12-1-2010

Marketing Business Languages: Teaching Students to Value and Promote Their Coursework

Annie Abbott
University of Illinois, arabbott@uiuc.edu

Darcy Lear
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, darcylear@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl

Annie Abbott
University of Illinois

Darcy Lear
University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

MARKETING BUSINESS LANGUAGES: TEACHING STUDENTS TO VALUE AND PROMOTE THEIR COURSEWORK

ABSTRACT

Students in business language courses develop and refine important professional skills, but not all students successfully communicate those academic experiences in their professional job search materials. In this article we first detail what employers expect of recent college graduates and match these qualities to innovative practices in business language curricula. Then we present two in-depth examples of business language course content that includes classroom activities and assessment items in which students articulate in business terms what they have learned in their academic course. Building these explicit steps into the course curriculum helps students recognize for themselves the professional value of their academic work and communicate that value to potential employers.

INTRODUCTION

Students often believe there is a direct link between their business language courses and their careers. Indeed, the presentations, teamwork, and letter-writing in most business language classes often look similar to what students will observe and create when they leave the classroom and start a job. For example, students are drawn to the applicability of the social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Delicious, etc.) for business modules in one of our business Spanish courses. On the end-of-the-semester course evaluations, the majority of students cited those social media modules as the most valuable element of the course, and one student even tied the benefit of that content to the work world: "There are new jobs available within companies for people who use social media." The following semester, when asking for letters of recommendation, several students from that course shared their job search materials with the professor. None of the students highlighted the extensive work on social media for business that they had done in the business Spanish course.

What does it mean when students say they value the applied skills we teach them in our business language courses yet fail to feature them in their job search materials? It may simply mean that they value other things more. On the other hand, they may not know how to present them. Standard resume templates emphasize educational degrees and work experience, yet the analytical tools utilized and experiential projects completed in a business language course do not clearly fall into either category. In an interview, when asked to give examples of skills employers value (teamwork, leadership, time management, etc.), students may automatically refer to their on-the-job experiences or courses in the specific field for which they are interviewing. As business language instructors, we want to make sure that students also highlight the professional assets our courses provide.

In times of economic crisis it is more important than ever that college students transitioning to the job market know how to emphasize every possible advantage their university experience gives them over the competition. The leap from college to career is always a difficult juncture, but it is even more critical during a time of high unemployment. While having a college degree still gives students an advantage in the job market, starting salaries for college graduates are down in general. Furthermore, unemployment is a bigger problem for recent college graduates aged 23–27 (at 6% in 2009, up from 3% in 2007) because they are losing out to college graduates over 27 who also have work experience (for whom 2009 unemployment of 4% showed a 2% rise since 2007) (Edwards). Even more sobering is the fact that in 2007, 51% of college seniors who applied for jobs had secured an offer by graduation; in 2009 that was down to 19.7% (Samavati). Business Spanish instructors have an opportunity to help students stand out in the job search process.

Today's students excel at being students. They are well trained to write papers, take tests, and give in-class presentations. Yet today's employers want new graduates who are prepared to enter the workplace and immediately use skills that are necessary in a global world with complex problems. Business language educators already include practice with those skills in their curriculum, but students need to actively connect that coursework to real-world professional skills. Designing a current curriculum is not enough. We need to develop classroom activities and exams that lead students to express the skills they develop in our courses in professional terms. In this article we first match the skills employers want to business language teaching practices, and then we offer two in-depth examples of how we help students present their experiences in our business language courses in ways that employers recognize and value.

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

In 2008, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) commissioned a survey of employers and asked their opinions about how colleges can assess and improve student learning (Peter D. Hart, "How Should Colleges"). Among the five main findings, employers indicated that college transcripts are not useful in gauging a college graduate's career potential (4) and that they prefer "assessments that demonstrate graduates' ability to apply their college learning to complex, real-world challenges, as well as projects or tests that integrate problem-solving, writing, and analytical reasoning skills" (4). Furthermore, employers were asked to evaluate college graduates' preparedness in twelve key areas: teamwork, ethical judgment, intercultural skills, social responsibility, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, self-knowledge, adaptability, critical thinking, writing, self-direction, and global knowledge. A majority of the surveyed employers did not give a "high" score in any key area, and they gave "low" scores for global knowledge, self-direction, writing, critical thinking, and adaptability (3). More recently, a 2009 survey of employers conducted on behalf of the AACU focused on college learning in the context of the current economic crisis (Peter D. Hart, "Raising the Bar"). Based on "the increasingly complex demands they will face in the workplace" (1), 75% of employers believe that colleges need to do a better job preparing students for the challenges of our global economy (5–6), and a majority believe that should be accomplished through a "blend of liberal and applied learning" (1). They support teaching and assessment practices "that demonstrate (a) students' acquisition of both depth of knowledge in their major and broad skills, (b) students' ability to apply their college learning in real-world settings, and (c) their development of ability to conduct research and develop evidence-based analysis" (1).

If the employers surveyed were to visit a business language course, they would be pleasantly surprised. A perusal of a few articles dedicated to business language instruction reveals curricular innovations that develop the very skills and assessment practices that employers most value.

For example, to evaluate a college graduate's potential to succeed on the job, employers favor "assessments of real-world and applied-learning approaches" (Peter D. Hart, "How Should Colleges" 1). Internships fit that need. Ikuko Kurasawa and Ayumi Nagatomi describe their students' internships in Japan and how they develop many of the key areas for job preparedness identified by employers. Upon re-entry into the United States, their students develop the self-knowledge and self-direction employers want by conducting a self-analysis and setting realistic goals for their own language development.

After reflecting on their internships, "returning students know best what kind of skills and knowledge they lack and what goals they have set for themselves" (28). Involving real-world business people in the curriculum is another fitting approach. Thunderbird business language faculty invited local business people into the classroom as "outside evaluators of [students'] language and communication skills" (Grosse and King 41). Their presence helped set expectations for the students: "With the guidance of the faculty member, the students learn to compare their own levels of proficiency to that of those already working in the professions where they want to work" (41). Technology can bring real-world business people into the classroom when they are not available locally. For example, a video interview with a female entrepreneur selling "herbal remedies made from the local plants of Martinique" serves as the basis for business French activities that engage students with basic business concepts and terminology as well as with "historical, sociopolitical, ethical, and 'green' concerns" (Saint Paul 43). Social responsibility and ethical judgment rank extremely high on the employers' list of key skills, and this set of classroom materials proves that even a traditional classroom-based pedagogy can guide students to bring those considerations to the forefront of their business analyses.

According to the employers, teamwork is an area in which students have room for improvement (Peter D. Hart, "How Should Colleges"). Many companies now are experimenting with MOOs (Multi-User Domains, Object-Oriented), such as Second Life, as a virtual conference room for meetings when team members are in different locales. Indeed, many business language courses involve teamwork, and the innovative nature of their projects enhances many of the other key skill areas employers believe should be developed more. For example, business German students used a MOO in their course (Seitje-Eilers). This develops students' teamwork skills, especially within virtual teams, and increases their flexibility—coworkers may not be in the neighboring cubicle (or even in the same time zone) and meetings may not take place face to face. In a business French course, students work in teams, partnering French majors with business majors in order to create heterogeneous groups, and study a French company's annual report (Powers and DeVille). They analyze business concepts (balance sheets and other financial reports) and cultural issues (the shift from nationalized to privatized business practices). This activity alone develops students' quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, global knowledge, teamwork, and oral communication (reflected in the groups' reports). In a different business French course, American students

collaborated in cross-cultural virtual teams with MBA students in France in order to examine specific issues of globalization within a French company (Babanoury). Students presented their findings orally and in writing. The students gained skills in teamwork, oral communication, and writing, and the cross-cultural collaboration also produced "a sort of culture shock" (22) that required critical thinking and self-knowledge to work through.

In our own teaching of business Spanish, we provide students with the opportunity to develop all the key areas targeted by employers. Our students work in real-world professional settings in their community service learning (CSL) placements. In their CSL work, students achieve each of ACTFL's 5 C's—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities (Lear and Abbott, "Foreign Language")—which correspond to the intercultural skills, oral communication, self-knowledge, critical thinking, and global knowledge that employers want. The Spanish and Entrepreneurship courses we teach at both our institutions focus on social entrepreneurship and include specific lessons about social responsibility and corporate ethics (Abbott and Watson). The reflective writing that is integral to CSL develops our students' writing skills, self-knowledge, and critical thinking. Our students' group projects produce deliverables for our community partners while teaching teamwork. Those teams then present their work in a variety of formats—in-class presentations, poster sessions, and on-line screencasts—further refining their communication skills. Students hone their abilities to do quantitative analysis by using census data to make judgments about the niche markets with which they work in the community. However, some skills that employers seek present challenges even in a business language course using CSL. For example, we found that few students reach high levels of self-direction in their CSL work (Abbott and Lear), and some students adapt better than others to the challenges of a CSL course (Lear and Abbott, "Aligning").

The reality is, of course, that employers do not visit business language classrooms; their only way of seeing what students have achieved in the course is through the students' job search materials. Pedagogical innovations that directly address employers' needs do not automatically translate into the awareness students need to perceive that "course activities" are transferable to the professional world. When students finish their final presentations, exams, and textbooks, they may also mentally close the file on the course and all the skills they developed in it. We address this directly in our CSL business Spanish courses, and we present two in-depth examples in the following sections. Our examples are based on students' CSL work, but any business

language course can include activities and exams in which students clearly connect their coursework to professional skills.

EXAMPLE 1: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Combining business Spanish with CSL allows our students to combine theory and practice. At the end of the semester, we lead students through a series of classroom activities from the textbook *Comunidades: Más allá del aula* (Abbott) that explicitly connect their coursework with the work world. Students are asked, "¿Qué importancia tiene [esta experiencia con el aprendizaje en la comunidad] para tu carrera?" ("How is this [CSL experience] important for your career?") (144–47), and their responses to the individual activities help them articulate the professional skills they developed in their CSL work in ways employers value. This section describes all four individual activities: Pasos 1–4.

Assigning Professional Value to Course Experiences

In the first activity (Abbott 144–45), students read about the difference between hard and soft skills and consider examples of each. Students then list specific hard and soft skills that they developed in their CSL work for the course. Activities that students had previously considered "assignments" or "volunteer work" are reevaluated and re-labeled. Although it has a simple structure, this is not a simple exercise. For many, this is the first time they have thought this way about a Spanish course, and extra examples may help them recast their own work. For example, employers value ethical judgment, a skill that students use in their CSL work all the time without calling it that. Our students gain the hard skills necessary to help immigrants fill out and file a myriad of official forms. In that process, students acquire sensitive information, including immigration status. Their practice of maintaining absolute client privacy is a soft skill that demonstrates ethical judgment. We should also encourage students to highlight computer expertise, which they tend to take for granted. For example, students who work in a busy social services office use on-line shared calendar programs to consult and update their supervisor's schedule; mastering that program is a hard skill. It takes soft intercultural skills, however, to gather from the multilingual and multicultural service recipients the information students enter into the calendar.

  The words we use to talk about students' activities can also encourage them to assign professional value to their university experiences. The second activity in the series (Abbott 146) asks students to list their university activi-

ties and experiences and then translate them into the type of language that the business world recognizes. The textbook provides several models, but students may benefit from additional examples. If students have given in-class oral presentations, they can emphasize their oral communication skills with this wording: "Combined visual and audio elements to create content-rich presentation slides to accompany dynamic public speaking." Another approach is to first provide students with professional language—"Used face-to-face and web-based communications for team building"—then ask them to match it to language they already use—"When I was out of town, I Skyped my classmates during our brainstorming session." It is also important to evaluate students' first efforts and push them to expand and refine whenever it is possible. Business language students who have successfully collaborated with students from another country might translate it as, "Successful teamwork with international students." A more accurate and developed translation might look like this: "Worked successfully within a culturally and linguistically diverse team to produce high-quality written documents." This version helps potential employers spot the students' abilities regarding teamwork, communication, and intercultural experiences.

Packaging Course Experiences in Professional Terms

Once students have assigned professional value to their business language assignments, projects, and experiential learning, they must then package it in standard business formats. An interviewer may not understand the relevance of an interviewee's "business Spanish service learning course." Labeling the same experience as a "community-based practicum in a social services office with Spanish-speaking clients" makes it sound less academic while retaining the true spirit of the experience. Therefore, in the third activity in the series (Abbott 146), students connect their CSL experiences to common phrases in want ads. Students listen to a story about Sara, a very successful student with experiences that mirror many of their own: she took a business Spanish CSL class, studied abroad, held a leadership position in a campus student organization, and helped organize an on-campus event while studying abroad. Students then match the qualities that employers seek to those that Sara and they themselves have demonstrated. By using the language of typical job advertisements as the basis of the activity (e.g., "Se busca a personas que no se agobien al trabajar en múltiples proyectos" ["Looking for people who can balance multiple projects"] and "Se busca a personas que usen su creatividad para encontrar soluciones" ["Seeking creative problem-solvers"]), students

have another opportunity to begin to incorporate professional concepts and vocabulary into the presentation of their educational experiences.

The final activity in the series (Abbott 146–47) directs students to work on their own resumes. Specifically, they must craft a resume item for their business Spanish CSL work and decide whether to categorize it as work experience, volunteer work, or something else. Any category is fine; the important thing is to give employers a vision of the significant accomplishments. All too often, students simply write, "Volunteered at elementary school" and miss the opportunity to explain their achievements and the valuable skills they developed. Resume writers are urged to quantify their results, not just their efforts, and many of our students can do the same. A business Spanish student doing CSL work as a student tutor could tactfully gather some information from the teacher and write: "Informally assessed student's learning style, adjusted teaching techniques and student's math scores climbed two letter grades." This information highlights the student's self-direction, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning. Former students' resumes can serve as positive examples for current students.

Presenting skills developed in a business Spanish course on a student's resume will hopefully help them land a job interview. The textbook also asks students to consider how to handle a job interview (Abbott 145). The classroom discussion can then lead in many directions. Students may respond to interview questions the instructor asks. Instructors can emphasize current trends in interview techniques, such as behavioral and competency based interviews, and help students answer accordingly. For example, if asked, "Tell me about a time you worked on a team project," students can practice using the STAR process to describe a specific situation (S) or task (T), the action (A) they took, and the result (R) of that action. Even more importantly, we can invite students to showcase their self-knowledge and critical thinking by responding with a sentence stating broader concepts gleaned through the specific situation or task they just described, "From that specific experience I learned this broader lesson (_____), and I would apply that knowledge at your company in this way (_____)." Finally, we can encourage students to be proactive about how they highlight their unique and valuable business language skills in a job interview. Just as our coursework does not naturally fit within the categories of a typical resume, an interviewer may never directly ask about a student's business language coursework. However, most interviewers invite questions from the interviewee or ask if there is anything else they should know about the candidate. Those are perfect opportunities to promote business language skills.

EXAMPLE 2: EXAMS

Assigning Professional Value to Course Experiences

Commonly asked job interview questions make excellent oral or written exam items. They challenge students to assign professional value to their business language course experiences and then to formulate those experiences in professional terms. For example, before our oral exams, students choose one of several job interview questions and prepare their answers. The list includes questions such as:

- Tell us about a time you failed at something and what you did about it.
- Do you prefer to work in teams or independently?
- What could you contribute to our company?

Students' answers reveal their level of job preparedness in terms of self-knowledge, self-direction, teamwork, and critical thinking while they also showcase their oral communication skills. Often, this type of exercise is approached as a role play and students are encouraged to invent information for their answers. Instead, our students are required to base their answers on work they have actually accomplished in the business language course.

To begin the exam, students have five minutes to choose a question and form an answer that includes a specific example from their CSL experience in the course. The instructor begins with a professional greeting, asks the question the student has prepared, and then probes for details until students have had several opportunities to demonstrate the oral communication and self-knowledge skills that employers seek. Follow-up questions can include:

- Can you give me a specific example, please?
- What did you do about that situation?
- What is that situation like now?
- Tell me more about that experience.

To assess students on their adaptability and critical thinking, the formal interview is followed by reflections on the interview itself. The instructor provides suggestions and recommendations, and then the student responds to prompts:

- How did the interview meet, and not meet, your expectations?
- What would you have done differently if you were the interviewer?
- What did you notice about the behavior of the interviewer?

On the following written exam, one essay item is another common interview question: "¿Por qué deberíamos contratarlo/la a Ud.?" ["Why should we hire you?"]. This question provides an opportunity for students to talk about their competitive advantage over others who are interviewing for the

same job. Experience in a business Spanish course provides many examples, but students may not think of them on their own. Therefore, the essay item provides students with the structure that forces them to make the connections: "Most graduates who have studied Spanish have not had the opportunity to simultaneously apply those skills outside the classroom. I have. In my business Spanish class, I studied [choose one of these management concepts: horizontal vs. vertical management structure, four steps to administration, characteristics of a good manager]. Then I experienced that concept in practice in the following way: [give a specific example of the concept in your CSL placement]."

Formulating Course Experiences in Professional Terms

While the exams are straightforward in their design from the professor's perspective, they challenge the students' understanding of the relationship between their coursework and their careers. Instructors must actively guide students in assigning professional value to course experiences by encouraging them to do two things: (1) connect their CSL experiences to future professional workplace contexts, and (2) use appropriate business language to discuss those experiences and the skills learned.

For example, university students who tutor in English as a Second Language classrooms for their community service learning often assume that their service-learning work has nothing to do with their business career goals. However, one student working in a Pre-Kindergarten Head Start classroom as her service-learning assignment wrote eloquently of her understanding of the connection between her work with preschoolers and her future obstacles with patient compliance in a medical context. She understood that "getting people to do what you want them to do" is a universal challenge, whether it is preschoolers at a volunteer placement or clients at a busy medical practice.

As instructors, our role is to provide a framework for students to connect their class work to the work world, then have them think critically and to adapt. The structure of an exam question can cause students to make connections they had previously missed. For example, if asked what their volunteer work as an ESL tutor in the public schools has to do with their future career in business, most students will simply answer: nothing. However, reframing the question can make the connections explicit: "We have just studied management structures. In the school setting, teachers are the equivalent of middle management, you are the lower management and students are the employees. Now tell me one thing you will do as a middle manager and another thing you will not do based on specific experiences you had in that classroom."

Students also struggle with appropriate language. Instead of starting their answers using academic language such as "in my SPAN 320 APPLES class, I volunteered in the schools," instructors can guide them toward more appropriate and generalized wording, such as "there was a service-learning component to my business Spanish course." Furthermore, while moving students away from campus- and course-specific jargon, instructors can also have them use business terms in their answers to interview questions. For example, students working at a food bank can call the grocery stores donating food "suppliers," the people coming to get food at the food bank "clients," and themselves "distribution coordinators."

Students' own accounts of internship and job interviews are the final test of the effectiveness of translating course experiences into professional terms. One author's students used content from the business Spanish course in interviews and got the summer internships they sought. In class, students researched the management structure of the company of their dreams. They filled in a table listing four steps of effective administration and described how each step is manifested in the company they researched. One student was able to speak eloquently in his interview about the company's history and competitive advantage because of that assignment. Another student, answering the oral exam question about failure, stated she did not know the weight of the food distributed at the local food bank. Her solution was to write a grant proposal to buy a scale for the food bank so that they could weigh the food and give accurate reports to the supplier. Then she related that same story in her successful internship interview.

These examples show how curricular activities that focus on expressing course experiences in professional terms can indeed be useful to students at the critical juncture that is the transition from college to work, especially during an economic crisis that makes the job market tougher than it has been in generations.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, business language faculty are designing innovative courses that challenge students and build skills that employers want. Yet students often fail to incorporate those course-based experiences into their job-search materials. One solution is to rethink the design of our courses, just as we expect students to thoughtfully reconceptualize their experiences. As a starting point, the syllabus should list the following as one of the course's learning objectives: the ability to recognize the pertinent professional skills practiced in the course and communicate them effectively in a professional dossier. In that way, we

send a consistent message that the ability to effectively present experience and knowledge is an integral part of a business language course. This is not the work of the campus career counseling center; as we have shown, this undertaking requires critical thinking and higher-order analysis, which we always strive to develop in our students. When we give students the tools to connect their valuable skills to job-market needs, they can go beyond just saying that they value our business language courses to actually demonstrating that value to employers.

WORKS CITED

Abbott, Annie R. *Comunidades: Más allá del aula*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010. Print.

Abbott, Annie, and Darcy Lear. "The Connections Goal Area in Spanish Community Service-Learning: Possibilities and Limitations." *Foreign Language Annals* 43.2 (2010): 231–45. Print.

Abbott, Ann, and Maida Watson. "A Business Language Faculty Development Program with Experiential Learning: Florida International University's CIBER Program in Madrid-Ávila, Spain." *Global Business Languages* 11 (2006): 3–21. Print.

Babanoury, Claire. "Collaborative Company Research Projects: A Blueprint for Language, Content, and Culture Learning." *The Journal of Language for International Business* 17 (2006): 15–28. Print.

Edwards, Katherine. "Commencing Unemployment." *Economic Policy Institute*. Economic Policy Institute. 10 June 2009. Web. 9 May 2010.

Grosse, Christine Uber, and William E. King. "Strategic Alliances for Business Languages: From the Classroom to the Community." *The Journal of Language for International Business* 16 (2005): 39–48. Print.

Kurasawa, Ikuko, and Ayumi Nagatomi. "Study-Abroad and Internship Programs: Reflection and Articulation for Lifelong Learning." *Global Business Languages* 11 (2006): 23–30. Print.

Lear, Darcy, and Annie Abbott. "Aligning Expectations for Mutually Beneficial Community Service-Learning: The Case of Spanish Language Proficiency, Cultural Knowledge, and Professional Skills." *Hispania* 92.2 (2009): 312–23. Print.

———. "Foreign Language Professional Standards and CSL: Achieving the 5 C's." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14 (2008): 76–78. Print.

Peter D. Hart Research Associates. "How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning? Employers' View on the Accountability Challenge." The Association of American Colleges and Universities. 9 Jan. 2008. Web. 15 Apr. 2010.

———. "Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn." The Association of American Colleges and Universities. 20 Jan. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2010.

Powers, Scott M., and Sue DeVille. "The Integration of Culture in the Business French Classroom: Engaging Students in the Analysis of an Annual Report." *Global Business Languages* 11 (2006): 97–111. Print.

Saint Paul, Therese. "Green Business in Martinique: An Example in Postcolonial Entrepreneurship." *The Journal of Language for International Business* 17 (2006): 43–74. Print.

Samavati, Shaheen. "Recent College Graduates Finding Entry-Level Jobs Hard to Get and Hard to Keep." *Cleveland.com*. Cleveland.com. 31 May 2009. Web. 9 May 2010.

Setje-Eilers, Margaret. "Creativity, Culture, Business German, and a MOO? Integrating On-line Technology into Foreign Language Instruction." *Global Business Languages* 11 (2006): 55–69. Print.