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ABSTRACT

Situated within the growing body of work on languages for specific purposes and community service-learning, this article explores the place of specific professional skills in the business language curriculum. It argues that the integration of explicit curricular content related to professional correspondence (emails, letter of recommendation requests, and cover letter content) will better prepare students for the work place without compromising the rigor of the traditional humanities disciplines.

KEYWORDS: Business Language Studies, community service-learning, work place skills, Business Spanish class activities

INTRODUCTION

In trying economic times with unemployment rates at record highs, the importance of job search skills and strategies regularly make headlines. Those of us who teach business language courses are uniquely positioned to prepare students while they are still in college to meet some of the high demand needs called for by employers: professional behavior, development of relevant workplace skills, and real-world experience such as internships, service-learning, and networking. This article will position the development of workplace skills within the literature on Business Spanish and service-learning, detail sample activities in the written mode (email writing, letter of recommendation requests, and cover letter content), and conclude with areas for further study.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The development of language for specific purposes (LSP) programs, such as Business Spanish, in the US has been well documented. Grosse and Voght's seminal piece on LSP in the US described the development of LSP, its place in traditional language programs, the role of multiculturalism in LSP, and finally the research base on LSP along with an agenda for future research. More than a decade ago, an entire volume entitled *Spanish and Portuguese for Business and the Professions* (Fryer and Guntermann) was published. Recently, Fryer

documented the history and major players "in the development of coursework and materials for business languages for specific purposes" (122).

In their 2011 follow up to Grosse and Voght, Long and Uscinski completed a comprehensive study of LSP programs in US colleges and universities. They found that the total number of programs has remained stable over the years, but that response to student demands has led to a greater depth and variety of curricular offerings so that LSP has become a viable alternative to traditional curricular programs in many language departments where minors, degree tracks, and certificates in LSP are on the rise.

To advance the cause of LSP finding its place in college and university language programs, Doyle proposed a streamlined nomenclature and "accompanying theoretical discourse" (107) for the research and pedagogy associated with business language: Business Language Studies (BLS). He defines BLS as:

> a major empirical subdiscipline of LSP whose objective is to examine and predict how languages are, may, or should be used to conduct business in various communicative situations and cultural contexts. It is characterized by multitheoretical intellectual foundations derived (a) from established disciplines such as economics, linguistics (e.g., applied, comparative, psycho- and socio-), psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, political science, language study (which dates back to the Latin *trivium*—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—of the Middle Ages), geography, business (i.e., principles of management, marketing, finance, advertising, etc.), and international business; and (b) from emerging fields such as communication studies (business communications), intercultural communications, and global studies. (109)

While relatively little academic literature has been published on practical curricular innovations in the field of LSP (Abbott and Lear, "Marketing"; Lear, "Spanish" 2006; Lear, "Innovative" 2007), the business and trade press abounds with articles proclaiming the need for more practical, professional training for students so that fewer arrive at the workplace underprepared: "The 10 Worst Mistakes of First-Time Job Hunters" (Eggers), "What You Shouldn't Post on Your Facebook Page if You Want a Job" (Madrigal), "Final Cut: Words to Strike from Your Resume" (Lowman). Business Spanish courses have traditionally taught students about business in Spanish, but recent trends show that it is increasingly important to also teach students specific workplace skills.

One practical way to bring these professional skills into the LSP/BLS classroom is through community service-learning (CSL). Over the past de-

cade, integrating CSL into language classrooms has been featured in the CSL literature (Caldwell; Darias et al.; Díaz-Barriga; Elorriaga; Hellebrandt, Introduction 2003; Hellebrandt, "Spanish" 2006; Jorge; Julseth; Sanders; Varona and Bauluz; Weldon), but few have explicitly addressed practical workplace skills (Abbott and Lear, "Marketing"; Abbot and Lear, "Matching").

CSL provides a link between higher education and the professional world (Abbott and Lear, "Marketing") and it provides ACTFL's 5 Cs—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities—in a way that classrooms cannot (Lear and Abbott, "Foreign" 2008). A lot of work has been done on the effects of CSL on the central skills of any language course, communication and cultures (Beebe and DeCosta; Darias et al.; Hale; Jorge; Mullaney; Varas). At the same time CSL is uniquely able to tap both the connections standard (Abbott and Lear, "Connections") and the communities standard (Beebe and DeCosta; Hellebrandt, Introduction 2003; Hellebrandt and Varona; Jeffries; Long and Macián; Plann; Weldon).

Lear ("LSP Curriculum" 2012) links CSL in LSP courses to employers by arguing that CSL gives students access to workplaces in which to apply their academic skills while they are still undergraduates while simultaneously giving employers a stake in university programs. Additionally, CSL in LSP can promote future support among alumni, assuming that students value those experiences while still on campus. However, CSL poses some of the same problems employers encounter with new hires in the workplace: a lack of independence when it comes to self-directed work (Abbott and Lear, "Connections"), struggles with adapting to the new and perhaps unfamiliar workplace environment (Lear and Abbott, "Aligning" 2009), and an absence of training on specific skills related to job seeking and the professional workplace.

PREPARATION FOR THE WORKPLACE

This article will address specific professional skills in the written mode that can be integrated into any LSP/BLS course to better prepare our students for the transition to the workplace: email writing, letter of recommendation requests, and cover letter content.

Email

Over the past decade, email has gone from a convenient way to communicate quickly and efficiently regardless of distance to a time-draining task that takes up an increasing portion of each work day. The democratic and informal nature of email often means that it is used inefficiently, excessively, or inappropriately. Business Spanish courses are a great place to begin to bring email use under control. Students learn important letter writing skills

in Spanish, such as appropriate professional greetings ("estimado/a," not "queirdo/a") and closings ("Atentamente"), while also analyzing the most appropriate and efficient ways to use email in any professional context—something everyone needs, but will not get anywhere else in the postsecondary curriculum.

The email class activity begins by having students match business concepts, such as value propositions, risk assessment, and strategic planning to the context of email-writing. For homework, they complete a reading and answer comprehension questions.

The reading largely consists of a list of DOs and DON'Ts such as "don't make your problems other people's problems." These include emails that describe a problem and conclude with "What should I do?" when instead they should conclude with ideas to solve the problem presented. In the academic context, a student might explain that s/he has to miss class and then ask the professor what to do. A good alternative is "I have to miss class. I have attached my assignment, will get the homework from a classmate and see you next week." That gives quality information, completes a task, and closes off any possibility of it turning into a conversation. All of this is important because students will need to behave professionally in their email correspondence after college.

Another DON'T is "don't use email for conversations"—if there is a lot of back and forth involved, it is best to find other means for communicating. This may happen in a professional context between meetings—a conversation started in a meeting continues on email without anyone able to act on anything through voting, delegating, or other means. In the academic context this often manifests in the emails that do not comply with a DO: do provide complete information. For example, every semester most faculty members receive some version of this email: "can I get in your class?" The faculty member who replies to that email has entered into the unfortunate situation of engaging in a back-and-forth conversation:

—Can I get in your class?
—Which class?
—Class XYZ.
—Sorry, that class is full.
—I know, but…

A good rule of thumb is: if there is a third email, it should provide closure: "Thanks!" or "See you then!"

One final DO: do be aware of reciprocity. In reciprocal relationships, expectations of how others handle email should align with one's own handling of email. Anyone who expects email replies within one hour should also answer every email received within one hour. Like so much of the culture we teach in language classrooms, students have to be encouraged to think from the perspective of the other person in an email correspondence. What will this recipient think when they receive this message? Will they understand the context and know what to do?

In a relationship that is not reciprocal the needs expressed in email are often one sided—benefiting the sender without having any benefit for the recipient. In this case, the sender should assume a deferential role. Again, this is a matter of intercultural competence that requires one to ask, "Is my burning priority one that this person shares? Or is this something low on that person's priority list?" For example, if the sender is asking for a meeting that has no benefit to the recipient, the meeting should be scheduled at the recipient's convenience and gratitude should be expressed for the time it will require. Students have to understand that it is professionally inappropriate to say, "it's really important that I meet with you" and then say that the times the person offers are not convenient. In the professional workplace, such one-sided demands on the part of a new employee might not be well received.

After completing the reading and accompanying comprehension activities for homework, students log into their email during class and find a business email (from an online purchase, correspondence about service-learning placements, a job, an internship—any correspondence that is not social). Students then analyze those emails to see if each contains the following elements of a well-composed professional email:

- an appropriate salutation
- an appropriate closing
- correct grammar and spelling
- clear expression of thoughts
- concise content
- appropriate language
- the recipient knows the actions to be taken
- all the necessary information
- expectations of an answer, its contents, and deadline

For homework, students are asked to write an email for the academic context that complies with the same checklist. It can be correspondence

related to their community service-learning placement, an inquiry about a class they want to take, notice that they will miss class, an email for a student organization, or an inquiry about an internship or any other professional correspondence. At the very least, this activity should result in students who are prudent in their correspondence with the faculty member teaching the course in which the lesson is covered.

Letter of Recommendation Requests

While the Business Spanish materials in *Cuaderno de Correspondencia, Documents, y Ejercicios for Éxito comercial* (Doyle, Fryer, and Cere) provide excellent practice for the future professional who will have to write letters of recommendation, college students are not getting specific instruction on preparing their own application materials. For example, the advice of college career offices to students asking for letters of recommendation from their professors is to send a polite email and attach documents such as a resume and personal statement. Yet what is the professor supposed to do with a resume and personal statement—quote it in the letter of recommendation, thus repeating the material the student already submitted to the same source? A good letter of recommendation must contain unique, detailed content about the professor's experience with the student. But when faculty receive generic requests for letters of recommendation, their choice is either to send a generic letter of recommendation or spend more time than students spend on most assignments just writing one letter of recommendation. Business Spanish classes are an excellent venue to address the gap between what students have been told to provide and what faculty really need—all while developing business Spanish skills.

At the start of the class activity on letter of recommendation requests, students are asked a series of questions that force them to quickly review numbers in Spanish within a real-world context: (1) when did you last take a Spanish language course? (semester, year), (2) how many students were in that class? (3) how many courses was the instructor teaching? (most teach 2–4 per semester—often different classes), (4) how many students total did the instructor have that semester? (#2 x #3 = _____), (5) how many semesters have passed from the time you took that course to the present, and (6) what's the total number of students that instructor has taught since you were first in his/her class? (#4 x #5 = _____).

After the reality check that is the total number of students any professor teaches, students read the following representative request for a letter of recommendation and work in pairs to list information that this student should have included in the email, then the entire class agrees on necessary improvements.

I have submitted my application for dental school and found out for a few schools I need a recommendation letter from a non-science teacher. If it would be possible for you to write one for me I would really appreciate it. I can send my personal statement and resume if this would be helpful.

Students usually agree that it is essential to include the course title and semester in which the course was taken in a letter of recommendation request. To determine whether or not that is sufficient information, students then read the generic letter of recommendation in Figure 1:

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing on behalf of XXXX XXXXX. XXXX was my student in a fifth-semester Spanish for the Professions course at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in the fall of 2009. Spanish classes are small in size and meet three days a week so there is a greater opportunity for students and faculty to get to know each other than in typical university courses. There is an emphasis on active participation in Spanish courses at UNC, which can intimidate students not only because of the requirement to constantly interact, but because all exchanges are conducted in Spanish. XXXX always arrived to class prepared and was dependable in every way. She understands that while she has a lot to offer, she also has a lot to learn and is always willing to share what she knows while also learning from others.

This is illustrated in the personal reading and journal projects that students presented to each other during class. For her own presentations, XXXX chose medical topics in order to advance her understanding of her future professional field. When her classmates presented on topics related to business, law, or current events she always asked a lot of questions and contributed information to the discussions.

While XXXX's wholehearted participation in class made her a standout student, she also consistently performed at the top of her class on assignments and exams. Her written assignments were always well-organized and concise and she was able to effectively react to my comments on drafts, both in terms of language and content.

For her final project in the course, XXXX presented on Y. This project taught her the universal value of bilingualism—no matter where you are, no matter what profession you choose, bilingualism will always be an asset.

I believe XXXX would reflect well on any program with which she were associated. I recommend her without reservation. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Figure 1. Generic letter of recommendation

Students are then asked if their names and the current course/semester could be filled in for the redactions and be accurate. If the answer is yes, that's not ideal! The next class activity is an analysis of the form letter content of the generic letter of recommendation paragraph-by-paragraph (so they see that the first paragraph is almost entirely a description of any college-level Spanish course). Using the same outline students developed to analyze the generic letter, they fill in specific, detailed information that is *only true about them* in order to personalize that letter. Details might include CSL work the student completed, a specific conversation during office hours, the course project the student has undertaken, or the student's approach to various assignments, such as choice of topics, areas of interest in the course that overlap with their career goals, or their collaborative work with other students in the course.

Finally, students compose an email asking the course instructor to write a letter of recommendation. The draft email must "refresh" the instructor's memory about the course, the semester, and the details about assignments and projects the student did for the course. Then the professor can use the content of the email to make the generic "template" into a highly personalized letter of recommendation. And since the student has made it so easy, the faculty member can complete the letter quickly and confidently.

Students are reminded that anything they write to the professor could be quoted *exactly* in a letter of recommendation. For example, if a student writes, "I want to be a doctor and this class had content about medicine in Spanish" the faculty member might write "when asked what the course had to do with her career aspirations, the student said, 'I want to be a doctor and this class had content about medicine in Spanish.'" Students must be reminded that they need their own words to reflect well on them. If a generic letter of recommendation contains faint praise, one can imagine the damage their own faint-hearted quotes could do to their applications.

Cover Letter Content

As the job market becomes increasingly competitive, the ability to prepare excellent job application materials is essential for college students. The popular press has addressed the need for specific, concrete examples instead of broad generalizations on resumes (Lowman), reminding job seekers to avoid empty descriptors such as *team player*, *experienced*, and *dynamic*. Abbott and Lear ("Marketing") make explicit connections between students' CSL work and well-crafted, specific resume lines.

Once students have prepared their resumes, written a great personal state-ment, and provided a quote for their professor to include in a letter of recom-

mendation, they might feel that they have run out of content for yet another unique take on their CSL experience from their Business Spanish class, but they cannot overlook the importance of cover letters. Unlike resumes, which can be used repeatedly for multiple applications (though not always), a cover letter should be customized for each application.

While a student might use the same resume to apply to one job that involves training clients or personnel and another job that requires providing logistical support, the cover letters should be different. Community service-learning often provides a single student with a variety of workplace experiences. For example, a community partner that provides business training for aspiring Hispanic entrepreneurs might ask Business Spanish students to participate in all aspects of their organization. When applying for a job that requires the employee to provide training, the student's cover letter might focus on small business workshops that the community partner provided:

> … *with my community partner I observed, assisted and eventually independently taught business math workshops to aspiring Hispanic entrepreneurs ….*

While the letter for the job that requires logistical support experience focuses on marketing and recruiting participants for the workshops:

> … *I developed and distributed flyers to agencies and organizations that served Hispanics while also tapping the networks of those who had already completed the workshops in order to recruit participants for the community partner's business math workshops…*

Without explicit instruction, many college students cannot generate the necessary cover letter content that not only couches their CSL work as business experience, but does so in a variety of forms. Business Spanish classes can teach students the process. First, students are asked to list the content they already have from their Business Spanish CSL on their resumes, letter of recommendation requests, and personal statements. That is the content they cannot repeat in the cover letter.

For homework, students have to find a job ad. If students have a real internship or job ad, they should use it—the more real-world the activity is, the better. If they do not have a real ad, students (or instructors) select an ad from an online source such as http://hacesfalta.org or http://idealista.com.

Many ads contain a bulleted list of requirements. For example, the first ad on http://hacesfalta.org on Wednesday, August 15, 2012 was for a soccer coach. The list of requirements included:

- Formación en este deporte (*training in the sport*)
- Compromiso (*commitment*)
- Trabajo en equipo (*team work*)
- Capacidad para adaptarse al cambio (*capacity to adapt to change*)
- Pasión por trabajar con niños (*passion for working with kids*)
- Pasión por el FUTBOL (*passion for soccer*)
- Idiomas: Inglés (*languages: English*)

The cover letter paragraph should be written to specifically correspond to each bullet point on the requirement list. In the case of the position as a soccer coach, the student must first describe his/her own experience playing the sport, using an example that demonstrates a high level of commitment through frequent practices, travel, or continuous years of participation on a team. CSL placements are often an excellent source to illustrate working well on a team, a capacity to adapt to change, and a passion for working with kids. For example, students who have worked in ESL classrooms in public schools can talk about how their passion for working with children led them to choose the CSL placement in the public schools. Then they explain that they were able to cooperate with the classroom teacher, the school administration, and other volunteers in order to succeed with the children. Often travel to the public schools and orientation programs present a significant change for students accustomed only to campus life. In fact, this is true of any CSL experience and BLS classes are the ideal place to craft a single, concise paragraph that illustrates the adaptability required to succeed in CSL.

After completing a cover letter paragraph, students exchange letters and conduct peer review of language, grammar, clarity, conciseness, and a one-to-one correspondence between the requirements listed in the job ad and the content of the cover letter. Finally, students compare their own cover letter content to the rest of their application materials to make sure they have not repeated too much content or the exact wording from a personal statement or letter of recommendation request.

CONCLUSIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

As the above examples illustrate, BLS and CSL classrooms are the ideal places to fill unmet needs for undergraduates in their transition toward the

workplace. BLS faculty can provide the traditional linguistic, lexical, and cultural support while also helping students craft professional documents for the workplace context. However, the place of such practical work within the humanities is uncertain, and there remain several areas for further study.

One area for further study is the place for the development of workplace skills within the traditional humanities curriculum. The reality remains that the home of BLS and CSL is within humanities language departments, but the explicit relationship between practical workplace skills and the traditional humanities curriculum has to be empirically explored. Anecdotally a strong argument can be made for the presence of the humanities' core values in BLS. For example, the study of Latino last names in a Business Spanish CSL course has immediate practical applications. In the professional context, knowledge of Latino naming conventions is of the utmost importance in maintaining files, completing birth certificates or other medical records, and receiving and leaving phone messages. However, a lack of understanding of Latino naming conventions quickly becomes an issue of identity: if the "last" last name (*el apellido materno*) is used on official documents such as birth certificates, that essentially changes the individual's family name, thus altering their very identity, and that marginalizes the person (forcing him or her into the role of other). These issues of identity and otherness are core elements of the humanities curriculum.

The argument can be made that with an increasing demand for income-generating models in higher education that the future of the humanities will depend on BLS and CSL programs (Lear, "LSP Curriculum" 2012). Corporate partnerships could be brought to bear on BLS and CSL programs that prepare students for corporate careers. The potential for alumni development will be strong among students who feel that their education directly contributed to their workplace success. Preparing undergraduates for their futures will have to include preparing for futures other than academic ones. The model of higher education does not have to be replaced or fundamentally changed, but it will have to make room for the realities of its students.

Finally, traditional academic research would shed light on many of the unanswered questions about the role of BLS and CSL in the future of the humanities. Short-term and longitudinal studies are needed. For example, pre-test and post-test studies of the professional skills taught in a BLS course would illustrate the effectiveness of the curricular content described here, as would use of experimental and control group study of BLS students with, and without, the intervention of the specific workplace skills described here. The results of satisfaction surveys for students who participate in BLS and

CSL courses and workshops would illustrate the value of such curricula to students. Longitudinal studies should follow students after they have transitioned to the workplace to find out if, and how, they use the skills from their BLS and CSL coursework as well as to find out what other curricular content would have been useful.

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