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Attitudes Toward Languages for Business at Two South Florida Universities

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ABSTRACT *This study compares and contrasts the attitudes of business and language professors at two Florida universities toward foreign language for business courses. It presents the results of questionnaires distributed to one hundred and thirty-seven business faculty and thirty-one foreign language professors at the two institutions. The findings provide information about how the two groups view each other, and the reasons why business schools might be opposed to having language requirements. The results also reveal several problems in communication that exist between language and business faculty at the two universities. The purpose of the study is to gather and analyze information about how language and business faculty perceive each other in order to further mutual understanding, communication, and wider acceptance of language for business courses.*

The acceptance of language for business courses in the curriculum depends largely on the attitude of faculty members and administrators toward such courses. However, earlier survey results indicated that lack of cooperation between the two disciplines had sometimes hampered the efforts of those seeking to build joint language and business programs. Several foreign language professors who respond-

ed to a national survey of Spanish for Business at U.S. colleges and universities cited problems of communication with business school faculty as a chief reason for an unsuccessful program;¹ among their claims were that members of the business school either failed to respond to them, or showed no interest in cooperating with them. On the other hand, language professors who described their programs as successful often commented on the interest and support of the business faculty in conducting joint programs and language for business courses. Similar comments have been expressed by business faculty: at annual meetings of the Academy of International Business, business professors informally cited as problems in working with language faculty their unwillingness to cooperate, little understanding of the needs of business students, and lack of flexibility in adapting language courses to business purposes. Others with more positive experiences found language faculty to be accommodating and eager to cooperate with colleagues in the school of business. Clearly, the attitudes of faculty members in both language and business departments play an important role in the ultimate acceptance of language for business courses in the curriculum.

Need for Cooperation

Important language and business professional organizations have recognized the critical need for language for business courses. The organization which accredits colleges of business in the United

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States and Canada, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), has called for the internationalization of the business curriculum.² The Modern Language Association's Commission on the Future of the Profession has recommended that foreign language departments recognize and serve the needs of students by offering courses which teach the practical application of language skills.³ In addition, Congressman Paul Simon has drawn attention to the desperate need for American businessmen and women, diplomats and government employees to communicate effectively in foreign languages.⁴ Several surveys conducted by language and business professors have demonstrated that companies do indeed place a value on foreign language skills in their employees.⁵ Such emphasis on the need for language for business courses cannot be ignored by the academic community.

Purpose of the Present Survey

In order to better understand the attitudes of language and business faculty toward each other and language for business courses, I conducted a survey at two South Florida universities: the University of Miami (UM) and Florida International University (FIU). The survey was designed to measure how language and business faculty of the two universities view each other's disciplines, language for business courses, and their place in the curriculum.

Questionnaires were distributed to all the members of the foreign language and business faculties at both universities. The University of Miami is the leading private institution in the area, while Florida International University is the state university system's campus in Miami. Two related questionnaires were used; one was designed for the modern language faculty, and the other was planned for business faculty. The principal difference in the questionnaires is that the language faculty were asked about their knowledge of business subjects, and the business faculty were queried about their knowledge of foreign languages. All other questions were the same for both groups.

Results

The results of the study may be biased in favor of languages for business, given the importance of international trade in Miami, and the large Hispanic presence in the city. Business faculty in Miami may be unusually sensitive to the advantages of knowing a second language. Nevertheless, neither UM's nor FIU's college of business has a particularly strong foreign language requirement. In

fact, the University of Miami only recently approved a business program with a language requirement: the undergraduate major in international business management. Florida International University has a language requirement in the Master's in International Business degree.

Questionnaires were distributed to sixty-nine professors in the Departments of Finance, Accounting, Management, Marketing, and Information Sciences at the University of Miami and to sixty-eight business faculty at Florida International University. The response rate for business faculty at each university was about forty-five percent. Of the twelve faculty members in the Department of Modern Languages at Florida International, eighty-three percent responded. Slightly over one-third of the nineteen language faculty members of the University of Miami returned their questionnaires.

The first question on both the language and business questionnaires revealed whether the faculty had taken any language or business courses. While almost all of the business faculty had studied a foreign language, only twenty to twenty-five percent of the language professors had studied business courses. Most of the business professors studied French or Spanish, with German a close third. Economics, marketing, and accounting were the courses most frequently studied by the language faculty.

All of the language faculty who had studied business agreed that their courses had been useful. However, only two-thirds of the FIU business professors and forty percent of the UM professors said that knowledge of a foreign language had been very beneficial to them. Almost half of the UM business professors and about one-fourth of the FIU professors said that foreign language study had not been very useful to them. Business courses have helped the language faculty find employment, do their income taxes, understand current issues, and make investments. The business professors cited five areas in which knowledge of a second language had been beneficial to them: communication and culture, professional advancement, travel, reading professional literature, and vocabulary building in English.

One of the most positive results of the survey was that almost all of the respondents in both disciplines expressed a desire to learn more about the other discipline. This interest and acknowledgement of the value of each field are encouraging, since it indicates that greater cooperation between the two disciplines is a distinct possibility for the future. For example, language faculty wanted to know more about business subjects for a variety of

reasons: to conduct real estate transactions, to understand current issues, to prepare income tax returns, to make sound investments, and to run a small business. Business professors expressed interest in learning a wide variety of languages. Spanish was by far the most popular, due to its wide use in Miami and the possibilities for professional advancement and travel. After Spanish, the languages that business professors most wanted to learn were French, Russian, and German.

Business and language faculty at the two universities were asked about the difficulty of learning each other's discipline. Most business faculty members considered foreign languages to be hard to learn, while most foreign language professors said that business subjects were not so difficult to learn. Perhaps the business professors had experienced problems in learning foreign languages. The language teachers may not consider business subjects intellectually challenging, or they simply do not know how difficult business courses are, since only one-fifth to one-fourth have taken such courses.

Another significant result of the survey shows that a majority of language and business professors believe that traditional language courses do not meet the needs of business students very well. Most language faculty members responded that traditional courses meet the needs of business students only fairly well. Over half of the business faculty said such courses do not satisfy student needs very well.

The majority of language and business faculty agreed on the skills that are most important for business students to acquire in the foreign language classroom. They ranked conversation and listening comprehension foremost among eight skills, which included culture, grammar, business terminology, business correspondence, reading skills, and pronunciation. Only the FIU language faculty ranked business terminology ahead of conversation and listening comprehension. These findings are consistent with the results of a survey of two hundred and fifty business personnel conducted by Patricia Francis Cholakian.⁶ The purpose of her survey was to learn which foreign language skills were considered the most valuable by employers. The overwhelming response indicated that comprehending and communicating were recognized as the most important foreign language skills. The implications of these results are that foreign language courses for business students should place a strong emphasis on developing communication skills.

In the South Florida study, business correspondence and grammar were identified as the

least important skills for business students to learn, although they were still rated as fairly important. The business professors at FIU and the language professors at UM ranked business correspondence as the least important of the eight skills, while the UM business faculty and the FIU language faculty considered grammar to be the least important of the content areas.

According to the survey, most business faculty are not familiar with language for business courses. This indicates a lack of awareness of the course offerings by the language department, since both universities offer language for business courses. The language departments need to spend more time and effort familiarizing business faculty with the courses that are intended for their students. However, a lack of awareness of language for business courses is a problem even among the language faculty, since only half the respondents are familiar with this type of course. All language and business faculty members should be made aware of language for business courses in order to advise students about them.

Both language and business faculty overwhelmingly agreed that language for business courses should carry the same amount of credit as other language courses. This implies that such courses should occupy a place in the curriculum equal to that of more traditional courses.

Language professors often speculate about why more degree programs in business do not have a language requirement. In answer to this question in the survey, the business faculty identified two major reasons and three minor reasons why business programs resist having a language requirement. The most frequently cited reason was that foreign languages are not important enough to be included in the curriculum, relative to core business skills. Students of domestic business subjects probably will have no need for foreign languages, and so why should they be forced to study them? The second major reason is that the business curriculum is already filled with area requirements. The students have no time for electives such as foreign languages. Other business professors claimed students would avoid enrolling in business programs if they included a language requirement. Some faculty members said ethnocentricity was a reason for opposition to the inclusion of a language requirement. Two professors stated that some colleagues had their own problems with languages and so resisted students' learning foreign languages.

Language professors felt that ethnocentricity was a major reason why more business programs do not have a language requirement. Others gave the

reasons of a crowded curriculum, an attitude that languages were not important enough, and possible student resistance to a language requirement.

Apparently, many arguments exist against the establishment of more language requirements in business school programs. In international business programs, a language requirement is clearly more appropriate than in domestic programs. When language departments advocate the creation of a language requirement for such programs, they should offer language for business courses designed especially for the needs of business students. These courses should have a greater appeal for the planners of international business curricula than traditional language courses.

In their responses to the questionnaire, business and language faculty did not agree on what level or levels to offer language for business courses. Many business faculty favored courses at either the intermediate level or all three levels. In contrast, language faculty felt courses at either the intermediate and advanced or at all three levels are best. According to a survey of Spanish for business courses, most of the offerings are at the intermediate level.⁷

One of the purposes of the questionnaire was to determine the level of communication among faculty members in language and business. According to the responses, very little dialogue takes place between the two disciplines. Basically the two groups appear somewhat isolated from each other, with little opportunity for social or professional exchange. When asked about problems in communication between the two areas, most of the business faculty responded that they had never communicated with colleagues in the language department. Language professors claimed never to have spoken to colleagues in the business school. Others said they had no idea about any problems in communication because they simply did not communicate. Some business faculty said that they felt no need to communicate.

Several faculty members mentioned specific problems in communication, describing a fundamentally different view of the world held by the two groups. Others mentioned the different objectives of language departments and business schools. Some professors described the lack of understanding of each other's viewpoint, and the absence of desire to build any understanding. A few language faculty stated that they had tried repeatedly to communicate with colleagues in business, but nothing ever came from their initiative.

Clearly, the results of the survey reveal a need for greater communication among faculty members

in both fields. Without an exchange of information about courses, needs, and objectives, little opportunity exists for cooperation and joint programs. If business faculty are largely uninformed about language for business courses already in operation or in the planning stage, they cannot be expected to send students to the courses. Language faculty members need to inform and involve their business colleagues in curriculum planning of language for business courses and general language courses.

The results of this survey also reveal that language and business faculty share interest in and respect for each other's discipline. This implies a mutual willingness to interact if given the opportunity. The Hankamer School of Business at Baylor University provides an example of how interested business faculty can be in foreign language study. Baylor offered two faculty sabbaticals to business professors interested in attending intensive language programs in the summer of 1983. Twenty out of one hundred business faculty applied for the language training programs. Other examples of cooperation between foreign languages and business include joint programs such as the ones at Eastern Michigan University and the University of South Carolina.⁸ The developers of these successful programs persisted in their efforts to establish lines of communication between language and business units. Eventually their hard work resulted in the creation of the language and international trade program at Eastern Michigan and the Master's in International Business (MIBS) program at South Carolina.

With better communication between the two groups, the attitudes of language and business faculty toward languages for business can be improved for a multitude of purposes: mutual understanding, professional growth, and the practical education of students.

NOTES

¹Christine Uber Grosse, "A Survey of Spanish for Business at AACSB Colleges and Universities in the United States," *The Modern Language Journal*, 66 (1982), 383-90. Another reference to a lack of cooperation from business faculty and deans is found in a review of a survey of commercial language courses by Patricia W. Cummins, in Claire Gaudiani, et al., "Foreign Languages and the Professional Curricula," in Robert G. Mead, ed., *Foreign Languages: Key Links in the Chain of Learning* (Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference, 1983), p. 76.

²Robert E. Grosse and Gerald W. Perritt, *International Business Curricula: A Global Survey* (Waco, TX: Academy of International Business, 1980), p. vii.

³Commission on the Future of the Profession, "Working Paper of the Commission on the Future of the Profession," *PMLA*, 96 (1981), pp. 525-40.

⁴Paul Simon, *The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis* (New York: Continuum, 1980).

⁵Several surveys reveal that companies value their employees' foreign language skills. See Patricia Francis Cholakian, "Commercial French: An Opportunity for Innovative Classroom Techniques," *The French Review*, 54 (1981), 666-71; John R. Hubbard and Robert A. Ristau, "A Survey of Bilingual Employment Oppor-

tunities in International Trade," *Foreign Language Annals*, 15 (1982), 115-21; Ronald L. Carter and Robert McGlashan, "International Business Programs: A Needs Assessment," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of International Business, Montreal, Canada, on October 17, 1981.

⁶Cholakian, p. 666.

⁷Uber Grosse, p. 384.

⁸See Elizabeth G. Joiner and Robert J. Kuhne, "The MIBS Program at South Carolina: An Option for Potential International Business Executives," *The Modern Language Journal*, 65 (1981), 262-68.

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