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CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING IN BUSINESS CHINESE

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade, foreign language teachers have been recognizing the value of adding elements of foreign culture to foreign language classes with a business emphasis.¹ It has been shown that teaching business languages in combination with foreign cultures is more effective in motivating students and improving their communicative skills than the conventional method. The knowledge of foreign cultures is beneficial to a student's future career, especially in this age of global economy. It will generally broaden students' perspectives toward the world, enabling them to respond to different cultural environments smoothly and appropriately. Cultural knowledge is therefore essential for students to master foreign languages and to be prepared to deal with the real world.

In the international business arena, familiarity with a particular foreign language as well as its culture can be a great asset for a business person. It often contributes significantly to smooth business relations and successful cooperation among business partners. With the blooming economy in Asia, there are enormous opportunities for business people. However, America has to compete with other industrial countries such as Germany for the Asian market. Apparently, America will not be as competitive in that region as other industrial countries if it is not well prepared to understand Asian languages and cultures. More and more Americans are realizing the importance of foreign language and culture in business. As Moore and McGoey indicated in their study, many companies in Chicago feel that it is especially important to be familiar with Asian languages and cultures. This belief is shared by other major US companies.

¹My sincere gratitude goes to Professor Alan Garfinkel for his proof-reading of the article, and to other comments and suggestions for revision. All errors, if any, remain mine.

Among the Asian countries, China is especially attractive to business people because of its huge market and tremendous potential. China's territory is larger than the USA and has 1/5 of the world's population. Since China's adoption of an open-door policy in the early 1980s, its economy has been developing rapidly with an average annual growth rate around 10%. Linguistic and cultural acquisition of Chinese business customs will certainly improve one's competitiveness in doing business with, and in, China. At the same time, it will connect Western investors with other East Asian countries as well, because:

. . . it is not only China's size, natural resources and huge population that could give it [global economy] an overwhelming edge in the future, there are also the racial and cultural factors linking China with Japan, Korea and the other countries of East Asia. China was the wellspring for much of the traditional culture and civilization of all of these countries, including their Confucian-oriented social and moral systems. (De Mente xiii)

To acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge in a business setting, a Business Chinese Program in a college curriculum is therefore necessary. Such a program will not only provide education in the Chinese language, but also empower students with pertinent knowledge about Chinese culture.

DISCUSSION

When preparing a Business Chinese curriculum, course objectives must be determined first. Then primary teaching materials (such as textbooks) should be developed or selected to meet the course goals. After these procedures, teaching strategies can be determined according to the objectives and materials. Based on students' Chinese proficiency and needs, a Business Chinese course can be designed to train the oral communication skills, the writing skills, or both skills as applicable to the Chinese business environment. Supplementary teaching materials may be added to the main textbook, such as audio-visual tapes and authentic materials for reading purposes.

An elementary business language course should, as a minimum, provide training on the oral communication skills required in the business routines. In addition, basic writing skills may be taught in accordance with the students' language level. At this stage, the course should be fo-

cused on the cultural/contextual knowledge and basic linguistic patterns. At the intermediate level, students are required to have a higher proficiency in Chinese. The course emphasis can be shifted from speaking to writing. The major task at this stage is to introduce more Chinese cultural knowledge and to train students in how to write business correspondence for various circumstances.

Cross-Cultural Training of Speaking Skills

The notion of a functional approach to foreign language teaching has been debated over the past ten years. The essential idea of such an approach is that students should be trained to communicate in the target language to make sense of the world. In other words, students should master not only the grammar of the language, but also have adequate knowledge of the culture. Otherwise, they may not be able to use the language in a proper cultural context. For example, many Westerners in China become upset when they are asked by a Chinese person “...?” [have you eaten?]. This is a typical example of linguistic misunderstanding based on a lack of cultural knowledge. In China, “...?” [have you eaten?] is one of the common ways of greeting, which is similar to talking about the weather in Western countries. In business communication, misunderstanding is a main obstacle preventing positive relationships between business partners.

Acquisition of culture can be achieved using a number of approaches, one of which is the contrastive strategy. Following is a sample lesson for an elementary level Business Chinese course, “At a Business Banquet ... (Hong, *Practical Business Chinese* 17).

Situation: Business Banquet in Beijing, China

Goal: Introducing the Chinese business banquets in terms of style, food, table-layout, behavior and topics at a banquet table and explaining the appropriate manners at such an occasion.

Activities:

(1) *Discussion in English:* This activity is designed to prepare students for the upcoming topic by discovering similarities and differences between China and the West in a business banquet situation. Video clips containing both American and Chinese business banquets may be shown. The preparatory questions include:

- a. What topics are commonly discussed at a business banquet in your country?
- b. What themes should be avoided at such a banquet?
- c. Compare dining behavior in China with that of your country.
- d. What do you expect to eat at a banquet?
- e. Describe possible groups of people you may meet at a banquet.
- f. List adjectives you would use to describe yourself at such an occasion, for example, relaxed, nervous, or scared.

(2) *Text-Reading in Chinese*: The text is presented in authentic Chinese and students should be able to find expressions that contain obvious cultural differences.

(3) *Culture-comparison*: Cultural differences in the text are discussed and compared in the form of exercises. For example:

a. Mr. Li is the director of the Import Branch of a Chinese Import and Export Company; Mr. Huang is the Assistant Director of that branch. Both attended the banquet. After observing the hosts' verbal behavior at the banquet, students are asked to compare such behavior of the hosts with that observed in this country.

b. In China, guests are often offered cigarettes, wine, or liquor at a banquet. What would be offered to the guests at such a occasion in this country? If it is not customary, how should guests reject such an offer in Chinese politely?

c. As a summary, students list all polite expressions in the text and indicate appropriate situations in which they are used. For example:

... (mei guanxi): used as an apology;

..... (dajia suibian chi): used politely to let the guests enjoy the meal (literally: everybody casually eat);

... (man man chi): used politely to let the guests enjoy the meal (literally: slow slow eat).

(4) *Culture and Politeness*: In order for the students to acquire more cultural knowledge in the related context, they are given a short narrative text. In this business banquet situation, students will find out what topics are appropriate, how hosts and guests

behave and the sequence of the dishes, etc. The title for this reading text is “Business Meals in China .”

(5) Relating to the topic in the reading, students are then asked to express themselves appropriately in Chinese in a given situation, for example:

What do you say in Chinese, if

- a. the host has introduced someone to you;
- b. you want someone to pass you the soy sauce which is far from you;
- c. you are finished, while others are still eating;
- d. the host adds more food to your plate, but you are already full;
- e. the host asks how the food is;
- f. you want to be excused to go to the restroom.

(6) Finally, after students brainstorm for all possible cultural information, the situation will be finally realized as the students engage in role-playing. They are assigned roles as hosts and guests in a business banquet, choose a local Chinese restaurant, and “act” the scene as if it happened in China. Before the actual play, they make sure that the “guests” receive a written invitation. The teacher may record the play and analyze it later with the students.

The discussions and role-playing activities in this lesson are designed to involve students in the class and to enhance their awareness of Chinese culture. Social behavior is introduced, using various examples:

1. In China, the host of a banquet, dinner, or party usually does not open presents in front of guests. Rather, he/she would open the gifts after the guests leave and express his/her thanks to the gift-giver at a later time.
2. To express his/her friendship to the guests, during a dinner a host may place more food on a guest’s plate and say “.....” [please eat a little bit more] even if the guest has already said that he or she is full.
3. As in other countries, compliments are always welcomed in China. However, Chinese responses to a compliment are very different from the West. For example, after you say that the food is

delicious and the host is a very good cook, he or she would reply “.....” [No, the food is not so good. I am not good at cooking]. It would be awkward to say “...” [thank you] to respond to a compliment, because it is a Chinese tradition to be modest.

4. When the guests are leaving, the host(s) should accompany the guests outside the house/restaurant to see them off.

Culture cannot be learned out of context. It is thus an efficient way to teach Business Chinese to include plays and other such exercises in each lesson for greater student participation.

Cross-Cultural Training of Writing Skills

Business writing in Chinese is a type of practical writing with a special format and phraseology. Business correspondence should be polite, concise, and clear. Appropriate usage of certain Chinese words can provide *professional flavor* to business correspondence. With adequate knowledge of the Chinese culture, the writer can utilize proper expressions for special occasions, such as special greetings for Chinese traditional holidays, which add a *personal touch* to a business letter. Business correspondence not only serves as a means of communication, but also conveys the professional image of the writer and his/her business. Some frequently used words and phrases in Chinese business correspondence follow:

Business Letters: Business letters serve a variety of purposes including inquiry, offer, counter-offer, acceptance, or rejection. The following polite expressions are commonly utilized in such correspondence:

- a. ... [guifang; literally, honorable side]: used to address the recipient;
- b. [yu xie guifang hezuo]: used at the end of a letter to thank in advance the recipient for his/her cooperation;
- c. ... [jinzhi]: used at the end of a letter to express respect and good wishes;
- d. ... [zai yi ci biaoshi zhongxin de ganxie]: used at the end of a letter to express sincere gratitude.

Invitations: Invitations include information such as the time, place and nature of the event. More importantly, sincerity should be expressed throughout the text. For example:

- a. [shifen rongxin de yaoqing]: literally, to invite with great happiness;
- b. [yinqie qidai]: literally, to expect ardently;
- c. [yi yukuai de xinqing]: literally, with happy mood. Often used in invitations for politeness.

Advertisements: Ads may be more difficult for students, since they often require refined, lively and sometimes humorous language to achieve their pragmatic goals. It would be beneficial to students to learn expressions containing specific references to culture and traditions of China. Authentic ads from videos and newspapers can be used to get students actively involved in this learning process.

Training in practical business writing is not limited to the above areas. The goal of such training is to provide students with as many varieties of expressions as possible in literal business communication in Chinese. Appropriate activities include reading authentic materials and writing business documents. Sample business correspondence is given in the textbook to provide students with different writing formats. Special uses of Chinese greetings and salutations for traditional holidays are also introduced. In addition, the origin and meaning of each holiday can be taught.

SUMMARY

China's unique culture and behavior are an integral part of the Chinese language. To be successful in doing business with China, a businesswo/man must first comprehend Chinese business customs and their context. This requires a knowledge of Chinese business culture. Business Chinese courses are therefore necessary and should be designed to prepare students with the knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, as well as the ability to adjust smoothly to Chinese business situations.

The course curriculum should be designed according to students' Chinese proficiency and practical needs. Culture can not be learned out of context. Therefore, an effort has been made to develop a Business Chinese textbook in order to train students to communicate better in various business-related activities. However, teaching activities are not limited to

those presented here. Proper techniques should be developed according to course objectives and pragmatic goals. With the development of new technologies, such as audio/visual techniques and multimedia computers, more tools will certainly be available to language teachers as well as students. Since business courses are one of the Chinese language courses in greatest demand, more efforts and resources will be needed to develop high quality textbooks and teaching methods.

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