- In positive situations, use you more often than I. Use we when it includes the reader.
- In negative situations, avoid the word you. Protect the reader’s ego. Use passive verbs and impersonal expressions to avoid assigning blame (Locker, 1997, p.34).

Here are Reep’s guidelines :

- Put yourself in your reader’s place, and look at the situation from his or her point of view.
- Emphasize your reader’s actions or benefits in a situation.
- Present information as pleasantly as possible.
- Offer a helpful suggestion or appreciative comment when possible.
- Choose words that do not insult or accuse your reader.
- Choose words that are clear and natural, and avoid old-fashioned or legal-sounding phrase. (Reep, 1997, p.362).

“You-Attitude” is often implied in such expressions as “Put yourself in the other person’s shoes,” and “Walk a mile in their shoes,” and so on. However, you have to know their size and shape before you can put yourself in the other person’s shoes. They may be quite different from yours. Moreover, to walk a mile in his or her shoes can be particularly difficult when you walk around out of your own linguistic and cultural territory.

The You-Attitude clearly has some problems. Among them are :

- It is applicable only in the same linguistic group (American people and American English) ;
- It involves a self-centered word trick manipulation which loses its effectiveness when translated into a foreign language ; and
- It is an anachronism, originating in the days of letter writing when the mail order business was at its height in the US.

To illustrate the above “Walk a mile in their shoes” analogy I would like to introduce the following composite story (Kameda, 1996). One day Mr. Honto, a Japanese manager in his middle forties, found a memo left on his office desk. It was from one of his local American employees, who had become a father. The card read, “Mary Roe was born on May 5 at 5 : 50 am. She weighs 7 lbs. and 9.5 oz. and is 19.5 inches long.” Having read this memo, he realized he was unable to get a clear picture of whether or not the baby girl was above or below average in weight and height because of his lack of experience in American culture and unfamiliarity with US weights and measures.

Thus, as Salacuse (1991) writes, “When persons from two different cultures meet for the first time, they generally do not share a common pool of information and assumptions to interpret each other’s statements, actions, and intentions. In short, they do not know the code.” However, people wrongly are apt to assume a commonality of understanding when both speakers use the same language, such as English, as a global lingua franca. This assumption is not always true in the world of cross-cultural business communication.

As Gilsdorf (2002, p.364) claims, “We know that even two speakers *born* to the same language experience only approximate commonality of meaning ; yet we routinely forget to compensate for that fact and end up with cases of bypassing. Internationally, the commonality of understanding can be far more sketchy, and the contextual issues much more complex, than most of us realize.”

This principle of You-Attitude emerged in the US at a time when businesspeople conducted business activities mainly by letters and cables, particularly in the mail order businesses many decades ago. It includes specialized pronoun use, preference for positive wording, and emphasis on reader benefit. The purpose of this strategy in conventional business discourse, as noted above, is to decrease reader resistance while simultaneously increasing reader cooperation. The goal is to motivate the reader to act positively on the recommendations, requirements, or requests presented in the message.

However, this goal hints at the writer’s self-interested ideas or efforts to persuade the reader to take an action that the writer wishes. The You-Attitude, in US business communication, really is me-oriented. I doubt if this you-oriented principle, designed for a people sharing

the same language, American English, within the limited area of one nation state, can also work well in a world where people use varieties of English or so called World Englishes in addition to their own languages.

Today's Business Writing and Differences in Values Across Cultures

When we look at contemporary business writing, we can see much wider varieties of writings than exist in conventional and traditional business letters. This kind of writing has the following features :

- A wide variety of writings such as letters, emails, FBs, tweets, company information, CEO's addresses either on website or in print ;
- Transmission into the world across nations and cultures ; and
- A wide variety of languages and cultures among the receivers of such writing.

When we discuss global business communication, we need to emphasize that each businessperson thinks and responds according to the way he or she was brought up, that is, according to his or her respective cultural background. Regardless of whether or not we use business English as a lingua franca, a foreign businessperson judges the merit of a business proposal or transaction largely from the standpoint of his or her own cultural, moral, and social values and not that of the other party.

If everybody in a society thinks something should be good, the society will create a situation where that is in fact the case. For example, a statement like "Be yourself" or "Stand up and be counted" has very strong individualistic value in the US. However, in another society, such as Korea or Japan, where harmony is a dominant value, "Not to stand out so much", "To work with the group," "Respect your elders," and so on are typical collective values. Some of these are expressed in maxims, in sayings, in advice, and so on in these countries.

Suppose that if a senior Korean were to invite an American for tea, the tea is served, and it is offered to him. This would involve placing the tea before the American, and the American would ask for some sugar, drink the tea, and so on. The Korean might be a little bit upset by that behavior. Why? It is because the American did not wait to be invited to take the tea. On the other hand, if an American invited a Korean for coffee, ... and the Korean guest waited to be invited to take the tea, the American might be little bit annoyed and say to himself, "Why are you Koreans so stuffy, so stand-offish? Please help yourself."

The "help yourself" would be a strong American value, whereas in the case of the Ko-

rean value, perhaps "act the guest and wait to be invited" would be a value, where there is a clear distinction between who is host and who is guest. We can say the same thing in the case of Japanese values. So even when you have a common language, BELF or Business English as a lingua franca, you can have differences in values that influence behavior and interpretations of behavior, which causes some misunderstandings.

A businessperson measures the advantages or disadvantages of a business association on the basis of reasoning that has been shaped by his or her cultural heritage. Therefore, the point to remember is the enormous importance of considering the other person's particular outlook on the basis of his or her cultural background before trying to communicate your thoughts or ideas in BELF. In short, put yourself in the other person's shoes.

When writing a business email, or even speaking in English to a foreigner, who himself or herself uses English as BELF, we must always remember that people of different cultural backgrounds look at the same thing differently. Wilson (1975) aptly put this lesson into the following statement: "What may be perfectly acceptable to a Japanese, may be totally unacceptable to a Frenchman, German, Russian or Italian. One man's bread, as the saying goes, is often another man's poison."

Next, let us see some examples of anti-direct expression practices (implicit and vague verbalization) prevailing in this part of the world, the East Asia or Korea and Japan. The Western world is a pro-direct expression culture valuing explicit and precise verbalization customs and practice. It is in the Western tradition to call a spade a spade or to say what you mean, and mean what you say.

In Korea as well as Japan, however, this is not a linguistic tradition. Of the many features of Korean language habits that might be mentioned, the following is of special importance (De Mente, 2004, p.123).

The communication based on intuition, "reading" the other person's mind and verbal cues. *Kibun*, meaning "feelings" or "mood," is one of the most important facets of Korean psychology.

For Koreans to develop and maintain harmonious relationships, they must be able to accurately "read" the *kibun* of others, adjust their own expectations and behavior accordingly, and at the same time protect their own feelings. The Korean standard for communicating with others is expressed in the phrase *uishin jonshin*, which literally means "from my heart to your heart" or "heart to heart." In its Korean context, it is a kind of cultural telepathy. In Japan we also have a similar saying (as a matter of fact, as written in Chinese characters, the Korean

and the Japanese phrases are exactly the same.) A saying in Japan is *ishin denshin*, which means, “What the mind thinks, the heart transmits.” It is a type of communicating Japanese are naturally familiar with, and they often run into difficulty in dealing with foreigners because they take for granted that a foreigner is on the same wavelength and is “receiving” their messages.

The Korean national mindset and etiquette has become homogenized to an extraordinary degree – to the point, in fact, that much of the communication among Koreans is nonverbal. People can anticipate the actions and read the body language of others more or less like an open book. The process of divining the intentions of others without resorting to words came to be known as *nunchi*, which translates roughly as “to measure with the eye,” or figuratively, “to read minds” – something that can be labeled “cultural telepathy” (De Mente, 2003).

In contrast, the Western world exhibits a pro-direct expression culture, involving explicit or precise verbalization practices. As noted above, it is in the Western tradition to call a spade a spade or to say what you mean, and mean what you say. In Japan, however, this is not a linguistic tradition. As Condon and Masumoto (2011, p.25) observed, situational factors govern all communications. Here is what they write :

The air or emotional atmosphere, vague but palpable feelings – these are central in the context of interpersonal relations and communication in Japan. To “read the air” and sense what others are thinking or feeling without having to ask is an art, a mark of maturity, and an essential quality of leadership and management.

For Japanese to develop and maintain harmonious relationships, they must be able to accurately “read” the *feelings* of others and adjust their own expectations and behavior accordingly. Explicit and precise verbalizations of feelings often are unacceptable.

Ishin denshin, an important practice in Japan, is a kind of cultural telepathy. Because they are products of an intensely personal and homogenized culture, Japanese often know what the other person is thinking without the use of words and can respond accordingly. The process of predicting the others’ intentions without resorting to spoken or written words is known as *sasshi* (noun form) or *sassuru* (verb form), which can figuratively be translated as “reading the other person’s mind.” *Sasshi* is at the heart of *ishin denshin*.

Communicating with Individuals

When we turn our attention to the issue of cross-cultural business communication, we

have to keep in mind that we communicate not with single nations and cultures, mere combinations of territory and history. Nor we communicate with the people in general of these nations and cultures, but with individuals, who may differ from us in cultural practices but who share with us a common human nature.

We communicate using English as our global business language not with a cold ferroconcrete building, our would-be "customer" in a foreign city, but with a human being who has the same warmth in his or her body and in his or her heart as we have. The thoughts and emotions of all human beings are all of the same kind regardless of any other differences. Your counterpart in business communication, no matter where he or she comes from, understands consideration for others, cries when he or she is sad, and laughs when he or she is happy, just as you do. Yes, they surely do. And if they do, they can practice what Americans call "putting yourself into other guy's shoes," and we can say "put yourself into the other's being" even across cultures. When we feel cold, we think of others and presume they also feel cold. If we are hungry, we know others must be also hungry.

Oriental philosophy explains this relationship of self and other as follows : If one person and another are in opposition to each other, and if these two beings are entirely different entities, it is hardly possible for the person to be considerate of, sympathetic with, and feel consideration for, the other person. However, these two people are linked together with an invisible string. Oneself and the other are in opposition to each other, but yet they are not two completely different entities. They are not separate individuals, but are eternally linked together somehow in a way that we cannot see.

However, if the person should entertain ill feelings for the other person, he or she can't be considerate of the other person. Only if and when such ill feelings against the other disappear from his or her heart, can he or she put his or her complete self into the other person's being, and then they can both become as one. That a person entertains ill feelings for others means that he or she has yet to put aside isolating his or her self. If you can learn to forget yourself and truly put yourself into the other's shoes, the self becomes a formless thing, although the now "forgotten" self is still one's true self. Where there is no "yourself," all becomes your SELF, one big SELF. Physically, there is a natural distinction between self and other, but spiritually there is no distinction between them. There is only one big self. This is the complete merger of self and other. Berlo (1960) referred to this in saying :

The goal of interaction is the merger of self and other, a complete ability to anticipate, predict, and behave in accordance with the joint needs of self and other. We can define interaction as the ideal of communication, the goal of human communication.

Zen also teaches us “when we forget ourselves, we actually are the true activity of the big existence, or reality itself. When we realize this fact, there is no problem whatsoever in this world, and we can enjoy our life without feeling any difficulties (Suzuki, 1970).”

While “You-Attitude” is a matter of technique of handling people with carefully chosen words, this approach assumes the premise that we human beings are self-centered creatures, that basically we are selfish beings, and that we like ourselves better than we like anyone else. This approach presupposes the affirmation of the self alone. I think, however, the complete merger of self and other can’t be realized by affirmation of the self alone. It can be realized only by the negation of the self.

The thing that actuates others is not a mere technique, but a person’s sincerest motives that derive from love and consideration for others. It is a living lie to simply and mechanically persuade others to do what you want them to do under the appearance of pleasing them if you entertain ill feelings against them. This is not true empathy. Let your ill feelings against others disappear first. Try not to be so egocentric. In order to do these things, try to forget your small self, try to be in one with others, in one big self, based on the quintessence of communication, that is, the sharing of the human-in-commonness transcending the confrontation of self and other.

The Nature of True Empathy

As Berlo (1960, p.119) observes, “when we develop expectations, when we make predictions, we are assuming that we have skill in what the psychologists call *empathy – the ability to project ourselves into other people’s personalities.*” Himstreet and Batty (1990) defined empathy as “the mental projection of one person’s consciousness into the feeling of another.” These authors explained that :

. . . empathy is the ability to put yourself in another’s shoes and to anticipate the other person’s reaction to situations. Notice that this definition of empathy involves two skills : First, an empathetic person can identify the feelings or emotional state of another ; and second, the person can respond to this state effectively as a result of the accurate identification.

Here are oft-quoted statements to show how important it is for you to put yourself into the other person’s shoes ; one is advocated by Confucius in his Analects compiled 500 years BC, and the other is by Jesus Christ in his Golden Rule. The only difference is that one is written in negative imperative and the other affirmative imperative.

- Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. (Confucius)
- Do unto others what you would have them do unto you. (Jesus Christ)

It was appropriate for these two great men to have said these things in ancient times, when the scope of peoples’ movements and actions were rather limited. However, these teachings have become somewhat obsolete in this era of globalization when so many people with so many mindsets move around in the world. These sayings should be modified along the lines of Berlo in his *The Process of Communication* (1960, p.177), a bible for all students of business communication. He stated as follows :

Even the Golden Rule might well be amended. The Golden Rule tells us to “treat others as you would have them treat you.” This is an egocentric admonition. In our dealings with people, particularly those from a different culture, it is more useful to say “treat others as they would like to be treated – which may be quite different from the way you would like to be treated.”

This is the nature of true empathy, I believe. In practicing empathy across cultures it is important to remember this human dimension in attempting to “put oneself into another’s shoes.” It is important to share real human emotions as they, not you, feel them. The following letter to the editor in *Asahi Shimbun* (1988) by a 74 year-old lady illustrates the true nature of empathy between an old married couple :

My husband came home from his Esperanto class in the evening. Considering he must have been tired, I made and brought a cup of hot Oshiruko (sweet red-bean broth) to him. “Oh? Did I say anything?” said he. When I said back, “No, nothing,” he further said, “I was just thinking that I would like to have Shiruko in a little while.” Feeling very happy, I later brought a cup of green tea to him, seeing a proper time. Once again I saw the same look of pleasure and satisfaction on his face. Whom should I thank for this happiness?

We can see the complete merger of self and other, the goal of interaction, between lines of this poetic letter. Every one of us, no matter where he or she comes from, is granted the talent to exercise this type of empathy toward others. I believe that the sort of empathy illustrated in this story can be used in business communication. Even if one person and another are in opposition to each other, it is still possible for one person to be considerate of, and sympathize with, the other. The two are linked with an “invisible string.” They are not alien beings ; rather, they are linked together in their common humanity.

When we transcend the confrontation of self and other and when our counterpart and we become one big self, our love of ourselves becomes, as it is, our love of others. And only

when this is realized, the Golden Rule “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you” can work successfully without any qualifications like “treat others as they would like to be treated”—which may be quite different from the way you would like to be treated. To persuade others to do certain things under the appearance of pleasing them is not true empathy. Real empathy requires a transcendence of the confrontation between self and other. It requires sincere application of “*You-Consideration*.”

The term *You-Consideration* is not the translation of You-Attitude. It was advocated by the late Professor Ozaki (1975) and involves linguistic and communicative behavior that is motivated from the standpoint of the oneness of self and other. He originated both the idea and the term. He propounded this concept because he believed oneness of self and other is truly required for successful cross-cultural business communication in English. It is a mental attitude that attempts to suppress self-centered judgments.

One person can never really be another person. And it is difficult to understand all the factors that characterize a particular culture unless one lives in that culture. However, with a genuine desire to understand, it is still possible to be sensitive to the feelings of another person and to see a situation from his or her perspective.

The simplest way to empathize in communication is to imagine: If I were the recipient of the message I am about to transmit, how would I react? This is especially important when communicating across nations and across cultures. The sender should always assume that the recipient of the message might have different understandings and images of what is said. This being so, the sender should provide additional information to ensure that the recipient’s understanding is enhanced, and therefore more likely to be in accordance with what the sender intended (Kameda, 2005).

I believe that you can practice this simple way by adopting the words by Saint-Exupery (*Quotations for Speeches* by Daintith & Stibbs, 1992, p.78), the author of *The Little Prince*, who said “To love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking together in the same direction.” To share a perspective on things, it is necessary for partners to stand next to one another and look in the same direction. If businesspeople are empathetic with their foreign counterparts, the messages of both will become easier to understand.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the importance of empathy, aiming at presenting a conceptual paradigm for global business communication research with special reference to the empathic

concept of “*You-consideration*” as an important tool in effective cross-cultural communication, in contrast to the non-empathic “you attitude.”

In order to develop this conceptual study the following conceptual ideas of cross-cultural business communication were introduced and discussed: (1) linguistic capability and communication competency are different things, (2) linguistic skill alone does not guarantee effective business communication, and (3) Westerners and Asians, particularly Koreans and Japanese, who share a similar language style, have different communication styles.

The findings of this research suggest that the American-born “You-attitude” is bound to fail in cross-cultural communication because such communication is only “decoration.” A “You-attitude” generally means that a sender chooses words and phrases in such a way that the messages to be conveyed are more likely to be received. It is apt to fail to reach the other person in a sincere spirit of true empathy because You-attitude is merely a method of transposition between self and other. The differences between the two actually remain as before. In the paper some other problems were introduced and analyzed in detail.

“You-attitude” is bound to fail in cross-cultural communication – because such communication is only decoration (in the sense of being a mere rhetorical tool) and loses its impact when it is translated into another language. It fails to reach the other person in a sincere spirit of true empathy. In contrast, a “*You-consideration*” is a mental attitude that attempts to suppress self-centered judgments. With a “*You-consideration*,” the sender attempts to keep criticism, observations, and analyses to a minimum. The sender of a communication thus attempts to transcend all forms of opposition, enmity, and conflict that might arise.

Both Western and Asian businesspeople inevitably face problems of misunderstanding stemming from the differences in their cultural backgrounds and in fundamental conceptualizations. They will need to learn techniques to avoid awkward miscommunication problems that will be directly related to costs and lack of success of international business and management.

Within this framework, I have discussed various issues of global business communication difficulties in each chapter. I believe that the result of this study will provide assistance for international business people and yield practical steps for them to solve cross-cultural communication problems. I also hope that this study will provide researchers and teachers of global business communication with practical guidelines for effective business English and communication teaching.

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