

12-31-2014

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Recommended Citation

Zhou, Yi (2014) "Action-Based Learning for Language Proficiency and Cross-Cultural Competence: Learners' Perspectives," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 19 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol19/iss1/8>

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Cover Page Footnote

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Wen Liu at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) Bowles Alcohol Studies Center who provided statistical expertise to this study. I would like to thank Dr. Sohini Sengupta, Research Coordinator, at the Center for Faculty Excellence at UNC-CH, who provided feedback and edits on this paper.

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ACTION-BASED LEARNING FOR LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE: LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate how students perceived the effect of an action-based/action learning (AL) approach used in a course called Global Business Project (GBP) in their learning of a foreign language and culture. A total of 112 students' descriptive data and responses from GBP course evaluations over the past three years (2011–2013) were examined. Quantitative data indicated that the majority of students held positive beliefs that their language proficiency and cultural competence had improved as a result of the AL experience in this course. The findings also suggested that students' degree of satisfaction was significantly associated with their learning experience, and was increased with a faculty language mentor. Based on the results, recommendations are provided for curriculum developers, decision-makers, and language educators to consider incorporating the AL approach into their curriculum.

KEYWORDS: action-based/action learning (AL), Global Business Project (GBP), mentor, unpredictability, facilitating, language proficiency, cultural competence

INTRODUCTION

An action-based or action learning (AL) approach has been extensively used in businesses, public services, and business schools for organizational leadership programs as well as for personal and professional development (Zuber-Skerritt, 2003). This approach connects learners to a real-world experience where a problem is discussed, reflected on, and acted upon by a group of individuals using “programmed knowledge” (Pedler, 2011). It emphasizes learners as the center of the learning process by having them work beyond their comfort zones in an unfamiliar environment on a genuine and difficult problem (Dilworth, 2010). AL particularly applies to business school programs in which business majors with more exposure to international experience in

cross-cultural communication skills and critical thinking are more likely to get the top jobs (Gasta, 2008).

In response to the high demand for leaders who think globally and are culturally competent, the Center of International Business Education and Research (CIBER) of Kenan-Flagler Business School, together with other interested CIBERs and partner schools in target countries, formed a Global Business Project (GBP) consortium that matches MBA students with specific projects proposed by business clients. Ranging from small businesses to big international companies, clients expected students to help them solve a real problem that they faced in their businesses. Students came from diverse cultural backgrounds, different university environments, and varied work experiences. The GBP program used the AL process in which 4-6 students formed a team to work on a real, and usually complex, problem assigned by the client. Teams worked first virtually, in the United States from January to April, on collecting data or useful related information addressing business issues. They then worked out possible solutions to present to their clients on site in Brazil, China, India, Japan or Thailand in May. A faculty advisor worked with each student team to facilitate learning and team-building processes to ensure the team moved toward its desired goals. Since teams were in the target country for two weeks, from mid-May to the end of May, to complete their projects, they were expected to acquire or improve language and cross-cultural communication skills while doing their projects. The GBP program designers believe that incorporating language and culture into this program through meaningful experiential projects adds value to students' international experiences as well as helps the business community to grow internationally and competitively.

This study explores the effect of the AL approach on improving students' language and cultural competence as perceived by learners. The study's findings have pedagogical implications for language educators and curriculum designers who are thinking of incorporating this approach into their curriculum. Therefore, it addresses the following research questions:

1. In the GBP course, what was the impact of the AL approach in helping students incorporate the language and culture of their host country into their team experience?
2. Were students' language and cultural learning outcomes better if they had a faculty language mentor versus not having a faculty language mentor?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The GBP program was set up in 2008 using the conceptual framework of the AL approach that Professor Reg Revans from the University of Manchester initiated and developed. Drawing from his observations and experiences, Revans established the formula “ $L = P + Q$ ” in which L stands for learning, P is programmed knowledge, and Q is questioning (Dilworth, 2010). He contends that conventional instructional methods have been largely ineffective because of a lack of questioning insight, which is considered very important in the learning progress. As Revans’s approach was widely accepted and practiced by businesses, public organizations, and educational institutions, it was also adapted by researchers and practitioners to accommodate their needs. Others expanded Revans’s AL approach by adding “reflection” to the learning process, which involves setting a goal, making plans, taking actions, reflecting on actions, and finally achieving the desired goal. Through learning and reflection on one’s own acquired knowledge and concrete experiences, learners can form conceptualizations and generalizations for a learning/problem-solving task (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Although Revans questioned the role of an Action Learning coach/mentor, more researchers argued (O’Neil & Marsick, 2014; Gibson, 2012) that, without a learning mentor or professionally trained coach, learning with actions could be unproductive. This is because, in the process of tackling a real problem, there always occurs an unpredictable issue to be fixed. Such uncertainty can create difficulties that learners have to face. With the advice of a learning mentor, however, learners are more likely to work toward their goals. Indeed, mentors encourage learners “to explore what they cannot see around them as well as what they imagine they can” (Revans, 1998, p. 13).

While the AL approach has been extensively recognized and practiced for organizational change and individual development, there is evidence that such an approach also works for improving students’ learning capacity and critical reflection capability in higher education settings (Vaartjes, 2010). Institutions like the MIT Sloan School of Management and the Fisher College of Business at Ohio State University use the AL approach to engage students in a business challenge within a global company. This enhances the students’ meaningful international experiences to “effect change in their perceptions and impact on how they viewed abilities and future opportunities” (Gasta, 2008, p. 35). A project conducted where there is a high level of diversity and languages spoken in Northern Gauteng of South Africa by Zuber-Skerritt (2002)

indicated that an AL approach increased academic women's cross-cultural awareness and communication skills among colleagues. However, there is little research on language and cultural practices using the AL approach. When comparing the AL approach to other well-established approaches in second/foreign language teaching and learning, such as task-based, project-based, and experiential learning, Lier (2007) asserts that the AL approach puts emphasis on the student as an active learner who will ultimately use his or her linguistic and cultural knowledge in the real world. In other words, the AL approach emphasizes the full involvement of learners who face the uncertainty and complexity of the dynamic learning process that may take place in a classroom, or the community.

METHODOLOGY

Student Population and GBP Course

A total of 188 students enrolled in a GBP course in the years of 2011, 2012, and 2013 from diverse cultural backgrounds and work experiences. These students came from multiple universities in the United States and foreign countries. Their working experiences involved the areas of accounting, marketing, finance, operation, corporate strategy, supply chain, IT, engineering, environment, real estate, manufacturing, consulting, and law. Of the participants, 106 (56%) were male and 82 (44%) were female. One hundred and sixty-three (87%) were in MBA programs and 25 (13%) were in other programs, such as Master of Accounting or Master of International Business. Before starting the GBP projects each year, all students were required to complete a language proficiency self-assessment following the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) speaking proficiency guidelines. Forty-five (24%) considered themselves to be distinguished or superior speakers, 12 (6%) were at an advanced level, 12 (6%) were at an intermediate level, 22 (12%) and 67 (36%) rated themselves as novice speakers or with no prior knowledge, respectively. As English is the language for official and business communications in India, 30 (16%) students were not required to learn any target language.

Of the 188 GBP participants, a total of 112 students answered the course evaluation questions related to the impact of language and cultural learning for the GBP. This larger course evaluation (see Appendix 1) is part of a standard evaluation that has been used for years by the Kenan Flagler Business School with minor modifications. Project teams consisted of 4-6 students, with a total of 47 project teams over the three years. Each team was assisted

by a faculty advisor as a business coach for each project. For the 2011 and 2012 projects, each team also was assigned a faculty language mentor for facilitating students' language and cultural learning during the project period. Specifically, the faculty language mentor advised students to learn a language, improve their linguistic proficiency, or understand cultural differences so that they would be able to communicate at a basic level with the local clients. Any intermediate and advanced language students on the project team additionally discussed project-related data and issues with the clients. The faculty language mentor also was responsible for making individual language learning plans based on students' self-assessment results and administered them in-person or through a virtual language assessment. Due to budget cuts in 2013, however, the faculty language mentor was eliminated and each team project instead had to have one student who was a native or advanced-level speaker of the language of the host country in question. The student language officers could not function in the same capacity as the faculty language mentors. They only helped mentor student peers with language and cultural tips, provided language translation for oral and written communication, and served as a liaison between clients and members of their teams.

In the absence of the faculty language mentors, all students, except native speakers, were required to make a language study plan and set learning objectives even if they had reached a certain level of language proficiency. The ways by which students planned to achieve their language learning objective varied, ranging from attending formal classroom instruction in their home school to self-study or private tutoring.

Data Collection

In addition to students' background information, we were interested in one of the questions from the students' evaluations related to feedback on language and cultural learning: "How effective was the GBP course in helping you... incorporate [the] language and culture of your GBP host country in a way that made a difference in your approach and/or outcome of the project?" (included in Appendix 1). To measure students' responses for this question, responses were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 = extremely ineffective, to 5 = extremely effective. It was followed with an opportunity to respond freely on how the GBP course helped with language and cultural learning. In addition, data from each of the 112 responses were collected regarding whether or not the students experienced having a faculty language mentor for their GBP projects. Students' data for these questions were collected from the GBP course evaluations in the years of 2011, 2012, and 2013.

Data Analysis

To answer Research Question One (*What was the impact of the AL approach in helping students incorporate the language and culture of their host country into their team experience?*) we calculated frequencies of the response option to the evaluation question on language and culture learning and identified themes from the open-ended textual responses explaining why, using the existing course evaluation data for the years, 2011–2013.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the percentages of students who responded that incorporating language learning and culture in the GBP courses was very effective to extremely effective.

TABLE 1: ANNUAL EVALUATION ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL LEARNING (2011–2013, n = 112)

GBP Year	Faculty Language Mentor (Yes/No)	Responses by Students (n)	Very Effective-Extremely Effective Rating (%)
2011	Yes	37	76%
2012	Yes	34	56%
2013	No	41	44%

The results indicated that the majority of students agreed that the AL experience was very effective to extremely effective in giving them the opportunity to improve their language and cultural competence. The 2013 GBP course indicated lower results, perhaps because of the lack of faculty language mentors that year.

This over all positive perception was most likely the result of their in-country, cross-cultural communication and collaboration with local clients, which helped students gain a deeper understanding of the importance of language skills and cultural competence in a globalized world. Studies indicate that students with more international experiences, particularly with language and cultural training, are more competitive in the job market (Gasta, 2008). The *Economist* (2012), in which a global survey of 572 executives was conducted, reported that the majority of executives believed that businesses with international ambitions increasingly expected prospective employees to acquire “the necessary cultural sensitivity and communication skills in order to succeed” (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012, p. 3). Likewise, the findings

from an unpublished 2005 survey of Iowa businesses also indicated that “Iowa businesses believe they are losing money because employees are deficient in required language and culture skills” (Gasta, 2008, p. 34).

Students’ open-ended comments showing the effect of the AL experience on improving their language and culture learning supported their quantitative responses. Students commended their GBP experience as “a truly unique and enjoyable learning experience” that helped them have a better “understanding how different cultures approach business problems sets” as well as to have a “(challenging) opportunity to pursue studying a foreign language as a component of the program.”

It was important that the GBP course required students to study the language ahead of time to reach a certain level of language proficiency. This helped business communication with the client. A student from the Brazilian projects said:

“There were much fewer English speakers than I anticipated, so using Portuguese was a daily necessity. We conducted many onsite interviews in Portuguese, which provided invaluable insight into our client and ultimately led to our successful recommendations. Also, we were dealing with a TV station, which broadcasted solely in Portuguese. Knowledge of the language was essential in understanding our client and client’s business.”

Another student commented:

“I am very very grateful that learning the language was part of the GBP stipulations. Fewer people spoke English in Brazil than I thought and I found myself attempting to speak Portuguese with virtually every Brazilian I spoke to. I also fell in love with the language and would love to become fluent!”

Although the AL approach in the GBP course brought about a positive effect on students’ perception of learning other languages and cultures, it should be noted that students’ perceptions on effectiveness decreased in 2013. The only change in the GBP course that year was that a student language/cultural officer (a native speaker) replaced the faculty language mentor. To answer our second research question (*Were students’ language and cultural learning outcomes better if they had a faculty language mentor versus not having a faculty language mentor?*) we examined whether having or not having a faculty language mentor made a difference in students’ perspectives on the language and cultural learning. We used a one-way ANOVA with the year (indicating the presence or absence of a faculty language mentor) as the

independent variable and the students' effectiveness score on language and culture learning as the dependent variable (figure 1).

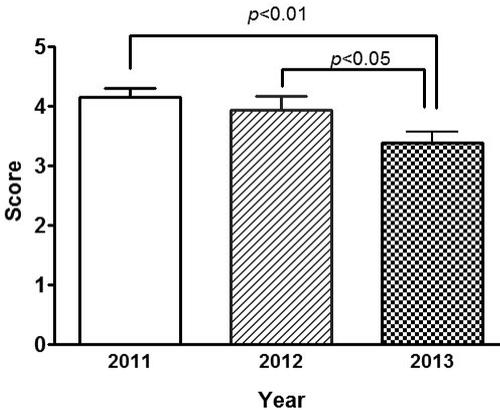


Figure 1. ANOVA Result for Comparing the Years (2011–12 vs. 2013), With or Without a Faculty Language Mentor on Effectiveness Scores on Language Culture and Learning. Note: All values analyzed using one-way ANOVA (IBM SPSS Statistics 22), and followed by comparison of each year's means with the Newman-Keuls test.

The one-way ANOVA result revealed that there was a main effect of the year— $F(2, 109)=5.017, p=0.00$ —suggesting there was a significant difference in students' effectiveness perceptions related to the impact of the AL approach on language and cultural learning between the years 2011 and 2012, with a AL language mentor, and the year 2013, without a mentor. This finding suggested that the role and work of the faculty language mentor may have helped students gain a better understanding of the host country's language and culture. This result also confirms prior research that a professional, trained coach or mentor enables students to reach a deeper understanding of what actions are most appropriate in a foreign setting. Students with language faculty mentors also perceived themselves to be more motivated to learn the host language and cultural skills and more sensitive to cultural nuances in their host country. One student commented about how his language faculty mentor helped his team: "We listened and analyzed the situation combined with cross-culture knowledge and people's personality, which really broadened our horizon and helped us better understand the project."

Other students' textual responses on the role of faculty language mentors reflected that peer mentors were not an adequate substitute for the faculty lan-

guage mentors. Students thought that faculty mentors were “a great resource for cultural suggestions, pronunciation techniques and business insight” and “an invaluable resource to the team.” Even though some students agreed that their peer mentors helped teams construct project-related materials in the host language, their responses reflected that their student language/cultural officer generally was effective as the liaison for translating work. The peer mentors were not as helpful as the faculty language mentors to help the team study the host language and culture before working with the host country’s clients. Some students wrote in the 2013 course evaluation: “I think that the GBP should put more emphasis on learning a country’s language and culture” and “it would be better to have some external help from GBP (e.g. sending digest with articles to read about Brazil, references about webcasts to attend, websites to read, songs, culture, etc.). I really believe this will be better served by a staff at GBP.”

CONCLUSION

This article examined the GBP program evaluation results related to how its students perceived the effect of using the AL approach on their language and cultural learning and whether having a faculty language mentor made a difference on their perspectives of the effectiveness of the AL approach for their language and cultural learning. We found that the majority of students agreed that incorporating language and cultural learning into their GBP experience had brought about a positive effect on their final team project. In the process of questioning, exploration, and reflection on another language and culture, students gained a new appreciation for the true value of being open to questions, misunderstandings, and conflict caused by cross-cultural communications. The results also showed that there was a significant difference between students’ perceptions regarding their learning language and culture when a faculty language mentor was involved versus a student peer language adviser.

This study’s findings has implications for the field of business language teaching and learning, and more broadly, for general foreign language teaching and learning. Although it is challenging to employ an absolute AL approach in a classroom setting, “the way in which it shapes the role of the facilitator as well as relationships between participants” (Perry, 2012, p. 10) could be valuable for administrators, curriculum developers, and language educators when considering incorporating an AL approach into a foreign language curriculum or a study abroad program/project. It also is important to be aware that the AL approach characterizes “the interplay between structure and process”

(Lier, 2007, p. 52) that can lead to unpredictability in the learning outcome. Therefore, flexibility and openness to adjustment regarding emergent practices and processes are essential. As companies are seeking more opportunities to expand globally, they are aware that the value and the role of global skills, such as language and cultural capabilities, are crucial to business success. Educators in higher education must develop challenging but feasible and relevant programs to meet the actual needs of businesses. The practice of engaging students in AL opportunities, particularly in a foreign country, would help them improve cross-border collaboration and communication skills as well as to recognize the benefits of gaining linguistic and cultural competence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX 1 GBP COURSE EVALUATION 2013

1. What resources convinced you to participate in the Global Business Project (GBP)? (Please check all that apply)

#	Answer	Response	%
1	GBP website		
2	Info session held at school		
3	Past GBP participants		
4	GBP coordinator/CIBER office		
5	Other—Please specify (just the experience that it offers; email; table at orientation, etc.)		

2. How effective was the GBP experience in helping you reach the following objectives:

#	Extremely ineffective	Ineffective	Effective	Very effective	Extremely effective	Total Response	Mean
1	Hands-on experience working with a global client						
2	Experience working with virtual teams						
3	Exposure to a practical consulting/problem-solving methodology						
4	Opportunity for networking with peers and possible employers						
5	Opportunity to incorporate language and culture of my GBP country in a way that made a difference in my approach and/or outcome of the project						

3. Please select which option best fits your experience.

#	Far below my expectations	Mostly did not meet my expectations	Neutral	Mostly met my expectations	Exceeded my expectations	Total Responses	Mean
1	To what extent did your GBP experience meet your expectations?						

4. What are the three most important things you learned as a result of your GBP experience (can be about self, about career goals, about the country, the industry, ... anything)

5. How did the workload for your GBP course compare with other courses this year for which you earned the same amount of academic credit as you did for the GBP?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	GBP required about the same amount of work as my other classes		
2	GBP required more work than my other classes		
3	GBP required less work than my other classes		
	Total		

6. Comments on workload; please let us know if you think your school considers offering more credit for GBP and if so, how much?
7. What did you like most about the GBP? Why?
8. What did you like least about the GBP? Why?
9. What suggestions do you have to improve the GBP?
10. Would you recommend the GBP to future MBA students? Why or why not?
11. Have your career plans changed as a result of participating in the GBP?
12. Please explain:
13. If you enjoyed your GBP experience and wish to include a testimonial that we can use in promotional materials, please include it here with your name.
14. Who was your faculty advisor? If your team had two faculty advisors—please list and rate each individually (this entry is for Co-Faculty Advisor #1).

15. Your faculty advisor was expected to “be a guide on the side” who did not solve your client’s problem for you, but gave you appropriate advice, direction, and feedback to permit you to learn much and provide true value to your client. How effective was your faculty advisor in this role?

#	Extremely ineffective	Somewhat ineffective	Effective	Very effective	Extremely effective	Total Responses	Mean
1	Please rate the effectiveness of your faculty advisor in guiding you to a successful execution of your project						

16. Your faculty advisor was also expected to serve as a liaison with the client both at the beginning of the project and at times when the client needed to be a bit more responsive, clearer about scope, etc. How effective was your faculty advisor in serving this role as a client liaison?

#	Extremely ineffective	Somewhat ineffective	Effective	Very effective	Extremely effective	Total Responses	Mean
1	Please rate the effectiveness of your faculty advisor in guiding you to a successful execution of your project						

17. Explain your answer (for FA #1); please be specific in criticism or praise, so that we can incorporate your feedback into our selection and development of current and future advisors.

18. If you had an additional Faculty Advisor (co-faculty advisor), please list the name here (this entry is for Co-Faculty Advisor #2).

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