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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND INTEREST IN GLOBAL BUSINESS COURSES AND CAREERS

INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century draws to a close, one of the most important economic developments is the increasing internationalization of business. Companies from nations all over the world are looking beyond the borders of their respective home countries in search of suppliers and markets. As a result of this growing internationalization, companies find that their managerial needs are changing. International companies need managers that (1) are nationally diverse, and (2) are culturally sensitive. That is, managers must be drawn from many countries in order to get the best people available and to ensure an understanding of the various countries in which the international firm is doing business. Additionally, these managers must be able to understand and adapt to the multiplicity of cultures in which the firm is operating, regardless of their country of origin.

Business educators have an obligation to make students more sensitive to different cultures and thereby better prepare them for success in the world of international business. The ability to do this is, in no small measure, a function of student attitudes and interests. An important question facing the profession is: How receptive are students toward international curricula and international careers?

Most of the recent academic literature addresses the need to internationalize curricula in business schools, community colleges, and liberal arts programs. The impetus for this emanates from the competitive business communities at home and abroad as domestic and foreign compa-

Global Business Languages (1998)

nies seek new markets for their goods and services. This trend is further reflected in the direction taken by accrediting agencies, particularly the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which have mandated that schools internationalize and culturally diversify their various programs. Several authors have addressed the forces affecting curriculum changes and have developed programs to equip faculty with the background needed to teach courses in the international curricula (Esemuede; Kwok, Arpan, and Folks; McGrath and Hargrove; Mason; Shooshtari and Fleming; Smith and Ruhland).

A number of studies have emphasized interdisciplinary efforts in developing and revising major and minor curricula. They have proposed what business subjects should be covered; what cultural, language, and geography courses should be included; and they have advocated the need for internships as integral program components (Devine; Francesco; Gorjanc; Harris; Krajewski and Patrick; Lincoln and Naumann; Marco; Teagarden and Branan).

Given the wealth of academic research concerning internationalizing curricula and developing faculty, it is interesting to note that few studies have addressed the needs and preferences of our primary customers—the students themselves. One particular study, C. Jeanne Hill and Kenneth Tillery, had the express purpose of examining “the attitudes and perceptions of the undergraduate business student . . . toward an international business career” (10). This study was based on survey results from 99 junior and senior business students who had expressed an interest in international business. The Hill and Tillery study found favorable attitudes toward international business courses, careers, and overseas assignments of two or more years. However, it was found that these attitudes differed by gender, since male students were more favorably inclined toward international careers than their female counterparts.

Another study, by L. W. Turley, Richard Shannon, and J. Mark Miller, explored 1) attitudes of marketing majors toward international marketing and the preparation they were receiving for international marketing positions and 2) the foreign language skills of these same marketing students. The sample was national in scope but limited to members of student American Marketing Association chapters. Of those responding 97.8% either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement “International marketing will be more important in the future.” But, only 23.2% believed that they had received good preparation for an international

marketing career from their school (48.8% were neutral and 28.0% felt the preparation received was inadequate). These students believed overwhelmingly (88.1% yes; 2.1% no) that an international marketing course should be required of all marketing majors. A large majority (61%) also believed that marketing majors should be required to take a course focusing on a foreign culture. And, in what Turley and his colleagues considered to be a surprising finding, 53.7% thought that a foreign language should be required in the marketing major. It should be noted that of the respondents, 69.5% reported being “at least minimally proficient in at least one foreign language.”

It seems logical that language proficiency and exposure to foreign cultures would have a positive effect on students’ interest in international business courses and careers. It is the purpose of this article to explore that relationship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 13 regional schools of business. All were public institutions, selected on a non-random basis to achieve balanced geographic representation. A faculty member at each school was contacted by telephone and asked to cooperate in the administration of the surveys, which were conducted in Introduction to Business classes (or Introduction to Marketing classes at schools that do not offer Introduction to Business) and the business capstone course. Obtaining prior agreement to participate by faculty members prevented a non-response problem. All of the faculty members contacted agreed to participate and did in fact administer and return the questionnaires.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire was a short, one-page (front and back) instrument that took five to ten minutes to complete. It consisted primarily of closed-end questions with a few short answer open-ended questions (such as “Of what country are you a citizen?” and “How many languages do you speak?”). Questions were designed to elicit information in three areas:

Demographics: Academic major, sex, class, and country of citizenship.

Cosmopolitanism: Foreign travel, languages spoken, and overseas work experience.

Interest in international courses and careers: Number of international courses already taken, interest in taking additional international business courses, feelings about a three-year job assignment abroad, and feelings about a 30-day job assignment abroad.

Analytical techniques

Data was entered into a standard spreadsheet and analyzed using standard statistical packages. Tabulation, cross-tabulation, and chi-square (χ^2) statistics were run on the data.

The independent variables used in this study were sex, country of citizenship, foreign travel experience, and number of languages spoken. Each of these was examined with respect to the following dependent variables: interest in taking international business courses, number of international business courses taken, intention to take additional business courses, feelings about taking a three-year overseas assignment, and feelings about accepting a thirty-day overseas assignment. Additionally, we looked at the relationship between citizenship and number of languages spoken.

FINDINGS

1. Forty-nine percent of the sample were females, 51% were males.
2. Ninety-one percent of the sample identified themselves as citizens of the US, 9% identified themselves as citizens of other countries.
3. Sixty-two percent of the sample reported speaking only one language. Thirty percent reported speaking two languages, 8% spoke three or more languages.
4. Respondents' sex was a differentiating factor with regard to feelings about a three-year assignment overseas, but did not show an association with the other dependent variables. Relationships were found between respondents' citizenship and foreign travel experiences and all of the dependent variables (Abramson, Hollingshead, and Robbins).
5. In the sample, American students reported an average of 1.36 languages spoken, non-American students reported speaking an average of 2.59 languages, a statistically significant difference.

6. Table 1 shows a positive relationship between the number of languages spoken and both interest in taking international business courses as well as the number of international business courses taken. Multilingual students, on a per capita basis, have taken more international courses. A positive relationship exists between the number of languages spoken and whether or not the individual planned to take additional international business courses. Those speaking only one language (English) are less likely to plan on taking additional international courses than those who speak two or more languages. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between those speaking two or more languages and those speaking only one language with respect to feelings about a three-year assignment overseas. Significantly more of those speaking two or more languages indicated they “would really like” a three-year overseas assignment. Finally, a significant difference can be found between the two groups with respect to a thirty-day assignment overseas. Sixty-eight percent of “one-language” students “would really like” a thirty-day overseas assignment compared to 81% of multilingual students.

Table 1
 Chi-Square Statistical Analysis
 NUMBER OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN
 (One, Two, Three or More)
 n = 1550

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	$\chi^2 \leq .05$
Interest in taking international business courses?	Yes
How many international business courses have you taken?	Yes
Do you plan on taking more international business courses?	Yes
How do you feel about a 3-year overseas assignment?	Yes
How do you feel about a 30-day overseas assignment?	Yes

7. As shown in Table 2, there is a statistically significant difference in American students’ interest in international courses and careers based upon the number of languages they speak.

Table 2
Chi-Square Statistical Analysis
American Students
NUMBER OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN
n = 1429

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	$\chi^2 \leq .05$
Interest in taking international business courses?	Yes
How many international business courses have you taken?	Yes
Do you plan on taking more international business courses?	Yes
How do you feel about a 3-year overseas assignment?	Yes
How do you feel about a 30-day overseas assignment?	Yes

8. As per Table 3, non-American students do not show statistically significant differences in interest in international courses and careers based upon the number of languages spoken. This is to be expected because the sample is biased toward cosmopolitans. These non-American business students, by virtue of their studying at a university not in their own country, are internationally oriented.

Table 3
Chi-Square Statistical Analysis
Non-American Students
NUMBER OF LANGUAGES SPOKEN
n = 150

DEPENDENT VARIABLE	$\chi^2 \leq .05$
Interest in taking international business courses?	No
How many international business courses have you taken?	No
Do you plan on taking more international business courses?	No
How do you feel about a 3-year overseas assignment?	No
How do you feel about a 30-day overseas assignment?	No

CONCLUSIONS

Strong differences were found based upon the number of languages spoken and all of the dependent variables for both the sample as a whole and for American students in the group. This was not true for non-American students. Foreign students as a group were very interested in international courses and career assignments. They were homogeneously high in their international orientation, so that consequently their language skills were not a discriminating factor. This may be a case of self selection error in the study because the non-American students included in the sample cannot be said to be representative of all non-American college students. By virtue of their attendance at American universities, they exhibit a bias toward internationalism. Further research should study foreign business students in their own countries to determine their attitudes. American business students at foreign universities should also be studied.

RECOMMENDATIONS

International business courses and international business careers must be marketed to students. The strong relationships found in this study can form the basis for that marketing activity. One part of the strategy would be to place greater emphasis on foreign languages in the curriculum. Classroom exposure to foreign languages should be enhanced by real-world experiences. Therefore, more foreign students should be recruited by American colleges of business so that there are more opportunities for American students to interact with non-American students. In addition, colleges of business should promote activities that cause such interaction.

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