

Business Language in Focus

Highlights from the 2014 National Business Languages Conference

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Springtime: this glorious time of year evokes renewal and prepares rich, fertile ground for great growth to come. The season itself provides the perfect metaphor for the events and energy surrounding the annual National Business Language Conference, when educators from across the country join together to sow and cross-fertilize ideas for teaching business languages and cultures. Key moments from the [2014 Business Language Conference](#) will be the focus of this issue's Business Language column for the benefit of teachers who were not able to attend but who nevertheless aspire to grow their own skills or program offerings in this area.

The National Business Language Conference is sponsored by CIBER programs at several universities, and the organizers and venue changes from year to year. (For more on CIBERs, see my [previous](#) Business Language columns or visit [CIBERWeb](#) for a description and activity listing of these Department of Education grant-funded Centers for International Business Education and Research.) This year's conference was planned and run by CIBER staff in the [Marriott School of Management](#) at Brigham Young University, though it was held from April 24th through the 26th at the Canyons Resort in Park City, Utah. CIBER support is crucial to the Business Language Conference and to many other business language-related innovations—online business language course offerings, cross-disciplinary trainings, short-term study abroad programs, and much more.



Park City, Utah's Canyon Resorts provided the picturesque setting for the 2014 conference

With the theme “Embracing a New Era for Business, Language and Culture,” conference organizers called for presenters and participants to connect U.S. business needs with the skills of language instructors, administrators, and researchers at all levels (K-12 and beyond), in both the commonly taught and critical languages.

As in past years, the conference sessions spanned a wide range of learning opportunities, from business-oriented skill-getting workshops, such as “Effective Simulations in the Classroom” and “Teaching with Business Cases,” to more narrowly focused presentations, including “French for Ocean Engineering: A Process for Developing Objective-Specific Materials.” Lengthier

language-specific workshops gave teachers of Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, and French additional pedagogical approaches as well as the chance to network with colleagues.

Although most presenters spoke from experience in the post-secondary setting, several brought expertise from other levels: Danika Cornelius of the Seacrest Country Day School in Florida offered perspectives on “Global Positioning: Developing Language for Leadership and Global Competency Courses”; from the University of Pennsylvania, Ronaldo Ribeiro spoke on the “Repertoire Approach, Diversity and Awareness in an Advanced Language and Culture Class for MBA Students.”

Entrepreneurship as Content and Teaching Method

Among the numerous topics covered at the conference, *entrepreneurship* stood out as particularly exciting and interest-provoking. The concept of entrepreneurship involves conceiving a creative or innovative solution that leads to starting up a new business venture, or rethinking an old one, either for profit (usually referred to as *business entrepreneurship*) or for the greater good, e.g., to address/resolve a social problem (social entrepreneurship).

Business Language Conference presenters explored this general topic as a content area but also as a method for teaching business language. “Entrepreneurial Literacy” was the focus of a talk by Kutztown professors Karen Rauch and Dawn Slack. Through detailed descriptions of two different courses—one in Spanish and one in language studies, which included students from a variety of language programs—they argued how entrepreneurship and language acquisition can mesh effectively in the foreign language classroom.

In a session entitled “Teaching Social Entrepreneurship to Language Students: Using Business to Create Social Value,” Annie Abbott (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) and Deb Reisinger (Duke University) presented state-of-the-art examples of integrating hands-on experience in entrepreneurship through micro-loans, and the ramifications that a mission-driven approach has for social entrepreneurs, like non-profit organizations.

Inspired by a seminar on social entrepreneurship, Reisinger challenged her Business French students to do more than simply read about or discuss the topic; rather, she provided them with actual micro-loans of \$27 and then asked them to think creatively, step well outside of their normal comfort zone, and, using only their own skills and the microloan, to raise as much money as they could in one week. The experiment resulted in enormous success: Students surprised Reisinger—and themselves—by raising over \$3,000, which was then donated to a local charitable organization.



Prof. Reisinger presents her Business French micro-loan project

Sean Hill of Fairwell High School and Mid Michigan Community College likewise reported on how he created entrepreneurial opportunities beyond the classroom. Specifically, he described how his “online service-learning project for a micro-loan organization” led to the revision of a unit related to the debate on immigration and helped students reach beyond merely learning about “barriers to economic prosperity in Latin America” to actually fighting poverty when they selected microloan recipients.

The focus on entrepreneurship in these recent business language course innovations appropriately bespeaks the entrepreneurial spirit—the willingness to take risks and to learn and grow from the outcome—that business language educators possess.