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EMPHASIZING FOREIGN LANGUAGE USE
TO INTERNATIONAL MARKETING STUDENTS:
A SITUATIONAL EXERCISE THAT MIMICS
REAL-WORLD CHALLENGES

ABSTRACT

An international marketing exercise consists of students orally providing an introduction in a chosen foreign language of what they, as potential salespeople, might say to a client in that country. Students speak (not read) their prepared statements to the class and are leniently, yet constructively, evaluated on language use and pronunciation and marketing credibility. The objective is to emulate a real business situation and to show students the challenges of working with different languages and cultures in international marketing and the imperfections of direct translation. Results of a student survey showed that a majority of students believed the exercise to be valuable.¹

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Language reflects “different assumptions in terms of time, attitude to action, social hierarchy, and how this is expressed in the ... phrases used in marketing communication” (Usunier, 1996, p. 378). The International Marketing class at Boise State University emphasizes language knowledge and includes a course language exercise. Certainly international business professors and practitioners realize that foreign language knowledge is important. One has only to look at the journals devoted entirely to this (*Global Business Languages* and *Journal of Language for International Business*). Holden (1989), writing about languages of “marketing value” notes the “. . . general Anglo-American reluctance to learn foreign languages,” which can “. . . engender

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented at “The International Business Trinity: Language, Technology, and Culture,” the CIBER Conference sponsored by the University of Connecticut, Stamford, Connecticut, April 2004, and was published in its proceedings.

an indifference and, worse, a blindness to the importance of other countries' languages as languages of business communication . . ." (p. 1). He also states that a language barrier ". . . affects the businessperson's capacity to interpret other cultures and therefore other markets" (p. 5). Certainly, having the ability to speak and understand the language of a host country allows expatriates to adjust to living in that country and to engage in more meaningful interactions with natives of that country (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer and Luk, 2004).

Publications not specifically devoted to the importance of foreign language study continue to comment as well. An article in the *European Journal of Marketing* warns that "When a foreign language is not understood sufficiently well it acts as a barrier to establishing (. . .) closeness to the market, and it is for this reason that language differences are significant in international marketing . . ." (Swift, 1991, p. 38). An article in the *Journal of European Industrial Training* presents a survey of Irish exporters which finds that 86 percent of respondents felt it was at least "important," if not "essential" to be able to communicate in the native language of a foreign customer (Clarke, 1999, p. 11). Former German chancellor Willy Brandt was quoted as saying, "'If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, *dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen*' (Then you must speak German)" (Vincent, 1999, p. 30).

Lack of foreign language skills and expertise in global regions are said to be one of the key causes of the decline in US international competitiveness, according to the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (Rogers and Arn, 1998; citing Rider, 1990). Linguistic and cultural illiteracy were listed as a "major cause of the U.S.' sluggish exporting performance" by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB-International) (Loughrin-Sacco and Earwicker, 2003, p. 72). Even in the new world of e-commerce, a lack of foreign language skills can hurt businesses. Selling goods worldwide on the Internet means that a Web site must offer product information in a selection of languages rather than just English (Campbell, 1999). Language should be "at the top of the list" of considerations when planning a company's Web site (Cateora and Graham, 2005, p. 135). The business research firm Forrester found that visitors stay on a Web site twice as long if the information is in their own language and that "business users" make purchases three times more often when the content is in their native language (Vincent, 1999, p. 30). Marketing students themselves increasingly feel that foreign languages and foreign cultures

should be required study (Turley and Shannon, 1999). Deans of business schools agree with them; Rogers and Arn (1998) report that 71% of AACSB deans say that there should be a foreign language requirement in a business curriculum.²

Specifically related to the international marketing class is Holden's (1989) classification of languages according to their function. All categories of his classification include some form of the word *market*. The categories are:

- Languages of market contact (a lingua franca used in cross-cultural interactions, but perhaps not the mother tongue of either party or even widely known in the market);
- Market languages (languages of industrial and economic activity and languages of some end-users of products, even if not an official language of the state);
- Languages of marketing value ("official" languages in countries with high involvement in international business which generate new scientific and technical information).

The class text provides a good justification for language study. Cateora and Graham's *International Marketing* repeatedly states that "the importance of understanding the language of a country cannot be overestimated" (2005, p. 109) and "language may be one of the most difficult cultural elements to master, but it is the most important to study in an effort to acquire some degree of empathy" (2002, p. 106). Students are reminded that "you do not have to be fluent. Speaking even a few words of another language sets you apart" (Spaeth, 2002, p. 7). Even if speaking a few words is beyond some people, then language-challenged learners can take comfort that language recognition in itself is a valuable skill (Lovelock, 1994). In a nationwide US study of advertising executives, Pompian, Ray, and Ryder (1997) found that of those who had used foreign words or phrases in advertising aimed primarily at monolingual English-speaking audiences, 63% of ad executives said that they expected consumers to make the correct translations, but 87% indicated that consumers should at least be able to identify the language without any translation ability. Indeed, class discussion often examines

² Perhaps faculty of medical schools might feel the same. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* (Parker-Pope, 2001) even suggests that learning a foreign language can help ward off senility by performing a new mental challenge.

language recognition as being sometimes more important than language translation.

The language component in an international marketing course shows students both the obvious and subtle cultural differences that languages convey in marketing communications. It also shows that marketing messages cannot always be directly translated (even with the help of on-line technology) from English to another language—the idea must sometimes be communicated in a more indirect way that is appropriate to the culture of the target market. A useful exercise we use shows students that the translation of a marketing message from one language to another—and one culture to another—is not an easy, straightforward process.

DESCRIPTION AND CONTEXT OF THE ASSIGNMENT

The class exercise is an introduction, in a chosen foreign language, which a student, in his or her role of salesperson, might say to a potential client in that country. This includes who the student is, what organization (s)he represents, and a persuasive explanation of why (s)he is calling. Students also present orally their prepared statements (they are not allowed to directly read them) to the class. Part of the exercise guidelines state that formal register must be used unless the student explains why it is not used. A portion of class before the day of the exercise presentation (as well as a question on an exam) is devoted to how one speaks formally. The class text discusses an “American vice” (Cateora and Graham, 2005, p. 138) of being too quick to use first names in business encounters, so it does not come as a surprise to the students that titles and honorifics need to be used. Cateora and Graham (2005) also discuss how various languages use different forms of the pronoun *you* to indicate degree of formality. Specifically mentioned is the *tú/usted* distinction. Once students understand the importance of the difference between the two pronouns, then the necessity of proper verb conjugation can be discussed as well.

While the professor needs to be somewhat lenient with pronunciation and grammar, students must attempt to present their assignments as well as possible. What is minimally acceptable ability in the business world can be discussed along with the exercise. Hopefully students are encouraged when they are reminded that much successful foreign-language communication is not error-free. For example, Yonkers (2002) discusses how a less than perfect command of the subjunctive mood will not necessarily interfere with communication, but in some languages, an incorrectly conjugated verb could distort meaning.

Of course, since this role-playing exercise usually does not have a “client” responding to the student, the emphasis is on “language production rather than two-way communication,” a major weakness, according to Yonkers (2002, p. 73). Therefore, when the student performs the exercise in a language in which the professor is competent, the professor assumes the role of client, and provides that two-way communication, sometimes to the surprise and dismay of the student. If the student does not seem to understand the “response” to his or her introduction, then the professor points out that often listening and understanding are more difficult than memorizing and simple speaking.

Obviously, the professor is in a better position with regard to some languages than others in evaluating the exercises. In cases where the professor is incapable of evaluating how well the students are speaking their chosen language (e.g., Japanese, Chinese), she asks other class members who are native speakers of that language to offer constructive criticism. Students are also reminded that this is a marketing assignment and that they need to be persuasive and credible. Only a small number of semester points (25 of 400) are allotted to this assignment. If a student obviously makes a good faith effort and meets the professor’s minimal linguistic expectations for the exercise, s(he) does receive all 25 points. However, refusal to perform the exercise at all, or failure to perform at least at a minimum level, results in failure for the entire semester. Students are told in the class syllabus that each assignment throughout the semester must be completed at a minimally satisfactory level.

During the exercise, the professor uses the time to discuss the value of each language for international business, with informal reference to Holden’s (1989) categorizations of language. For example, when a native Marathi speaker spoke in Hindi for her “second” language, the student was also asked to explain to the class where Marathi is spoken and how Hindi is more universal (along with English), for business purposes in India. As per Yonkers’ (2002) suggestion, audience analysis and nonverbal communication is emphasized as well. For example, the professor asks the student if (s)he would shake hands with, bow to, or kiss the cheek of the client during the brief conversation.

In preparation for the assignment, the professor discusses some on-line translation options such as dictionary.com, Alta Vista’s BabelFish Translation Service, and newstran.com. Sample English sentences are entered and then the resulting translation is discussed, especially by those students who have the skills to know whether or not it is a good translation. The dangers of

machine translation are discussed, as well as the possible necessity of adaptation from one English-speaking country to another (e.g., the famous “nothing sucks like an Electrolux” ad [Delaney, 2004]; the product “Spotted Dick,” which can be found on many British grocery shelves; and the articles “Babelfish Adds Canadian and American to Translation List,” 2002 and “David Appleyard’s Guide to Common British-American Word Variants,” 2004).

As with differences in the English-speaking world, Yonkers (2002) writes of a “growing movement” (p. 76) for a non-Castilian, neutral Spanish language, and Ricks (1993, p. 82) reminds us that Spanish-to-Spanish product marketing also needs to be carefully considered. One example he relates is when Tropicana marketed its orange juice in Miami with the description “jugo de China.”

China means “orange” to Puerto Ricans, but not to the Cubans in Miami. Thus, the Cubans thought that it was “juice from China” and were not very interested in the product.

Of course poor translations often do not matter, as “What Is English: The English FAQ” (2003, par. 1 and 2) discusses:

Most of the English found on English.com is not an attempt to communicate—English is used as a design element in Japanese products and advertising to give them a modern look and feel (or just to “look cool”). There is often no attempt to try to get it right, nor do the vast majority of the Japanese population . . . ever attempt to read the English design element in question . . . There is therefore less emphasis on spell checking and grammatical accuracy (note: the same can be said for the addition of Japanese or Chinese characters to hats, shirts and tattoos found in the US or Europe).

Quite often it is easier to come up with English names than Japanese for a particular product. New products are brought to the marketplace in Japan more than anywhere else in the world and Japanese words and slogans quickly get used up. Japanese graphic designers will often tell you that English is widespread because the Japanese writing script (or scripts) limits their creativity—there are only so many ways to display their language, and only so many different types of fonts to use.

An example of a brand name which would never be used in the English-speaking world is the Japanese sports drink named “Pocari Sweat.” The name

would certainly not connote a refreshing beverage to an American, although it appears that the English word was chosen because of its association with sports and exercise (Stewart-Allen, 1998). For a business student who plans to market products internationally, brand names must be chosen carefully after evaluating all sorts of possible language pitfalls, including “crosscultural references, connotations and fickle colloquialisms” (Stewart-Allen, 1998, p. 9). International Marketing texts often tell of humorous and interesting failures of brand names that do not cross cultural and linguistic barriers well. Cateora and Graham (2005, p. 356) list the above-mentioned “Pocari Sweat,” along with “Alu-Fanny” (French foil wrap), “Crapsy Fruit” (French cereal), “Pschitt” (French lemonade), “Plopp” (Scandinavian chocolate), “Atum Bom” (Portuguese tuna), “Kack” (Danish sweets), “Mukk” (Italian yogurt), “Poo” (Argentine curry powder), “Kum Onit” (German pencil sharpeners), and “Bimbo” (the popular brand of bread in Spain and Mexico).

Professors need to be careful concerning some linguistic myths, such as the Nova story. The often-believed story of how the Chevrolet Nova sold poorly in Spanish-speaking countries because “Nova” (or “no va”) translates as “it does not go” has even made its way to the list of Urban Legends (Mikkelson and Mikkelson, 1999). One success story, though, of careful cross-cultural linguistic research for brand names is Kodak film. A team created the name “Kodak” after researching that the name was easy to pronounce everywhere but had no specific meaning in any country (Ricks, 1983).

The above discussion raises the overall topic of the marketing value of language. The professor often reminds students that the study of language for marketing purposes is about more than just speaking to each other in a foreign language. Usually, the class discussion is organized around the following framework intended to show the marketing value of languages:

- research (asking the right questions in the right language and with the right wording)
 - direct translation
 - translation equivalence (Craig and Douglas, 2000; Kumar, 2000), including challenges of equivalent connotations on the semantic differential measure (Voss, Stem, Johnson, and Arce, 1996)
- segmentation
 - target market selection (Lovelock, 1994) and a reminder that language segments may cross country borders

- choosing relevant language (e.g., engineering, medical, business terminology) to address relevant targets better and more directly (Pullin, 2001; Victor, 1992)
- legal issues (e.g., France's *Loi Toubon*; the British government passing legislation requiring businesses to provide documentation in Welsh as well as in English in Wales [Lovelock, 1994])
- customer satisfaction
- marketing mix issues
 - product (product and brand names [Hong, Pecotich, and Shultz, 2002; Ricks, 1983], labeling)
 - promotion (advertising, sales promotions, public relations, personal sales effort)
 - pricing and distribution (cost of a new, government-ordered revision of German spelling in textbooks, dictionaries, and the distribution of these new books [Wallmeyer, 2004]).

STUDENT REACTION TO THE EXERCISE

The students' reaction to the language exercise has been positive. The majority of them (15 of 19 surveyed) agreed that the non-English language exercise was appropriate for an international marketing class. They also generally agreed that it demonstrated and reinforced the international communications ideas taught in the course. One student commented that "at first it was a little strange to have a language exercise in a marketing class, but now I see that it was worth it." Another noted, ". . . it [the exercise] shows how translations can be wrong sometimes." One student judged the exercise appropriate for an international marketing class because "this class is the first to deal with communicating to and in a foreign market . . ." Two students found the exercise rather novel, with one commenting, ". . . the student tries something that otherwise [he/she] wouldn't *dare* to" (authors' emphasis).

Although the class was not composed of solely international business majors (who are required to study a foreign language as part of their course requirements), more than 80% of the students had previously studied a foreign language. Most agreed that their previous language study aided them in the class exercise. However, students who spoke English as a second language were not permitted to use their mother tongue for the exercise. As a result, two students complained of having to learn a third language in order to complete the exercise. Others incorporating this exercise into their classes may consider alternative assignments for these non-native English speakers.

Perhaps an alternative exercise could involve them as language evaluators and helpers, sharing their native language expertise with classmates.

Some students seemed sensitive to the fact that the international marketing class was composed of a mix of various business majors. Four students remarked that because there was no foreign language requirement for marketing majors, the foreign language exercise might be inappropriate for this international marketing course. However, three of these same students added that the exercise was still appropriate and valuable, given the objectives of the course. Two students who were opposed to the foreign language exercise cited a lack of previous foreign language study or the lack of a foreign language prerequisite as reasons. The third student who opposed the exercise stated that the exercise “does not teach a student anything new about marketing” and suggested that the exercise be performed instead in a cultural studies class.

There were a few suggestions for improving the foreign language exercise. Two students proposed having the students divide into groups to learn the language required for the exercise better. Another proposal was to provide more resources than just the Internet translators. One student suggested that the exercise be put into an international business class at a school where foreign languages are required (actually, the class is a required one in an international business curriculum where foreign languages are required). Two students recommended extending the exercise even further by studying more examples, such as the variations in Spanish between Spain, Mexico, and South American countries. Two students recommended removing the exercise from the course; another wanted a foreign language prerequisite or “at least a warning” of the required exercise in the class description for course registration. Maybe they forgot the wording from the class syllabus under the prerequisites section which reminds them of the benefit of foreign language study (“Additionally, the student *must* have an interest in and experience studying international events as they relate to business topics. Language training is a very strong plus in preparation for this course.”) Finally, one student cautioned that requiring students to perform the exercise in front of the class can make a student feel “stupid.”

There are always a couple of students who simply cannot deal with this language activity. They handle the stress in one of two ways: they drop the course, often for this reason alone, or they vent their anger on the professor and the rest of the class discussing how unfair this assignment is. In these circumstances, the professor tries to remind students kindly that if somebody

is studying or working in international marketing, at some point in his or her career, (s)he will need to function (if only superficially) in a foreign language, and that foreign language knowledge “improves ability to negotiate and adapt product and service offerings to meet the specific needs of the customer” and “gives a psychological advantage in selling” (Swift, 1991, p. 40; citing Turnbull, 1981). The students can also be advised that foreign language skill improves career prospects (“2001: the European year of Languages,” 2000), both in business and with government agencies. Since September 11, the need for foreign-language translators has strained the FBI’s Language Service Division (Klaidman and Isikoff, 2003). The professor also needs to remind the students that the written exercise includes an introduction and conclusion in English and that students need to follow good writing guidelines for writing in the language in which the class is taught—English.

CONCLUSION

A majority (15 of 19) of the students surveyed felt that the foreign language exercise was valuable and appropriate for an international marketing class. Students reported that the exercise supported the other language and communications objectives of the course and emphasized learning about foreign languages and cultures. Although there were three students in the class who had not previously studied a foreign language, two of these same students still agreed that the exercise was worthwhile. Recommendations for improvement of the exercise included working in groups and providing more language resources for performing translations.

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