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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge the 2012–2013 CIBER BLRT grant that made this research possible. I am grateful to Professor John M. Norris for providing valuable suggestions and advice when I wrote the grant proposal and during the initial preparation period for this project.

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ATTAINING SUSTAINABLE GROWTH OF A BUSINESS CHINESE PROGRAM THROUGH UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

ABSTRACT

This article presents a research project of utilization-focused evaluation of the Business Chinese Program at the University of Hawai'i for the purposes of ensuring the program's quality, demonstrating the program's values to its stakeholders, and providing the reflections associated with it. This article begins with a review of the program, and then details the evaluation processes, featuring four major phases: planning, data-collecting, analysis, and reporting. The discussion of the results of this evaluation is intended to provide a feasible model of business language program evaluation with tangible evidence of both the merits of the program and its accountability to its funders.

KEYWORDS: business language, program evaluation, accountability, utilization-focused, program design, student learning outcomes

1. INTRODUCTION

To educate the next generation of global professionals, language programs are making great efforts in enhancing the program profile and maximizing their student learning outcomes. Accordingly, the accountability and credibility of a program need to be demonstrated by the results of a program evaluation. An evaluation provides a basis for ongoing feedback to practitioners and thus increases the value of a program when evaluation results are properly utilized (Ross, 2009). Evaluation is also a required component in many federal and private funding applications/proposals, and a mandate following the implementation and the execution of a project. A variety of language programs have been utilizing evaluations as a mean of program improvement (Norris et al., 2009). Resources of relevant publications and references are abundant (<http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/evaluation/resources.htm>). However, the evaluation of business language, or Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), has rarely been found in research studies although evaluations of language programs at universities or colleges in general are widely surveyed (Davis, Sinicrope, & Watanabe, 2009).

According to a survey of 50 universities, colleges, or institutes, conducted by the University of Michigan CIBER (Centers for International Business Education and Research) in 2013, the number of American post-secondary schools that plan to start a business Chinese program, or Chinese for professionals, has grown significantly for the last three years (from six to twenty-six, with or without a concrete plan, which is a 330% increase). Given this circumstance, it is obviously meaningful and beneficial to all practitioners of language programs if a business Chinese program evaluation is conducted, and insights on program sustainability and improvement can be drawn from the perspective of teaching languages for specific purposes. Aiming at capturing a snapshot of the current status of a business Chinese program, and making potential contributions to language program development in general, a utilization-focused evaluation was conducted at the University of Hawai'i for its Business Chinese Program (BCUH) originally customized for the China International MBA program (CIMBA). This internally motivated program evaluation project was funded by the annual Business Language Research and Teaching (BLRT) grant by the US CIBER Consortium for 2012–13. This article presents the complete process of this research, focusing on its motivation, methodological procedures, data analysis, evaluation findings, reflections, and the potential utilizations of this study.

2. MOTIVATIONS

Program evaluation is an essential component in second language education, since its result has a direct impact on various aspects of a program. As for the motivations, there are both internal and external forces that can drive a language program to undergo program evaluations. The internal driving forces come from a program's need for its self development, improvement, and survival. The external forces can be attributed to requests for demonstrations of accountability, accreditation, and public scrutiny from funders, program auditors or inspectors, and administrators (Norris, 2006; Patton, 2008, p. 140). Among all these driving forces, for a program established for particular purposes through special funding, demonstrating that resources are well managed and a program is efficiently attaining desired results to funders, sponsors, and other stakeholders is not only a mandate in the planning and proposing stage of the program, but also a decisive factor for the continuation and survival of the program. The intended positive consequences of evaluation reveal the progress and values, and may bring multiple benefits, including securing continuous funding, keeping stable or growing enrollment, enhancing

the profile of both the institute and the program, as well as providing a better picture of how, and to what extent, a program contributes to student learning. On the contrary, the negative aspects of evaluation results may raise attention to practitioners, enabling them to take necessary actions such as reviewing course syllabi, identifying possible gaps between the practice and evaluation results, thus proposing revisions to the program.

The BCUH was established in 2007 by the Chinese section at the College of Languages, Linguistics, and Literatures under the funding from the Shidler College of Business at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The BCUH has been going through a needs analysis and constant needs survey, curriculum design, implementation, review, and revision since its launch (Wang, 2007). It has a good reputation, and is currently in its sixth year. Much experience has been gained during its operation. However, the BCUH practitioners felt strongly that it was time to conduct a thorough program evaluation in order to reflect on the existing practices and summarize the accomplishments of this program. In the meantime, this evaluation can identify the areas for improvement, gather evidence for the program's accountability to its funder, and generate ideas for a strategic plan for the program's sustainability. To achieve these goals and objectives, a program evaluation project was proposed and designed by the BCUH practitioners. Upon receiving the BLRT grant, the evaluation was started in the summer of 2012, and completed in the spring of 2013 in consultation with experienced language program evaluators.

3. THE BCUH EVALUATION PROCESS

The BCUH evaluation was designed to implement a progress-oriented process with balanced emphasis on using both quantitative and qualitative data. The evaluation underwent four main phases following the recommendation of Patton (2008): (1) planning and designing, (2) data collecting, (3) data analyzing, and (4) reporting and using evaluation results. People to whom the results were reported are all stakeholders, including the BLRT funder, the BCUH program sponsors, students, instructors, and administrators.

3.1. Methodology/Approaches

As opposed to measuring and assessing, evaluating is the process of gathering information about any of the variety of elements that constitute a program for the primary purposes of "understanding, demonstrating, improving, and judging program value" (Norris, 2006, p. 579). To be more specific, measurement consists of using tests or observations as instruments to obtain

quantifiable indicators of learners' language proficiency achievements. Assessment is the systematic collection of comprehensive data, and the use of them as evidence to reflect a student's learning progress. In contrast, evaluation at the programmatic level concerns a holistic picture of the program, and naturally includes both measurement and assessment. The integration of measurement and assessment within evaluation processes leads to a sound and global understanding of the program as it addresses the concerns of various parties. Therefore, the information gathered through a program evaluation ought to be fully examined and utilized. Although proficiency measurement and assessment have drawn more attention in both practical (Grosse & Voght, 2012) and theoretical (O'Sullivan, 2012) studies for teaching LSPs, the evaluative research and practice at the programmatic level in the field of teaching LSP, particularly in the area of teaching business languages, or languages for professionals, has not yet been fully explored.

Contemporary program evaluations often have multiple purposes and foci. During the evaluation process, targeted program elements needed to be identified in order to serve multiple purposes. The evaluation results directly led to a better understanding, demonstration, improvement, and judgment of the program's value. To obtain a holistic view of the program and to meet the needs of stakeholders, the utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) approach (Patton, 2008) is widely adopted by many program evaluators due to its special emphasis on the use and usefulness of the evaluation results. Following the UFE model, the evaluation of the BCUH started with a process for making decisions about the issues of collaboration with a group of users for their intended uses, and identified what has been accomplished along with the problems that needed to be solved. Then, it looked for answers to the questions about whether or not this program is delivered as planned and proceeded toward the intended goal of stakeholders. It also determined if the goal of this program should target long-term growth even if it may not be identical with its original form. Finally, the results and recommendations of the intended uses of these results were reported to the stakeholders and relevant parties.

3.2. The Background of the BCUH

Based on a rigorous analysis of stakeholders' needs and the existing teaching materials in the market (Wang, 2011), the BCUH program was initially customized for the newly founded CIMBA for the College of Business. The BCUH was designed to meet an ideal model, featuring content-based, pragmatics-enhanced, culturally enriched, and technology-assisted curricula (Wang, 2012). A series of business Chinese courses was created, and named as

“Chinese for Business Professionals,” covering listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills from beginning to advanced college levels.

Each BCUH cohort of students takes the program in three semesters, starting from the Fall semester of a school year, and ending with the first Summer session. Upon entering the program before the start of the Fall semester, CIMBA students are placed in one of the three course levels (beginning, intermediate, or advanced) based on their proficiency. A needs analysis of incoming BCUH students is conducted at the early Fall semester through an online survey and face-to-face interview. The survey results are analyzed. A midterm feedback and self-reflection are solicited in the following Spring semester. After completing the studies in the Fall and Spring semesters, students taking the Summer session courses may be re-organized into different levels of classes based upon their language proficiency achieved in the two preceding semesters. The Summer session focuses on pre-departure cultural training before the study abroad in addition to the special language curricula adjusted to the immediate needs of students. The final phase of the cohort’s year is a speech presentation at the end, as a capstone project for study at the program. Students can choose a variety of topics, including Chinese business, economy, politics, culture, or history.

The BCUH began to accept non-MBA students registering at each level from the second year of its establishment. As a result, the curricula were gradually shifted toward Chinese for professionals from purely business-content foci. Along with the expansion of the curricula, enrollment in the program has grown steadily each year. In addition to Chinese majors, non-MBA students participating in the course series come from varying majors, including economics, international business, sociology, accounting, and Asian studies.

3.3. The Four Phases

3.3.1. Phase 1: Planning and Designing

At the start of this phase, an evaluation team was formed to carry out the whole project. The major task for the team was to identify purposes, program elements that need to be examined, instrumental tasks, intended users, and the uses of the evaluation results. Regarding the uses, it was determined that the evaluation results were to be used to justify the curricula, validate the associated program activities, identify achievements and gaps, and provide recommendations on improvements for the purpose of generating awareness of the program values at multiple levels. With the clearly defined purposes and uses in mind, the evaluation team adopted surveying as one of the major

data collecting instruments, and designed survey questions that ensured that the intended results gathered would impact the whole program in the way that all stakeholders desire (Davis, 2011, p. 3).

The BCUH contains four groups of stakeholders. The most current group is composed of students enrolled in the program in each cohort. We needed to find out if what they experienced in this program matched what they expected in the needs survey. An ever-expanding group is the CIMBA alumni. We were eager to know how their training at the BCUH benefitted their work or life either directly or indirectly. Compared to their language training in China, we wanted to know what were the strengths and weakness of the BCUH program they attended. The third group consists of administrators from the College of Business. We wanted to obtain their observations about how they viewed the BCUH program. Is the BCUH producing graduates with Chinese proficiency that meet the program expectations overall? The last and most important group is the BCUH faculty. The key questions are: "To what extent is the whole program progressing toward the program's ultimate goals?" "What are faculty keenly aware of as they teach in this program?" and "Are there any perceptions and misconceptions?"

One of the primary intended users of this operation is the program coordinator, who is highly motivated to conduct this research, and to obtain a holistic profile of the program. In short, the main goals of the evaluation are to investigate whether the BCUH program meets students' needs and whether or not it is useful to alumni. Further, to what extent has it progressed toward the ideals of its funder and practitioners?

3.3.2. *Phrase 2: Data Collecting*

Among all the useful methodologies mentioned in the literature (Watanabe, Norris, & Gonzalez, 2009), the BCUH evaluation team selected the following three instruments for data collecting: *focus groups*, *survey questionnaires*, and *interviews*. The team believed that these three methods most reflected our practical needs and situations, and thus added substantive and observational components to the data collection in terms of quickness, efficiency, depth, generalizability, probing, clarification, and the ability to follow-up (Davis, 2011, p. 8).

The four main groups of stakeholders were designated as the focus groups in this research. All four groups were surveyed via online questionnaires containing two parts. The first part elicited Likert-scale responses containing data convenient for quantitative analysis. The second part contained open-ended questions. For the purposes of comparison, the major parts of survey questions

that were pertinent to the curricula were similar across the four groups, although some parts were slightly different in deference to the group characteristics.

Due to logistics, interviews were conducted only with the following three groups: the current BCUH students, faculty members, and College of Business administrators. The interviews of the twenty-two BCUH students were semi-structured, and further triangulated, separating MBA students ($n=7$) from non-MBA students ($n=15$). For the faculty group ($n=6$), all six instructors participated in the survey questionnaire and two were interviewed. The administrative staff also ($n=4$) participated in the survey. While all of the four staff members were expected to take both an online survey *and* an interview, only two of them completed both. Of the remaining two, one finished only the online survey and the other did only the interview. There were a total of eight alumni ($n=8$) who responded to the call for participation and answered the online questionnaire, making up 22% of the total alumni contacted. Six of them sent their responses to the open-ended comments via email.

3.3.3. Phrase 3: Data Analyzing

Responses on the three-point Likert-scale items in the online survey were converted to numerical values for analytical purposes (e.g., not useful/important at all = 1; somewhat useful/important = 2; very useful/important = 3). Answers to the opened-ended questions were analyzed thematically, and categorized with summaries. Interviews were transcribed and identified for their major themes and values. Representative quotes were quoted in the generalized report.

Previous research (Wang, Tschudi, & Jiang, 2007) has shown that the arc of business language learners' pragmatic development corresponds to their levels of language learning, and can be illustrated in Figure 1.

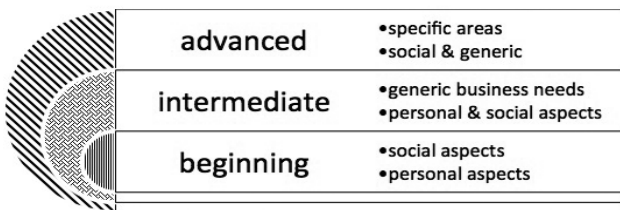


Figure 1. The Arc of Business Language Learner's Pragmatic Development

Figure 1 suggests that (i) aspects of social and personal communication are better covered throughout the whole business language program, from

beginning all the way to advanced level; (ii) the generic business aspects are better covered at the intermediate level; (iii) the specific areas of business, such as trading, consulting, and financing, are not an urgent need until the learners reach the advanced levels of language proficiency. Accordingly, the BCUH curricula are structured in compliance with the findings, where social and personal aspects receive almost the same amount of instruction as the generic and specialized business areas (Figure 2).

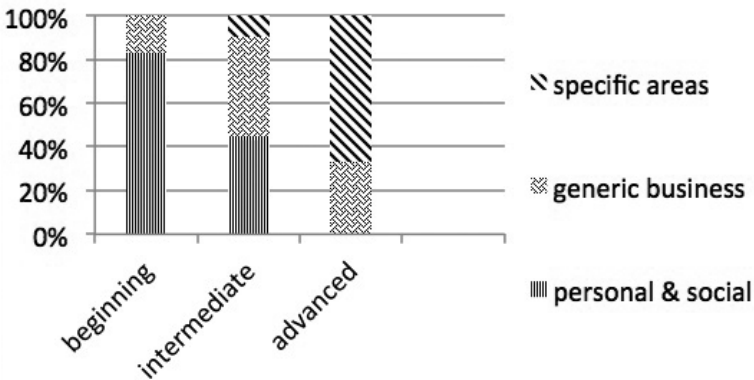


Figure 2. The Structure of the BCUH Curricula

The BCUH program, shown in Figure 2, supports the suggestions in Figure 1, which indicates that the BCUH curricula (the mainstay of the BCUH program) are substantially proven to be pertinent by the needs reflected in the surveys for evaluation purposes. Comments from open-ended questions also indicated the pragmatic nature of the course design.

The responses from the current student group and the alumni group on their needs regarding the content to be covered are shown in Figure 3:¹

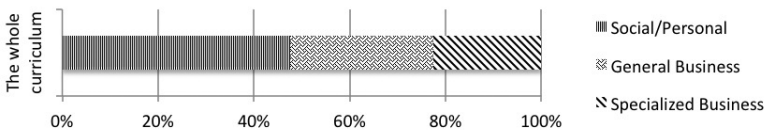


Figure 3: Students and Alumni Needs of the BCUH Content

¹ Figure 3 and Table 1 are adapted from the evaluation summary drafted by research assistant Wei-li Hsu, a PhD student in the Department of Second Language Study at the University of Hawai'i.

Regarding the diversity of topic importance, the responses from five groups of stakeholders showing their preferences are illustrated in Figure 4.

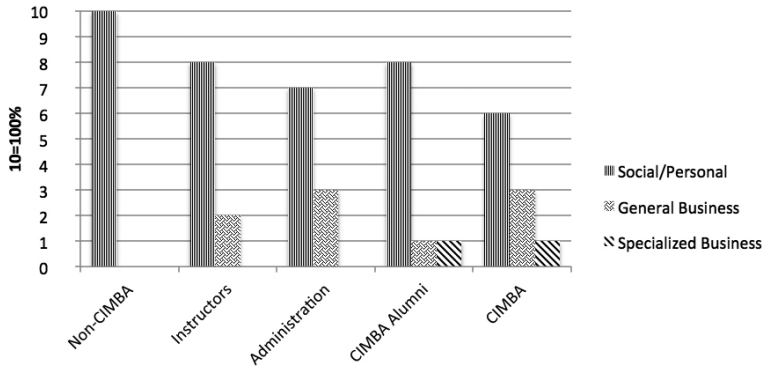


Figure 4. The Diversities of Importance for the First Ten Topics

While social and personal aspects are clearly preferred over the other two areas by all focus groups, the proportion of the preferences among all three aspects (social/personal, general business, and specialized business) indeed vary widely. The non-MBA students clearly favored the topics in the social or personal aspects regardless of their Chinese proficiency levels. Both instructors and administrative staff preferred topics of general business besides the social and personal coverage, leaving very little room for specialized business content.² The MBA students and alumni seemed to share a similar view on a balanced curriculum, giving more emphasis on the specialized business content. Overall, the results of the questionnaire on the importance of the top ten topics are in accordance with the curriculum implemented within the program.

When viewing how helpful the whole BCUH program was in term of students' employment, the alumni group provided the most convincing evidence, which is summarized in Table 1.

The qualitative analysis is based on the transcriptions of the six group interviews and individual interviews of the stakeholders. Answers to the questionnaires received from the alumni show that the words that appear the most in the interviews were "conversational" or "communicative" abilities. From beginning to advanced levels, students with diverse backgrounds and motivations were concerned with "survival skills" more than any of the

² The figures for these two categories are too small to be shown in Figure 4.

TABLE 1: THE HELPFULNESS OF THE BCUH

	Non- CIMBA Students (n = 16)	CIMBA Students (n = 8)	CIMBA Alumni (n = 6)
Helpfulness for employment*	1.69	1.50	2.00
Recommend the program to others**	2.50	1.50	1.50

*very helpful = 2, somewhat helpful = 1, not helpful at all = 0

**very likely = 3, likely = 2, somewhat likely = 1, unlikely = 0

other functions or topics listed. They showed their primary interest in the ability to “*live a daily life in China*”³ besides talking professionally over the business dinner table or at a negotiation meeting. Therefore, gaining the ability to converse naturally and build relationships in Chinese so that they could have a sort of “*introductory elevated speech*,” and “*talk to close the gap*,” were the foremost needs of the BCUH students along with the linguistic and cultural contents covered in the curricula. In particular, beginning level learners wanted to be professional in various conversational skills at formal registers, and advanced learners were still expecting to improve their communication skills in addition to reading and writing intensively and extensively for business-specific areas. This was generally aligned with the recognized global trends of successful business that needs accuracy both linguistically and culturally in international and domestic marketing efforts (Duggan, 2009).

The constant needs analysis is an important element leading to the success of the BCUH at its inauguration and its continued growth. Students of the BCUH have always been more diverse in their language backgrounds, work experience, and learning goals than those enrolled in the general track of the Chinese program. The global needs analysis and the analytical research of the business Chinese textbooks on the market (Wang, 2011) gave the program designers confidence in their curriculum design and operational practices. The local needs analyses conducted on a regular basis have supplied updated information for faculty to adjust their curricula in order to achieve maximal student learning outcomes and the program goals.

³ All italic words in quotation marks are cited from the interview transcripts.

3.3.4. Phrase 4: Reporting Evaluation Results

The interview and survey results were summarized in a report, including the academic backgrounds and the motivation of students enrolled in the program, summaries of the program's strengths and weaknesses, as well as suggestions for improvement. The analysis and reflections of this evaluation research were presented in a series of conferences and workshops on business language and general language teaching.

The biggest strengths of the BCUH found in the results for the curricula were in design, instructional approaches, and operational practices. Besides the three well-proportioned and optimized aspects of curriculum content at each proficiency level, the mixture of MBA and non-MBA students in one class also received positive comments, especially from the MBA students, who repeatedly stated that the mixed class was helpful in providing a broader learning environment and increasing the interaction and communicative opportunities. The alumni group was particularly surveyed regarding the curriculum effectiveness after their entering the workforce. The area that received the highest score is the "cultural sensitivity" that the BCUH gave them. This is also one of the main foci of the program that distinguishes it from the traditional language track. The area that received the next highest score was on living and social communication in general, indicating a match between the students' feedback and the previous needs analysis.

The main challenges to the BCUH faculty were identified as the diverse backgrounds of students, the necessity of being adaptive to their different learning needs, as well as keeping the curriculum goals and objectives articulated with the traditional program. The BCUH certainly can successfully overcome these challenges. As a recommendation from this study, faculty efforts should be spent on meeting the students' needs, attracting more students, and ensuring a healthy articulation with the traditional track. Other areas identified that need attention include increasing more speaking exercises with native speakers, creating listening opportunities by inviting guest speakers, and emphasizing a variety of writing skills from beginning to advanced levels of the BCUH.

4. REFLECTIONS ON THE EVALUATION EXPERIENCE

The BCUH program evaluation is considered the first of its kind for business Chinese program evaluation and sets an example. The results revealed in this research provide multiple evidence of the value of the BCUH in terms of its credibility and accountability. The steady growth in student enrollment in

the program is exemplary for its customized curricula and feasible practice. This study supports the finding of a national survey that LSP programs are “solidly established as another curricular option” (Long & Uscinski, 2012, p. 173). Such programs have gained popularity for their depth and foci in response to the broader needs of stakeholders.

For the last two decades, LSP has evolved to become a field with a wide base and greater interdisciplinary breadth (Grosse & Voght, 2012). The growth of the BCUH has demonstrated this over a six-year advancement that is reflected in the evaluation results. This study has provided an attainable model of business language program evaluation by focusing on utilization. First of all, evaluation prioritizes the primary users and uses. Secondly, it presents tangible evidence of both the merits of the program and its accountability to its funders, without minimizing the improvements that need to be addressed. Third, an evaluation motivated by program practitioners reveals both strengths and areas for improvement. The framework of this study aims at facilitating problem solving and encouraging heightened commitment during the program building process. It is also expected that the conclusions drawn from this evaluation will have an impact on decision making and benefit the business language students when the results are maximally adapted and utilized in all program practices (Norris, 2009).

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