

12-31-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Coria-Sánchez, Carlos (2012) "Lived Experiences in a Mexican Business Context," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 17 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol17/iss1/5>

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## LIVED EXPERIENCES IN A MEXICAN BUSINESS CONTEXT

### ABSTRACT

Spanish for Business classes have increased substantially in the last 30 years in American higher education.<sup>1</sup> Lived experiences in another country are a necessary part of any research conducted to teach cultural aspects of any society. As instructors of these classes, we cannot rely entirely on the information provided by official government Web sites. Mexico is not the exception, and instructors should travel to this country to gain the lived experience that provides first-hand knowledge of the country's business cultural practices.

**KEYWORDS:** lived experiences, Spanish for business, Mexican business culture, Mexican small and medium-sized companies' owners' perspectives, Mexican government Web sites.

In his article “Autobiographical Inscription and Experiential Pedagogy in Business Language: The Panama Canal and Ground Transportation in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic,” Michael Doyle makes a compelling case about lived experiences, in this case, in the business language curriculum:

There is no substitute that can improve on the pedagogy informed by lived experience, which adds a unique and indelible autobiographical inscription to the content being taught. The argument here is that an educational enterprise is deficient without both forms of education present, blending into an eclectic hybrid ... what is learned in a “classroom” and via secondary research with ... what is learned outside the classroom through direct experience and primary on-site research. One must complement the other if the fuller potential of the pedagogical undertaking is to be realized. The “life of the mind” alone is insufficient. In this context, theory calls for application and praxis, as what is taught in a business language classroom is done for situations beyond the limitations of the classroom—i.e., for knowledge-informed work in the real world, across the friction inevitably caused by different languages and cultures. (45)

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<sup>1</sup>The research for this article and the interviews were conducted under a Fulbright Scholar Grant on Mexican Business Culture in Mexico.

It is, indeed, first-hand experiences that will provide instructors with some of the best authentic resources to use in the Spanish for Business classes. However, most instructors rely on pertinent textbooks for their “first-hand experiences.” As instructors of Spanish for Business courses, some of us tend to rely on articles from particular journals, trade books, and the Internet to teach certain issues taking place in Latin American countries. For instance, in the specific case of Mexico, these “issues” almost always revolve around business culture, business etiquette, and customs (punctuality, gifts, etc.). We also discuss corruption; import/export policies adopted by the Mexican government to help small and medium-sized companies to compete more globally; the always doubted benefits or pitfalls of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States, and Mexico; competitiveness between Mexican companies to improve goods and services; investment by Mexican businesses in labor training and technology; investments in the country; and policies and regulations to start a new business.

We must trust reliable text books and articles to convey to our students proper information about Spanish for Business because we belong to a culture of serious researchers. However, we also must look for opportunities to live abroad and have the “lived experiences” that being immersed in a country’s society provides. Through my own on-site research I have gained a different idea about Mexican business men and women’s perceptions that seriously contradicts some of the government’s assertions and I have debunked a few myths surrounding the business arena of the Mexican economy. As part of my “lived experiences” for an extended period of time in Mexico, I was able to collect daily information of how things work and at the same time gather interviews. [http](#)

My daily experiences and interviews are not intended to present the general sentiment of how all Mexican people involved in commercial activities feel about the country’s policies, regulations, and business culture. They are a sample of small and medium-sized companies that struggle to survive in Mexico by trying to remain competitive within their own markets. My objective throughout these interviews was to capture the Mexicans’ point of view of their own business surroundings without any external influence. That is, immersed in their own environment, these Mexican business men and women share their voices regarding issues such as corruption and bribery, business culture, punctuality, exports and imports, competitiveness, and women in the workplace.

Due to my on-site research in Mexico, one of the most recurrent issues my Spanish for Business and Liberal Arts students ask about is the always

popular topic of Mexican unpunctuality. There is much to learn about the cultural concept of time, which Mexican and American societies approach differently. While *being on time* for an American means to arrive exactly at an agreed time, for a Mexican *being on time* might mean a window of about twenty to thirty minutes. I always share with my students the following story that took place in Mexico to contextualize the Mexican concept of time:

The Director of Research at the Universidad de Xalapa, my host institution during my Fulbright Grant in Mexico, is also a business man. Dr. Benjamin Garcia Herrera was my main contact both inside and outside the university with the business world in the state of Veracruz and Mexico City. On one of the occasions that I asked Dr. Garcia Herrera to introduce me to business people from the city of Cordoba, he told me that he had to be in the city of Veracruz at 9:00 a.m. on a certain day; he invited me to come with him. We agreed on meeting in my office at 6:50 a.m. to travel from Xalapa to Veracruz. Dr. Garcia Herrera was punctual. At 7:00 a.m. he went to get coffee, at 7:20 a.m. he had to pick up some papers from his office, at 7:50 a.m. we stopped to fill up the tank, by 8:15 a.m. we were leaving the gas station for a 100-kilometer drive to be at a local restaurant in Veracruz at 9:00 a.m. At the time, I was thinking that unless this car has wings we won't make it to Veracruz in forty-five minutes. We were half way when Dr. Garcia Herrera got a call on his cell phone. Yes, it was his client calling from Veracruz saying that he was already at the restaurant and was waiting for him. Dr. Garcia Herrera said he was almost there, that he would be arriving in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes turned into another forty minutes and we arrived in Veracruz at 9:45 a.m. Dr. Garcia Herrera did not apologize to his client for being late; neither was the client surprised by the time delay. They both were happy to see each other in Veracruz. They spent another twenty minutes greeting each other and talked before discussing business.

This one experience does not represent general behavior in Mexican society; however, it shows a pattern that repeated itself on many more occasions. It is not my intention to perpetuate a negative stereotype about Mexicans being late; it is, in reality, to show our students through a "lived experience," the differences between Mexican and American concepts of time.

Some of the most popular sources for business culture and other more general topics that a number of Spanish for Business instructors use are: *Doing Business in Mexico* (1993) by Jay M. Jessup and Maggie L. Jessup, *Inside Mexico: Living, Traveling, and Doing Business in a Changing Society* (1994) by Paula Heusinkveld, *Business Mexico* (1994) by Peggy Kenna and Sondra Lacy, *Management in Two Cultures: Bridging the Gap Between U.S.*

*and Mexican Managers* (1995) by Eva Kras, *How to Do Business in Mexico* (1997) by Glenn Reed and Roger Gray, *Doing Business in Mexico* (1997) by Christopher Engholm and Scott Grimes, *Culture Shock! A Guide to Customs and Etiquette: Mexico* (1998) by Mark Cramer, *Mexicans and Americans: Cracking the Cultural Code* (2004) by Ned Crouch, *Mexico—Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs and Culture* (2006) by Guy Mayor, and *Why Mexicans Think and Behave the Way They Do!: The Cultural Factors That Created the Character and Personality of the Mexican People* (2009) by Boyé Lafayette De Mente.

A search in Google on June 27, 2012 for Mexican Business Culture produced about 93,200,000 results; Mexican competitiveness turned up about 527,000 results; for Mexican small and medium-sized companies, the search located about 15,600,000 results; and for exports and imports in Mexico, about 3,050,000 results. The prominent articles ranged from culture and etiquette to manners and population, to investment advice.

Many of us teaching Spanish for Business take as accurate the information offered in several of these sources but it seems that some of the articles' authors, or the instructors teaching the materials, have not taken the time to travel to Mexico to verify their assumptions. Although we cannot travel all the time to validate the information we use for our classes or support our own research, it is important to have "lived experiences" on several of these subjects that we teach our students. There is a large amount of literature, for example, about the pros and cons of NAFTA; however, few people have traveled throughout the mountains of Puebla, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and other states in Mexico, to see first-hand the poverty of the indigenous people who are subjected to the neo-liberal economic policies of this free trade agreement in the country. Mexico's economy has grown only 1.8% from 2000 to 2011 according to a recent article in *The Economist* ("Back to the Future").

Some of the authors of the trade books and articles state that they have lived in Mexico; however, many of the instructors using the information provided have not visited the country and checked for themselves the accuracy of these materials. There might be several reasons why instructors do not have the opportunity to visit Mexico and live there for a short period of time to get the necessary knowledge about issues that pertain to Mexican business culture, policies, and government regulations. Yet the sources on business culture cited previously do not offer a Mexican voice. That is, they do not provide the opportunity for Mexican business people to present their own perspectives about the issues discussed in the trade books and travel books that are then

taught in schools and universities. Mexican business men and women need to express their feelings and experiences living in their country's environment, since they are the individuals who reside in the places where ordinary commercial transactions occur every day.

Many Latin American countries (and Mexico is not an exception to the rule) mistrust their governments; this is a deeply rooted part of their culture. Since NAFTA was signed in 1994, the Mexican government has published on several of its Web sites the new regulations and policies regarding support for small and medium-sized companies to export their products. For instance, the Ministry of Commerce offers as a priority, "Atender la problemática y/o consultas que presenta la comunidad empresarial relacionadas con su actividad empresarial, principalmente exportadora, proporcionando apoyo, asesoría y orientación a los empresarios" [To attend to the problems and questions presented by the business community related to commercial activity, mainly exports, by offering support, consulting, and orientation to entrepreneurs]. Nevertheless, many entrepreneurs with small and medium-sized companies would argue that what the government says on its Web sites is one thing and what it really does in practice is another; thus, the mistrust of the government's "efforts" to help businesses.

There are two issues that have become more of a myth than a fact. Many articles relate to two other important topics after NAFTA: Mexican companies' competitiveness and investment in human resources and technology. Most of the information we can gather comes, precisely, from articles that do not offer the Mexican entrepreneurs' perspective. For many of these Mexican business men and women, their country's competitiveness has been halted for a long time. There are factors such as lack of support from the Mexican government (regardless of what we may read on official Web sites), and the economic crisis. There is the case, also, that Mexican companies do not invest in human resources and systems to be more competitive because either they just do not believe in these kinds of investments or they lack the money to do it. Aside from large companies such as Bimbo, CEMEX, Cuervo, and FEMSA, very few small and medium-sized companies dare to compete in the global markets.

Nora Elia Cantu, an executive accountant from Banorte, one of the most important banks in Mexico, mentions in this regard that: "Competitiveness among Mexican companies has dropped in the last years due to factors such as high cost of services provided by the government, plus the government has not approved structural reforms required in fiscal, labor, and more recently

energy areas; this last one was approved but not in the terms demanded by private investors. At the present time, companies in general, due to the economic crisis, are focusing on restructuring debts, reducing costs, and trying to survive.” With regards to human resources and new systems to improve competitiveness, Cantu explains that “in the entire country there are many small and medium-sized companies that do not invest in personnel training or technology due to high costs. Most family-owned companies do not have a strong infrastructure. This is something that also takes place in larger companies” (Personal interview).

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and are about one hour long. They are useful for both instructors and students in a Spanish for Business curriculum. They offer real-life business people within their real commercial context, authentic vocabulary, real-life concepts related to business practices, and materials presented by native Spanish speakers. The interviews illustrate the way they actually talk. These Mexican men and women executives, professors, and business students discuss cultural and business issues and offer their opinion on a wide array of issues.

For access to the interviews, visit the following site, where you may listen to them: <http://languages.uncc.edu/spanish-faculty/carlos-coria-sanchez.html>.

The following excerpt from a written interview, the only one in English, is an example of the many recorded interviews in Spanish that took place in various Mexican cities during 2009.

Interview with executive accountant Nora Elia Cantu from Banorte, one of the most important banks in the country:

*1. Do Mexican companies believe in human/labor and technological investment?*

My experience in other states of the country shows me that most of the family-owned medium-sized companies do not believe in modernization, personnel training, or operative systems. Many have told me that if an international company was to compete against them, they would go bankrupt because they cannot compete.

*2. Why are Mexican producers afraid to expand their manufacturing capacities to export to other countries?*

In part, it has to do with lack of knowledge in terms of what and how to do it; also, the lack of investment to expand; it is, as well, the lack of government financial aid or loans for companies to expand their businesses.

*3. How much corruption and bribery exist in Mexico?*

This practice is all over, and the government is especially dishonest at all levels.

*4. What is your experience, as a woman, about women in the workplace or in executive positions? Is it still difficult for women to succeed in both areas? What social barriers are women still facing?*

This is a process which has advanced a lot in recent years. It is more common to see that women are accepted in executive positions; however, the problem that executive women face is the balance between their professional and personal lives because they are still responsible for taking care of their families. So, women have to play two roles to succeed in both areas.

*5. Why are the majority of Mexicans always late or do not arrive at all to some business or job-related meetings? What do you think is the reason for this cultural situation that affects productivity in the country?*

The lack of competitiveness that we used to have before globalization created an excess of confidence that became part of our culture where we used to say “we have what we want anyways.” To be late was like “nothing happens, they have to wait for us”; this has changed as people now are faced with the fact that they have to make clients and that attitudes like this can make one lose our place in business.

*6. Is nepotism still a practice in Mexico? Do some companies still give jobs to a son/daughter or family member even if he/she is not capable of doing certain jobs? Does this mean that family comes first?*

At the moment a corporate government is established or when it faces an economic crisis like the one we are going through right now, it does not allow keeping personnel who do not offer value to the company. In the public sector this is different because that sector still hires “friends” or “family members”; there is still a lot to do in this area.

*7. In the United States universities have been training students, for many years now, about Mexican business culture and etiquette. In many universities in Mexico this is not the case about American business culture. Is not this some kind of disadvantage for Mexican students compared to their American counterpart if they do not know the American business culture?*

I know that some major universities have some agreements with companies to carry on mutual exchanges. These universities require that all their graduates go into the labor market and the companies require more and more

graduates with high educational standards. However, this happens only in some universities because there is a great deficiency in Mexico due to many other universities receiving authorizations to function but they really don't have the minimum qualifications to operate.

8. *What social and cultural barriers are women still facing to stand out as companies' owners, executives, and professional employees?*

There are extensive circles in which men think that women should stay home and that it is a problem to have women in organizations; they think companies cannot count on women to travel, work long hours, and they cite situations that arise from pregnancies.

As instructors and researchers we tend to utterly trust our sources when we teach or write about a given topic. And we must, since we belong to an environment that values responsible and meaningful research. However, it is not an easy task to interpret Mexican business culture, its governments' policies and regulations, and bureaucracy. When necessary we need to travel abroad to acquire knowledge and "lived experiences" that we can introduce to our students. We are always encouraging our students to travel abroad to gain a broader perspective of the different cultures in our more globalized world; we also need to experience the richness of "lived experiences on-site." We need to share, as academicians, our findings, knowledge, and understanding of Mexican society in this case. It is true that personal anecdotes are important, because they are part of our own being, especially if these anecdotes are conveyed within a critical research agenda. There must be much more real involvement than only observing one small Mexican community or just a few government Web sites before attempting to understand, in all its multiplicity, Mexican business culture and the best way to do business in the country.

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