

12-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Haidan (2011) "Chinese for Business Professionals: The Workplace Needs and Business Chinese Textbooks," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 16 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol16/iss1/5>

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CHINESE FOR BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS: THE WORKPLACE NEEDS AND BUSINESS CHINESE TEXTBOOKS

ABSTRACT

The acquisition of pragmatic competence in the workplace is the ultimate goal for business Chinese learners. Whether the business Chinese textbooks and instructional materials can meet the language needs of different workplaces in China has a close bearing on the quality and efficacy of business Chinese teaching. Funded by both the interdisciplinary research grant from the University of Hawai'i Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER), and the Business Language Research and Teaching grant from twelve US CIBERs, this study will present an endeavor to fill the gap between the actual needs of the stakeholders and the current status of business Chinese textbooks in the market. Two major parts of this study include (1) a needs analysis with triangulated sources and methods that would increase the reliability and validity of the interpretation of data (Long, 2005), and (2) an analysis of the panoply of teaching materials in light of current pedagogic theories with a particular focus on pragmatics and content. Recommendations from this study may provide reliable guidelines for business Chinese curricula intended for helping students of business Chinese acquire the tools to communicate successfully.

KEYWORDS: Business Chinese, needs analysis, textbook analysis, curriculum design

1. BACKGROUND

According to *Bloomberg*, China became the second largest trading partner of the US five years ago (Drajem, 2006).^{*} The demand for business Chinese increases as the ability to engage successfully in business-oriented

^{*} I would like to thank the reviewers for making generous comments, and Professor Allen Wood for his encouraging suggestions. I am grateful to Professor Christine Grosse. It was her enthusiastic speech at the 2011 CIBER Business Language Conference that made me complete this article. Last but not least, I also wish to thank Susanne DeVore, an MA student at University of Hawai'i, who read this article and shared her interesting experiences about working in Chinese-speaking environments.

communication in Chinese becomes a greater asset to international business people. Business school administrators and students are quite clear about their demands for language training with direct and immediate communicative use in the business environment. Two recent surveys (University of Michigan, 2006, 2009) have shown a growing audience for instruction in business Chinese in universities and higher institutes in the US.

The University of Hawai'i (UH) became a forerunner in offering Chinese for business professionals when it cooperated with the Japan-America Institute of Management Science (JAIMS) to offer its China-Executive MBA, a program that started in 1997. In the fall of 2006, in response to the call to establish a successful business Chinese program for the newly launched China International MBA (CIMBA), I was entrusted with developing business Chinese curricula in a scientific way. During the planning period, the committee discovered that, on the one hand, business Chinese instruction materials on the market often consisted of generic readings or fictitious conversations that might de-emphasize the needs of the users, or that were based purely on content and approaches fabricated by textbook authors according to preconceived notions of the needs of the textbook user. On the other hand, the actual needs of those studying business Chinese had not been analyzed or articulated. Therefore, it was necessary for a business Chinese needs analysis to be juxtaposed with the results of the textbook analysis, resulting in observations that may benefit the growing business Chinese education community.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS CHINESE

A first step for curriculum design, needs analysis, is defined as "the systematic collection and analysis of all information necessary for defining a defensible curriculum" (Brown, 2009, p. 269). This process is especially necessary when developing a language curriculum for special purposes, such as any business language that satisfies the language learning community. Since its promotion in the 1970s, needs analyses have been extensively conducted on the use of English for business and in the workplace (Uvin, 1996; Edwards, 2000; So-Mui and Mead, 2000; Tanaka, 2001; Crosling and Ward, 2002; Chew, 2005; Holmes, 2005; Jasson-Aguilar, 2005; Evans, 2010; Kassim and Fatimah, 2010; [all cited in Brown, 2009]; and Wozniak, 2010). There are also a few studies of the needs of other languages used in business scenarios, such as German (Vandermeeren, 2005), Japanese (Nagatomi, 2008), and Spanish (Zinggeler and López-Gómez, 2011). The analysis of Chinese use in business and the workplace has never been conducted.

In light of the insufficient research and the need for holistic program development, the steering committee secured funding from the UH CIBER and consulted professors from Shilder College of Business at UH for this interdisciplinary research. In the summer of 2007, with assistance from JAISMS and the State of Hawaii's Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, the research team traveled to Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin, and interviewed business practitioners using Chinese as a business language in China. Another source of data came from survey questionnaires administered before students took business Chinese courses.

2.1. INTERVIEWEES OF THE NEEDS ANALYSIS AND SURVEY RESPONDENTS

We identified our interviewees as those who use Chinese in various business activities (Frendo, 2005). The interviewees were (1) graduates from the former China Executive MBA program at UH (4 people), (2) foreign employees (mostly American) working and using Chinese in various business environments in China (8 people), and (3) supervisors or managers of expatriates working in China (8 people). They were either inexperienced, had work experience, or had general business experience and worked at a variety of different levels. In addition, they had special needs for their specific work. The interviewees worked in a wide range of different areas, such as accounting, marketing, construction materials, a governmental business department, investment, filmmaking, consulting, cultural cooperation, sports brokerage, publishing, finance, and the hi-tech sector. The fourth category consisted of over 50 students in the CIMBA program, which requires two years of business experience, and students who registered for business Chinese classes starting in 2007.

2.2. NEEDS ANALYSIS FRAMEWORKS

Because of the limited time and funding, I adopted both the Discrepancy Philosophy and Democratic Philosophy (Stufflebeam et al., 1985) as the foundation for this analysis. The former addresses the differences between students' future desired performance and current ability; the latter addresses the goals preferred by a majority of stakeholders. Necessities (objective needs), and *wants* (subjective needs) are what learners need or would like to know (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; also in Brown, 2009). The situation needs are most prominent because needs assessment is commonly considered "situation-specific" (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001; Purpura et al., 2003).

2.3. APPROACHES

Triangulation is a “procedure ... to increase the credibility of data and thereby, eventually, to increase the credibility of the interpretations of those data” (Long, 2005, p. 28). This strategy has been widely applied in a number of research projects. Of the seven triangulation approaches in Brown (2001, p. 229), five are adopted in this study. They are theory triangulation (using multiple frameworks); methodological triangulation (survey questionnaire, video recording, face-to-face interviews, and telephone interviews); interdisciplinary triangulation (respondents from diversified disciplines); time triangulation (gathering data on different occasions); and location triangulation (using three cities in China plus Honolulu, Hawaii).

2.4. SURVEY CONTENTS

Interviewees of the study were surveyed about their (1) business Chinese learning background, (2) additional Chinese training in China, (3) significant gaps between language training and language use at work, (4) daily routines at work and use of Chinese as a business language, (5) situations they are unable to handle with their current Chinese proficiency, (6) culture shock they have experienced, and (7) their language needs, including abilities and content areas.

Supervisors were asked about (1) their expectations for their non-Chinese employees' Chinese language competence and (2) the traits and behaviors they expected their staff to have.

Questionnaires for students registering in business Chinese classes are attached (See Appendix 1).

2.5. SUMMARIES OF THE INTERVIEWS

The articulated abilities from interviews are threefold. Regarding the daily routine and operations in a company, interviewees identified the following as necessary abilities: (1) establish rapport with colleagues in the workplace environment, (2) participate and interact in company and group meetings, including debriefing with their team, (3) use specific protocols for phone behavior, (4) make public speeches and break the ice, (5) interact with all related departments. Besides, the skill of interviewing prospective clients is equally as important as negotiating. Finding suitable topics and making friends with Chinese people are other important issues for work and life skills. At the same time, it would be useful if people acquired strategies for improving specific business-oriented pragmatic skills.

Respondents also expressed that they want to be able to read company documents, business reports, and emails among co-workers. They also said it was necessary to be able to write informal communications, such as business correspondence, emails, memos, and use specific protocols for cell-phone text messages. It was equally important to produce formal writings, such as contracts, proposal drafts, and translations of documents. It was also considered useful to have the ability of searching online and find related information, do data collection, processing, organizing, and analyzing along with the compilation of files based on data. Many interviewees indicated the importance of the ability of using Chinese Windows, office software, vocabulary, abbreviations, and code-switching related to the Internet.

As far as culture, interviewees thought it was quite hard to seize the nuances of daily life. One American-born Chinese man, for instance, whose parents own a Chinese restaurant in the US, found it difficult to see a duck's head hanging in the window of a restaurant. Some Asian Chinese interviewees felt they were treated differently from Caucasians in China. Regarding office customs, interviewees thought it took time to grow accustomed to the lunchtime nap that is common in China. They also wanted to learn the rules about speech and silence, because some observed that talk happens "after the meeting." They think Chinese colleagues want to deal with very personal questions, but devalued "thinking out of the box." Some of these interviewees wanted to learn what they called "unspoken rules" because they sensed that Chinese colleagues have a "clearly set, sort of guidelines and underlying foundation to the way they operate" (Wang, 2007).

Interviewees from diverse industries hoped that vocabulary and terminology would be as broad as possible, covering a wide range of sectors and fields, such as accounting terms, so that they could read balance sheets, documents dealing with finance and banking related to their investments, and marketing and sales documents that are related to initiation, segmentation, research, and analysis. In terms of discourse strategies, interviewees said that concluding a conversation naturally was just as important as knowing the formulaic expressions for initiating social interactions. Adjusting the register in speaking in different genres was a key concern, too. General negotiation abilities in business situations or during small talk, along with nuances and genres, directness and indirectness in everyday work, corporate culture, and company culture, etc. were all articulated in these interviews. Some considered it just as important to understand how the complicated (Chinese) government administration works and to understand the newest government policies in China.

2.6. SUMMARY OF SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Among the 58 survey questions, the 20 language skills shown in the following table are among the “most important” for the surveyed students.

TABLE I. MOST IMPORTANT LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR THE SURVEYED STUDENTS

<i>Priority order</i>	<i>Ques- tion #</i>	<i>Language skill</i>
1	33.	Answering questions in a job interview
2	03.	Asking for and understanding walking directions on the street
3	06.	Ordering a meal
4	10.	Using local transportation (taxi, subway)
5	13.	Using medical services
6	22.	Making business appointments
7	43.	Giving a general introduction about my company to a visiting delegation
8	07.	Chatting with a stranger
9	05.	Getting plane or train tickets
10	04.	Getting a room in a hotel
11	36.	Chatting about my work at a social gathering
12	02.	Notifying others by email about scheduled events
13	17.	Opening a bank account (choosing an account type, etc.)
14	20.	Having an informal drink with a friend or colleague
15	23.	Giving my opinion in a company meeting
16	14.	Renting an apartment off campus
17	18.	Using the post office
18	35.	Speaking with a supervisor about problems in the workplace
19	39.	Training new employees
20	32.	Asking questions of an interviewee for an assistant position

For these 20 prioritized language skills, 12 of them are from the “social/personal” question group (Questions #1 to #21), six are from the “generic business” group (Questions #22 to #27), and only two are from the “specialized business” group (Questions #38 to #58). This survey result provides a brief picture about students taking business Chinese courses. Regardless of their language proficiencies, students of business Chinese seem to be much more concerned about their general social and personal skills than other generic business or specific business-related language skills.

3. REVIEWING BUSINESS CHINESE TEXTBOOKS

The number of business Chinese textbooks on the market has burgeoned over the past decade. For this research, we have collected nine series of business Chinese textbooks for English-speaking learners, with a total of 44 books (see Appendix 2).

The majority of these textbooks are intended to teach speaking and some reading or listening. Out of the 44 textbooks, nine focus on communication

protocols for business and daily life, seven are organized with a unilinear trading story, three center on strategies and skills for trading and negotiation, and two introduce company structure and operational details. Reading-focused textbooks were another main category. Two were case studies. Three have contents that either re-wrote relevant materials from newspapers, magazine, or online resources, or directly re-presented materials under selected topics. One textbook focuses on knowledge and information related to trading only. Three additional textbooks take the approach of listening drills, and another three focus on business writing. There are even soap opera TV series for a fabricated business trading story.

4. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This considerable number of business Chinese textbooks is intended to cover a broad range of areas that responds to the needs of many audiences. However, Wang et al. (2007) show that trade still has too large of a share (Fig.1) in beginning and intermediate textbooks, which is probably due to tradition.

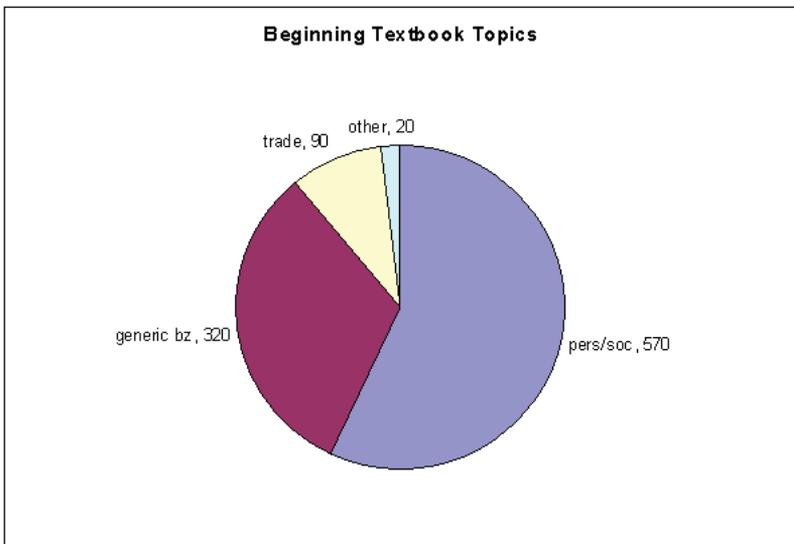


Fig. 1. Beginning Textbook Topics.

In intermediate and advanced textbooks, trade dominates the specialized topics (Fig. 2).

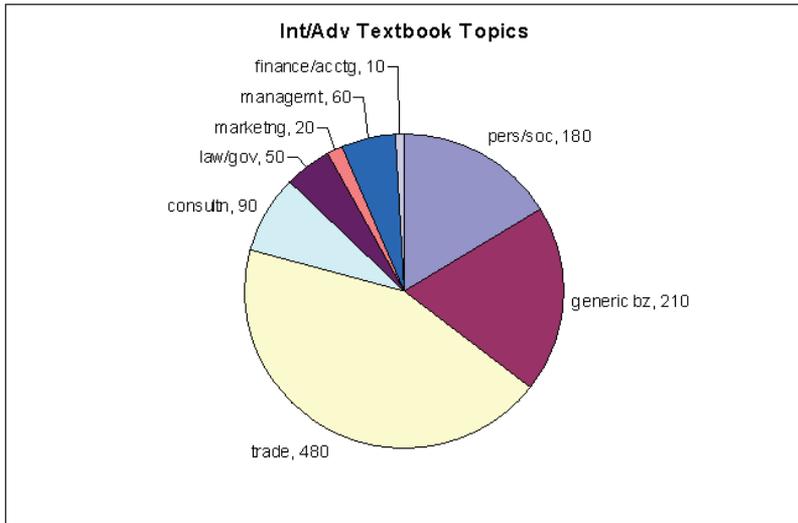


Fig. 2. Int/Adv Textbook Topics.

Statistics of the industries in which UH business Chinese program students have interned over the past thirteen years show that trade is not a popular sector among business Chinese learners. Only 4% of them work in this field (see Fig. 3, Wang 2007). The majority of the interns or graduates favor work or internships in such fields as consulting, banking, advertising, and marketing, or government agencies.

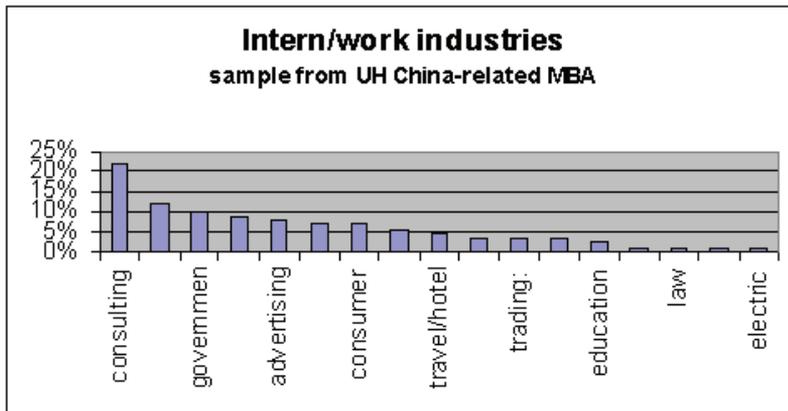


Fig. 3. Intern/work industries.

Wang et al.'s (2007) corpus-based survey carefully examines the pragmatics of these textbooks from the perspectives of organization, explicit instruction of pragmatic content, breadth of functions, variety of forms, variety of useful tasks, effectiveness of speakers' strategies, and the material's authenticity.

We can also recall the survey results shown in Section 2.6. Among these 12 prioritized skills from the "social/personal" group, six (Survey Questions #3, #5, #6, #10, #14, and #18) are somewhat covered in a few beginning and intermediate business textbooks. For the abilities listed at the top, skills such as "answering questions in a job interview," "using medical service (in China)," "chatting with a stranger," "chatting about my work at a social gathering," and "having an informal drink with a friend or colleague" are seldom included in these business Chinese series (Wang, 2008).

These summaries yield a clear picture of pragmatic contents that are necessary for business communication but are missing in existing materials. This shows that most users of business Chinese are not concentrated in the trading sector, as many textbook writers seem to have thought. Moreover, the number of non-native speakers using business Chinese is rapidly increasing. This requires business Chinese educators to gain more reliable information from stakeholders, rather than using dated existing materials consisting of generic readings of fictitious conversations and approaches fabricated by textbook authors according to preconceived notions of the needs of textbook users. Only when curriculum designers refer to the results of needs analyses to enrich pragmatic approaches, can they "stand a good chance of creating a defensible curriculum" (Brown, 2009, p. 286), and thus avoid the potential failure of the program.

A trustworthy needs analysis may often produce recommendations that can serve as reliable guidelines for business language curricula that help students acquire the ability to communicate successfully. The practices employed in this research on business Chinese have confirmed our belief in the significance of stakeholders' needs analysis for the establishment of a new program or of selecting business Chinese instruction materials. For business Chinese curricula, like other language learning for special purposes, the learner's needs are always the top priority (Grosse and Voght, 2011). Business Chinese educators need to incorporate the interests of professionals from a wide variety of industries, and teach their students a language that truly responds to their needs, equipping them with the necessary pragmatic competence.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: CIMBA LANGUAGE NEEDS SURVEY

Instructions: Please indicate the importance of each of the following language-using skills as a personal learning goal of yours within the scope of the CIMBA language program. Your assessment of the importance of each goal FOR YOUR CHINESE LANGUAGE LEARNING may be based on various factors—first of all, your feeling of how useful that function is, but also other factors. For example, if you think that a goal might be unrealistic for you, that might cause you to rate it as less important for you.

For each row, select a number from 1 to 5, 1 meaning not at all important, 5 meaning extremely important. If you have no opinion or the scenario does not apply to you, select "NA".

Social/Personal						
1. Writing a simple grocery list	NA	1	2	3	4	5
2. Notifying others by email about scheduled events	NA	1	2	3	4	5
3. Asking for and understanding walking directions on the street	NA	1	2	3	4	5
4. Getting a room in a hotel	NA	1	2	3	4	5
5. Getting plane or train tickets	NA	1	2	3	4	5
6. Ordering a meal	NA	1	2	3	4	5
7. Chatting with a stranger	NA	1	2	3	4	5
8. Getting information about bars, restaurants, etc. in town	NA	1	2	3	4	5
9. Asking about available entertainment and nightlife	NA	1	2	3	4	5
10. Using local transportation (taxi, subway)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
11. Negotiating rates and services for a cell phone	NA	1	2	3	4	5
12. Obtaining a quote and making arrangements for Internet service	NA	1	2	3	4	5
13. Using medical services	NA	1	2	3	4	5
14. Renting an apartment off campus	NA	1	2	3	4	5
15. Hiring a domestic worker	NA	1	2	3	4	5
16. Understanding and composing personal text messages (SMS)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
17. Opening a bank account (choosing an account type, etc.)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
18. Using the post office	NA	1	2	3	4	5
19. Using concierge services (laundry etc.)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
20. Having an informal drink with a friend or colleague	NA	1	2	3	4	5
21. Visiting a karaoke bar with friends	NA	1	2	3	4	5

For each row, select a number from 1 to 5, 1 meaning not at all important, 5 meaning extremely important. If you have no opinion or the scenario does not apply to you, select "NA".

Generic Business						
22. Making business appointments	NA	1	2	3	4	5
23. Giving my opinion in a company meeting	NA	1	2	3	4	5
24. Setting an agenda for an internal company meeting	NA	1	2	3	4	5
25. Scheduling arrangements for a factory site visit	NA	1	2	3	4	5

26. Making arrangements for travel for my company CEO's China visit	NA	1	2	3	4	5
27. Inquiring about a hotel's facilities for a business event	NA	1	2	3	4	5
28. Asking for personal or sick leave	NA	1	2	3	4	5
29. Asking for procedural information on using office computers	NA	1	2	3	4	5
30. Asking for procedural information on using the copy machine	NA	1	2	3	4	5
31. Asking for procedural information on using company archives / files / the library	NA	1	2	3	4	5
32. Asking questions of an interviewee for an assistant position	NA	1	2	3	4	5
33. Answering questions in a job interview	NA	1	2	3	4	5
34. Requesting an internal transfer	NA	1	2	3	4	5
35. Speaking with a supervisor about problems in the workplace	NA	1	2	3	4	5
36. Chatting about my work at a social gathering	NA	1	2	3	4	5
37. Negotiating conditions for working overtime	NA	1	2	3	4	5

For each row, select a number from 1 to 5, 1 meaning not at all important, 5 meaning extremely important. If you have no opinion or the scenario does not apply to you, select "NA".

Specialized Business

38. Negotiating the price of a wholesale purchase	NA	1	2	3	4	5
39. Training new employees	NA	1	2	3	4	5
40. Writing marketing research reports	NA	1	2	3	4	5
41. Writing case studies	NA	1	2	3	4	5
42. Doing product introductions at a trade fair booth	NA	1	2	3	4	5
43. Giving a general introduction about my company to a visiting delegation	NA	1	2	3	4	5
44. Preparing an expense report requesting reimbursement for travel expenses	NA	1	2	3	4	5
45. Taking minutes in a company meeting	NA	1	2	3	4	5
46. Composing a press release for a new product	NA	1	2	3	4	5
47. Coordinating an advertising campaign for a product of your company	NA	1	2	3	4	5
48. Reading sales contracts	NA	1	2	3	4	5
49. Negotiating terms for manufacture with a subcontractor	NA	1	2	3	4	5
50. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of eCommerce	NA	1	2	3	4	5
51. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of the travel industry	NA	1	2	3	4	5
52. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of IT (software, etc.)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
53. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of the entertainment industry (TV, etc.)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
54. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of finance and banking	NA	1	2	3	4	5
55. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of accounting	NA	1	2	3	4	5
56. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of laws and regulations	NA	1	2	3	4	5
57. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of taxation	NA	1	2	3	4	5
58. Dealing with specialized language on the topic of securities markets	NA	1	2	3	4	5

Please list any topic that you feel is important but we have not included.

APPENDIX 2: BUSINESS CHINESE TEXTBOOKS PUBLISHED IN CHINA AND THE US FOR ENGLISH-SPEAKING LEARNERS

- 周红 等 (2011). 《商务汉语写作 Business Chinese Writing》. 上海: 学林出版社.
- 李晓琪, 崔华山, 李海燕 等 (2009). 《新丝路: 初级速成商务汉语 New Silk Road Business Chinese I》, 《中级速成商务汉语 New Silk Road Business Chinese II》, 《高级速成商务汉语 New Silk Road Business Chinese III》北京大学出版社.
- 林欢 等 (2009). 《新丝路: 商务汉语写作教程》. 北京大学出版社.
- 崔华山 等 (2009). 《新丝路: 商务汉语听力教程》. 北京大学出版社.
- 冯禹 等. (2006). 《在商言商 Close the Deal: Advanced Chinese for Creative and Productive Business》. Boston: Cheng & Tsui.
- Kuo, J. (2006). 《新世纪商用汉语初级会话 Startup Business Chinese: An Introductory Course for Professionals》. Boston: Cheng & Tsui.
- 梁镛 等. (2006). 《中级经贸汉语 Intermediate Business Chinese》. 北京语言大学出版社.
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- 王小军 等 (2005). 《基础商务汉语: 会话与应用 A Business Trip to China: Conversation and Application》. 北京语言大学出版社.
- 袁芳远. (2005). 《成功之道 Business Chinese for Success: Real Cases for Real Companies》. 北京大学出版社.
- 张黎 等 (2005). 《商务汉语入门-基本礼仪篇 Gateway to Business Chinese: Regular Formulas and Etiquette》. 《日常交际篇 Gateway to Business Chinese: Daily Communication》, 《商务汉语提高-应酬篇, 办公篇, 业务篇 Advanced Business Chinese》. 北京大学出版社.
- 张晓慧等 (2005). 《经理人汉语: 生活篇 Chinese for Managers: Everyday Chinese》. 外语教学与研究出版社.

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