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CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL
BUSINESS WITH LANGUAGE CONCENTRATION:
RESULTS OF A SEVEN-YEAR STUDY OF
AN AMERICAN BUSINESS EXECUTIVE IN CHINA

ABSTRACT

Existing international business with language concentration curriculum research indicates that little is known about perceptions of current international executives who are working in multinational corporations. This article investigates an American international executive's perceptions of language and cultural barriers in multiple multinational corporations in China. The researcher's seven-year period of contact with the business executive from 2003 to 2010 led to the collection of multiple data sources through business-activity protocol questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The international executive's perceptions suggest that the international business curriculum development was in the following three areas: (1) language competency, (2) multicultural awareness, and (3) global awareness.

KEYWORDS: Chinese, curriculum, global awareness, multicultural awareness, international business

INTRODUCTION

In 2001 China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) helped to further solidify its growing position in global trade (Prasad & Rumbaugh, 2003), which resulted in increasing overseas operations and the number of local offices of multinational corporations in China. From 2004 to 2007, Chinese language learners in US universities showed a dramatic increase of 51.2% (from 34,153 to 51,582 enrollments) (Welles, 2004; Furman et al., 2007). Educational institutions in the state of California show the greatest increases in enrollment and lead the country in undergraduate course enrollments. According to the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA, 2007) and Furman et al. (2007), Chinese is offered at 101 universities in California and 678 universities in the US; and the undergraduate course enrollments in California make up 29.3% (14,773 enrollments) of national enrollments. As Liu and Shibata (2008) pointed out, studying Chinese language is advantageous and meaningful for students' future careers.

Adachi (1996) states that “knowledge of general culture is not enough to make the language workable in a specific usage such as in business communication” (86), therefore, more students who study a foreign language seek more practical use of the language for business rather than merely for academic purposes. For instance, students at Portland State University are expected to use Chinese to engage people in meaningful social and business contexts, which include “what to say and how to say it at a job interview, business briefings, project presentations, business discussions, trade negotiations, and negotiations for establishing a joint-venture enterprise” (Liu, 2004, 103).

Fong (2003) says that language, communication, and culture are intricately intertwined with one another, and that language is a symbolic system in which meaning is shared among people who identify with one another. Culture has its particular discourse patterns, which distinguishes differing worldviews (Kachru, 1981). And culture is a social system in which members share common standards of communication, behaving, and evaluating in daily life (Fong, 2003).

In China, the Chinese are making tremendous efforts to learn English, and English has become an essential requirement to secure a job in multinational enterprises or joint ventures. As a result, the motto “know English, have work, and earn money” has become popular in China (Berns, 2005, 87). Chinese business people now exhibit higher English proficiency than in the past, especially those who are working in multinational corporations. There is a growing group of critics who argue that English only usage is good enough for a graduate of the International Business program in the United States to work in China or a target setting and that International Business major graduates need not learn foreign culture to conduct business successfully.

PURPOSE

It seems that using an international executive’s perceptions is a significant resource to reflect the real business situation in international companies. However, existing international business curriculum research indicates that little is known about perceptions of current international executives who are working in multinational corporations. The research questions are:

- Q1. How is Chinese as a foreign language used in the context of international business in an authentic Chinese business environment?
- Q2. What are the practical implications of an international business executive’s perceptions for an International Business curriculum?

METHODOLOGY

Participant

Jim is a white American male in his forties, born and raised in Indiana. He finished his bachelor's degree of science in Electronic Engineering from Purdue University. Following his graduation from Purdue University, he traveled to China for the first time in 1995 to teach English to Chinese students at Beijing Jiaotong University. In 2003 I met Jim, who had just returned from China and was pursuing his MBA degree.

In the summer of 2004, Jim received his MBA degree and found a job as vice-general manager in Beijing at Pacific Resources International (PRI), a US holding company with primarily a high-tech manufacturing investment enterprise in China. In the summer of 2008, Jim became the director of the Commercial Agency Department of Colliers International Property Service in China, a multinational real estate corporation with over 291 offices in 61 countries.

Jim's Chinese Proficiency

Jim studied Chinese for a total of four years. The first of these four years was spent studying beginning level Chinese language in the United States. Jim spent an additional three years studying Chinese in Beijing University. In China, he spent one year on each of the following three levels of Chinese: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Jim identifies his own proficiency levels as intermediate in reading and writing and as intermediate-advanced in oral and listening.

The Survey

To acquire the American international executive's perceptions of the language and cultural barriers in multiple multinational corporations in China, a letter explaining the purpose of the study was emailed along with a daily questionnaire to the participant in China in 2004. The participant was asked to fill out a business activity protocol questionnaire provided by Louhiala-Salminen (2002), while working in Pacific Resources International (PRI) from 2004 to 2008, and return the questionnaire by email.

The second survey was constructed for this study and emailed to the participant in 2010 after he worked for Colliers International (see Appendix B). This self-reported survey explored the business executive's learning and usage of the target language in the workplace, including two parts: (1) the

business executive's education and language learning backgrounds in the US, and (2) cultural barriers in China. To encode and interpret the questionnaires, I visited the executive's multinational corporation office in Beijing and interviewed him during the summers of 2008 and 2010.

RESULTS

Jim's First Company: Pacific Resources International (PRI) 2004–2008

Pacific Resources International (PRI) helps companies get started with successful business operations such as joint ventures (JVs) and wholly foreign-owned enterprises (WFOE) in China and around the world. As a branch company of PRI, PRItronics is an engineering-focused electronic manufacturing services company located in the Beijing Electronics District. Through leveraging the management capabilities in factories and offices in China, the company provides consultation in sourcing, engineering, and investment analysis for new manufacturing start-ups or restructuring of existing factories. PRItronics has approximately 100 technicians, engineers, and workers. Most workers are Beijing local residents. Jim's business activities, as vice-general manager, involve reviewing contracts and quotes, attending Chinese managers' meetings, making factory walk-throughs, recruiting, visiting customers, preparing expense approvals, and conducting other administrative duties.

Language Usage in Pacific Resources International (PRI)

The questionnaire results regarding the usage of Chinese and English during the activities completed on a certain day both on the job and at home (total: 15 hours) provide details about Jim's language usage (see Table 1). During the typical working time from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. for which the data was collected, it was found that around 47.9% of Jim's communication was conducted in Chinese, and around 52.1% of his communication was conducted in English. Most of his morning and afternoon business activities that required Chinese involved communication with different department managers, local workers, customers, high-level executives, and other business people.

Lunches from noon to 1:00 p.m. were usually spent with other English-speaking colleagues. Jim had evening business dinners less than one evening per week, and dinner conversation was 100% in English. On the average, Jim returned home by 6:00 p.m., and the language used in his home environment with his wife and three children was English 100% of the time. Jim sometimes also made international phone calls from Beijing to family and friends in Indiana, and the conversation was 100% in English.

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF USE OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

Morning Section:			
Time	Business Activities	Chinese (%)	English (%)
7:00 a.m. – 8:00 a.m.	Responding to mail/email/fax letters	0	100
8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.	Planning and preparation Customer and other phone calls	0 60	100 40
9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.	Department managers' daily briefing meeting	70	30
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Customer visits	50	50
Afternoon Section:			
Time	Business Activities	Chinese (%)	English (%)
12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.	Lunch	30	70
1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.	Factory walk-through Expense approvals and other administrative duties	80 60	20 40
2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	Department managers' meeting to review contracts	90	10
4:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	Other phone calls	20	80
Evening Section:			
Time	Business Activities	Chinese (%)	English (%)
5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.	Wrap up Leave work by 5:30 p.m.	-	-
6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.	Home dinner	0	100
7:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	US family phone calls	0	100
8:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.	Relax	-	-
9:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m.	International phone calls	0	100

In the morning (8:30 a.m.–9:00 a.m.), Jim made phone calls to customers using 60% Chinese, while he used 50% Chinese for face-to-face visits with customers (10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.). Two meetings were held for the purpose of reviewing quotation contracts with department managers; the morning meeting (9:00 a.m.–10:00 a.m.) was a routine briefing meeting that was conducted 70% in Chinese, while the afternoon meeting (2:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m.) was conducted 90% in Chinese. The factory walk-through activity (1:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m.) included talking with local workers that was conducted 80% in Chinese, and reviewing expense approvals and discussing other administrative issues with factory supervisors was conducted 60% in Chinese. Before finishing for the day, an afternoon (4:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.) office phone call was conducted 20% in Chinese regarding customer visits and administrative issues.

To describe the percentage of time his customers use Chinese with him on the average, Jim stated that approximately 50% of his Chinese customers spoke only Chinese. Although some local Chinese department managers and customers had studied English at their respective universities, their English proficiencies were all at different levels, which caused communication barriers when Jim worked with native Chinese executives and customers. Most of the workers had received only a high school education, so their English proficiency levels were quite low. Therefore, it was necessary for the management to rely primarily on Chinese to communicate with them.

The most common types of business activities for which Chinese reading and writing skills are used include emails, followed closely by strategic proposals, reports, letters, and faxes. Jim said that the international corporation's strategic proposals and business reports were all in English (100%) because top executives in positions above him speak mostly English. Furthermore, international calls to the US headquarters (about one evening per week) were in English only (100%).

However, Jim told me that "90% of [his] written communication is email," because faxing was more expensive than email, and email was a faster way to communicate. This finding states that email is the most-used channel for exchanging messages, replacing mailed business letters and faxes in the business environment. Very rarely did Jim email in Chinese, although his assistant/interpreter translated some emails for him. The reason for this was that Jim's computer operating system was in English, so his abilities to type Chinese emails on his own were limited.

Jim's Second Company: Colliers International (2008–2010)

In July 2008, Jim became the director of the Commercial Agency Department of Colliers International in the Beijing branch, a leading global real estate corporation with over 11,000 property employees and over 291 offices in 61 countries. Since 1989, with China's growing influence across the globe, Colliers International has established real estate offices in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and site offices in more than 40 cities across China. In 2007, Colliers International's revenue was over \$2 billion with 868 million square feet of property space. As the director of the Commercial Agency Department of Colliers International, one of Jim's primary duties was to further expand the commercial market in China.

Chinese Usage in Colliers International

Jim used Chinese in the course of his business activities only when communicating with his non-English-speaking staff and clients. However, he says that these occasions were rare "since most of [his] staff and clients speak English." Jim also mentioned that although he primarily conducted business in English, he "will often throw in a Chinese word to be clear, and other [Chinese employees] will often use a Chinese word if they can't think of the English [word]."

Barriers

Jim was asked, "What are the key abilities that international managers in international business fields must possess?" Jim stated that an international manager's success was built upon comprehensive competencies: Chinese language proficiency, innovative concepts, cultural knowledge, communication skills, and local flexibility with full access to the global market. When asked about his opinion of the role of his interpreter, Jim stated:

It was hard to tell what business background my Chinese counterparts and/or interpreters had. When I was doing business in China, I felt it was tough to explain some business terms to Chinese businessmen. This is mostly because some interpreters are good at conversation, but they lack the international business experience and are clueless about the business terms I used.

In Beijing, for example, I was interested in investing in a rubber company. We had a great time chatting, but when we began to negotiate, I wanted to discuss their company's financial condition ... You know that it is especially important for an investor's cooperative effort to understand each other's financial condition. If I am not sure about the financial status of a company,

there is no way I can invest. I asked them a question about their assets, which were RMB 70 million, as the interpreter translated. However, when I talked about “uncollectible amount,” the interpreter had no idea what I was talking about.

Jim values most the characteristic of having knowledge of the cultures in which Chinese is spoken because “cultural misunderstanding is often the reason for an ex-pat’s failure in China.”

As he often needed to translate business terms for both US businessmen and Chinese businessmen, Jim expressed his concern about the need for Chinese language skills when doing business in China:

I brought a dictionary with me. When I found the Chinese customer and interpreter had no idea about some business terms, such as uncollectible amount, I helped them and just said “Huai Zhang (坏账),” which does work out for both American and Chinese business groups. It is interesting to translate “uncollectible amount” into “bad account” in Chinese.

An additional competency for an international manager in China includes establishing relationships with financial and government institutions, as all benefit from a unique combination of the globalization viewpoint and specialized localization knowledge.

In addition, Jim shared that the cultural barriers, based on the significant differences from American business culture, that he had experienced in China have been in China’s corporate culture, including issues like saving face, stronger politics, lack of trust and personal relationship.

I asked a bilingual Chinese person to explain some cultural issues to me, such as *Mianzi*/face (面子) and *Guanxi*/personal relationship (关系)—two of the most important cultural issues in China, which are different from the American culture.

Mianzi (面子) is considered the Chinese concept of face as a kind of prestige that is emphasized in Chinese culture; it is reputation achieved through interpersonal communication, success, and ostentation (Hu, 1944). *Guanxi* (关系) is defined as Chinese business people promoting their business network through personal connections (*Guanxi*), such as dinners, gifts, and friendly experiences (Nowak & Dong, 1997). Jim prefers to use the Chinese pronunciation *Guanxi* and *Mianzi* rather than using equivalent English translations because the business cultural implications are indicated behind the original Chinese words.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The international executive's perceptions suggest that the international business curriculum should change in the following areas: (1) language competency, (2) multicultural awareness, and (3) global awareness. These three areas need to be added to the objectives of the IB program and integrated into the specific courses.

Language Competency

Although English is used in international corporations, this study revealed that almost 47.9% of Jim's daily business communication was conducted in Chinese because approximately 50% of his customers spoke only Chinese in the first manufacturing company for which he worked. Jim moved to a second international company in the real estate field and held a higher administrative position. His language requirements there were lower than those required by the first manufacturing company for which he had worked.

Therefore, it follows that language proficiency requirements depend on the specific business activities and audiences involved. Usually, the higher-ranked the executive's position in China is, the more likely it is that the executive works with a business audience that possesses higher English proficiency. Although many higher-level business positions do not require top managers to speak Chinese, it is impossible for an international business major graduate without experience to be hired for a high-ranking executive position.

One should keep in mind that Chinese workers and customers learn English from non-native language speakers through a grammar-translation method, which has led to poor communication competence in English throughout China. It is difficult for an international business major graduate to find an entry-level position in Chinese business that does not require Chinese language proficiency. Language proficiency has been found to be the first step for an entry-level manager to rise to a position in higher executive management. Chinese language capabilities have proved to be an effective way to help Jim communicate with local people and develop his professional vocabulary beyond English equivalent translations. Therefore, Chinese language competency requires that students not only reach an advanced level but also acquire experience directly by communicating with Chinese businesspersons in the US and international Chinese-speaking areas.

Multicultural Awareness

Despite lowered language requirements in his new position, Jim still concentrated on overcoming cultural barriers. International business teaching content should prepare students for multicultural awareness, especially when students

encounter multicultural conflicts. The executive's perceptions confirmed the two cultural areas with which students must become familiar, Chinese traditional culture before 1949 and contemporary culture after 1949 in the context of society, politics, economic history and cultural topics in comparison to perspectives of the Western culture.

Global Awareness

Global awareness means that students interpret the impact of global issues on business organizations, including the theory and business practices of the major industries and services in China. Students must learn theories of international trade and the role of marketing across national boundaries and markets.

To ensure that students grasp the concepts of global awareness, students must understand Chinese companies' globalization strategies in the US, and hence, the course name should be Chinese Companies in US. Students must understand globalization strategies of multinational corporations in China, and the course name should be China Market Research. Finally, the IB business program requires students to complete an internship in a Chinese company in the United States or a Chinese-speaking workplace outside the United States, where their international business skills are engaged in real business activities.

There are limitations to this study, which suggest the need for future research. The results were based on only one case study of an international executive in multinational corporations and they reflect his daily activities. A multi-faceted investigation would lead to a much deeper awareness of the demands of business activities and the need to use Chinese as a business language in various international business workplaces with more international executives. It is hoped that the study assists students who major in international business with a foreign language concentration to overcome language and cultural barriers in order to access the international market.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

*BA in International Business—Chinese Concentration**Major Requirements (Total 78 units)***Required Lower-Division Core Courses (24 units)**

Accounting 201A	Financial Accounting (3)
Accounting 201B	Managerial Accounting (3)
Bus Ad 201	Business Writing (3)
Economics 201	Principles of Microeconomics (3)
Economics 202	Principles of Microeconomics (3)
Management 246	Business & Its Legal Environment (3)
ISDS 265	Intro to Info Systems and Applications (3)
Math 135 or 130	Business Calculus (3 or 4)

Required Upper Division Core Courses (33 units)

Bus Ad 301	Advanced Business Communication (3)
Economics 335	International Economy (3)
Finance 320	Business Finance (3)
Finance 370	International Business Finance (3)
Management 339	Principles of Management and Operations (3)
Management 340	Organizational Behavior (3)
Management 350	International Business and Management (3)
ISDS 361A	QBA: Probability and Statistics (3)
ISDS 361B	QBA: Statistics and Management Science (3)
Marketing 351	Principles of Marketing (3)
Marketing 445	Multinational Marketing Strategies (3)

Required Global Business Courses (3 units)

Economics 330	Comparative Economic Systems (3)
Economics 332	Economies of the Pacific Rim (3)
Economics 333	Economic Development: Analysis & Cases (3)
Economics 334	Economies of Latin America & the Caribbean (3)
Economics 336	Economies of the Middle East (3)
Finance 371	Export-Import Financing (3)
Finance 373	Asia-Pacific Financial & Security Markets (3)
Marketing 475	Export Marketing Strategies (3)
	Approved Study Abroad Course (3)

Capstone Core Course (3 units)

Management 480	Global Strategic Management (3)
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Required Chinese Concentration (15 units)

Chinese 310	Mandarin Chinese in the Business World (3)
Chinese 311	Mandarin Chinese for International Business (3)
Chinese 315	Introduction to Chinese Civilization (3)
Chinese 325	Contemporary Chinese Culture (3)
Chinese 495	Internship (3)

APPENDIX B

Survey for Business Executives

Please take your time answering these questions (20–30 minutes max.) Answer them as accurately and truthfully as possible and remember that your name will be kept confidential. Your participation in this survey is voluntary and you can choose not to continue at any time. Your insights are very valuable and very much needed in the profession of language teaching and international business programs. I encourage you to contact me should you have any concerns.

Q. 1. What is your gender?

- Male Female

Q. 2. What is your first (native) language? _____

Q. 3. What is your primary second language? _____

Q. 4. Please check all the degree(s) you received, write your major(s), and the year you graduated.

Degrees	Major(s)	Year
<input type="checkbox"/> Associate's degree		
<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree		
<input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree		
<input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral degree		
<input type="checkbox"/> Other ()		

Q. 5. For how many years did you study each of the following levels of Chinese (in years) in your home country?

Beginning Chinese:	_____
Intermediate Chinese:	_____
Advanced Chinese:	_____
Chinese for specific purposes (literature, business, culture):	_____
Chinese for business training purposes:	_____
Other course/program (_____):	_____
In total, how many years have you studied Chinese in home country:	_____

Q. 6. How many times have you traveled to China (for work, study, travel, or other), and what have the duration of these stays been?

Q. 7. For how many years did you study each of the following levels of Chinese after arriving in China (in years)?

Beginning Chinese:
Intermediate Chinese:
Advanced Chinese:
Chinese for specific purposes (literature, business, culture):
Chinese for business training purposes:
Other (_____):
In total, how many years have you studied Chinese:

Q. 8. What are the key abilities that international managers in international business fields must possess ?

Q. 9. At the moment, how would you describe your CHINESE ...

	Beginning Level	Intermediate Level	Between Intermediate and Advanced Level	Advanced Level
(1) Listening proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(2) Reading proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(3) Oral proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(4) Writing proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q. 10. Please share one or two short stories about cultural barriers you have encountered in your business activities in China.

Q. 11. Please write freely regarding any other things that come to your mind related to the topics covered in this survey. Anything else you would like to suggest for Chinese program and curriculum development?

This is the end of the survey.
Thank you for your participation!

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