

May 2010

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Recommended Citation

Rawson, Gay (2010) "Developing Cultural Competency in the Business Language Class," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 13 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol13/iss1/10>

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DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE CLASS

What is the goal of a business language class? Is it to prepare our students for the (global) business world or is it to teach business? Do we emphasize language or culture? These questions could be interpreted in many ways, leaving professors, students, and employers with vastly different ways of answering them. This article proposes looking at the needs of employers and the business world when organizing the course content of the business language class.

Outside interests need not, and should not, dictate academic goals but they might inform the content and method of delivery. After all, a business language class is a “language for special purposes” class, and as such lends itself particularly well to meeting a specific set of goals defined by outside agencies. If one goal of this course, and perhaps of the larger curriculum, is to prepare our students for the global world and an eventual job in their degree area, we may well want to consider what the needs of employers are. This article will explain research on current trends in business courses that is available to all interested parties, including students, faculty, and employers. It will then focus on a particularly interesting study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). This study impacted course and program design of the International Business Program in French at Concordia College. After providing a brief overview of this program, we will explain in detail how certain AAC&U recommendations are carried out in a business language class. The AAC&U makes several recommendations that are confirmed by interviews with recruiters, employers, students, and professors. However, we will focus on statements relating to developing cultural competency. In this way, we can better provide an answer to how the business language class might serve the larger goal of preparing our students for the global (business) world in regards to their cultural competence.

To determine what it is that students need to be prepared for the business world, we should first take the student’s perspective. Most students will go straight to *Google*, *Wikipedia*, or another Internet resource. These are not the same tools on which an academic relies, but they do provide important insight into the information readily available to the general public and to students. A

simple *Google* search querying “preparing students for the business world” shows a variety of suggestions for what students need and where our universities need to improve. It is interesting to note, however, that a large number now stress the importance of the liberal arts. From Admissions brochures for Cornell University to business blogs, the message is the same: our students need to communicate effectively and correctly in oral and written media. A liberal arts approach seems to provide this. Most universities have embraced this trend, explaining how business programs can combine with the liberal arts to prepare students for the global market. The AAC&U published a detailed report on this issue in December 2006. In this report, Peter Hart Research Associates, Inc. questioned over 815 managers, CEOs, executives, and C-suite-level executives (CXO or high-level executives with a “C” in their titles, such as CEO, CFO, etc.) as well as recent graduates to see how well new hires were meeting expectations, and in what areas improvement could be made. An overview of their results follows:

Majorities of employers think that colleges and universities should place more emphasis in the areas outlined below. (Recent graduates rank many of the same learning outcomes as top priorities, but their support for increased emphasis in many areas is less intense than employers’ support.)

Integrative learning

- The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands-on experiences (73% emphasis)

Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world

- Concepts and new developments in science and technology (82%)
- Global issues and developments and their implications for the future (72%)*
- The role of the United States in the world (60%)
- Cultural values and traditions in America and other countries (53%)*

Intellectual and practical skills

- Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings (76%)*
- The ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing (73%)
- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills (73%)
- The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources (70%)
- The ability to be innovative and think creatively (70%)
- The ability to solve complex problems (64%)
- The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics (60%)

Personal and Social Responsibility

- Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group setting (76%)*
 - Global issues and developments and their implications for the future (72%)*
 - A sense of integrity and ethics (56%)
 - Cultural values and traditions in America and other countries (53%)*
- [. . .]

* Three items are shown in two learning outcome categories because they apply to both.¹

One must clarify that the survey did not distinguish between “Business” and “International Business.” In today’s global economy, such distinctions may no longer be pertinent, although most university programs still make them. With that in mind, these results still confirm much of what colleges may have long known. And, it seems clear that our programs need to continue content-delivery and add to it many of the components suggested above.

It is also interesting to note that all of the areas mentioned in two separate learning outcome categories relate well to a Business Language (BL) Classroom: “Teamwork and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings” and “Global issues and developments and their implications for the future.” For a language educator, it is clear that to prepare students to work with others in diverse settings and developing implications for global issues today and in the future, they need to study other cultures and their languages. Business Language classes also relate to other categories, such as communicating effectively in oral and written forms, evaluating information, thinking critically, and in the best situations applying knowledge to real-world settings. That is no small task, and yet we need to be aware of yet another dimension: BL classrooms should also address the category “Cultural values and traditions in America and other countries.” Indeed, without the addition of cultural analysis and competency, one might argue that our students are not prepared to communicate effectively or work in teams. This cultural intelligence, then, is an aspect essential to our students’ success.

Before analyzing the specifics of the French International Business program at Concordia College and techniques adopted in my BL classroom, it is important to consider the words found on business consultant Wayne Hurlbert’s blog posting dated June 8, 2006.

¹ Hart 2. All bold items and underlines are in the original.

There are few things that can shatter a person's view of the world like the discovery that all that was thought to be true no longer holds. To find out that everything one knows is wrong can be devastating news for many people. It doesn't have to be that way.

Comments to his blog discuss that when businesses learn that their beliefs are not true for everyone, it leads to failure. As educators, we might apply this idea in a slightly different way: if our students realize, when they begin to work, that their cultural norms and beliefs are not the only ones and, even worse, that their beliefs might not be true for everyone, the results can be devastating. Decreased productivity, loss of revenue, lack of motivation, miscommunication may all result. If we can introduce this notion in our BL classes and programs, students will be better equipped to navigate successfully cultural differences and in turn bring that knowledge to their real-world positions.

The International Business (IB) Program at Concordia College presents an excellent model for undergraduate students. We have three flagship programs in French, German, and Spanish with more programs developing in Russian, Chinese, and English. For the International Business major with the World Language Option, students essentially have a double major in International Business and their language (for the three flagship programs). This includes regular business course work in Accounting, Statistics, Economics, Math, Computer Science, International Business, Ethics, supporting courses from across the curriculum, and an area of concentration in Marketing, Management, Finance, or Economics. As a requirement of this program, all students spend a semester abroad studying in either France, Germany, or Mexico, which must include a two-month internship at a multinational company. For the French option, students study at the Institut de Gestion in Rennes, France, and are mainstreamed with French students at the "Master 1" level. Their internship follows their studies so they spend a minimum of six months in the country, with a homestay living arrangement.

The language requirements differ by language but each language requires a "Business Language Course" and adequate proficiency in the language. The French option also requires a three-month study abroad experience prior to the semester abroad, two months of which are spent in homestays. These details are important because when we discuss developing cultural competency, it is important to understand that these students have worked toward this in more than one class and across more than one semester. The Business Language

Class is often the “capstone” class for our French IB students and is usually taken in the fall immediately prior to the semester abroad. Even without an IB major, learning cultural skills can be adapted to any classroom and to differing time constraints. The techniques described below are easily incorporated in first- and second-year language classes as well as advanced courses.

Before providing specific examples of exercises, a brief explanation of the course organization may be helpful. Most BL textbooks address similar topics, so the exercises developed here should be adaptable to any course level and text. The second-year course uses a BL textbook that is effective in terms of cultural content, but rather general in terms of business. This is not an official “business language class,” but it is designed to prepare students to study abroad. The enrollment is not limited to business students and serves a large variety of people who participate in the three-month program abroad or who are working toward certification and licensure in Education. However, with the choice of a BL textbook, we are able to expose our students to business realities and cultural nuances over a longer period of time. In this second-year course that is required for all French IB students prior to their three-month period abroad, the basic business textbook covers many topics: making a hotel reservation, answering the telephone, organizing a meeting, giving an oral presentation, traveling, eating in restaurants, working abroad, resolving conflicts, writing a résumé or CV, and discussing various important issues. The book serves all needs: a basic business introduction, practical travel needs, and “real world” information.

The course meets three days a week with the following organization each week: one day focuses on the BL textbook, one day presents details about the areas we plan to visit on the program abroad, one day develops cultural competency. These areas are not discrete and indeed each week is packaged around similar ideas and overarching themes. Five to fifteen minutes of every class focus on team building. Students develop a project, give oral presentations specific to the country as well as on current events in target areas.

The official BL class is at a third-year level and also meets three days a week. In this course, many more “business-specific” topics such as computer technology, marketing, management, banks, the stock market, insurance, transportation, and international commerce are covered in detail. Understanding how these different areas function in France and Canada, as well as making regular comparisons to the United States, is emphasized with each chapter. Much of the course also involves building a business-specific vocabulary. Two days of the week are dedicated to specific business content,

translations, and vocabulary. The third day of the week is spent developing cultural intelligence and understanding business practices, protocols, and nuances in the Francophone World. It is difficult at times to maintain this third “culture” day when the content becomes more and more difficult, but research suggests that students may need more of these team-building and culturally specific understandings than actual business vocabulary. A participant in the AAC&U study states: “. . . I look for people that take accountability, responsibility, and are good team people over anything else. I can teach the technical” (Hart). Students can work to memorize more terms on their own and in the context of their employment. The classroom is well suited to aid in developing team-building and cultural skills.

My individual research with students participating in our French IB programs from 2004 to the present indicates that 100 percent of the problems that arose stemmed from cultural misunderstandings or culture shock rather than from a lack of business-specific content knowledge. This suggests that we need to rethink how we prepare our students. If they cannot function in a “foreign” environment, then it does not matter how well students mastered their business classes. “Foreign” here is defined as any different environment. Indeed, many businesses present a “foreign” environment to the new and uninitiated graduate so “culture shock” can happen in their own city as well as in Paris. In my experiences, as long as a student has minimal language abilities of at least Intermediate-Mid on the ACTFL scale, it seems the cultural component overrides all other competencies when predicting success in student internships. Increased culture shock may have occurred because of language deficiencies, but the problems manifested themselves as cultural rather than linguistic. So, perhaps we must consider that a lack of cultural competency equals a lack of business-specific content knowledge. If students are unaware that business needs to be carried out in a certain way in a certain country and they are not able to make accommodations, then they are not prepared, and do not have the cultural business knowledge necessary to accomplish their tasks.

By adapting Human Resource games, Team Building techniques, Cultural Simulations, “ODARE” / DIE models, and Diversity Exploration tools, I have developed a program for the “third day” that greatly enhances students’ cultural competency and ability to function in a global environment. Students are required to read books such as *Culture Shock! France*, by Sally Adamson Taylor, and *Cultural Intelligence*, by Brooks Peterson, to aid in our discussions and understanding. Cultural Intelligence may be considered

in different ways. *Wikipedia*, a source with dubious accuracy but often the first place our students look, presents an acceptable definition for Cultural Intelligence and a brief history of the term that discusses measuring one's "CQ" or Cultural Quotient.

Cultural Intelligence, Cultural Quotient or CQ, is a theory within management and organisational psychology, positing that understanding the impact of an individual's cultural background on their behaviour is essential for effective business, and measuring an individual's ability to engage successfully in any environment or social setting. First described by Christopher Earley and Elaine Mosakowski in the October 2004 issue of *Harvard Business Review* and gaining acceptance throughout the business community, CQ teaches strategies to improve cultural perception in order to distinguish behaviours driven by culture from those specific to an individual, suggesting that allowing knowledge and appreciation of the difference to guide responses results in better business practice.²

In a BL class, it may not be critical to measure someone's "CQ." The most important aspects involve understanding how our culture and our unquestioned attitudes impact our relationships, specifically our ability to thrive in different business relationships and settings. *Culture Shock* explains the normal reactions to change and how one processes this. This concept is effective when preparing students to study abroad and also when changing from the culture of the college to that of the workplace.

In the second-year course, after approximately one week in which student interaction and behavior on different kinds of games are observed, teams are created in which the students work for the rest of the semester. For the third-year course, teams are project specific and vary. Each team must develop a team name and a team flag that is posted in the classroom. This is how we refer to the team, and we work very hard to create a team atmosphere. Teams play "get to know you" games, have to accomplish certain tasks with different members taking leadership roles, show group responsibility for returning assignments in a timely manner and for insuring that certain individual assignments from team members are turned in. Since we are preparing for travel in the second-year course, teams must also plan a detailed portion of our itinerary and help make travel arrangements. This involves writing to "Offices

² Bold is in the original. Again, when possible, I referred to sites easily accessible to the general public. This is the information that our students read and these are the ideas we need to help them understand, refute, or develop.

de tourisme” or hotels and making phone calls to native speakers. When we arrive, they are responsible, while in country, for carrying out inquiries for the sections they prepared and for leading the rest of the teams. By the end of this course, students learn about everyone in the class, but they know their teammates on a deeper level. They are able to recognize their contribution and role in a team (preferred styles) as well as those of the others. They also have determined how best to work as a cohesive group in order to accomplish common goals. All of this occurs in the framework of the cultural situation we are preparing. While the reality of our trip adds a wonderful dimension to this work, a similar course taught at another university just planned a “virtual” visit but with the same detail and similar team building skills. Some of the students even managed to take their dream trips!

Once the teams have demonstrated some cohesiveness (usually after only a week or two of five- to fifteen-minute daily games, or two full class days), we move to a model for understanding cultural differences. We usually begin by reading “Just Being There Is Not Enough” by Elaine Fuller Carter in the second-year course. This article describes a process termed “observe, describe, analyze” (ODA). It explains how to observe cultural differences, describe what is seen, and then analyze them. Students must write a paper, in their native language (English or French), describing a cross-cultural incidence of miscommunication, and then analyze the different components following Carter’s model.

“ODA” echoes the “DIE” model, which represents “describe, interpret, evaluate” and is used in cultural diversity training. In this case, “describe” is what is seen and heard. Students learn how humans naturally jump to interpretive and evaluative processes, without pausing to actually describe and reflect upon what specific words were exchanged. A poignant exercise with this involves the analysis of a picture. At the end of the exercise, students see that assumptions and stereotypes play significant roles in their split-second reactions. They also begin to understand the ODA or DIE process. We follow up with case scenarios presented in *Culture Shock* or ones that I created in which we debrief the situation using these models and attempt to identify the exact point of cultural miscommunication. Many of the business-language textbooks have cases that we use as well.

In order to reinforce the necessity to observe interactions and reflect on them before rushing to judgment, I combined the two models mentioned above into “ODARE” for “observe, describe, analyze, reflect (research, read), and evaluate.” This is what students must learn to do in different cultural situations,

whether in a foreign setting, in the workplace, or just at home. They first need to be aware that they must always be observing and paying attention to little details. The goal of the second stage is to be able to describe what actually happened, separating out emotion as much as possible, and sticking to the “facts.” We next analyze or interpret the situation, sometimes as a group. After developing our ideas about what happened, it is important to remember the importance of reflecting before evaluating or judging the situation. In my experience, students have difficulty understanding what is happening without additional research, conversation, and thought. Many times they jump to the “wrong” conclusion because they simply do not have the cultural framework to understand another way of evaluating the interaction. They simply cannot imagine another possibility at first. So, here is where content information as well as experience can help them better understand why a French shopkeeper might be upset if they walked in and started picking up merchandise in the store, why a heated political discussion over dinner with co-workers is a good thing, or why you cannot just arrive in a Francophone country such as France or Cameroon and expect to get down to business.

Readings in *Culture Shock* and *Cultural Intelligence* help develop heightened cultural awareness of different cultures and ways of behaving in the business world. It is important to include information about Iceberg models of culture, Culture vs. culture, stereotypes vs. generalizations, and more. The third-year class spends a fair amount of time learning about each student’s own personal cultural preferences and how those might work within the framework of the target culture. Brooks Peterson, the author of *Cultural Intelligence*, has a style inventory that many students choose to take. In it, their personal profile is developed, and they can then compare it to over 200 different cultural profiles.³ There are also questions in his book that guide a self-analysis of one’s cultural profile. The course engages students on those questions in written and oral discussions. Students then are able to understand better where their choices were more likely influenced by their culture and where their choices are more likely due to personal preferences. Finally, they began to realize how this would enhance or challenge their abilities to conduct business in different settings.

³ For information on the Peterson Cultural Style Indicator, consult his website <http://acrosscultures.com/pcsidescription.html>. There is a reduced academic fee to take this inventory and I offered it as an option. Students who participated in it reported overall satisfaction with the results. Their only suggestion to me was a desire to have even more class time to discuss results.

The final component to developing cultural competency in the BL class involves games, simulations, and trainings. Human Resource manuals, Team-Building books, and Diversity trainings provide excellent examples. These can easily be adapted to the BL or foreign-language class. For example, one quick five- to ten-minute game is called “But I’ve Always Done It That Way , , ,” and was originally developed by Bob Holmes “to illustrate how easy it is to develop and continue using unconscious habits, to point out that there are often equally effective alternative ways to accomplish an objective, and to illustrate that old ways of doing things may interfere with our acquisition of new behaviors, and therefore require ‘unlearning’ first” (Scannell and Newstrom). A trainer in a business setting or HR manager might use this to help employees accept change in the program or workplace. It is directly applicable to change within a cultural setting. There are discussion questions listed in many of these resource manuals that can be modified as needed for classroom purposes.

The exercise takes little time and is very effective. Three or four volunteers who have jackets or coats stand up. The class is asked to observe them carefully. The instructor asks each student to put on his or her jacket. The class then explains what they saw, and volunteers report how it felt. They are usually confused and give vague answers. The instructor then asks the volunteers to remove their jackets and put them on again, using the opposite arm first. Volunteers usually hesitate, laughter often ensues, and the class has more observations to report this second time. I have added a new adaptation to this game that calls for a third demonstration from the volunteers, depending on their abilities. The instructor places the jacket on the floor, back down. The collar needs to be facing the student with the base of the coat farthest away. Students are then instructed to put both arms into the sleeves at the same time and stand up. The jacket slides on easily. Many pre-schools use this method to teach children how to dress themselves. The students almost always laugh at this, but it is usually the quickest method. The class then discusses each of the three demonstrations to determine what happened. Which was the best way? Why do we prefer a certain way? Maybe we have “always done it like that” but this does not mean that our way is the only or even the best way. Another way may work perfectly well or even better and be more appropriate to a different cultural context.

It is always important to ask students to think of ways that the games relate to stated course goals. Most of the training games are concerned with managing change, increasing communication, setting the climate, creative

thinking, problem solving, team building, and more. The skills all relate to a better business environment but they also help achieve the needs stated in the AAC&U research.⁴ They provide fun, quick, and interactive ways to get students to think about important issues. And, once again, we put these activities into a cultural context. The games demonstrate cultural difference in memorable ways. Students often joke about the “coat game” when faced with uncomfortable change under stressful situations, recalling putting on their coat in the classroom and the discussion that followed. They remember the words from the books, and they mean more to them because they experienced the situation, even if in a simulated way.

Developing cultural competency for our business graduates, and all graduates, is not a luxury but a necessity in order to equip them for success in the real world. Many students at the end of the third-year business class comment that they learned more about themselves in this class than in any other. It was the first time they had learned how to write a CV (in English or French), the first time they learned how to prepare for and survive a job interview, the first time they realized what their managerial style preferences were and why that is even important. They finally began to realize the impact of culture on so many facets of their daily life and were able to make connections to appropriate behaviors in business settings. We can never erase cultural misunderstandings or miscommunications, but after a program such as this one, students have the tools to manage these situations, interpret them, and make necessary changes. Evaluations from our program show increased cultural awareness, fewer incidences of problems due to “culture shock,” and a feeling of greater preparation for what lies ahead. We can no longer separate “International Business” from “Business.” We live in a flat global world that does not recognize one cultural standard over another. Instead of erasing differences, scholars such as Peterson argue that we are in greater contact with more people and therefore experience even more differences. To prepare our graduates, in all disciplines, we need to have them develop greater cultural competency, and the Business Language classroom provides a rich and highly applicable environment in which to do it.

⁴ It is also important to note that these skills, as well as others described here, also meet the “5 Cs,” which are standards developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages for best practices in a foreign language classroom. The “5 Cs” are: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities.

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