

## Business Language in Focus

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### Do Business Language Courses Deliver? A Student's Perspective

With the enormous investment—of both money and time—that students make in order to earn a college degree, it's no wonder they are eager to connect what they learn in the classroom to what they'll be doing after they graduate. Business languages fulfill that need in a very direct way, providing students with concrete practical skills, like culturally appropriate resume writing, while also emphasizing longer-term skill development, such as analysis and interpretation of texts and graphs. But do these courses truly deliver what they promise? In this month's column, we'll get one response to that question from a student who has taken a business language course in not one, but *two* languages: German and Japanese.

#### An Unusual Double Language Major

Not many students major in, let alone enroll in, two languages at the college level, so from day one Rachel Crawford had already set herself apart from most of her fellow students at George Washington University (GW). Having started German in middle school and spent two weeks in Germany in high school, she decided to continue with the language at college, placing into an upper level course. Although Rachel had equal interest in learning Japanese at a young age, the opportunities were few and far between in her hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana. Not to be easily deterred from her goal, she began to study the language on her own and was able to place into GW's second-year course.

For college double language majors, a more likely pairing is with closely related languages such as Spanish and French. Rachel's unusual decision to major in both German and Japanese suit her own interests, and time-wise it was possible to manage because she started neither from the introductory level. "I would not have been able to graduate with this double major in four years if I had started from scratch in either language," she said. "I was also very reluctant to choose one language to major in over another. Fortunately, I didn't have to make that choice."

#### Perspectives on Two Business Language Courses

Working through the major course sequence in both language programs, Rachel ended up with experience in two business language courses. In the spring semester of her sophomore year she took the fourth-year level *Business German* course. Just one year later, after a semester in Japan, she completed *Advanced Japanese Composition and Conversation II*, which had a significant business language component. Neither course was required; she chose both as electives that then counted towards each major.

In an interview earlier this month, Rachel eagerly shared her take on the value of her experience in these business-focused language courses.

#### Course Content and Tasks: Surprising Similarities...

While much of the content differed, both courses addressed the topic of green business. In *Business German*, students spent three weeks on a [German green business case](#) about an organic, fair-trade t-shirt company called LaissezFair, owned by two young women in Cologne, Germany. They read the

case, watched video interviews with the women in their shop and learned about their business successes and woes. After reading several articles on German environmental conscientiousness and business policies, students researched, proposed, and presented potential solutions to LaissezFair's problems.

One unit in the Japanese course was similarly focused on environmentally friendly business practices, specifically on cases involving recycling and upcycling. An example was one Japanese university that sells recyclable bento boxes (a type of pre-packaged lunch). After eating, consumers could peel off a plastic lining from the bottom of the container and deposit the box into collection bin or return it to the university store to receive a modest deposit (a few yen). The article discussed some of the benefits and limitations of the program, one limitation being a less than 100% return rate on the boxes. The class discussed potential improvements to the program in increasing return rate and raising awareness throughout the campus about the program. For upcycling, students read an article about a U.S. company that partnered with a Japanese company to transform discarded cloth pieces into unique fashion items.



**Figure 1** The German green business Case featured LaissezFair owners Inge and Steffi

Working within these green business units in both business German and Japanese, Rachel learned to analyze the data presented in charts and graphs and even make data-supported predictions. In both classes, she was further challenged to synthesize this information with the business case tasks required of her.

Cultural aspects of business played a large role in both classes as well, Rachel noted, taking students well beyond mere vocabulary list of business terms that is often the stereotype of business language classes. "It's not only a matter of understanding the words, but also why someone said what they did."

### **... and Noteworthy Differences**

Unlike developing a business case solution for the German company in the green business unit in *Business German*, the output in the Japanese green business unit was more general: Students had to identify and research a Japanese company engaged in either recycling or upcycling and then arrange a Skype meeting to interview company representatives about their green business model. They were to write up a blog entry, to be posted on the class website, presenting what they learned.

Because contacting and setting up an interview with companies turned out to be more difficult than expected, some students—Rachel included—relied on information found on the company's website to complete the blog assignment. Nevertheless, Rachel found the entire process useful. Even without receiving a reply or landing the desired interview, she had learned how to write a formal email, and had practiced interview techniques in class.

Another major difference in the two courses, according to Rachel, was the explicit focus on grammar that was a major component of the Japanese course. As Rachel explains, the language used in formal settings, such as in talking to your boss or a coworker ranked above you, differs more drastically than it does in German. Whereas German has different forms of "you" for direct address (the *du*, *ihr*, and *Sie*-forms), Japanese employs entirely different verbs for formal contexts -- verbs that would not be

used in an informal context. For instance, the verbs to go, to come and to be (行く iku、来る kuru、いる iru) are all expressed as いらっしゃる (irassharu) when speaking to or of a person of higher rank. More time was therefore devoted to introducing and practicing such forms in the Japanese course than in *Business German*.

### **Bottom Line: Business Language Courses are Valuable**

When asked if she sees herself as a future businessperson, Rachel said she is unlikely to ever go for a business degree. Still, she sees the importance of business in the world that she's about to enter: "I don't see myself as the formal suit-wearing business type, but you can't get away from business situations today. Some day soon I'll have to do a job interview; I'll probably be working in an office; I'll be interacting with business people in formal and informal settings." Because she has taken these two business language courses, Rachel feels armed with skills, knowledge, and critical awareness that will be applicable in a professional setting but also beyond.

Rachel notes that she would recommend business language courses to other students no matter what their future career plans, and whether or not they will ever live and work in the second language setting. "Even if you're not going to continue with the language, you'll use the skills you've learned in other contexts." To her, non-business contexts could include the fun of reading Japanese manga or watching German movies, where she can now better understand and interpret character motivation and interrelationships, as well as twists and turns in the plot—thanks, in no small part, to her experience in business language courses.

**Author's Note:** The German green business case and the Japanese module were developed by GW faculty with the support of the GW Center for International Business Education and Research, a Department of Education grant. For these and other business language teaching materials, visit the GW-CIBER Business Language Programs Overview page on the [GW-CIBER website](#).