

Business Language Column

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Going Global: Connecting Foreign Languages with Business

The word *global* seems to be everywhere lately. It's being added to company names and product lines, even academic degrees. But what does it really mean?

In the context of business, the term *global* emphasizes our interconnectedness across national borders: The t-shirt I'm wearing at the moment was purchased at a "local" store in the U.S. but it is made of cotton that was farmed in India and ginned on machinery made in Germany, with the final product cut and assembled in Indonesia.

What does it take to be successful in this *global* context? One approach comes in the form of the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERs), created in 1988 by Congress and administered by the Department of Education. The 33 CIBERs located at universities across the nation develop programming that leverages their local expertise and research in areas that can support U.S. businesses in the international marketplace.

A key goal of CIBERs is to make U.S. businesses more competitive in the global economy. Since success in business relies on the ability to understand and interact and communicate with global partners and competitors alike, a required area for all CIBERs is business language education.

Until CIBER funding existed, business language courses were primarily the territory of the "commonly taught languages," the languages with enrollments high enough to warrant offering such a specialized course outside the usual expertise of most language educators. CIBER support has changed the business language landscape in two exciting ways, namely

- *all* languages are now able to develop and expand their business language materials, offerings, etc.. In fact, CIBER support places particular focus on less commonly taught languages, many of which are categorized as "critical" to U.S. national security and economic strength;
- language educators now have access to much-needed education in the areas of business content and business language pedagogy. On top of individual CIBER workshop offerings, best practices and innovations in business language teaching are featured at the annual CIBER [Business Language Conference](#) .

Every CIBER has its own unique approach to linking language to business, depending on factors like local resources and faculty expertise. The business language programming of the CIBER at the George Washington University (GW-CIBER) serves as a good example of the kind of programs CIBERs offer. (For more complete descriptions, [click here](#).)

Business Language Curriculum Development

CIBER support funded GW language faculty in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Russian to develop 15-week business language courses.

Materials for Business Language Teaching

Through CIBER, GW faculty in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, and Japanese developed business language "modules" which can be used to replace existing chapters in lower level language courses.

Professional Development for Business Language Faculty

GW-CIBER offers two annual professional development opportunities for language educators through the "Business Language Network," a platform for materials and ideas exchange.

Business Language Internship Opportunities

GW-CIBER's *Study Abroad @ Home* program matches business language students with internships at international institutions with a base in Washington, DC.

These examples show how just one CIBER takes advantage of the rich local resources for language teachers and learners. All created materials are available free online at [GW-CIBER's Business Language](#) site. For other examples of business language programming or to find a CIBER near you, visit the national [CIBERweb](#) and check back often for updates.

CIBERs and the Communities Standard

By linking language programs directly to the business context both at home and abroad, CIBERs encourage students to "participate in multilingual communities," the heart of the fifth National Standard in Foreign Language Education. Through partnering with businesses, for instance, and promoting use of the language in a new context outside of the classroom, business language programs help learners recognize the real advantage their language skills and cultural competence give them. Once learners have experienced the power of their language abilities in the real-world business context, they are often motivated to look for career opportunities, either at home or abroad, where they can continue to put those abilities to use.

Students in business language programs get to know business information resources in their local community and in other countries, and these resources can better inform them in areas relevant to them personally, such as long-term financial investment. These kinds of resources may well give them an advantage over the average monolingual American, and they can continue to turn to them -- and gain from them! -- in their personal lives in the years to come.

Integrating Business Language into Any Curriculum

Even without direct CIBER support, language educators at any level can make the link in their classes between business and their target language and cultures.

Let's look at a few concrete examples of ways teachers can connect their language teaching to business. One content area with a high level of interest for nearly all levels is careers. At first glance, this topic may seem only relevant to students at the high school and college levels, when students are closer to actually applying for jobs. Yet the topic can be viewed broadly enough to appeal to all levels, as long as it is modified according to interest and curricular relevance. Taking careers as a focus gives learners the opportunity to grapple with cultural products (e.g.,

resumes), practices (e.g., interviews), and perspectives. Tasks can be adjusted to make the language and culture input manageable.

Careers: "Language skills wanted"

- Reading job ads:

Working in pairs, students search job ads for jobs that require proficiency of any kind in the target language. Online services like monster.com allow you to include a language as a search term. Groups will report to the class on three potential jobs that strike them as interesting, giving job title, company name and type, location of job, language skill requirement. Each student should answer the question: Why would this job be a good/not so good fit for me?

- Applying for a job:

Learners at a more advanced level take the "Reading job ads" task described above one step further, actually preparing themselves for the process of applying for one of the jobs they identified as a good fit for them. (Note: When doing the initial task of reading job ads, these students should use resources in the target language, e.g., job ad services like monster.fr, or listings found in online or print magazines and newspapers.) This task would encompass writing a resume and a letter of application, possibly even preparing for a job interview, all in the manner appropriate to the target culture. All of these tasks offer opportunities to engage in discussions about concrete differences and similarities that encourage learners to contemplate cultural perspectives.

- Using language skills on the job:

To broaden students' understanding of how knowledge of a foreign language gives them clout in a job, teachers can invite business practitioners to speak with students about the importance of knowing the target language in their job. This can be set up as a panel with a focus on one or several business areas, depending on how much time and how many speakers are available.

Conclusion

In spite of increased contact across borders, language and culture continue to be barriers in international business (Kelm, 2011; Zhang 2011). Recent research even calls into question the assumption that English is the primary language of international commerce (Kuiper 2007). CIBERs stand behind the belief that an increase in foreign language and cultural knowledge will result in an increase in competitiveness in the global marketplace. CIBER business language programs offer a way to help remove the barriers by providing methods and resources for teaching business language.

For more ideas on connecting business to your language teaching, watch for the new "Business Language in Focus" column in future NCLRC Newsletters.

References:

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