Global Business Languages

Volume 16 *Partnerships and New Alliances* Article 6

12-1-2011

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Recommended Citation
Vigier, Mary and Smoller Le Floch, Nancy (2011) "Promoting Cultural Awareness in an International Business Program through Foreign Language Communication," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 16, Article 6.
Available at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol16/iss1/6

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PROMOTING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN AN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROGRAM THROUGH FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

The article examines a module developed over the past 20 years at a French management school to show how culturally based learning activities in the foreign language classroom can improve the school's management training curriculum. Through debates, role plays, and discussions, the module improves students' communicative skills and enhances their comprehension of self and others. The assignments aid students in making sense of unfamiliar contexts. By developing cultural awareness in addition to linguistic fluency, the class contributes to the school's mission to train future business professionals to become open-minded and thereby to operate more effectively in today's global business environment.

KEYWORDS: international business education, program learning goals and objectives, foreign language learning, interactive communicative skills, cultural awareness, faculty synergy

INTRODUCTION

Culturally based learning activities in the foreign language classroom can improve the management training of future business professionals. The present article examines a foreign-language module entitled *Understanding the American Mind* that we have developed over a period of more than twenty years in the business school curriculum at a French school of management. In line with the school's mission and the "Assurance of Learning" (AACSB) expectations, our module has two objectives: first, to help our students, who are future professionals, to conduct business more effectively in a global context by acquiring an understanding of American culture; and second, to improve their English-language skills through debates, discussions, and role plays. By understanding one's relations to others and by developing an awareness of the differences between France and the United States, our students will be more inclined to acknowledge and accept the differences not only between their culture and other Western cultures, but also non-Western cultures.

The Role of Cultural Learning in Business Education

Our approach to teaching cultural awareness in an international business program is supported by a substantial body of literature that has been developed over the past fifty years (Hall, 1959, 1960; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; Varner, 2000; Witte, 2010).

Despite the semblance today of a globally integrated world, differences in culture continue to divide societies. Therefore, instructors should direct the attention of each new generation of business students to these intercultural issues. In order to succeed in international business, one must be aware that approaches to work vary among cultures (Slate, 1993). Self-awareness and self-knowledge are crucial factors in adapting to cultural differences (Varner and Palmer, 2005). We are convinced that international business programs should develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills (Byram, 1997) individuals need to become competent leaders who are able to manage business interactions in an increasingly global business environment (Beamer, 1992; Shetty and Rudell, 2002; Tuleja, 2008; Ulijn et al., 2000; Varner, 2000, 2001). International business education should foster an understanding by the students of their own cultural values and behaviors so that they, the students, may compare them with those of other cultures, thereby expanding their worldviews and preparing them to conduct business in cross-cultural settings (Shetty and Rudell, 2002; Tuleja, 2008).

Intercultural communicative competence consists of the essential skills that managers need in order to interact successfully in an international environment. These include the cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies required to adapt to unfamiliar cultural situations appropriately and effectively (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009). When individuals communicate, they do so from their own frames of reference which are the result of their past experiences. Judging others by one's own standards and viewing people from other cultures as inferior are obstacles to effective intercultural interaction, which requires an understanding of differences, a tolerance for ambiguity, and a respect for otherness (Gibbs et al., 1988). Developing these open-minded attitudes and adopting a global mindset (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002) are prerequisites for successful intercultural communication.

Just as foreign-language learning opens the eyes of certain students to the structure of their native tongue, being exposed to foreign ways makes them conscious of what makes up their own culture (Atay, 2005; Beamer, 1992; Bennett, 1986; Elorza, 2008; Varner, 2001). The course outline (Table 2) shows that the module *Understanding the American Mind* is composed of

lecture-oriented classes as well as student-centered activities. Two lecture-based classes open the course, introduce aspects of American culture, and invite the students to consider elements of their own culture. Week 2 is especially rich in this respect for it stimulates students to ask themselves what constitutes their own system of cultural values. Once the student-focused activities commence, students are given full reign to discuss, compare, question, and debate a number of topics, thus providing them with ample opportunity to develop a deeper understanding not only of their own selves but also of their own country and a greater sensitivity toward other cultures (Atay, 2005; Kramsch, 1993).

At the same time, our students are confronted with the issue of frames of reference. Despite the semblance of a global world, made possible through technological advances providing instant news broadcasts from all corners of the globe, people continue to evaluate events from their own cultural perspective and are often oblivious to the fact that other frames of reference exist. Our course directs the students' attention to this and emphasizes the need to move from "changing one's behavior to understanding the behavior of the other side then determining what needs to be done so that both sides can work together in a business context" (Varner, 2001, p. 106). Consequently the benefits of the module *Understanding the American Mind* go beyond the mere comparison of France and the States since by the end of the course students have an idea of the types of questions to be asked and the frames of reference to be pondered, researched, and understood in order to communicate effectively with people from other backgrounds, other cultures, and other nations.

Our Module: The Context

We have adopted a case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009) to examine our foreign language module *Understanding the American Mind*. The school's mission statement is "to educate students to be competent, open-minded, and responsible managers, to take risks, to innovate, and to work in a borderless context." To support its mission and to assess student learning with respect to the objectives of the Master in Management program, our school has adopted six broad learning goals with clearly defined rubrics for each of the six. In Table 1 we provide a short list of the specific learning objectives that we address in our module and the school's broad learning goals with which they are associated.

TABLE 1: MASTER IN MANAGEMENT PROGRAM LEARNING OBJECTIVES THAT *UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN MIND* MEETS

Master in management program learning objectives cited in the present article (In the order cited in the text)	**Broad learning goals of the master in management program**
Master at least two foreign languages, both the linguistic and cultural dimensions	Interpersonal Communication
Demonstrate the ability to present arguments in a convincing way	Interpersonal Communication
Demonstrate an openness to others and to the world at large	Personal and Professional Development
Master the personal skills necessary for team work	Team Work and Leadership
Demonstrate the ability to lead a group	Team Work and Leadership
Demonstrate the ability to understand the ethical codes of other cultures	Ethics and Responsibility
Demonstrate the ability to listen and show empathy	Interpersonal Communication

The present article describes three major speaking activities—debates, discussions, and role plays—included in our module's syllabus. We will explain how these activities tie in with training students to become competent global managers, and show how our course supports the school's mission and is successful in assuring that a number of the learning goals are met (these are italicized in the text that follows as well as in Table 1).

Language Learning in the Master in Management Program

The Master in Management program includes mandatory courses in two foreign languages in its three-year curriculum since one of its learning goals is to *master both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of at least two foreign languages*. This is a distinct advantage of French business schools (Bryant, 1993). At our school, English is compulsory as the first foreign language and students have the choice between Arabic, German, French as a Foreign Language, Italian, Russian, or Spanish, as their second language. In addition to the two required languages, students have the opportunity to study a third. They may choose any of the second languages or Chinese, Japanese, Polish, or Portuguese. The business program is therefore rich in linguistic training.

OUR MODULE: *UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN MIND*

Structure and Design of Course

Understanding the American Mind, offered by the English Department, is taught over nine sessions and lasts one-and-a-half hours per session making a total of thirteen-and-a-half hours. Table 2 briefly summarizes the overall structure and themes of the course, and shows how the oral activities are positioned. The interactive exercises are well spaced throughout the semester to provide a balanced range of activities and assignments.

TABLE 2: *UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN MIND*: COURSE OUTLINE

Date	**Theme**
WEEK 1	*The Changing Face of America*
WEEK 2	*American Beliefs and Values*
WEEK 3	DEBATE
WEEK 4	*Route 66*
WEEK 5	*US Elections* - election years *Social Artists* - non election years
WEEK 6	DISCUSSION
WEEK 7	Test (Weeks 1–6) In-Class Written Essay
WEEK 8	ROLE PLAY
WEEK 9	Test (Homework for Week 9) *Holidays and Pop Culture*

Cultural Awareness and Communicative Skills through Debates, Discussions, and Role Plays

Understanding the American Mind focuses on a variety of themes, first those presented during predominantly lecture-based classes and then those developed during debates, discussions, and role plays, in that order. The three oral activities are woven into the course with the specific agenda to provide the opportunity to improve communicative skills in addition to acquiring cultural awareness and knowledge (Council of Europe, 2009).

French high school *(lycée)* and undergraduate students learn, in their three-part compositions, to state the positive, then the negative, and lastly to come to a synthesized conclusion. They are not used to defending their own personal

opinions, especially if it means disagreeing with their teacher who is assigning grades. Consequently, the first oral assignment is one that is culturally very different. After two predominantly lecture-oriented classes we begin the oral tasks with a fairly structured activity: debating. It is the students' turn to be in charge of the class activity, which represents a change from the traditional French educational culture. The second oral assignment, a discussion, is less structured than a debate and our students feel more confident in presenting their own personal opinions. The role play, the most challenging of the three, takes place toward the end of the module.

Objectives and Benefits of Oral Assignments

The three speaking assignments provide the students with meaningful and motivating communicative objectives for real-life situations. We believe that requiring the students to participate in classroom activities enables them to become better equipped to present complex topics with relevant supporting arguments, to understand sustained conversation, and to participate effectively in extended discussions. The oral activities in our syllabus allow students to develop their communicative needs further by providing the opportunity to improve their ability to take turns, summarize the main points, and propose solutions to complex issues (Council of Europe, 2009).

The course also meets a number of the Master in Management program learning goals. The speaking activities provide a set structure that encourages forthrightness, clarity, and relevance, thereby enabling our students to *demonstrate their ability to present arguments in a convincing way*. The grading scheme reflects the higher emphasis on oral activities (65 percent of the overall grade) as opposed to writing skills (35 percent). This differs greatly from the French tradition of translations, vocabulary lists, grammar rules, and drills.

From a cognitive point of view, each oral activity gives our students the opportunity to discuss or debate topics from a standpoint that is not necessarily their own. In so doing, they gain more knowledge of their own country while learning about the United States. In other words, they broaden their mindsets and *demonstrate their openness to others and the world at large*.

Choice of Subjects and Preparation for the Oral Assignments

Throughout the year, as instructors, we follow the news and collect articles, realia, and memorabilia relevant to the course. We also discuss technological innovations and how they can be incorporated into class preparations and student activities, taking into account the course evaluation suggestions of prior

students. In this way our module is constantly reworked, reference material is reviewed and updated, and activities are refined so as to catch the attention of each new generation of students.

Our students are encouraged to consult a vast range of sources when preparing for the oral activities. We have found, however, that their overall workload makes it necessary in the name of a good debate, discussion, or role play, to prepare a handbook in which they find the essential information, including pertinent websites. In fact, incorporating individual student access to the Internet has influenced the course set-up by allowing for more task-based homework. Furthermore, students must meet outside of class to organize the speaking activities, the purpose being to give them the opportunity to *master the personal skills necessary for team work.* Those who chair the debates, discussions, and role plays have the opportunity to *demonstrate the ability to lead a group,* and we make sure that the role of chairperson is shared by as many as possible.

Regular classes last for 90 minutes. Our experience has shown that dividing the class into two 45 minute sessions is appropriate for the oral activities and that it is best to have all the groups debate, discuss, or enact the same topic.

Debates. Over the years we have determined that, from a cultural standpoint, there are four particularly interesting debate topics: capital punishment, affirmative action, the Pledge of Allegiance and God in the government, and English as the official language of the United States. Each of the four captures our students' interest and explains something about the French mindset.

1. *Capital punishment*. French students feel at home with the subject of capital punishment in America; it is part and parcel of their high school studies. In general, the French are highly critical of capital punishment for ethical reasons. Debating capital punishment gives our students a philosophical reason for criticizing the United States, and they relish it. This is borne out in the written essays at the end of the module. Presenting and supporting arguments in favor of capital punishment is a difficult assignment, but it is also a challenging cultural-difference experience for our students. The exercise helps them better understand the "why" in addition to the "what" (Tuleja, 2008; Varner, 2001).

2. *Affirmative action*. The French consider affirmative action to be an American concept that emphasizes and reinforces differences. It became a newsworthy item in France several years ago when an Algerian-born business school director was named prefect of the Jura region, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the Interior Minister at the time, argued in favor of helping raise Muslims out of suburban ghettos and giving them a place in French society. Since then,

other people belonging to minority groups have been appointed to different governmental posts, keeping this a timely issue.

3. *Pledge of Allegiance and whether God belongs in the government*. These have long been subjects of debate in the United States. They too are appropriate issues for classroom debates in France, since the French government is resolutely nonreligious.

4. *Should the United States have an official language? Should it be English?* Our students are astonished to learn that the United States does not have an official language written into its Constitution. Furthermore, the fact that individual states can hold debates and make decisions underlines the rights of each state. Our students are thus confronted with a very different way of considering the role of the federal government.

Discussions. The subjects of the discussions are deliberately chosen to provoke the students to want to talk and communicate their opinions. One example is the notion of heroes, with questions such as: What is a hero? What is a superhero? What do American heroes and heroines tell us about American standards and ideals? Are the French and Americans similar or are they different in their need for heroes? Lively exchanges have resulted because the French definition of a hero and those of our international students differ greatly from the American concept of heroism. Our students also learn that they do not always agree among themselves about the need for heroes. Consequently, the discussion of another culture's ideals and values is a step toward *demonstrat[ing] the ability to understand the ethical codes of other cultures.* At the same time it awakens self-awareness in our students and gives them the opportunity to develop tolerance and respect for each other as well as for the peoples of other cultures, i.e., to *demonstrate their ability to listen and show empathy.*

Role Plays. In presidential election years, the role play deals with campaign issues. Students are assigned to one of the two major political parties and are given task-based homework on the Internet to prepare the campaign issues according to the party assigned. In recent years, these have included abortion, gay rights, gun control, the environment, health care, and immigration. For the role play, the chairperson leads a discussion between the Democrats and Republicans on the issues at stake. To conclude the role play activity, mock elections are held and students vote on who they believe will or should win the election.

In non-election years, the role play concerns Franco-American relations. We organize roundtable discussions during which the students, the dinner guests, adopt the attitude of a French historical or modern character. Groups

are assigned, and the students either choose from a prepared list or they are assigned a personage. The idea is to imagine a dinner party during which each student discusses twenty-first-century Franco-American relations from the point of view of the person he/she represents. The number of guests is calculated in such a way that there are never two students impersonating the same role. The list is updated each year to reflect current events and interests. Well-known personages who have been chosen for the students to impersonate have included Marquis de La Fayette, Alexis de Toqueville, Charles de Gaulle, José Bové, Jacques Chirac, Jean-François Revel, Philippe Roger, Jean-Marie Messier, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Dominique de Villepin, Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal, and Carlos Ghosn.

Linguistic Feedback

During each oral activity, the instructor fills out individual feedback sheets (Table 3) as each student speaks, thus providing linguistic feedback for the students who are evaluated for language, content, communication, and the overall effect.

TABLE 3: INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK SHEET

ORAL EVALUATION SHEET

NAME _____ SUBJECT _____

DATE _____ GRADE _____

PRONUNCIATION	GRAMMAR, EXPRESSIONS VOCABULARY

After each oral activity, the instructor studies the individual feedback sheets and makes a short list of the mistakes made by the majority of the students in order to design a linguistic worksheet (Table 4). The worksheet—without corrections—is handed out in class, and, collectively, we find *what [the students] meant to say.*

TABLE 4: LINGUISTIC WORKSHEET: ROLE PLAY—US ELECTIONS / CORRECT THE FOLLOWING MISTAKES (With Corrections Added)

WHAT YOU SAID	WHAT YOU MEANT TO SAY
I want to precise…	Specify / highlight / underline / point out …
That the cost of the war is important	That the cost of the war is high
The United States are the country the most polluting	The US is the country that pollutes the most
The energy becomes a global issue	Energy has become
It exists a lot of poor workers	There are
Are you agree with me?	Do you agree
…	
…	

Identifying the most frequently heard mistakes in pronunciation (Table 5) and using them as whole-class drill have also met with success. Pointing out these linguistic areas for improvement is a worthwhile class activity and has become an integral part of our teaching method.

TABLE 5: LINGUISTIC WORKSHEET: ROLE PLAY—US ELECTIONS / PRONUNCIATION (With Areas for Improvement in Bold)

Asia	th**is** country	th**ese** countries
De**mo**cracy	**sub**sidies / to subsid**ize**	Ir**aq** / I**ra**qis
quality [kw]	**eth**ics / **eth**ical	pr**i**vate / c**li**mate
Il**le**gal	c**ul**ture	**stra**tegy / stra**te**gic

Limitations and Challenges of Our Course

Due to scheduling constraints in the Master in Management program, each instructor is able to teach a maximum of two classes. Owing to its popularity, the module fills up quickly. As the course lasts only thirteen-and-a-half

hours, we have to adjust the syllabus to the limited time frame and take into account the different learning styles of our students in order to reach our learning objectives (Clarke et al., 2006; Gardner, 1983; Morrison et al., 2003, 2006). Indeed, varying our approach to the topics we cover as well as our teaching methods and techniques benefits both the visual and the verbal learners (Clarke et al., 2006), and enables us to design classes adapted to multiple learning styles (Gardner, 1983; Morrison et al., 2006). Work in the area of targeting learning opportunities to the different types of students has shown that learning outcomes improve when learning activities are matched to student learning styles (Karns, 2006; Morrison et al., 2003). Likewise, we craft our teaching strategies and materials to appeal to a variety of learning preferences and processes.

In spite of the fact that over 100 international students attend the school each semester, few foreign students take *Understanding the American Mind,* owing to their generally better command of the English language or to their participation in specialized programs. Therefore, fewer exchanges across cultures take place in the classroom than we would like. However, there is a marked improvement in the development of cultural awareness of all the students when international students take the course. We are most successful with students who make the most of the opportunities in the school to get to know the foreign students outside the classroom and who are thereby already open to other cultures. For the others, our module serves as a starting point.

DISCUSSION

Development of Cultural Awareness through Stereotypes

As part of their high school and undergraduate curricula, our students have studied texts giving the French perspective on race relations, capital punishment, affirmative action, and obesity in the United States. It can be argued that, at the same time, the media reflects, and is influential in propagating, the French perspective, making it become an ingrained mindset. Furthermore, movies by Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, as well as TV documentaries about prisons and mass killings, imbue French minds with stereotypes about America.

There is a false belief created by stereotypes that one "knows" about other cultures (Cardon, 2010; Witte, 2010). While not denying the partial accuracy of some stereotypes, we want our students to delve more deeply into their study of the United States. We also want to introduce certain aspects of the American society to which they have probably not been exposed and consequently of which they are unaware.

Even though stereotypes may be partially accurate, they represent an obstacle to communication, as they provide an incomplete picture of the whole culture. The danger is cultural narrow-mindedness when communicating with members of other cultures (Beamer, 1992; Varner, 2001). Successful intercultural communication requires questioning stereotypes (Osland and Bird, 2000), and our module *Understanding the American Mind* provides students with the opportunity to expand their critical thinking beyond clichés.

Transferable Skills

Our course on the United States, although culture-specific, can be transferred to culture-general situations. Through this module, students develop skills transferable to other Western, and even non-Western, cultures. As it is obviously not possible to acquire knowledge about every culture one may encounter, learning the culture of the country whose language one is studying serves as an example of cultural identity and should be combined with acquiring the methods to communicate effectively in all cultural situations (Byram, 1997). From a cultural point of view, the emphasis of our module is therefore twofold: (1) acquiring a method to understand and analyze cultural beliefs and practices both critically and comparatively, and (2) learning about the culture of the social group whose language is being studied. The cultural and linguistic framework acquired (Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2009) should serve as the basis for future interactions. Since the skills for coping with new cultural identities and processes can be transferred to other situations, our ultimate goal is to help our students enhance their ability to interact with different cultural groups, not just with one particular culture.

LEARNING GOALS

A number of the school's goals are being met with this module. Students are able to develop the linguistic and cultural elements of interpersonal communication by practicing English in the classroom and focusing on cultural themes. Furthermore, the course gives our students the opportunity to acquire the emotional intelligence and intercultural skills to function in a multicultural environment by being required to listen to others and to show empathy and tolerance. Students also enhance their teamwork and leadership skills by operating in teams for the debates, discussions, and role plays, and by chairing them.

The essential outcomes and benefits of *Understanding the American Mind* include helping our students acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Byram, 1997) that improve their communication competence and deepen

their cultural awareness. The course provides them with the setting in which they can interact with fellow classmates, sharpen collaborative communication strategies, and articulate their ideas with confidence (Council of Europe, 2009). The topics of the classroom debates, discussions, and role plays allow our students to reflect upon complex issues, co-construct meaning, and raise new questions. The intercultural sensitivity and cultural awareness acquired through the assignments assist our students in dealing with unfamiliar social situations (Nieto and Zoller Booth, 2010) similar to those they will encounter in cross-cultural settings. Furthermore, when our students take the floor and interact with others in English on a given topic, they are actors in their own learning process (Planken et al., 2004).

One of the "Assurance of Learning" (AACSB) assessment tools that the school uses is a comprehensive oral examination at the end of the three-year Master in Management program to measure a student's general culture, critical thinking, and communicative skills. *Understanding the American Mind* provides the structure that enables students to develop these skills, and fulfills the need to cultivate knowledge and broaden the students' mindsets to make them better business people and members of society (Hammermeister, 2010). The general knowledge acquired and the specific skill sets put into practice in our course "reflect [the] broad educational expectations" that constitute "the sustainable foundations for life-long learning in support of [our students'] professional and personal development" (AACSB International, 2007, pp. 4–5).

CONCLUSION

Student evaluations of the module have been positive, confirming that we are reaching our objectives. The course not only prepares our students for the school's compulsory six-month international experience but also contributes in a substantial way to their training to become competent global managers.

Foreign-language learning is the prime means for developing competence in international situations. Language learning combines the understanding of cultural beliefs and identities with the practical aim of communicating. Foreign language teaching has a unique contribution to make in preparing learners to interact with other cultures. With its emphasis on communicating in a language that is not one's own, foreign language acquisition is also concerned with applying linguistic competence to interactions in cross-cultural settings. Improving linguistic fluency and enhancing cultural awareness therefore cannot be separated in the foreign-language classroom. Both are essential components for training future business professionals to operate effectively in today's global workplace.

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