

May 2010

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Recommended Citation

Lein, Janet D. (2010) "Language and Culture Training for a Small Manufacturing Company," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol3/iss1/6>

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LANGUAGE AND CULTURE TRAINING FOR A SMALL MANUFACTURING COMPANY

Decades ago the auto industry produced virtually all of the components necessary to manufacture automobiles in house. Then they began outsourcing and a new manufacturing segment grew rapidly—the auto parts suppliers, some of which are small and some of which are very large. Now that the domestic automobile industry has become much leaner, these auto parts suppliers are looking for new markets. Many of the small manufacturing firms find that it is advantageous to team up with similar firms in other countries to supply the emerging markets in Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Asia. Some choose to be bought by companies that already have global operations, while others prefer a joint venture with similar companies. Either way, this typically creates two needs: 1) a need for employees of the American firm to learn something about the language and culture of their new partners, and 2) a need for translation services for the many documents shared by the international partners.

American companies cannot expect employees, executives, salespeople, and technicians to negotiate or carry out contracts with little or no understanding of the cultural differences in the ways people communicate and do business with each other. Understanding the language is the first step, but understanding and accepting behaviors, customs, and attitudes are equally important steps in the preparation for doing business with companies in another culture (Kenna and Lacy 3). Differences in methods of negotiating, problem solving, decision making, communication styles, and business etiquette can make it difficult or impossible to coordinate research, development, manufacturing, and delivery across the many cultural and linguistic borders of the global marketplace. An international business consultant to the auto industry has consistently found

Global Business Languages (1998)

that being monocultural and monolingual is a formula for certain failure (Trojanovich).

Many large, multinational companies have “in house” language instruction (Hedderich, “German Language Training Programs” 90), while smaller companies generally look to external agencies for assistance. There are commercial language schools in the major metropolitan areas that offer condensed courses in the business culture of individual countries as well as language instruction. Sometimes companies take the initiative and contact universities for assistance; that is what happened in this case. A description of the training program that was designed to meet the specific needs of a small, auto parts supplier follows. This model could be applied to many small companies, regardless of the product they produce.

The small company with which I dealt wished to form a relationship with a similar auto parts supplier in Germany, the end result being that they would jointly supply certain parts for the production of the new VW beetle that would be assembled in Mexico the following year. There are tremendous variations in the need for foreign language skills among companies, ranging from simple tasks, such as reading a fax, to highly complex tasks, such as negotiating a business deal (Edelstein 4). For this company it was certainly the former. The American company initially made contact with me because the German partner was forwarding documents to them in German. They did not know whether they could meet the specifications, because there was no one in the company who could read German well enough to determine what the rules and requirements were. It is not uncommon for manuals and reports to be sent out in German since that is the official company language at VW (Hedderich, “German Language Training Programs” 91). By the time they contacted me, time was of the essence; they needed the translations within three days because there was a bidding deadline to meet. This was the first of several documents, forms, blueprints, etc., that I translated for them during the course of half a year.

It was through the discussions about the translations, as well as the difficulty of making a phone call to Germany and getting the right person to come to the phone, that the interest in language instruction emerged. The heads of departments had contact people in the corresponding departments in the German firm, but they were sometimes unable to get to them because the person picking up the phone did not speak English.

John Grandin reports that it is often the individual with the technical expertise who is called upon to interact with the counterpart abroad (“German and Engineering” 146), so it is not surprising that the people in engineering were particularly interested.

The American company had received numerous brochures from commercial groups that contracted out one-day seminars in business culture, but on-going language instruction was not offered because this small company was not located in, or near, a major metropolitan area. They inquired whether I could arrange instruction in language and culture for middle- and upper-level management and deliver it at their facility.

DESIGNING THE PROGRAM

During the course of the half year that I had interacted with this company, it was evident that the company culture would play an important role in designing the course of instruction. The CFO and I scheduled a meeting for all those who had expressed an interest in this program; participation would be voluntary. The motivation to learn some German was strong; several people reported feeling embarrassed that they knew no German at all, because their counterparts spoke English to some degree (Hager 13). After an hour of discussion, I felt I understood their linguistic and cultural needs as well as the time constraints that existed. I explained what I thought could be accomplished within the time they had to devote to the language training portion of the project; this is reflected in the list of topics under “language component,” which follows.

We identified the following situations in which they expressed the need to know enough German to function at least minimally, as well as areas where more cultural information would be welcome:

- Individuals regularly visited the German manufacturing site for meetings or consultations. Once at the plant, their counterparts spoke English. However, they felt that travel would be facilitated if they knew basic phrases dealing with airports, trains, taxis; this included knowing numbers and the monetary system.
- They needed vocabulary, in list form, specific to their industry. This would be a quick reference in responding to faxes or reading forms. The terms fell into three categories: 1) engineering, steel, and technical terms; 2) sales, marketing, payment, and quoting terms; and 3) computer terms.

- They normally stayed in hotels while in Germany. Basic phrases dealing with getting rooms, ordering meals, and requesting basic amenities would be helpful.
- They had already noticed some cultural differences in the workplace, such as the use of last names and titles, closed doors, etc. What else should they know about?
- They were curious about the German forms of incorporation as compared to ours. What do designations such as “GmbH” mean in a practical sense (liability, taxes, etc.)?
- They wanted comparative cultural information: what is politically correct and what is not, how do the Germans think, behave, travel, live? When invited to a social activity, what are the expectations and/or taboos?

The following time frame parameters emerged from the discussion:

- The class would meet one day a week for two hours, lasting ten weeks. More time than that could not be taken away from work. At the end of the ten weeks, quite a few of them would be transferred to a new project.
- I could not expect them to do homework. In this company culture, overtime for middle- and upper-level management was the norm. They typically began the work day at 7 AM and often stayed until 7 PM.
- I could not assume that the same people would necessarily be present each week. This company had several manufacturing facilities spread over a two-state area and managers traveled between them on an irregular basis.

Coming from an academic setting where beginning students are in class four hours a week and can reasonably be expected to spend two hours in preparation for each class period, this was indeed a challenge. I seriously considered abandoning the idea because I did not think we could accomplish enough, given the time constraints; but their interest in a training program was sufficiently strong that it seemed best to support the project.

I decided that, given the severely limited amount of class time, ninety-eight percent of it had to be spent on language instruction, with cultural material to be read in English whenever they found time. The training program, as it finally evolved, had three components: language, culture, and technical vocabulary.

THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT

Based on the discussion with the group and recommendations in the literature (Boehringer 6), the following list of topics to be covered in the sessions was prepared:

Week 1	Greeting and leave-taking Introductions Politeness phrases Numbers
Week 2	Numbers, amounts and money, arithmetic Nationality Months, days of the week Telling time
Week 3	Dates Directions Weather Do you have ...?
Week 4	In the restaurant
Week 5	Riding trains and buses
Week 6	At the airport, taking taxis
Week 7	In the hotel
Week 8	Telephoning In the office
Week 9	Car rental Gas stations
Week 10	Review & Pronunciation overview

Everything was prepared on overheads or handouts so that I did not have to use any time writing on the board. I usually introduced the material with visuals or pantomime so that English was kept to a minimum. Every foreign language teacher knows that words like hotel, restaurant, toilet, etc. can be presented with pictures. A calendar page can be used to introduce the days of the week (in the next session for months and later on for dates). After presentation of the new lexical items, they were placed in an appropriate, standard sentence. Then I used oral substitution drills based on the Dartmouth Intensive Language Model, which the students learn in the first session. These drills keep everyone on task and thinking all the time, because nobody knows ahead of time who will be

called on to respond next. Only after giving the cue does the instructor indicate which individual student is to respond. The purpose of these drills is to teach a basic phrase by using numerous repetitions (such as “Entschuldigung, wo ist ..., bitte?”) and simultaneously have the students substitute vocabulary like “Hotel, Bank, Restaurant, Post, Toilette.” Even though these drills look long if written out, orally they take only about one minute each. The students get a maximum amount of practice in a minimum amount of time. It takes a little practice on the instructor’s part to get the technique rapid and smooth, but it is extremely effective (Lein 19). If a student responds incorrectly, another student is invited to respond, after which the first student repeats the correct response. In a two-hour session, about twenty of these simple substitution drills—and later multiple substitution drills—were interspersed with other activities.

Simple Substitution Drill (one minute duration)

Instructor	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Group	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Instructor	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Group	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Student 1	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Student 2	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Instructor	das Restaurant
Student 3	Entschuldigung, wo ist das Restaurant, bitte?
Instructor	die Post
Student 4	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Post, bitte?
Instructor	das Hotel
Student 5	Entschuldigung, wo ist das Hotel, bitte?
Instructor	das Büro
Student 6	Entschuldigung, wo ist das Büro, bitte?
Instructor	die Toilette
Student 7	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Instructor	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Group	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Instructor	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?
Group	Entschuldigung, wo ist die Toilette, bitte?

I prepared extensive handouts containing all of the material we would cover during each class session and left these packets for anyone who was absent. Each week we reviewed the material previously covered so that anyone who had not been there could see what the point was and how the structures worked. They could cover it later with another class member, if time permitted. I also prepared tapes containing a summary of the class material.

THE CULTURE COMPONENT

Each participant received a copy of *Understanding Cultural Differences* (Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall) and *These Strange German Ways* (Susan Stern). A copy of *Blunders in International Business* (David A. Ricks) was available for those interested. I indicated what they should read for the next session and offered to discuss it during the first few minutes, should anyone have questions. These were well-educated adults who brought much life experience to the readings, so virtually no time was spent on discussion during the class sessions, but at least the group had been reading the same material when comments did arise. I also gave everyone an annotated bibliography on cross-cultural awareness. The response to the two main books was extremely positive. After we read the books, I introduced them to culture assimilators, using a Thai example from Philip Harris and Robert Moran (298–99). I then asked them to recall any instances of misunderstanding they had experienced that could now be explained based on the reading they had done. Most responded that a lot of things made more sense to them after the readings. One person mentioned particularly the issue of working overtime, a common practice in this company culture, but a rarity in their German partner (Randlesome 120–22).

THE TECHNICAL VOCABULARY COMPONENT

One of the needs identified by the group was a translation of vocabulary specific to their jobs. This was not vocabulary that would be learned in class, rather reference lists for them when they needed to send or read a fax. At the first session, I asked everyone to prepare a list of the terms they needed and to give me these lists. Not coming from an engineering background, I knew I would not be able to translate everything, even though I had a good engineering dictionary. I prepared translations and then arranged to go early the next week in order to spend about ten min-

utes with several of them in their departments. This allowed me to ask questions about the meaning of particular terms. An example would be “cold rolled.” It turns out that this did not refer to metal that was rolled up, but rather formed on a cold process rolling mill, and the correct translation turned out to be “kalt gewalzt.”

The other need identified in this category was the preparation of bilingual versions of frequently used documents that were often faxed back and forth. Thus whether they were filled out on the German side or the English side, the chance for misunderstanding was minimized. This example comes from a “request for quotation” document:

Wir werden diese Anforderung nicht erfüllen können, weil . . .

- Wir stellen dieses Teil nicht her
- Bestellmenge zu klein
- Produktionskapazität für dieses Teil nicht vorhanden
- Material mit unserer Leistungsfähigkeit nicht vereinbar
- Technische Informationen oder Zeichnungen nicht ausreichend

We will not be able to meet the requirements of this request because . . .

- Do not produce this type of part
- Volume too low
- No capacity available for this type of product
- Material not compatible with our capabilities
- Insufficient technical information or bad drawings

Preparation of these documents required several sessions with the appropriate person to be sure that I understood the content. After two or three drafts, the documents were tried out on the German partner company to make sure that they were clear. If necessary, changes were made, the forms were printed and made available to the appropriate departments.

CONCLUSION

Twenty hours of instruction is certainly not much. But for this group of people, it was twenty hours more than they would have had otherwise, and it was tailored to their needs. Norbert Hedderich reports that telephone and fax communications form the majority of the contacts that

takes place in German for many companies working with German counterparts (“Demand for Business German” 47). Because this was precisely the case in this situation, everyone agreed that they had accomplished a great deal, considering the time they had to spend. The evaluation of the program was positive; several people mentioned that an important benefit for them was that they now were less afraid to tackle the language. Even though there was still much they would like to learn, they now knew how to make the most of what they could understand. I even overheard two of them beginning to play with the language. They were in an interior room during a power outage and decided that it was not just “schwarz,” it was “dunkelschwarz.”

This company has now been working with their German partner for well over a year and language skills have certainly improved for those who have frequent contact with the partner firm. While we all knew from the beginning that this ten week program could not possibly work miracles, it did get both companies started on a path to better communication.

There is a real need for linguistic and cultural skills in today’s global marketplace. In this instance, people from finance, marketing, and engineering all felt the need to have these skills, but it is almost impossible for professionals to take the time to learn a language. This could better be done during student years, but a survey of seventy-two undergraduate accounting programs, for example, showed that only four programs required a minimum level of proficiency in a foreign language for graduation and only ten schools required their accounting majors to take a course with international business or cross-cultural content (Ruiz and Schmidt 39).

Curricula seldom have room for additional courses. In the German and engineering program at the University of Rhode Island, they found it necessary to add a fifth year to the curriculum to accommodate the extra coursework required by a language component (Grandin “German and Engineering” 147–50). Proficiency-oriented language teaching provides students with the linguistic skills to function in real-world communicative situations; translation skills are not emphasized. Yet, the translations are needed by the corporate world. Is this a skill our students should have? Is this a service that language departments should, or can, offer?

John Grandin and Eric Dehmel warn that language programs must ensure that students gain a comprehensive overview of the issues of culture and cross-cultural communication, since “mastery of a second

language in no way guarantees knowledge of a culture or expertise in the intercultural sensitivity which is so necessary for those working in a transnational environment” (9). Some reports indicate that human resource directors find the ability to interact smoothly with members of other cultures more important than linguistic ability (Vande Berg 18). The business community has concrete needs and expectations in terms of language and cross-cultural skills; meeting these needs and expectations is certainly a challenge for the profession.

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