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## EMBEDDING LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND MISSION

Management education aims to equip students with the necessary skills to meet the challenges of doing business in today's increasingly global environment. Effective managers must demonstrate adaptability, creativity, emotional intelligence, intercultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, and a sense of responsibility. They must also master a variety of skills and competencies such as the ability to communicate and operate effectively in multicultural teams.

Is management education meeting these objectives? Over the past two decades, business schools have indeed come under criticism. In 1988, the official report *Management Education and Development: Drift or Thrust into the 21st Century?* (Porter and McKibbin) argued for the need to place increased emphasis on interpersonal and communication skills in management education programs. In 1994, the RAND Institute on Education and Training and the College Placement Council Foundation published their report *Global Preparedness and Human Resources* (Bikson and Law). Skills for managers were identified as: the ability to communicate and work in teams of people from diverse backgrounds; receptivity to new ideas and ways of working; and empathy and flexibility. Cross-cultural competence was defined in the study as "a widened knowledge base plus openness and adaptability to different cultural perspectives" (24). According to the report, these skills have become "the critical new human resource requirement" (26).

Critics call for business schools to educate managers with the "softer skills" required to meet the needs and challenges of today's companies operating a global market. In particular, concern has been expressed about the need to provide a curriculum that is less scientific and more practice-oriented, with emphasis on broader, humanistic courses (Pfeffer and Fong; Friga et al.; Mintzberg; Bennis and O'Toole). Companies are looking to business schools to educate students with the appropriate people skills for the 21st century, such as those highlighted in a survey of over 100 multinational companies by the association of French Graduate Schools of Engineering and Management (*Conférence des Grandes Ecoles: Commission Formation-Emploi*): adaptability, capacity to work in teams, written expression, and oral communication. *The Guardian Weekly* has reported that companies in the United Kingdom are recruiting candidates not only with strong academic credentials, but also

with soft skills such as “teamworking, cultural awareness, leadership and communicative skills” (Taylor).

In our view, language instructors are well placed to help fill the gap in the business school curriculum by developing these essential skills for future managers. What skills, then, are in fact developed in the language classroom? Learning a foreign language involves more than just mastering linguistic forms. The process of learning another language reveals to the student that different people construct reality differently, and this is reflected in language. Culture permeates “the very grammar we use, the very vocabulary we choose, the very metaphors we live by” (Kramsch 8). Cultural knowledge and awareness, as well as linguistic and intercultural skills, are integral to the language learning process.

While most schools in non-English-speaking countries realize the need to educate managers with competencies in at least English, and usually one other foreign language, less attention is directed to language learning in English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States. The assumption is made that, since everybody uses English for business communication, no effort is needed to learn a foreign language. Linguists and other communication specialists argue differently: “[L]anguage affects the ability of companies to function in the international arena” (Marschan et al. 591). Thus, educators in English-speaking countries, and more particularly those who have responsibility for the business school curriculum, should understand this reality. Tomorrow’s managers are more likely to achieve better mastery of the communicative and intercultural skills necessary to do business in a global context if they are exposed to language learning. By integrating languages in the management education program, language instructors help students to “communicate not only in English, the global business language, but also in another language which may just be the customer’s own language and may just make the difference in a difficult negotiation” (Bryant and Sheehan 74).

In this article, we use our own experience from a French business school<sup>1</sup> to suggest strategies that language instructors can adopt to improve the recognition and acceptance of language learning within the business school curriculum and mission. These strategies involve an on-going commitment and a proactive approach to promoting a better understanding of language learning among students, faculty, and administration. In our business school,

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language learning plays a central role in fulfilling both the mission<sup>2</sup> and the learning goals.<sup>3</sup>

In France, and in particular in the *Grandes Ecoles*,<sup>4</sup> the educational system has long recognized and integrated language learning as a useful component of the business curriculum. “The French business schools are the most advanced in producing future managers who master not only English, but also a second foreign language” (Bryant 5). Sonntag also discusses how languages are the hidden skills of French business students, providing them with a competitive advantage when compared with their monolingual counterparts, especially in countries where English is the native language (see *Les Compétences cachées*). However, to maintain languages in the business curriculum, we need to be innovative by developing motivating materials and activities, as well as by introducing students to new methods of learning as part of a continuous improvement process.

We believe that the strategies and ideas we present here can be constructive for our fellow language colleagues and can be adapted to other contexts. Our discussion begins with the language teaching classroom and the stuff of language learning, and then moves on to the wider issues of implementing an effective policy of communication with our students and our business-faculty colleagues.

#### LEARNING THROUGH CONTENT-BASED MATERIALS

A key objective in language teaching in our business school is to stimulate the learners’ oral communication, ideally in a professional context, through exposure to challenging authentic materials. Business-faculty colleagues may entertain false perceptions about what language instructors are doing in their classrooms. Many believe such instruction is confined to studying nouns and verbs, even though grammar *per se* is not taught. The task at hand, however, is in fact far more complex. In our experience, the choice of appropriate, content-based modules plays a crucial role in fostering a favorable learning

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<sup>2</sup>The school’s Mission Statement: “We educate students to be competent, open-minded, and responsible managers, to take risks, to innovate, and to work in a borderless context.”

<sup>3</sup>The school’s main program has six learning goals, of which four relate directly to language learning: “Ethics and Responsibility, Interpersonal Communication, Team Work and Leadership, Personal and Professional Development.”

<sup>4</sup>The French *Grandes Ecoles* are institutions of higher education providing graduate programs for students of engineering and management.

environment. If the materials themselves are sufficiently motivating and challenging, sufficiently provocative and controversial, the student will want to communicate so strongly that the language barrier progressively vanishes (Wilkins). Furthermore, as linguists, we have felt the need to meet our students on their own terrain, thus “gear[ing] activities towards students’ interests, development levels, experiences, various learning styles, and needs” (Tedick et al. 3). Hence, our common core program covers business themes laced with questionnaires, interactive quizzes, vocabulary exercises, translations, and recorded listening materials in order to make each lesson as enticing and stimulating as possible for the learner.

With the conviction that managers will need an ever-wider range of skills and significant general cultural knowledge, modules are divided into three categories that correspond to the broadening of perspectives we seek to encourage. Under *Language Skills*, modules are provided in translation, pronunciation and oral comprehension using diverse sources such as satellite radio broadcasts and podcasts. Students also prepare for international examinations such as the German, Italian, and Spanish Chambers of Commerce Diplomas, along with the TOEFL, GMAT or TOEIC tests. Under *International Culture*, area studies include courses on Latin America, Africa, and Pacific Rim nations, for example. We offer newspaper subscription modules, and courses in literature, cinema, and music. Under *Managerial Skills*, students may select courses in Business Case Studies, Anglo-Saxon Finance and Accounting, Managerial Economics or Corporate Ethics.

The aim of these content-based modules is not to teach the content, but rather to exploit the context in order to make the student more proficient in managing the terminology and the idioms necessary for effective communication. The context is the ground for linguistic practice and improvement. Behind the content-based approach, there is a hidden agenda: the differing perspectives offered in the modules provide a humanistic approach to learning, encouraging students to adapt to very different cultures, promoting adaptability, flexibility, respect, and tolerance. Indeed, the language classroom provides an ideal forum to discuss issues of ethics and responsibility.

At the same time, our students are exposed to authentic materials through management textbooks, video documentaries, radio programs, and up-to-date newspaper articles. In the various language modules, students are confronted with substantial differences in the pedagogical approach and even in the content itself. As a result, they develop a heightened awareness of how greatly customs and practices may vary from one culture to another and why such

differences must be taken into account. The underlying leitmotif in all our courses is innovative language learning through diversity of content-based materials.

#### EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW LEARNING PROCESSES

The fundamental learning processes behind our teaching approach are as important as the nature of the course content. The language classroom lends itself to new ways of learning and pedagogical experimentation, and we adapt our teaching to the institutional context. Our students have experienced the more traditional, directive methods used in French secondary school education. In our first-year program, learning vocabulary lists, translating prose sentences, and writing business letters are particularly appropriate. Teaching methods and classroom activities evolve, however, from a more directive, teacher-centered approach to more open-ended, interactive approaches as learner-centered tasks are woven into the program. Thus, students start off on familiar territory and are brought to a more conceptually challenging and exciting form of learning. The process is by no means abrupt. The objective is not to change the approach but rather to expand the different methods and activities used inside the classroom. The aim is to improve students' ability to communicate effectively in the foreign language (Bryant et al., "Improving Students' Communicative Skills"). Role playing, negotiating, information sharing, and an array of hands-on and learning-by-doing, task-based exercises are included. Students work in pairs, or in groups of three or more, and then participate in whole group discussions. During these student-centered activities, the instructor notes the main difficulties that students may encounter in grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions, business-related terminology, or pronunciation. These notes serve as the basis for a linguistic feedback session. One effective method is to list the mistakes made and to encourage students to find the correct use themselves. Since students are directly involved in correcting their own mistakes, they become genuine actors in the learning process.

Over the three-year period of study—and the resulting student-teacher contact time—we, as instructors, are able to initiate students to different language learning strategies. No single method leads to language competence. The multiple intelligence theory, as proposed by Gardner (1983), postulates that students respond differently to different stimuli and that instructors must, as a result, make use of a wide range of learning/teaching strategies, with a view to reaching as many students as possible.

One such strategy involves peer-group interactive learning: interpersonal activities “[...] in which learners are required to negotiate meaning among themselves in the course of completing an interactive task are particularly suited to language development” (Nunan 4). In such cooperative learning, students work together to achieve common learning goals, an approach that stands in marked contrast to the more individualized and competitive learning styles that students may have experienced in their previous schooling. As Plaisance and Vergnaud note: “Cooperation is just as fruitful as competition” (53) [our translation]. In the language classroom, students can improve their linguistic competencies and also develop key management skills. Companies today value managers who have learned to cooperate effectively in multicultural teams. In addition, Dörnyei views such approaches as highly motivating: “Research has confirmed that students who are given the opportunity to participate actively in classroom activities are more easily motivated and tend to evaluate such teaching methods very positively and will find the class enjoyable” (100).

By reinforcing students’ awareness and practice of these new learning strategies, we provide them with tools to use later in their professional and personal lives. In carefully thought-out contexts, students grapple with the difficulties of expressing themselves clearly and of listening to and understanding others. They fine-tune a sense of who they are and how they are coming across to others, and they develop a keener awareness of the complexities of communication in general. A better understanding of learning processes can thus significantly enhance the communication skills that play such a vital role in management.

#### USING EXISTING RESOURCES CREATIVELY—LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS

Our language department contributes to the school’s mission of encouraging diversity. Our team of language instructors, who come from different backgrounds and have different nationalities and experiences, reflect the diversity and complexity of the world itself.<sup>5</sup> These teacher resources provide a rich source of social capital and allow us to offer a wide range of modules.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Department of Languages and International Cultures at Groupe ESC Clermont comprises 8 permanent faculty members and approximately 35 adjunct instructors.

<sup>6</sup> Over 100 modules are offered in 11 foreign languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French as a Foreign Language, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

We promote teamwork and cooperation among fellow language instructors, practices that enable us to be more creative in our curriculum development. Colleagues take turns preparing lesson plans, enriching the content of the courses through different pedagogical approaches and teaching styles. The curriculum and syllabi are enhanced on an on-going basis through discussions within the department. Language instructors also cooperate by auditing each other's lessons and exchanging constructive criticism to improve their own teaching methods and update their materials. During departmental working lunches—called “picnic lunches”—instructors present their “best of...” lesson plans and thus share “food for thought” in the form of their most successful pedagogical ideas. This culture of collaboration among language instructors has led to designing and publishing teaching materials (Bryant et al., *Mastering Business English*) and to writing peer-reviewed journal articles collectively.

Language instructors play a special role in the students' personal and professional development, especially since languages are taught in small groups. In classes with 15 students, instructors are able to pay closer attention to the students' individual needs and provide more personalized encouragement and reassurance than in large lecture halls. Through these personalized learning relationships, language instructors may have a greater impact on students' progress. The language learning process, therefore, fosters a positive climate for personal and professional development—a critical component of management education.

As Slavin points out, students should also be considered as a resource: “We can no longer ignore the potential power of the peer group, perhaps the one remaining free resource for improving [our teaching]” (quoted in Nunan 5). When instructors set up their lesson plans to attain a greater level of student involvement, the learning is more effective. Exchanges that take place are enhanced by the diverse personal, cultural, academic, and professional experiences of the learners. In this regard, international students, often a neglected resource in the business language classroom,<sup>7</sup> can be invited to talk about their home country and to engage in dialogue with the host students. Task-based interviews set up between native and non-native speakers provide participants with the opportunity to practice a foreign language and to learn more about their respective educational systems and cultures, for example. Conversation sessions run by international exchange students lead to linguistic

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<sup>7</sup> Groupe ESC Clermont has more than 80 international partner universities.

improvement and facilitate the development of personal, cross-cultural relationships. Such networking skills have become essential for doing business in today's global workplace.

#### MARKETING LANGUAGES TO STUDENTS, BUSINESS FACULTY, AND INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

Language instructors must ensure that students fully understand the objectives of the language modules proposed within the business curriculum. In Slavin's model for quality of instruction, he describes the need to explain to students the learning objectives and the reasons for including the items in any syllabus or course (see *Educational Psychology*). For our present discussion, students need to understand that one of the advantages of competence in languages is to provide them with better job and career development opportunities. How many business students will know Arabic, Polish, or Russian, for example, when they graduate? When they learn a foreign language, they also become familiar with the cultural aspects of the country or region where the language is spoken. They should be reminded that the language classroom provides them with unique opportunities to develop the managerial soft skills that may be less prominent in their business courses.

How are these managerial skills taught in the foreign language classroom? The interactive, hands-on, task-based, learning activities, such as role playing and negotiating simulations, small group presentations, and debates, force students to come to terms with the image they are projecting of themselves. In this way, they appreciate the value added that accrues from being open-minded and sharing in a group situation. They fine-tune their communicative skills in the language classroom. Group projects challenge students to solve problems by cooperating and collaborating. They also learn to operate effectively in multicultural teams wherein their adaptability and leadership skills are enhanced. They develop a sense of responsibility by taking a stand and defending their positions in discussions on controversial issues. The language classroom therefore provides a framework for promoting a wider outlook on life. Language instructors need to remind students that companies are relying on management schools to educate their graduates not only to be competent in a specific discipline but also to be well-rounded individuals capable of coping with the business pressures of the 21st century.

To reinforce their role, recognition, and status in the business school, language instructors should actively seek opportunities for collaboration with the business faculty. For example, in our school, language instructors

cooperate with Human Resource Department colleagues to team-teach a course entitled “Job Marketing” in two or three languages. In this course students use their native language and one or two foreign languages to practice presentation skills and interviewing techniques. They also write job resumes and application letters in several languages. Colleagues from the two different departments, Human Resources and Languages, collaborate to assess students’ performance in multilingual job interviewing simulations. After each interview, feedback sessions from the student peer group as well as from the cross-disciplinary panel are particularly appreciated by the students for their richness in scope and depth.

Voluntary language courses are held to provide business faculty with an opportunity to practice and improve their oral skills in a more informal setting. Language instructors use short extracts from films in English, for example, as a springboard for discussion and exchange of views. Such activities reinforce the human side of our work and help to break down the barriers between disciplines. In this way, we improve the quality of relationships and increase the opportunities for future collaboration among faculty members. This interaction between colleagues contributes to mutual understanding for our respective disciplines and builds on the social capital within the institution. Indeed, language instructors work jointly with their business colleagues in presenting papers at conferences, reinforcing a multidisciplinary approach to management education. These activities have also led to co-authored journal articles.

Finally, as language instructors, we should seize opportunities to participate actively in the life of the business school, such as serving on committees, providing input to curriculum advisory boards, or being involved in the admissions process. In some institutions there may be opportunities to hold senior posts, such as program director or even dean. Very often, the language instructors have the appropriate competencies to play a crucial role in the implementation of the school’s internationalization strategy. They operate as international relations managers, helping to develop and maintain exchange programs.

## CONCLUSION

As business schools choose or are compelled to implement internationalization strategies, the dean and the business faculty should be reminded of the importance of learning foreign languages. Indeed, top management commitment to language instruction can play a crucial role in the

internationalization process. Far beyond the acquisition of a communication tool, language learning provides deeper insight into the hidden differences between cultures and peoples. In their intercultural dealings, students must be prepared to operate as global business persons and global citizens. The language classroom provides a forum for students to confront up-to-date business issues and take a personal stand by defending ideas. In this way, language instructors contribute to educating managers with a keen moral sensitivity and ethical fiber. The process of studying a foreign language enables our students to develop some of the necessary personal qualities and skills required in the workplace. They learn to listen, to show understanding and tolerance of others, to take risks and to accept mistakes, and to be creative when they do not master the language perfectly. And, above all, they learn humility.

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