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The Good Business of Language Learning: LWB 199, a Gateway Course to the Language and Business Major at the University of Tennessee

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THE GOOD BUSINESS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING: LWB 199, A GATEWAY COURSE TO THE LANGUAGE AND WORLD BUSINESS MAJOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

ABSTRACT
Language and World Business is a major at the University of Tennessee that combines one of eight language tracks with a specialization in one of three professional emphasis concentrations. During the course of completing this major, students also study abroad or perform an internship. The present study explores the format and content of Language and World Business 199, a required course that involves students in activities that introduce them to the curriculum and a variety of study abroad and internship options, as such guiding them toward careers in today’s global economy.

Language and World Business (hereafter LWB) is a major that was created at the University of Tennessee during the late 1980s in order to provide students interested in studying language, culture, and business with a program designed to prepare them for careers in today’s global economy. The curriculum, leading to a B.A., consists of 30–33 credit hours in upper-level language, literature, civilization, and film courses in one of eight language tracks (Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish), as well as one of three professional emphasis concentrations: international business (26 credit hours), international retail merchandising (26 credit hours), and international agricultural economics (25 credit hours).1 The LWB program, which is housed within the Department of Modern For-

1 Although I refer to LWB as a major, it should be noted that LWB is officially classified in the University of Tennessee undergraduate catalogue as a concentration within the French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish majors and, for Chinese, Japanese, and Portuguese, as an interdisciplinary programs major with a concentration in LWB. Minimum requirements for progression and continuation to the LWB major are a 2.75 overall cumulative grade point average (based on a 4.0 scale) and a
eign Languages and overseen by a committee of faculty from that department (one of whom serves as director), represents a cooperative effort between the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Business Administration. These units work in concert as managers of a curriculum that includes a number of special components, including business classes that have been designed with LWB students in mind, a practical experience component, and a unique course, LWB 199, which serves as an introduction to the major. The redesigned format of LWB 199, initially implemented in the fall of 2003, comprises the focus of the present study. In particular, I will describe the methods used to create a gateway course for students in eight language tracks as well as the strategies employed in order to provide these students with a sense of direction within the LWB major and a source of reliable and practical information on preparing for careers in the global business environment of the twenty-first century.

LWB 199, which is taught once a week during the fall semester of each academic year, is a two-credit-hour required course for LWB majors. Insofar as an important goal of LWB 199 is to promote an understanding of the links between the business and language components of the curriculum, students are encouraged to take this course as soon as possible after being admitted into the LWB major. It should be pointed out that LWB 199, which is traditionally taught by the director of the program (since its inception a professor of French or Spanish), is not a business course in the traditional sense. At the same time, while LWB 199 does not focus on the fundamentals of contemporary business practices, the course is intended to enhance students’ awareness of the international facets of the business environments studied in courses in Accounting, Business Administration, Management, and Marketing. Achieving this goal involves motivating students to value the ties between these environments and their language skills and knowledge of foreign cultures. For example, the strategic coordination of activities among businesses, which is typically studied in an introductory course in Management or Marketing, is a topic that is considered in LWB 199 in order to encourage interaction among students in the different languages in LWB.

As an introduction to the topic of interrelationships between businesses, and as a mechanism intended to trigger an awareness of the interrelationships

between the diverse cultures studied in the eight LWB language tracks, students in LWB 199 are asked to read Swee Hoon Ang’s article, “The Power of Money: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Business-Related Beliefs,” which is included for its discussions of attitudes toward money, business ethics, and “guanxi” (networking) in Asian and North American economic environments. This focus is the foundation for several follow-up activities that encourage students to develop a cross-cultural perspective. These activities include class discussions on the importance of “guanxi” (which has its roots in “Chinese feudalism” [Ang 46]) in Asian, Latin American, and European cultures, presentations by students on the significance of “guanxi” in the individualistic culture of the United States (as described in Gary Althen’s American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States, which all LWB 199 students are required to read), and an assignment that asks students to consider “guanxi” in a personal context by composing an essay (of 750–1000 words) in which they apply its principles to their own social and business experiences.

While traditional methods are used to assess the progress of students in LWB 199 (the final grade is based on quizzes, a term paper, and assignments such as the aforementioned essay on “guanxi”), certain activities are performed for personal development rather than a grade. These may be seen as intrinsically motivated activities, which are described by Edward Deci as “ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself” (23), and which may produce “internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination” (23). The importance of engaging students in such intrinsic motivation was established during the 1960s and 1970s by Jerome Bruner and Abraham H. Maslow, and has been confirmed more recently by H. Douglas Brown, who underscores the role of positive feedback in giving a “boost to their feelings of competence and self-determination” (39). The inclusion in LWB 199 of two such activities, the DISC and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personal assessment instruments,

2 Ang describes “guanxi” as “the special relationships between parties characterized by reciprocal obligations and personal interactions for the purposes of . . . establishing significant business relationships, and obtaining scarce resources” (46).

3 Some of these principles include: the importance of maintaining a network of relationships, knowing the right people, building and maintaining social relationships, and returning favors (Ang 58).
provides opportunities for delivering positive feedback to students. The administration of these personal assessment instruments is conducted in class early in the semester to allow for the answer sheets to be processed by trained experts, who provide each student with a report that includes a comprehensive and personalized analysis of their responses. After the students have a couple of weeks to consider their reports, these trained experts visit the class in order to offer explanations of the reports and respond to questions.\textsuperscript{4} The inclusion of the DISC instrument also provides an opportunity for students to practice their language skills. After the students perform the instrument in English, their individual reports (around 10 pages long) are prepared in their respective languages (for example, students in the LWB Russian track receive their reports in Russian).

As demonstrated by the course evaluation forms completed by LWB 199 students at the end of the past two fall semesters (2003 and 2004), the use of the DISC and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personal assessment instruments has succeeded in producing the introspection typically achieved with intrinsically motivated activities. Among the thirteen students who completed handwritten course evaluation forms in the fall of 2003, several made comments that confirm the internal reward derived from the personal assessment instruments. In response to one set of questions—Was this class intellectually stimulating? Did it stretch your thinking?—the following comments were made:

Yes, the personality tests made me analyze how I feel about myself and others.

I learned . . . more about myself.

I learned a lot about my personality.

It helped me learn more about myself.

\textsuperscript{4} For their assistance with the DISC and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instruments, the LWB program is grateful, respectively, to Mr. Ron Keese, of Keese Consulting Company (Knoxville, TN), and Dr. Yulan Washburn (professor of Spanish, Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tennessee).
This attitude is evident among the fourteen handwritten course evaluation forms completed during the fall of 2004. In response to the same set of questions, students identified a similar internal reward:

- It enabled me to see what type of characteristics I have (from test results).
- I got to take 2 personality tests and it was good to see what I would be good at.

In response to another question—What aspects of this class contributed most to your learning?—students from both years underscored the two personal assessment instruments:

- Learning about personalities of people (2003)
- tests (2004)
- personality tests (2004)

LWB 199 strives to assist students in developing their introspective skills through follow-up activities that motivate them to formulate career goals in terms of their individual strengths identified by the personal assessment instruments. Encouraging students to consider the results from the personal assessment instruments as indicators of actual skills that suggest an aptitude for particular careers—which is the purpose of these instruments when they are used by businesses—can be challenging in a classroom environment. Follow-up activities that expect students to envision themselves in a global economy should present them with information on how the business and humanistic elements of their major prepare them to exploit these skills. To this end, several weeks of the semester are dedicated to visits by individuals who provide information on internships. These visits have been incorporated into LWB 199 in response to a developing need in recent years.

In order to fulfill the practical experience component of the major, all LWB majors must either study abroad or perform a domestic or interna-

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5 Sixteen students completed computer processed evaluation forms in 2003, and eighteen completed these forms in 2004. The results from these computer processed evaluation forms are available via the “Tenn 101” link at the following Web site: http://web.utk.edu/~sais/results/.
tional internship. While the majority of LWB majors study abroad, a growing percentage of these students choose to perform an internship (currently around 30% of LWB majors, an increase from around 10% only a couple of years ago). These internships have become difficult to find because of the loss of European contacts and because the main supplier of local internships to the LWB program discontinued offering them in 2003. The problem was compounded by the fact that, prior to 2003, students in the languages with smaller enrollments (Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian) were unable to secure with consistency internships in which they could use their language skills while performing at least 150 hours of service. During the past two years, LWB 199 has served as an ideal platform for disseminating information on internships available to students in all the LWB languages. This service has also resulted in the creation of a network of internship providers who are able to target students directly by presenting their programs in class.

One significant component of this network is the relationship that has been established with the International Trade Center of Knoxville, TN (hereafter ITC), one of the partner organizations of the Global Business Center of East Tennessee, a “consortium of public and private sector partners . . . [that offers] programs, resources and services to area businesses interested in expanding their markets around the world and . . . help[s] bring international companies and opportunities to East Tennessee” (“East Tennessee Going Global”). Prior to the creation of this relationship in 2003, the faculty committee that oversees the LWB program had made several attempts to sponsor presentations on internships by the ITC, which were unsuccessful because of an inability to schedule these presentations at convenient times for large groups of LWB majors. The time and space offered by LWB 199 has remedied this situation. In the past, LWB students seeking internships were often

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6 Students receive the required three credit hours for an internship after performing at least 150 hours of service (which must be documented by the internship provider) and turning in an essay on their experience.

7 In preparation for these presentations, the LWB 199 class participates in a workshop at the University of Tennessee Office of Career Services, during which students learn how to make their résumés available on-line to internship providers (as well as to potential employers).

8 Additional information on the ITC may be obtained from the Web site of the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership: http://www.knoxvillechamber.com/.
referred to the ITC in order to find out which regional businesses (including those that originated in East Tennessee as well as multinational companies with an office in the area) were in need of students with language skills. This process is now conducted in LWB 199 as a component of the presentations offered by the ITC. One of these presentations, given during the fall of 2004, focused on the reasons why the multinational companies that work with the ITC chose to come to East Tennessee (tax advantages, the availability of relatively inexpensive electricity, etc.), and provided students with information about internships with these companies.

Future plans call for increased cooperation between the LWB program and the ITC in an effort to utilize LWB 199 as a vehicle for informing students about innovative types of internships. One such project centers on one-day seminars sponsored by the ITC in conjunction with the US Department of Commerce and the College of Business Administration of the University of Tennessee, which focus on a broad range of topics such as NAFTA, conducting business in the European Union, risk management, international logistics, and legal aspects of importing and exporting. This is being planned as an internship that will be available to students, in all LWB language tracks, who are unable to devote more than several months toward fulfilling the 150-hour service requirement. In particular, students will use their language skills (while assisting foreign visitors, translating documents, etc.) prior to, and during, the seminars, which are held every few weeks on the campus of the University of Tennessee. Rather than spread the service requirement over two semesters, which is often difficult for students who have part- or full-time employment, the 150 hours will be completed during a three-month period while performing a variety of functions that contribute to the planning, organization, and implementation of four or five seminars.

Another type of internship that will become available in the near future (to students in all LWB language tracks) will involve students as liaisons between the LWB program and a variety of local business consortia—such as the Blount Partnership, the Farragut/West Knox Chamber of Commerce, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce for East Tennessee, the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce, and the Smoky Mountain Regional Chamber of Commerce—that cooperate in the ITC’s mission to internationalize East Tennessee. Student liaisons will perform 150 hours of service during the semester in which they enroll in LWB 199, a strategy that is intended to facilitate monitoring the internships (which is performed by the director of the LWB program). In a typical internship, a student will distribute these hours among a variety of activities, including assisting the consortium with
tasks that require advanced language skills (such as translation and interpretation), serving as a source of information for the consortium on a particular foreign culture (Asian, European, or Latin American), and presenting periodic reports in LWB 199 on matters related to international trade that concern the local businesses within the consortium.

The cross-cultural nature of LWB 199 makes the course an appropriate venue for introducing an additional internship project, an innovative option that allows students to perform their service while immersed in a culture that is different from the one studied in upper-level courses in their principal area of study. The initial focus is China, where salaried positions as English teachers can be obtained with the assistance of organizations (such as Business English Solutions International, LLC) that arrange for housing and provide pedagogical training and job placement for a fee. The objective of this project, whose development is being supervised by Dr. Donghui He, assistant professor of Chinese at the University of Tennessee, is to secure summer positions that would be regularly available to students in all LWB languages. While this type of internship, which does not require any prior foreign language skills, deviates from those traditionally performed by LWB students, its incorporation into the curriculum reflects a continuing effort by the LWB committee to better prepare students for careers in today’s multinational business world.

Surveys conducted in LWB 199 during the past few years have revealed that many students are seeking to combine an internship with a study abroad experience. To meet this need, a cooperative effort between the LWB program and the College of Business Administration has established a linkage between the University of Tennessee and the Universidad Católica de Santiago de Guayaquil, which will be the on-site sponsor of a program that will target students in Spanish (currently around 35). The linkage between the two universities, which has been forged with the assistance of Dr. Michael Handelsman, professor of Spanish at the University of Tennessee and a specialist in Ecuadorian literature and culture, situates the Universidad Católica as the conduit through which LWB students in Spanish are placed as interns in businesses in Guayaquil involved in international trade. Concurrent to

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9 Fred A. Pierce III, director of undergraduate programs for the College of Business Administration at the University of Tennessee, has also played an important role in establishing this linkage.
the internship, students are also able to enroll in business courses (in Finance, International Economics, Marketing, and Management) at the Universidad Católica in addition to Spanish language courses designed specifically for foreign students. In concert with the Universidad Católica, the LWB committee and representatives from the College of Business Administration work together to monitor the internships in Guayaquil as well as the content of the courses (which are conducted in Spanish), so as to ensure seamless credit transfers to the University of Tennessee. LWB students in all languages are also able to participate in a summer study abroad program in Castiglion Fiorentino (Tuscany, Italy) that is sponsored by the College of Business Administration. In this unique four-week program, which runs from early July to early August, LWB students are able to fulfill one of the upper-level business course requirements and the practical experience component by completing two courses (in Management and Economics) that are taught (in English) by University of Tennessee professors.

In its redesigned form, LWB 199 functions as a bridge between the language and business components of the major by striving to motivate students to achieve a better understanding of the marketability of their degree. The class serves as a laboratory in which students engage in a variety of activities designed to demonstrate the value of the dual nature of the LWB degree in the international marketplace. As such, LWB 199 is also a clearinghouse for disseminating information on several internship options, including one specifically designed for students with time constraints and another that offers the opportunity to utilize class time in order to fulfill part of the practical experience component of the major. Perhaps the greatest indication of the success of the new format of LWB 199 is the recent growth in the number of LWB majors, which has increased from around 40 in early 2003 to around 60 in May of 2005.

WORKS CITED


