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## Wanted: Literature in the Language for International Business Programs

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### WANTED: LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROGRAMS

Many Language departments in the United States are now facing some transitional periods within their curricula. All the political, social, and demographic changes around the world from previous years have forced these departments to widen their programs and the courses they offer. It seems that Language departments have become aware that students are not necessarily motivated to take language classes because they are interested in literature, even less in literary criticism as it is presented within an academic context. On the contrary, Language departments have witnessed the fact that a great number of students are interested in the practical side of learning a language that, generally, is linked to professional purposes: the necessity to acquire linguistic abilities as a complement to their professional careers.

The interest in learning a foreign language is a national phenomenon that became an important priority for the federal government in 2000. In a letter from the White House on April 19, 2000, former President Bill Clinton emphasized how important and necessary it was for American students to learn a second language “To continue to compete successfully in the global economy and to maintain our role as a world leader, the United States needs to ensure that its citizens develop a broad understanding of the world, proficiency in other languages, and knowledge of other cultures.” (17)<sup>1</sup> For the federal government as for all new Language and International Business students, it is essential to learn the linguistic skills that will allow them to compete in a global economy.

The approach to learning a foreign language has been noticed in many different ones; however, it has had more impact—for obvious reasons—in Spanish. Richard Brod and Elizabeth B. Welles say that “Spanish registrations... have increased consistently since 1960 and have progressively accounted for a greater percentage of all registrations” (p. 3). Brod and Welles comment about the MLA 1998 poll that 2,763 universities and col-

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<sup>1</sup>*Enlace*. The American Association of Spanish and Portuguese. Fall (2000): 17–18.

leges that they had witnessed an 8.3% increase in the number of students enrolled in Spanish courses in the previous three years with 656,590 students compared to 606,286 students in 1995. According to Welles and a MLA 2002 poll 2,769 two and four year institutions of higher education responded that the enrollment in Spanish courses went up 13.7% from 1998 to 2002 with 746,267 students taking Spanish classes. Wells says that, "Spanish is and has been the most widely taught language in colleges and universities since 1970, and it continues to account for more than half (53.4%) of all enrollments" (p. 3). The increase in enrollment for Spanish classes has been, indeed, dramatic with a 22% total increase of students taking Spanish in less than ten years. In the conclusion to her report, Welles points out that "the statistics on registrations in foreign languages in United States institutions of higher education show that Spanish is clearly the language of choice for students who study languages, and it occupies a significant place in the undergraduate curriculum" (p. 4).

However, the increase in the number of students learning Spanish is not reflected in the traditional Spanish major. In the specific case of an institution like Clemson University, for example, that has a major in Languages and International Trade (L&IT) with different languages tracks, the last count in February, 2004 established that the majors enrolled are as follows: 195 L&IT majors and 24 Modern Language-Spanish, 8 Modern Language-French, and 3 Modern Language-German majors. The number of L&IT majors has held steady for the past several years. The number of Modern Language-Spanish majors is unusually high, probably one third more than usual. The French and German statistics are about the same.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1999 Georgia State University has offered the only program in the state of Georgia with a double concentration in language and international business. Currently Georgia State has more than one third of the student population in the University of Georgia State System learning Spanish. What has created such a big interest in the program is, indeed, the track that combines both language and international business.

The growth produced by the interest in learning a foreign language comes with other consequences as well, that affect both departments and their faculty. Like any other discipline within an academic context, the interdisciplinary link between Language and International Business demands that faculty

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<sup>2</sup>Information provided by Mrs. Suzanne Atkinson, staff member in the department of Languages at Clemson University.

update teaching curricula. We must, as professors, redirect our efforts to better prepare for a new type of students.

Some programs, depending on the school, offer two Spanish for business classes. The first class covers basic vocabulary, business concepts, reading and writing of business documents and some cultural aspects related to doing business in the Spanish-speaking world. The second course covers more in depth vocabulary, concepts, practices and cultural aspects on how to conduct business. Also included are economic geographies of the Spanish speaking countries and information regarding the different commercial treaties between them and the world. This information is, indeed, necessary but we must go further. It is up to us, as professors, to widen our curriculum and offer students a broader and better idea of the world in which they are going to work as professionals as soon as they graduate from college.

In order to attract students to these special programs we must reform our approach to teaching Languages for Business courses. One innovation is to offer a course such as Business in Hispanic Literature. According to Carmen Vega-Carney, a professor at the American Graduate School of International Management, “a survey of selected colleges and universities in the United States that offer business language in Spanish and Portuguese revealed no courses in business language and literature, although literary readings are included in some courses as a reading activity” (124).

We know it is important for our students to learn Hispanic culture, civilization and literature not only as a means to improve their language skills but to learn about other peoples as well. It is a fact, also, that some students in Language and International Business or Trade programs prefer not to take literature classes. Research shows that some students do not consider literature as the best way to enhance their fluency in the language since many times it is very difficult for them to express themselves in the target language. Vega-Carney mentions the excellent article “Approaches to Literature in First-Year College Spanish: Surveying the Textbooks,” in which Emma Gottwald and Judith Liksin-Gasparro write that: “it is claimed that literary readings are often too difficult for the learners’ linguistic abilities,” yet the authors continue, “studies have demonstrated that effective applications of carefully chosen material work in the classroom” (116).

An innovative way to broaden and update Spanish for Business programs would be through the use of literary texts as socio-cultural context. The importance of literature as a social and cultural document has been known since the middle of the nineteenth century. Frederick Engels, while

commenting on the value of Honore de Balzac's works as a reflection of a social process, describes the literary value of the French writer's works: "Balzac... gives us in his *Comédie Humaine* a most wonderfully realistic history of French 'society,' describing, chronicling fashion, almost year by year from 1816 to 1848, the ever-increasing pressure of the raising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles that established itself after 1815" (42–43).

The use of interdisciplinary texts was initiated last century in several American universities, especially within colleges of Business and Law and currently there are some universities that offer courses that contain this new combination. Literature presents itself as an extraordinarily useful tool to examine some of the difficulties and situations that executives and business administrators face in their professional lives. Robert A. Brawer, an English professor who was a manager of a multinational company, explores the pedagogical use of literature for executives in his book *Fictions of Business—Insights on Management from Great Literature* (1998). For Brawer, for whom the layout of human problems in fiction works, this is important and he writes:

I have always felt that imaginative literature is an invaluable but untapped resource for executives trying to understand and resolve perennial human problems in business. [...] I would insist... that the values and insights we glean from serious literature sensitize us to ourselves and, by extension, to the problems inherent in managing people in an organization. (1–2)

Brawer says that the discussion of such situations through literature is as useful for executives as what is learned through the most frequently used books in colleges of business administration. Brawer, of course, finds himself in an ideal situation to judge the merits of his proposal.

This kind of interdisciplinary link has also given rise to a different area of research dedicated to studying the relationship between both disciplines: literature and business. The field of literature and business already has several anthologies of English and American literatures created for business programs. There are also some other broader and more specialized studies such as *The Businessman in American Literature* by Emily Stipes Watts (1982) and *The Novelist and Mammon* by Norman Russell (1986), among others.

Foreign Language programs, however, are still lagging in this aspect. The possibility of using literary text as a cultural context in business language

classes has not been explored totally, even though there is plenty of research showing its pedagogical value. Carmen Vega-Carney, in "Teaching Literature in the International Business Classroom" mentions numerous studies that confirm the benefits of using literature and real material to approach cultural issues that help language for international business students grasp a better understanding of both their own reality and that of others in the country or region that they are studying. She writes: "The extraordinary attention accorded recently to the cultural component of language teaching, influenced by factors such as the proficiency movement, cultural studies, interdisciplinary programs, and issues of context and authenticity, strongly supports the integration of literature and business" (115).

The fact that literature and business are considered two different disciplines with nothing in common has various reasons. On the one hand, they are disciplines with different interests, one of them supposedly directed to the field of aesthetics and the other to the material world. On the other hand, few literature professors are trained to teach Language for Business courses, due to the fact that almost all of the doctorate programs in the country are in either linguistics or literature. Other factors are the difficulty of literary criticism for many students of business, the level of literary texts that very frequently are beyond the students' linguistics abilities and the idea that literature has no relationship to real, everyday life.

If English and American literatures are used for interdisciplinary studies classes, the same can be done in Spanish for business courses. It is clear that many students need motivation to make learning something real and tangible, so I suggest that professors go through a careful selection of literary works related directly to the business world. Learning about cultural, social, political, economic and business practices through a "content approach," students will be able to recognize past conditions that have shaped Spanish-speaking societies into what they are today. The clue is to select very carefully the literary texts related clearly to the cultural goals of a Business Language course. Carmen Vega-Carney again says that "in general terms, when preparing a course combining business and literature, consideration might be given to seeking works that present, for example: a) business in literature, b) literature about specific economic conditions of nations and peoples, c) themes of general interest for a learner in international business, and d) hidden cross-cultural issues" (119).

It is no longer the study of literature in its aesthetic dimension, but its reflection as a social reality that we would like to achieve. Hence, readings

or class discussions will not focus on literary criticism, structure or style, instead they will put students in touch with a social, political, economic and business world that they will enter once they graduate with a degree in language and business. I would also propose that students have to know that the “content approach” is to be used in this class. Once these points have been clarified for students, the selected readings in the textbook relevant to the Literature for Business Spanish class might have the following format:

1. Each chapter will contain a specific topic such as “the country and the city,” “the situation of Hispanic women in the work place,” or “corruption and bureaucracy” with an introduction that could include a historical, social, political and economical context in which the author wrote his/her work.
2. Each topic would include a basic vocabulary, “before reading” for the selected readings and a questionnaire at the end.
3. Each chapter contains a series of “topics for discussion” that would encourage students to engage in active group discussions to explore social and economic ramifications as they appear in the literary text.

Let us take, for instance, the topic “Country and the City” and use a fragment from the novel *Al pie de la ciudad* by Colombian writer Manuel Mejía Vallejo published in 1958. As stated before, students would have been introduced to the historical context that gave rise to this novel, the “época de la violencia” (times of violence) in Colombia during the nineteen-forties and fifties so that students would be able to grasp the facts that initiated the immigration from the country to the big cities. In particular, students would pay attention to the political violence created by liberals and conservatives that led to this massive movement of thousands of peasants from the country to the city.

*Al pie de la ciudad* tells the story of a father and his family who have been forced to live in a shack by a stream at the end of the sewer system that runs through the city. Due to social and economic marginalization, the inhabitants of Los Barrancos (shacks) are part of an informal economy. The father and his son “work” on the stream looking for waste and other materials such as copper or aluminum that could be sold in the city, always with the hope that the stream will bring, by accident, something of value. The

direct and clear style of Vallejo's writing can be used by the student to focus on the content of the text even though some regional and local idiomatic expressions demand that the fragment be accompanied by a vocabulary list.

At the end of the reading, students should answer a series of questions about the text just read:

1. The fragment takes place in two different contexts. Which ones are they?
2. The narrator indicates that both father and son worked fishing for waste. What does that mean?
3. Why is rain something good for a poor family?
4. How important is the fact that the shacks and the city are divided by open waste?
5. What is the author's attitude toward the modernization of the city?

By answering these questions students discuss the social and economic situation of the characters in the text: the way in which the main character and his family earn a living; the different living conditions of the shacks and the city; the future of the children's next generation without access to schools; and the social problems such as crime, prostitution, drugs, and violence in the family. The poor inhabitants of the shacks are marginalized from the country's national plan of economic growth and by the disrespectful attitude of politicians and the rest of the country's population. In this case, *Al pie de la ciudad*, is studied for its social content and not for its aesthetics, style or structure.

The questions that follow the reading are based on certain vital concepts of the social and economic reality in many Hispanic countries, such as the "underground economy" in which a great number of people participates. The discussion of the topic must be structured in such a way that students are allowed to explore the consequences of what they have just read, as we see in the following questions.<sup>3</sup>

1. What are the causes of the constant immigration from the country to the city in Latin America?

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<sup>3</sup>As a complement to the reading there are several movies that can be used to reinforce the topic "campo y la ciudad": "Los olvidados" by Luis Buñuel and more recently "El norte."

2. What kind of social and economic problems arise from this immigration?
3. Do large cities have the necessary infrastructure to absorb this immigration?
4. Are there enough jobs, housing and social services for the new immigrants?
5. If there is a lack of jobs, what kind of economy is created by these immigrants?
6. What kind of social problems come with the lack of schools, housing and social services.
7. What is the business man/woman's reaction to the large number of people working in the streets creating an "underground economy"?
8. In what way does this "underground economy" benefit/hurt foreign investment?

The basic themes of the questions asked above involve several business concepts important in the Spanish-speaking world of business. For example, "underground economies" affect a country's tax collection from people who do not file annual reports; or the way an international company investing in a country perceives the lack of social infrastructure for future employees and workers; or the competition that the same company might have to face from street vendors who, as said before, do not pay any taxes while the company does; or the way a business person would react and criticize the poor and street vendors which might affect a business transaction. Many works can be used to study cultural and business aspects such as corruption, international and domestic investment, "prestanombres" (*El socio* by Jenaro Prieto) and business transactions in the Spanish business world.

The growth of students enrolled in Languages for Business courses is a phenomenon that many universities and Languages Departments are facing today in the United States. It is, indeed, a new trend in academia that has to be approached in the best possible way to cover students' demand for these classes. The global economic changes that are continuously taking place around the world demand professionals well prepared in both Languages and International Business. If we want our students to be competitive once they enter their professional careers after graduation, we need to ensure, as former President Clinton said, that our students acquire proficiency in other languages and cultures. In order to do so our curricula must be updated and revised to take another approach, different from the traditional ones. The

use of literature is vital for both the improvement of language abilities and the learning of social, cultural, political, and economic issues pertaining, in our case, to Hispanic societies.

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