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## A GENERATION OF BUSINESS FOREIGN LANGUAGES<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years ago, most foreign language teachers were trained in literary studies, and that is largely the case today. Yet because of significant changes in enrollment patterns and demand, our traditional mission of educating students primarily in literature has been, and continues to be, challenged. Demand for a different specific purpose of language teaching, that is Business Foreign Language, has been steadily growing over the last twenty years and merits our attention. This article will take an historical look at how Business Foreign Language has developed during the last generation, highlighting a few important dates and programs, which have successfully integrated foreign language with business into a more complete academic degree curriculum. I will also bring to your attention some of the many studies and surveys that have been taken over the last few years on this matter, giving us a context in which to view recent developments in Business Foreign Languages.

Perhaps the real beginning of this historical perspective on business foreign languages is as old as business itself, and as old as language. In “early modern” times, one might mention Marco Polo and his discovery of a totally different culture with which to do business. The Renaissance, which many point to as the beginning of modern capitalism, brought a rebirth, indeed, an explosion of business, trade, and markets, some very newly discovered. Consequently, the problem of language had to be dealt with. By the 16th century, business language education consisted of very practical phrase books for international merchants, such as the *Colloques ou dialogues avec un dictionnaire en six langues (Dialogues with a Dictionary in 6 Languages)* by Henry Heyndriex published in Antwerp in

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<sup>1</sup> This article was inspired by the “International Business and Foreign Language” workshops directed by Ben Kedia at the University of Memphis CIBER. It is dedicated to Alvord Branan and to those early pioneers in Business Foreign Languages, Bettina Cothran, Michael Doyle, Bruce Fryer, Steven Loughrin-Sacco, and so many others.

1576. And so it went. Trade, and empires built on trade, rose and fell. In the west, the Portuguese and the Dutch were replaced by the Spanish and English, who were replaced by others. Wars were fought for colonies and markets, and business language education tended to be applied in an *ad hoc* manner. Gradually, and in a piece-meal fashion, business language education began to address the needs of the learner.

By the end of World War II, it seemed that the US economy was the only one left standing, and doing business was, as someone then said, like “shooting fish in a barrel.” This ease of access was to change, gradually at first, then dramatically by the early 1970s. If one were to summarize the state of business in the Post-World War II era, one might say that America had a fairly open playing field in the world market for about a generation. Then we had to actually compete in the international market place. The question was, “Did we have the language skills to compete?” Some academicians were already attempting to answer that question. For example, as early as 1946, Thunderbird (The American Graduate School of International Management) opened its doors and began training international managers with foreign language abilities. But this was one of the few exceptions; by the 1970s we began to feel the heat of competition and the need for foreign languages and cultural training in business.

Much of the significant history of the development of Business Foreign Language in the United States goes back just two short decades. Studies from the late 1970s, such as Marianne Inman’s Ph.D. dissertation entitled, “An Investigation of the Foreign Language Needs of US Corporations Doing Business Abroad,” seem to indicate a minimal role for foreign languages in the business world. Based upon questionnaires returned from 84 US companies doing business abroad, Inman’s study found that for most US companies doing international business, language training played no role in the planning of their overseas operations. Furthermore, Inman found that for US nationals and non-US nationals alike working for US companies engaged in international trade, a foreign language proficiency was strictly ancillary to an employee’s main job.

One year later, the RAND Corporation completed a study for the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies which they called: “Foreign Language and International Studies Specialists: The Marketplace and National Policy.” The Carter Commission conducted some 170 personal interviews with

representatives of business, government, universities and other nonprofit institutions. Here is a summary of some of the findings:

“Business respondents reported that expatriate staffs are generally assigned on the basis of managerial needs, not language needs. English is the dominant international language, and [US] firms employ foreign nationals to deal with local language. Businessmen are therefore less interested in Americans’ language and area knowledge than in their international sophistication, but neither criterion is important in recruitment.” (XII–XIII)

Monolingualism seemed to be the rule for our government operations abroad as well, as we see from the same report:

“There is substantial evidence in the Departments of State and Defense that ‘these agencies generally do not grant their highest career rewards to people who are typed as language or area specialists;’ such people tend to be frozen in lower level positions, both because their specialties are useful there and because they are commonly reputed to lack appropriate breadth of experience for executive positions. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that specialists have a strong motivation either to don generalists’ robes or to leave the service.” (XV–XVI)

Around the same time, Senator Paul Simon of Illinois began speaking of the “tongue-tied Americans;” he said that we should go home and install giant banners across all of our major ports of entry, land, sea and air, which read: “Welcome to the United States of America, We Cannot Speak Your Language.” In short, this was not too rosy a picture for Business Foreign Languages. The problem as defined by the Carter Commission was of Americans’ “scandalous” incompetence in foreign languages, and the report concluded, “Nothing less is at issue than the nation’s security.” Consequently, we can say that foreign language competence had finally made it to the level of a national security issue. The good news is that academia was getting the message.

In 1979, Eastern Michigan University (EMU) brought the interdisciplinized International Business curriculum, with a strong foreign language component, to the undergraduate level. It was an opportunity unrealizable in a two-year MBA curriculum to accept students with novice level language proficiency and bring them up to the

advanced or advanced-high level in a four-year curriculum. EMU also developed a rather large market of language for business purposes courses in several languages. A few years later, EMU inaugurated its annual “Conference on Language for Business and Economic Purposes, “a conference dedicated to bringing foreign language teachers to the world of business.<sup>2</sup>

Other universities started adding Business Language courses to their graduate and undergraduate curricula. In 1981, the University of South Carolina created the Masters in International Business Studies program, which brought the integrated International Business, Foreign Language and Cultural Studies concept to a traditional research institution with an AACSB (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business) accredited business program. Other examples vary from an isolated business language course, to a business language certificate or a business language minor in a foreign language department. A few programs successfully integrated foreign language with business into a complete academic degree.

Our experience with Business Foreign Language courses at San Diego State University (SDSU)<sup>3</sup> was typical for the times. In fall 1984, the Department of French and Italian discovered that the single largest group of students enrolled in French courses at SDSU were from the College of Business Administration. Upon verification, the other language departments found that they had similar enrollment patterns. Clearly, the business students, although not obliged to fulfill a graduation requirement in a foreign language, were anticipating something that we were not. Furthermore, we discovered that more business students had chosen foreign language as a minor than any other discipline on campus. Our department responded with one Business French course, then a second. Finally, in the fall of 1986, encouraged by the enrollment trends, a self-appointed group of faculty from the Colleges of Arts and Letters and Business Administration met and agreed to develop a group of “special” majors in business, foreign language, and regional/cultural studies. Although “special” majors are typically student-generated in

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<sup>2</sup> Thunderbird University recently hosted the 18<sup>th</sup> EMU conference, “Language, Communication, and Global Management” (April 5–8, 2000). The 2001 conference will be hosted by San Diego State University CIBER (March 28–31, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>See my article in *FFBAIT (French For Business And International Trade)* Fall (1989) IV, 3, “Rationale for an International Business Curriculum.”

response to a special need, we found them to be a convenient vehicle for “market testing” our new program in a controlled environment. Finally, a free standing International Business major was inaugurated in 1989, and is flourishing today. Briefly, this IB major consists of

- A business component of 16 courses or 49–51 semester units.
- A regional/cultural studies emphasis in one world region: Africa, Asia, Central Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, or Western Europe, with 6 courses (16 semester units) focusing upon that region.
- An emphasis in one of nine languages: French, German, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, or English.
- A required international internship, including required study (or internship) abroad.

Students beginning a foreign language at the university need to complete 6–11 language courses (22–30 semester units) spread over the full four years, and even more if they choose Japanese, Mandarin, or Russian. The language departments have responded by creating special business language classes: two each in French and Spanish, and one each in German, Mandarin, and Russian. Japanese has chosen to include business terminology and themes throughout its entire program. In total, there are 90 prescribed semester units out of a total of 124 required for a bachelor’s degree in International Business. Quantitatively, and (I would argue) qualitatively as well, this is one of the most demanding Bachelor of Arts degrees around.

What has been the student response to such a demanding program? In fall 1991, we had over 1,000 declared majors. The program is now officially impacted, which means that students must complete two years in pre-International Business and then apply for the major. In order to be admitted to the major, students must meet the highest supplemental admissions criteria at SDSU. We average about 725 students in the major (upper and lower division) in the following languages and area studies:

FOREIGN LANGUAGES	
Chinese .....	6%
English .....	10%
French .....	8%
German .....	4%
Italian .....	2%
Japanese .....	6%
Portuguese .....	1%

Russian .....	2%
Spanish .....	55%

AREA STUDIES

Africa .....	1%
Asia .....	16%
Russia, Central Europe .....	2%
Latin America .....	41%
Western Europe .....	22%
Middle East .....	1%
North America .....	11%

The International Business program at SDSU has constantly sought external confirmation of its quality and performance. The curriculum has been designed to meet AACSB accreditation standards. In addition, students are required to take one of several “exit exams” to gauge their competence in the business foreign language of their choice. Business French and Business Spanish students prepare for the exams of the Chambers of Commerce of Paris and Madrid, which offer certificates to students who pass their written and oral examinations. These are prepared and corrected abroad, but administered locally. SDSU recently added the “Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf” for students of Business German. SDSU has developed a series of VOICI (Visual Oral Communication Instrument) proficiency exams for Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish; these VOICIs serve as exit exams for those languages. The National Business Spanish Exam was offered for the first time in May 2000. These examinations can provide independent, external and internationally recognized verification of the proficiency levels of our students. Other additions to the program include a required internship or study abroad; adjunct business courses taught in French, Japanese, Spanish, Chinese, German and Russian, and direct reciprocal exchanges with business schools in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and Spain. We are currently arranging direct reciprocal exchanges with Cuba as well.

This International Business program has resulted in real, concrete benefits for our students. Our 1998–99 Alumni Report, which is the most recent survey of all of our IB graduates since 1989, reveals the following:

87% are employed full time

- 4% are attending graduate school
- 82% work in business or industry  
(67% of those are doing business internationally)
- 40% earn a salary of \$50,000 or more  
The average salary of all IB graduates is \$53,453
- 8% earn \$100,000 or more.

SDSU is not the only program of this kind. The University of Memphis has long had an undergraduate major in International Business, and a minor as well. This is the seventh year for their international MBA with a very noteworthy internship program. CSU Fullerton in California, Clemson University in South Carolina, Eastern Michigan University, Southern Illinois University, and the University of Maryland all have large, active, interdisciplinary undergraduate International Business programs.

On the graduate level as well, there are a number of programs of the very highest quality which fully integrate foreign languages into business studies. In addition to the University of South Carolina, there is the Lauder Institute of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and the American Graduate School of International Management (Thunderbird). The University of Texas at Austin offers a double degree program with the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lyon, which is always rated as one of the three top “grandes écoles de commerce” in France.

The message about Business Foreign Languages was heard far and wide, and enthusiastically followed. During the 1980s, everything seemed great for Business Foreign Languages. But certain questions did arise, like, “Does foreign language competence make a difference in international operations of US-based corporations?” “What kind of skills (language, culture) are needed?”

At the very best, it was a mixed message for Business Foreign Languages just ten years ago. In 1989, the *New York Times* reported the results of the now famous US Governor’s Conference which recommended that “... all college and university graduates be conversant in another language” and, that, “states alter public school curricula to add international studies, including foreign language training ... beginning in elementary school.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>February 26, 1989, p. A 22.

Government had gotten the message, and so, it seems, had Business. At the April 1989 meeting of the AACSB in Montreal, Robert Malott, Chairman of the Board and CEO of FMC Corporation (Fortune 500) in a plenary address said that 30% of his entry level hires in 1989 were required to have a foreign language and that 40% of the next year's hires would be required to possess foreign language skills. At the same meeting, Barbara Thomas, Senior Vice President and Group Head of The International Private Banking Group of Bankers Trust Company said that 100% of the new hires in her division were required to have foreign language skills.

Foreign language skills were clearly important for future business leaders in the US and for US competitiveness abroad. However, another study done at about this time provides us with an interesting reality check! In May 1989 a National Foreign Language Council Occasional Paper entitled, "The Foreign Language Needs of US-Based Corporations" was published. The author, Carol Fixman, conducted in-depth interviews of 32 key persons in nine international firms, in an attempt to identify what the main issues were for corporate America in foreign language competence and what future trends they saw developing. A few findings of that report follow:

In general, foreign language skills do not seem to play an important role in either hiring or career advancements. (10)

I could find no companies which directly included information on foreign language skills in performance reviews of their employees. (11)

Only one company which I interviewed requires that US expatriates have knowledge of the host country before going abroad. (14)

The numbers of employees studying foreign language in any one corporation do not appear to be large. (14)

The good news is that there was a clear tendency to view international experience as crucial for the leaders of US-based companies. This seems to be a relatively new recognition. The current senior management of many of the firms had no significant international experience, and foreign language skills do not play a role for many of these individuals. However, the rest of this Council paper sounds strangely familiar to the conclusion drawn ten years earlier by Marianne Inman that for most

companies doing international business, language training played no role in the planning of their overseas operations.

There seems to be a contradiction between what the top business managers and major magazines and newspapers say on the one hand, and what Fixman discovered when she conducted her study on the other. In fact, Fixman did not interview the same people the journalists did. The journalists reported what top business managers said, while Fixman talked primarily to the Human Resource, and Training and Development persons — in other words, to those who are most closely connected with the recruitment process. One can only conclude that still in the late 1980s the views of the business leadership had not “trickled down” to the recruiters.

In 1989 walls were coming down all over, not just in Berlin. One did not have to be a prophet to see the opportunities for international business. Still, things were mixed for Business Foreign Languages. But something else was happening, something that involved combined efforts of government, business, and academia: the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBER).

CIBER was created in 1989 by the United States Department of Education as a result of a successful lobbying campaign by the AACSB. The first item of note is that CIBER was a business, and not a language, initiative.

The prescriptive definition of a Center for International Business Education and Research merits our attention. There are six programmatic requirements, three of which are particularly interesting for our discussion. Each CIBER shall provide:

- Interdisciplinary programs which incorporate foreign language and international studies training into the business, finance and management curricula.
- Business, finance and management training for foreign language faculty.
- Intensive language programs designed to enhance the international skills, awareness, and expertise of members of the business community.

The federal government funds the academic community to lead the business community in giving greater emphasis to US globalization. Educators, including foreign language educators, are becoming catalysts

in a major foreign policy thrust determined to be a vital issue of national security. As of today, the CIBER network has grown to 28 centers, including many institutions mentioned above.<sup>5</sup>

With the 1990s, our perspective of Business Foreign Languages seems a little brighter. The situation described by Fixman has clearly changed, according to an article published in 1990 by Wendell McCulloch of CSU Long Beach in which he reported the results of a questionnaire sent to businesses in Southern California. The answers to the question, “What are the academic training criteria for positions in your organization dealing with international activities?” are quite revealing. In descending order of percentage of the respondents naming the disciplines which were important or desirable, Foreign Language was 3rd with 64%, after Management and Marketing, but ahead of Finance, Economics and Accounting.<sup>6</sup> The specific languages listed in descending order of importance were Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Mandarin, Italian, Arabic, Korean, Portuguese and Russian (no percentages were supplied).

By 1994, the trend was definitely changing in the business world. In July of that year, the US Office of Educational Research and Improvement conducted an in-depth case study of major US-based corporations employing over 400,000 people. It found that

- US corporations were beginning to value second language proficiency more highly.
- Recent emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in college curricula was seen by employers as positive preparation for work in an economy without borders.

Most of the employers interviewed, the OER study notes, urge students to acquire second language skills. Employers also suggest that students seek multicultural knowledge and experience. Finally, the report suggests that international study should not be considered a separate specialization as much as a component of already existing academic and occupational programs.

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<sup>5</sup>For more information on research, faculty development, curricular materials, please consult the CIBER web site, which can be accessed through the Purdue University web site: <<http://ciber.centers.purdue.edu>>.

<sup>6</sup>Management — 71%, Marketing — 68%, Foreign Language — 64%, Finance — 59%, Economics — 58%, Foreign Cultures — 58%, Business/Government Relations — 54%, Accounting — 53%, Geography — 51%, Area Studies — 44%, Political Science — 40%, History — 37%, World Literature — 20%.

Also in 1994, Tora Bikson and Sally Ann Law published a report for the RAND Corporation entitled *Global Preparedness and Human Resources: College and Corporate Perspectives*. This report was aimed at corporations that attempt to adjust their human resource policies to adapt to economic globalism; also targeted were academic decision-makers and faculty who attempt to adjust curricula; and finally students who prepare themselves to compete in a global workplace. Bikson and Law conducted 350 interviews in sixteen corporations and the same number of institutions of higher education. They conclude that

According to both corporate and academic respondents, US colleges and universities are turning out job candidates with high levels of domain knowledge. But with respect to cross-cultural competence, job candidates are much less well prepared. They are unlikely to understand the international dimensions of their major academic field; and they probably have not had a general education background that includes world history, geography, or comparative political science. Moreover, many have not had exposure to other cultures and languages. Compared to international students, our respondents believed US students to be at a serious competitive disadvantage in the global labor market. (65–66)

On the subject of supply and demand, Bikson and Law also concluded that they expected the demand to grow as more and more US firms position themselves for international competitiveness. However, their study finds that the supply of cross-culturally competent US job candidates is scarce.

Our nation desperately needs good young people trained in the languages and cultures of our international trading partners. More and more business leaders are recognizing this need. At the same time, our educational institutions are not designed to generate curriculum and academic programs on demand. As educators, we must study trends, anticipate demands and take the necessary, reasonable steps to plan for an appropriate and timely response to that demand.

To bring this historical perspective up to the present, we see what is fast becoming the price of entry into the global job market in a suggested advertisement:

Wanted: Bilingual college graduates with top grades; multiple internships; one or more years of full time work; demonstrated leadership, teamwork and customer service skills; experience living abroad. Must be computer literate. Fluency in a second language.

As we peruse the *Wall Street Journal* or search the web, this kind of ad for a global manager, according to Fortune 500 hiring executives, is fast becoming the rule, not the exception.

What can we conclude about Business Foreign Languages during the last generation? First, it has become apparent that the argument for the importance of Business Foreign Languages has been successfully made. It is a truism that "The language of business is the language of the client." Furthermore, if Bikson and Law are right, the supply for cross-culturally competent, bilingual and multilingual US job candidates is scarce. We had better prepare now for the great demand that will inevitably come. Second, models for interdisciplinary curricula are already in place, and there is federal support for these efforts, most notably seen in the 28 CIBER centers. The good news is that there is a growing movement among US colleges and schools of business toward developing International Business major programs requiring language competence, an approach that is already the standard in Europe. And finally, if history informs the present and the future, then we can map out some megatrends. To prepare for the future, foreign language teachers must go beyond what is frequently considered to be a traditional language program, that is, language for literature only. Business Foreign Language is a viable option. And, of course, in developing language courses for business purposes, we know that one size does not fit all. It is important to find out what fits one's needs, whether it is a course, a minor, or an International Business major.

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