

May 2010

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Recommended Citation

Fryer, T. Bruce (2010) "The Language of Business: Organizing Language Instruction for the Citizens in the International Marketplace of the Twenty-first Century," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol1/iss1/2>

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THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS:
ORGANIZING LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION FOR
THE CITIZENS IN THE INTERNATIONAL
MARKETPLACE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

DEFINITION OF TERMS:
WHO ARE TOMORROW'S CITIZENS?

As we proceed through the 1990's toward the twenty-first century, we observe many changes in world economies caused by changing political realities, changing economic circumstances, and their interrelationship.¹ Today we are increasingly more aware of the impact that our economic and political behaviors can have on the biological environment that we share with other human beings and the physical environment that supports us all. All these systems are now linked together more closely than before through high tech information processing systems that allow us to be aware of, and to share in, events and developments all around the globe as never before in the history of mankind. Who are tomorrow's citizens? They are you and I, and the citizens of every nation and province in the world. As Robert Reich, US Secretary of Labor, has asked in two articles, "Who is us?" and "Who is them?" International borders mean less than in the past. What is important is the layered preparation that individuals receive to become productive contributors to the overall community and effective participants in the global marketplace. Only adequate education and experience will allow citizens to be productive. It is less important now *where* one makes a contribution than *what* that contribution will be in the global picture.

¹A version of this article first appeared in the Conference Proceedings of the Third Annual Caribbean Language Conference and is reprinted here with permission. The contents of this article were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and the reader should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

*Twenty-first Century Living:
Systems and Their Interrelationship*

In order to determine what the language of business is so as to better prepare a world citizen for a positive role as a participant in the twenty-first century world marketplace, it is necessary to make a broad needs-assessment and project it toward a new century. This exercise forces us to reconsider a lot of long-established and well-accepted beliefs. The political boundaries that have been useful to us may have become too respected. These borders, as pointed out by Johnston and Edelstein, “exist despite—indeed, often in defiance of—commonalities between and among the realms they separate. They discourage travel, frustrate discourse, and impede understanding” (1). One thing is for certain, in order to conduct business in the future, it will be vital to understand the important global systems and their interrelationships. The five systems as outlined by Kenneth Boulding are physical systems, biological systems, economic systems, political systems, and information processing systems (17–18).

1) *Physical System*. This system includes the land masses and their shifts or changes. It also involves air and water systems, volcanoes, storms, and the variations in climate. It does not take a great deal of imagination to comprehend that the floods that ravaged the Midwest USA in recent years are examples of how commerce can be affected by weather. The changes in weather and other natural phenomena attributed to El Niño, earthquakes in Mexico, land slides in Costa Rica, in addition to the concern for human destruction of the ozone layer are other examples.

The Master’s Degree in International Business (MIBS) program at the University of South Carolina² requires placement of students in international internships around the world as a major part of each student’s program.³ They intern for a six-month period in countries where the language they learned is spoken in order to gain authentic business experience. Currently the languages included are Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Non-US citizens whose second language is English intern in the United States. The

²“America’s Best Graduate and Professional Schools,” *US News and World Report* (19 March 1990): 53; “The Best Graduate Schools,” *US News and World Report* (29 April 1991): 69; “The Best Graduate Schools,” *US News and World Report* (23 March 1992): 67; “America’s Best Graduate Schools,” *US News and World Report* (22 March 1993): 59; “America’s Best Graduate Schools,” *US News and World Report* (20 March 1995): 93.

³T. Bruce Fryer and James T. Day, “Foreign Language Curricular Needs of Students Preparing for an Internship Abroad,” *Modern Language Journal* 77.3 (1993): 277–88.

Spanish track practicing throughout Spanish-America received the nickname of the “disaster-track” a few years ago because of the physical difficulties encountered during their six-month internship period. These misfortunes included a flood in Colombia, earth slides in Costa Rica, earthquakes in Mexico, and hurricanes in Puerto Rico. Interns, like any business person taking a business risk, must take into consideration physical factors. Those who have read the early twentieth-century novels by Latin American authors realize the extent to which physical realities found in *La Vorágine*, *Doña Bárbara*, *Don Segundo Sombra*, and other works have had their language influenced by the themes of physical realities. This is also necessary knowledge for the well-prepared business person.

2) *Biological System*. This system includes the sum of all the living things on earth, where they live, how they support themselves, and how they relate to each other. Particular emphasis needs to be given to the human species, and the interdependency of all living plants and animals requires careful scrutiny by *homo sapiens*. The elimination of just one link in the ecological system leaves a gap that forces humans to realize their dependency on nature, a fact which transcends the shallow importance of national borders as a limitation to the solution of these problems. As Moore and Miller point out, environmental concerns require that companies and governments reshape the ways in which they think about business and investment, since it is now understood that environmental concerns can have beneficial results on a long-term basis.

Both the physical system and the biological system are so interconnected that cooperation across international borders, both regionally and globally, is essential. If one nation or trade group takes a unilateral position that is detrimental to other groups, for security or economic reasons, some sort of major conflict is inevitable.

Changing conditions, both physical and biological, are continuous but often imperceptible. Erosion of the earth’s surface is constantly occurring, but only time reveals the damage. Water, wind, rain, and hail, as well as gravitation itself can cause erosion. Although these changes are not confined to any one political entity, many seem to be in Africa and Asia. Human population growth is one of the most serious biological problems impacting on the world ecological and (by extension) business scene, particularly when it is compounded by a physical system problem, such as the advancing Sahara desert in parts of Africa. Signs of this are

growing in the western United States and Mexico, in regions of South America from Ecuador to Argentina, and in Asia, Europe, and Australia as well. Recent discoveries by archaeologists studying the mysterious collapse of the Mayan civilization in the Yucatan area of Mexico and Central America implicate ecological factors. Although new theories point to escalating warfare as a central factor, “overexploitation of the rain forest ecosystem on which the Mayan depended for food [and water] shortages might have played a role in the collapse as well” (Lemonick 48). Overpopulation has been examined as another problem. University of Arizona archaeologist T. Patrick Culbert points out the interdependence of all these systems by indicating that something trivial like two bad hurricane seasons or a maniacal king could have been the cause of the ultimate collapse of that great civilization (qtd. in Lemonick 48).

3) *Economic System*. This system includes those aspects of the global social system that relate to work, processes of production, distribution, and consumption. The European Economic Union facilitates free movement of workers across national borders. Migration has always been a function of the economic system, with workers relocating to places where jobs and life support systems are available to them. Recently we saw the movement of workers from Central and Eastern Europe to Germany as an example of this type of migration. Several hundred years ago, world trade included a forced migration of labor from Africa that brought with it long-term concerns. The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) places challenges on the North American community to begin the integration of the Americas economically and culturally. From a Latin American perspective, Heraldo Muñoz observes that in the post Cold-War era, “(t)he challenge before the Latin American and Caribbean countries is to see that environmental issues in inter-American relations are approached from a new perspective” (5). The same is true for other similarly interdependent regions of the world.

4) *Political system*. This system is formed by states or nations, and involves matters of their independence, legitimacy, leadership, power, authority, and their decision-making practices. In many cases, these mechanisms affect other human organizations within the society, and are a major factor influencing the business procedures of individuals from different regions of the world. A country with a tradition of democracy, for example, makes decisions in different ways than a nation with a history of cen-

tralized authority. These traditional practices influence responses to changes in the physical system, the biological system, and the economic system in a synergistic way. Examples of these synergistic transformations are evident in many of the developments taking place in Eastern Europe today after the breakup of the former Soviet Union.

5) *Information processing system.* This structure includes the highly improved communication media by which individuals and organizations communicate with each other and the ways in which they process and value information. As we know from history, knowledge is power. In a world in which information does not flow according to the rules of supply and demand, it is obvious that factors such as secrecy, ownership, or monopoly can have a great impact. Communication requires a common medium in order to be effective. In the business world, English today performs an important role as a critical second language for many countries. The United Nations designated six languages for official communication: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish, and Russian.⁴ Ironically German, despite its economic importance, is not an official language due to the establishment of this organization in the post-World War II period. Many of the most affluent member-nations of the United Nations have less need to contract or obtain a great number of translators. The poorer nations must seek individuals able to translate into the six accepted languages. Machine translation with post-editing may help in handling greater quantities of translation. However, of critical importance are the ways in which different cultures evaluate the data that they receive. It is a question of going beyond just *good language*, so that communication needs to be in *good taste*, that is to say, acceptable to the culture receiving it.

In the language classes of the future, the content and processes mentioned above need to become part of our linguistic and cultural objectives. In the Americas, for effective communication to take place, our students must be skilled and knowledgeable in areas of possible cooperation. Heraldo Muñoz of the Organization of American States (OAS) indicates some of the ways in which the Americas might seek these cooperative efforts:

⁴United Nations Department of Commerce Services: Translation Division, Documentation, Reference & Terminology Section, *Terminology Bulletin* No. 342.

- 1) The promotion of environmental consciousness in educational programs;
 - 2) The promotion of transfer of clean technologies and those favoring environmental protection and conservation;
 - 3) The development of common terminology and common criteria for the protection of natural resources;
 - 4) The harmonization of environmental legislation across the Americas;
 - 5) The review at the international level of the impact of natural resource use;
 - 6) Policies to prevent environmental accidents;
 - 7) The training of human resources in environmental matters.
- (9)

Twenty-first Century Living:

World History versus Tomorrow's Citizens

In many countries, the perspective received by the majority of citizens is limited to that country and its immediate tradition. For example, in the United States, everyone studies United States history in depth. In addition, since the United States was founded, settled, and governed predominantly by Europeans, World History is often limited to European History. Geographic/historical literacy regarding the rest of the world is very low. In the Americas, the Caribbean region offers a diversity in its history worthy of emulation. The Caribbean countries extending from the islands to the shores of South, Central, and North America reflect a broad, diverse range of cultural traditions from all the continents of the world. With the speed and accessibility of telecommunications at hand, it will be more possible than before for individuals and groups to keep in touch with their historical and ethnic roots. The citizens of the twenty-first century will make those kinds of demands on educational systems. It will be much more important to look objectively at the highs and lows of historical patterns and to evaluate those patterns in light of an evolving set of universal values. Teachers will need to be more-widely educated with exposure to two or three languages and cultures in order to help young citizens evaluate the implications of their decisions. An in-depth experience with a second or third language and culture is the only true way to provide this experience. Other cultural histories may need to be learned with study abroad opportunities. Foreign language teachers will become trans-

lators and interpreters of international developments for their students and communities. For the Caribbean region, African, European, and Oriental histories will be extremely important to examine the broadest possible viewpoints.

*Twenty-first Century Living:
Diversity of World Cultural Backgrounds*

The several histories evident in the Caribbean reflect the vast diversity of cultures that must be navigated in the world marketplace of the twenty-first century. In addition to ethnic and racial differences, there are differences between men and women, young and old, and able and disabled, among others. One of the most important challenges facing current language educators is to help students develop the ability to value diversity as an advantage and to nurture that diversity in order to work effectively with it. As language teachers, we need to help students see how many misunderstandings result from different communication styles. We need to foster methodologies as examples of communication systems in our classes through drama and interview activities that explore the issues of stereotypes, cultural differences, teamwork, and productive environments. These allow learners to see the benefits that diversity can bring. In addition, universal human values need to be fostered. The result of these types of cross-cultural methodologies in our language classes will allow second-language learning to become an incentive to personal human growth as well as the traditional linguistic and literary objectives.

*Twenty-first Century Living:
More Emphasis on Public Political Processes*

Language learning activities should foster the opportunity for students to identify and begin to resolve issues that concern the public at the local, state, national, and global levels. Who are the key players? How will they act and why? What will be my/our response so that a common goal can still be achieved? Solutions to world problems through interactive negotiation activities such as a Model United Nations⁵ promote understanding different values and alternative conceptual analyses. In all cases, there should be a consideration for a fair solution to public concerns, a process which discourages extremist thinking on either end of the spectrum. World diplomacy and negotiation skills should be the objective for

⁵United Nations, *How to Plan and Conduct Model U.N. Meetings*.

language use. In other words, we need to think of longer language learning sequences that reach out to higher levels of language ability.

THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE: WHAT IS IT?

Fernand Braudel describes the history of civilization and capitalism from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries in a three-volume work. In Volume Two, entitled *The Wheels of Commerce*, he describes the trading zones or markets as follows:

Whether they were urban, regional, national or even international, these markets were the reality the merchant had to reckon with, the context of his actions, furthering them or holding them back. What is more, they were transformed over the centuries. And the changing geography and economy of the markets were of course constantly reshaping and redirecting the individual action of the merchant. (138)

Today the international marketplace is in an even greater state of flux due to the increase in global communication networks. The individual has greater freedom than ever before to seek clients in remote areas of the globe. Although there have been many diverse ways in which the elements of production, distribution, and consumption have been dealt with, so long as international communication media remain open and unencumbered through improved technology, we will likely see more similarity in the patterns of those elements.

WHAT IS THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS?

The Predominance of English as an International Business Language

Historically, the language of the dominant military power has been the language of international communication. In the Western world, Latin was imposed throughout the Roman Empire. Similarly, the languages of other countries spread as their military, political, and economic influence grew (viz., Spain, France, England, and the United States). In the global marketplace, however, a common phrase often heard is that the language of international business is the language of the customer. If this is the case then Chinese, Hindi, English, and Spanish will be the most widely

used languages of international trade in the future, since these are the most widely spoken languages. Highly skilled users of these languages will continue to be needed as translators and interpreters; they will be seen increasingly as necessary resources for firms, governments, and other organizations. Will machine translation and the availability of international translating agencies make international trade more feasible? Recent developments in this area have given some encouragement to this as a possible aid (Fryer 1–7). Others raise skepticism about applying machine translation profitably (see Lukfin). For information concerning careers using foreign languages, please see Seelye and Day; Rivers; Berman; and Arpan.

Content versus Form

Previously we mentioned the need for new content in our language classes. But what about the accuracy issue? Is it important? Jeannette Bragger believes that accuracy is important and cannot be sacrificed merely for teaching only oral production. The precision with which language is used can be critical in our ability to communicate effectively. Selection of vocabulary, structures, and cultural contexts is, and will continue to be, of the utmost importance in effective business communication. Documents are still legally binding. As spectrographic transmission of our voice is converted into written language through machine processing, the accuracy of our spoken language may, in fact, need to begin to approach the accuracy of our written language today.

Variety of Language Skills Required

Our traditional four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) continue to be important in the language class. A study of the importance of the four skills as perceived by international interns in the French and Spanish tracks of the University of South Carolina Masters in International Business Studies (MIBS) program over fifteen years indicated their perception of the strategic ordering of skills as 1) listening, 2) speaking, 3) reading, and 4) writing (Fryer and Day 281–82).

Increasingly, translation and interpretation skills will become important for the international business firm, which has a truly international clientele. Major translation/ interpretation firms will operate with skilled translators and interpreters from all over the world, people who will be independent contractors or will represent translation agencies to facilitate

effective communication between producer and customer. Language teachers will need to work with the development of translation and interpretation skills in the classroom to provide insight and motivation to younger language learners looking for productive career areas. Programs for these courses will not resemble our current college or university major, but rather will be a specialized sequence incorporating a lot of knowledge from the world systems indicated earlier.

Finally, the silent language of non-verbal communication, which Edward T. Hall talked about many years ago, and the cultural dimension will become increasingly important in the instructional process. Kitzie McKinney has pointed out that since approximately 65% of what is communicated is nonverbal, the use of video is increasingly important, since it includes the visual elements. How a deal is negotiated or when it is lost is extremely important for aspiring business people to see and understand.

*Organizing Language Learning/
Acquisition for Meeting These Needs*

When organizing the instruction for meeting the needs of tomorrow's citizens in the international marketplace of the twenty-first century, it is critical to consider three contexts in classes of language for special purpose, i.e., international business language:

- 1) The physical context: geographic and demographic;
- 2) The professional, work-related context: be it business, medical, social work, law related, construction or labor related, etc.;
- 3) The cultural context: political, historical, and environmental.
(Doyle, Fryer and Cere iii-iv)

Learning/Acquisition Locations

In addition to the traditional personal and academic experiences, study abroad programs must receive more emphasis (see Day). Additionally, intensive language programs need to be implemented to move students to the higher levels faster and in greater numbers. Beyond that, we must restructure our universities and institutes to provide more high level instruction instead of simply repeating the experiences of lower levels of education.

Active collaboration between educational institutions and professionals will provide opportunities for students to experience business language used in the workplace itself. Short immersion experiences in businesses and longer internships for traditional as well as for older learners can also generate valuable learning experiences.

The private and the public sectors can plan together to design special centers for language and culture learning. Local magnet schools, programs for the international baccalaureate, and state-funded specialized schools (language and international studies) designed to focus on developing these special programs can provide new kinds of educational opportunity that will better prepare residents of these areas to compete as leaders in the new global marketplace.

Finally, legal centers, social work agencies, medical facilities, and government centers can provide appropriate locations for working with language needs by cooperative efforts with local high schools, community colleges and technical schools, and colleges and universities. In many cases today, Spanish-speaking clients or speakers of Asian languages are more frequently encountered. These locations could better serve their customers by having students or interns who were able to assist linguistically.

Other Areas of Language for Specific Purposes

A number of other professional areas provide an extension of the business/occupational context and require specialized or technical language in addition to the common cultural and geographic/demographic contexts. These professional areas are in need of international research. They include governmental needs, legal and criminal justice, health profession (medical needs), and scientific, engineering, and technical needs. The contexts will have to be adjusted to meet the particular needs of the profession, but there is definitely a core of common terminology or jargon that is reflected in the profession. Defining these common cores is a challenge that the foreign language teaching profession is facing right now. Ultimately the adaptation of those cores is the challenge instructors of language for special purposes face. In order to be ready to put a plan such as this in place, the early educational system must incorporate longer sequences of language study and must provide students with insights into what language and communication really entails. Language learning must consist of more than just accurate communication about

meaningless tasks to be mastered. It must have its basis in student needs. *That* is the business of language teaching (see Branan). It is much more than teaching business language.

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