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TEACHING BUSINESS VOCABULARY AND PRACTICE  
THROUGH SPECIALIZED LANGUAGE READERS AT  
THE INTERMEDIATE COLLEGE LEVEL

Among the perennial challenges to the foreign language teacher is the question of how to bring together the traditional approach to language teaching with the pressing demands for “relevancy” of the language instruction to a utilitarian purpose. The methodology employed traditionally in language instruction consisted of basic grammar drills combined with cultural vignettes to attempt to produce, at least in the teachers’ minds, a well-rounded foreign language initiate. The emphasis of the traditional instruction was on memorizing the rules of grammar in the hope that students would remember them when faced with a situation where they had to use the language. This system produced legions of students who could quote the rules by chapter and verse, and who consequently scored high on grammar-based tests, but who could not go beyond a couple of sentences without the aid of the text or a dictionary in a real-life situation. In his monitor theory, S. Krashen (1975) demonstrated that the achievement of high scores on standard grammar tests has little relevance to the ability to communicate orally in a foreign language. This leads one to question why so much time is still being spent on rote memory drills.

Approaches offering alternatives to the traditional importance placed on grammar are constantly being explored as are approaches to attempt to get students to produce language. Noteworthy is T. Terrell’s “natural approach,” which emphasized that the focus in a communicative situation should be on the message. Terrell postulated that it should be easier to learn the language much as a child does with real needs being addressed by those around him/her. The formal instruction in the language comes after the student comprehends the message through imitation and relating the message to the actual situation. Another noteworthy approach was J. J. Asher’s “Total Physical Response.” This approach was centered on activi-

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ties in which the teacher asks students to act out events or to perform specified actions. The focus again is on the student responding to the stimuli and associating the requirement to the language as a by-product of his/her action. There are, of course, many other approaches that could be mentioned, however, they are not the focus of this article.

Most foreign language teachers agree that there is no substitute for a “total immersion” experience in a foreign country to truly learn the language and the culture. Several programs such as the junior year abroad and “Summer in Quebec” abound. These, by and large, are merely extensions of the university academic experience in a foreign country. Few of these actually require a “total immersion” with host country nationals. An exception to this pattern, however, is the Multinational Organization Studies (MOS) major at St. Mary’s University of Texas, which requires a summer internship with a French, Spanish, or German institution or business in a country in which these languages are spoken.

Given, then, the limited possibilities to live, work, and study abroad, the reality is that most of our students, no matter at what level, will never be able to participate in such an experience. So, since a “total immersion” experience is a distant possibility at best, the challenge to the teacher in the college classroom, and particularly at the intermediate level (after grammar instruction has been received at the high school and the elementary college level) is to make the experience of language learning in the classroom environment *relevant* and *applicable* to the student’s career interests. For college students career interest is reflected in the major they have chosen to study.

Most college students, however, take foreign languages only to satisfy graduation requirements. The attitude that foreign languages are just one more “ticket to punch” on the graduation route is very widespread among undergraduates. Much of this attitude can be traced to the traditional approach used to teach languages and the question of relevance, or lack thereof, to the student’s major. Nonetheless, there is no reason to have students participate in endless, and usually meaningless, grammar drills in what has been described as “languages for languages’ sake.” There is room in the college language curriculum to give to the student a practical application experience related to his or her major. At St. Mary’s, this premise led to a field test of an integrated professional language component within the intermediate level language courses in French and Spanish.

Before proceeding, let us take a quick look at St. Mary's University. It is a small (undergraduate enrollment, 2400) Catholic liberal arts school in San Antonio, Texas, founded by the Brothers and Priests of the Society of Mary in 1852. The university is divided into five schools—Humanities and Social Sciences; Science, Engineering, and Technology; Business and Administration; Graduate and Law. The student body consists of about 60% women and 40% men. Also, there is a large Hispanic population, overwhelmingly Mexican-American of around 58% to 62%, with the rest Anglophone European Americans or Anglophone African Americans and a small, but growing, international student body.

The Hispanic population is not necessarily bilingual, since most of them are third- and fourth-generation United States born. Linguistically, this group is a mixed population of “native” speakers of Spanish who are bilingual and a large “semi”-native population that speaks a *patois* of English and Spanish called “tex-mex” or “spanglish.” This *patois* consists of Spanish grammar and syntax with English vocabulary, which sometimes gets “hispanicized” to enable the speaker to communicate with his/her conversant. Occasionally, the English verb also gets “hispanicized” with the Spanish ending, *e.g.*, “quiero ‘pichar” (“I want to pitch” with an added -ar of the Spanish *lanzar*, to pitch). A typical “tex-mex” sentence might run like this—“Oye, quiero que vayas conmigo al ‘party” (“Say, I want you to go to the party with me”) or “Tu carro está muy ‘shiny’ y ‘pretty’ (“Your car is very shiny and pretty”). Finally, there is the fine example of the mother of one of my former students who told me that Patricia, her daughter, “está *teachando*” (“She is teaching”) in response to my question about her daughter’s current employment.

Among this group one finds a bewildering array of linguistic proficiency in Spanish ranging from natives to monolingual Anglophones. Culturally, the group is very aware of its Hispanic roots and living in a region with a very rich Spanish-Mexican tradition it is hard to escape them. However, to become more effective in society politically and socially and to achieve success in business, this group has a pressing need to acquire a vocabulary and practice in Spanish for everyday needs in order to improve and enhance speaking and writing skills in Spanish. Unfortunately, other than for mandated foreign language classes starting in some cases at the elementary school level, most Mexican Americans have not had any *formal* education in the language. They are, however, surrounded daily by the language either at home or in their neighborhoods.

This population has different needs than the average English-speaking students known in the American Southwest as “Anglos.” Its members needs are centered around “formalization” of the spoken language, which involves correcting speech, spelling, associating grammar with their speech and increasing their vocabulary in Spanish. This, of course, requires imaginative approaches to teach them Spanish.

The challenge for the teacher is to find ways to capitalize on this rich repository of language knowledge and to find ways to assist the students to improve their skills, no matter how rudimentary these may be, so they can utilize them in their chosen professions. In an economy like that of San Antonio and South Texas, which depends so much on Mexican trade even without the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Spanish is a necessity. Consequently, the Languages Department at Saint Mary’s University undertook the task of coming up with ways to assist not only the Hispanics, but all students, to capitalize on their existing language skills.

The English-speaking population (which includes many second- and later-generation Spanish-surnamed individuals) has different problems. Many are from South Texas, and thus no strangers to Spanish. However, their language skills reflect previous generations of Spanish teachers who believed strongly in the constant repetition of verb forms and on “pronunciation” as the base for teaching the language. Given the often sterile environment in which this “learning” took place, and still takes place (the classroom for one hour per day for one to two years), many of them never get past the regurgitation of verb forms with no eventual application. Consequently, we get many students in this category who are turned off by the constant drilling of verbs, while others become experts at conjugating verbs and at memorizing the grammar rules, but, as was mentioned before, not able to use the language outside the context of the classroom. All this has occurred despite the ready availability of opportunities not only to practice the language, given the 63% Hispanic population of San Antonio, but to listen and see programming in Spanish from its two television stations (both Univision and Telemundo serve San Antonio) and five radio stations that broadcast in Spanish and “Tex-Mex.”

Our students of French have a different problem. Despite the natural affinity of the two romance languages, Spanish and French, and despite the presence of a small, but active, Francophile and Francophone population in the San Antonio area, most are not able to practice their skills un-

less they go abroad for a junior year or do an internship under the Multinational Organization Studies (MOS) Program, described before. French, nonetheless, is the second most popular language studied at both the high school and the college level in San Antonio.

Among our greatest number of majors are those of the School of Business—which includes accounting, marketing, human resources, international business, finance and management. Two other disciplines account for the bulk of our university's majors—Education and Pre-Medicine. The university has a requirement for one year of a modern or classical language at the appropriate level, meaning that those who have studied a language in high school or learned it at home cannot take an introductory class except for remedial purposes. The majority of students must complete an intermediate level course in order to comply with the requirement.

The intermediate level of language instruction is, according to Disick, “a perplexing disarray of aptitudes, interests, and competencies” (417). This assessment is very applicable to the situation at St. Mary's with its student population mix. The questions of relevance and the social need for improving the language skills of our students gave the faculty in the department the impetus to look at new ways to teach our intermediate students. With this in mind, we had a series of discussions regarding the different approaches we could take to address our students' needs and our department's performance. After careful consideration and consultation among the language faculty, we decided to conduct a field test during the Spring, 1994 semester with the intermediate level classes in both French and Spanish using the Schaum Foreign Language Series authored by Katia Brillié Lutz, Conrad Schmitt, and Protase “Woody” Woodford. The series is published by McGraw-Hill and, although there are several texts which have supplements dealing with specialized language, we felt that this particular series offered us the most versatility and the best organization for our purposes.

We contacted McGraw-Hill Publishers and told them of our plans. We also requested a small grant-honorarium for all our teachers, both part-time and full-time, to attend a workshop on the concept and to work out the logistics involved in implementing the program. In January 1994, our department received the grant and we proceeded to conduct what we called a “field test” of the Schaum Series Readers. This series currently consists of nine titles, similar in both French and Spanish: Law and

Criminology; Medicine and Medical Services; Finance and Accounting; Economics and Finance; Commerce and Marketing; Tourism and Hotel Management; Sociology and Social Services; Education and Teaching; and Political Science and International Relations.

The test was limited to the second-semester intermediate French and Spanish college students because these texts were available and we felt these students were in the best position to capitalize on the instruction. The objectives of the test were:

- 1) to introduce the students to the lexicon of their chosen or a related profession;
- 2) to address the question of “relevancy” of language instruction to their majors;
- 3) to encourage interest in the vocabulary development and speaking proficiency by giving the students language skills applicable to their majors;
- 4) to provide the students a type of transfer of skills learned in English in the Business classroom to the Spanish classroom and vice-versa;
- 5) to provide teachers with a new approach to the teaching of college intermediate level courses.

Nine sections of intermediate Spanish numbering twenty-five students each and one section of intermediate French numbering fourteen, participated in the field test. Each class section was divided into groups by major. For the business majors we used two texts, *Comercio y Marketing* [Commerce and Marketing] and *Finanzas y Contabilidad* [Finance and Accounting]. Students were grouped according to their choice, since we had no text for Human Resources, for example. Nonetheless, except for the accounting majors, the majority generally opted for the Commerce and Marketing group in each section. Since groups were made up of underclassmen in all year groups, from freshman to senior, we found that subject knowledge varied from one group to another. Many freshmen and sophomores in the group required upper classmen to step into the leadership role since they had taken more business classes. However, in order to promote the use of Spanish or French by all members, group leadership was rotated. A second assignment, which was also rotated, was that of “recorder,” whose duty it was to write down, research, and report to the

group, and to the class, words encountered for which they could not find the meaning within the resources readily available in the classroom. Given the specific nature of specialized business lexicon, a typical collegiate dictionary is woefully inadequate for the task. A copy of the lexicon compiled during the semester was given to all group members at the end. According to their comments, most students benefited from this activity.

A typical class section consisted of between three and eight students. Fewer than three students created a situation that was not deemed useful, since the absence of any student would leave a single-person "group." More than eight was too unwieldy and did not provide weaker students the opportunity to participate and contribute to the discussions.

To lessen the impact of any presumed advantage of the native- or almost native-Spanish speakers, and to relieve a natural anxiety of the non-native population toward speaking, the "spoken" language was never graded and was corrected only at the end of the discussion session. Even then, evaluation of oral usage consisted of a general comment of things to correct for the future, and not given as individual criticism. This encouraged even the Anglophones to "open up" and to speak during discussions in class. The relevancy of the topics being discussed as related to knowledge acquired in the business curriculum was a very good stimulus for most students, judging from their comments.

Testing was done by means of selecting a section from the reading assignment prepared in advance for the class and having students answer the questions in class either through a "pop quiz" or through oral questioning about the selected part. There are, however, many opportunities to grade the individual, since the text chapters are divided by topic containing a series of exercises for both oral and written comprehension and practice.

Another innovation made by two of the teachers, one in Spanish and one in French, was a videotaped presentation by each member of every group at the conclusion of the course, in the target language. The students gave a short presentation on what they learned in the course and what use they could make of the vocabulary acquired. The teacher then viewed the videotape and assigned a grade as part of the overall course grade.

A questionnaire, a copy of which is attached as Appendix A, was administered to a representative group of 125 Spanish students and 14 French students regarding the conduct of the instruction. The general consensus was that this approach benefited all the students and gave them not

only the tools to work with for the future but an advantage over those who had not studied the specialized lexicon. An abbreviated compilation of the answers to the questionnaire is found as Appendix B. In addition, judging by the comments received, most students got some positive reinforcement of their business knowledge. The majority of students stated in their comments that they would not sell back their Schaum Readers to the bookstore since they deemed them useful for their future careers.

As with any new approaches to teaching, there were a few difficulties in connection with the field test, that include:

- a. The role of the teacher in this environment was one of proctor/facilitator because of the discipline-based nature of the topics and the very specialized vocabulary that was entailed. It was a very difficult thing to do, especially for some of the senior faculty members used in conducting their classes in the same manner throughout their lives. There was a feeling of a “loss of control” on their part.
- b. The lack of texts for some of the more numerous majors such as Psychology was a hindrance in that these majors had to go with an “affinity” text rather than one directly related to their majors. Likewise the business students were split into two different camps, with Human Resources Management totally absent from the field.
- c. Lack of sufficient time to really “dig” into the heart of the discipline. We set aside one scheduled hour per week, which was not nearly sufficient according to the students.
- d. Lack of experience with the concept. To our knowledge, what we attempted has never been done. Therefore, we had to “feel” our way through and, of course, made many mistakes.

After analyzing the students’ comments and responses to the questionnaire, we came to the following conclusions and recommendations: First of all, judging from students’ and teachers’ comments, it was overall a very positive experience for both the instructors and the students. The most obvious benefit to the students was to actually experience vocabulary and text pertinent to their chosen majors. This gave them a powerful incentive to dedicate more time to the study of the language, knowing that they were learning something of value for a lifetime, in some cases.

Many students commented that they were retaining the text for use in their careers.

Some of the instructors had initial reservations regarding the use of the readers, since most do not know the specialized lexicon nor the body of knowledge of the disciplines in any depth. In addition, trying to guide as many as six groups in one class, with each group studying such diverse titles as those cited, was initially a daunting task. However, all the instructors viewed this as a learning experience, an opportunity to improve and expand their own vocabularies. They felt that they benefited as much from the experience as the students.

McGraw-Hill, and others in this field, should consider putting some of the work, such as the vocabularies and the chapter quizzes, into computer-generated applications. Also some consideration should be given to CD-ROM for materials such as the anatomical charts in the medical reader. This would facilitate individually paced learning and reinforcement. Students could return to the language laboratory on their own time and work on exercises that require some more time. Consideration should also be given to computer-generated midterm examinations and "pop-quizzes" as part of the package.

Finally, we feel that this innovative approach accomplished its objectives. Teaching business students, and other students of specific disciplines, the lexicon of their chosen profession in a foreign language class not only encouraged them to delve deeper into the language but it also reinforced knowledge in their field. It served as a confidence builder in the use of the foreign language. The department has adopted the Schaum Series Readers as an integral part of language instruction and is into the second year of use. We expect to continue to look for ways to improve our efforts and to share what we have learned with others looking for ways to make language classes relevant to the real world of business and other professions.

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## APPENDIX A QUESTIONNAIRE

### McGraw-Hill Reader "Field Test" Questionnaire

#### COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What year will you graduate from St. Mary's?  
1994 \_\_\_ 1995 \_\_\_ 1996 \_\_\_ 1997 \_\_\_ 1998 \_\_\_
2. How many semesters of French or Spanish (circle one) have you had?  
Semesters studied    2       4       6 or more  
High School \_\_\_ College \_\_\_
3. I consider myself a \_\_\_\_\_ speaker of French/Spanish (Circle one):  
Native    semi-native    non
4. The introduction of the Major-based readers (Circle one):
  - a. has had a positive impact on my ability with the language
  - b. has had no effect on my ability with the language
  - c. has had a negative impact on my ability with the language
  - d. been a waste of time and should be discontinued
5. If your answer to question 4 was (a) circle all that apply.

- a. my vocabulary has increased
  - b. my reading comprehension ability has improved
  - c. my speaking ability has improved
  - d. Other
6. If your answer to question 4 was (c) or (d) please write down your comments here:
7. In your own words what are the strengths of major-based instruction:
8. In your own words what are the weaknesses of major-based instruction:
9. How would you test the materials presented in class?
10. How would you combine the teaching of regular grammar with this concept?
11. Suggestions/Final comments

## APPENDIX B RESPONSES TO QUESTIONNAIRE

Due to administrative problems only a representative sample consisting of five of nine sections of Spanish and one French section were polled. A total of 11 out of 14 French students and 101 out of 125 Spanish students participated. Answers to questions posed in the questionnaire were tabulated and the results presented here. Discrepancies in numbers are due to missing or multiple answers provided by the respondents and, of course absences for the day.

### COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What year will you graduate from St. Mary's?  
1994: 23; 1995: 41; 1996: 45; 1997: 9
2. How many semesters of French or Spanish (circle one) have you had?
- |                   |   |    |           |
|-------------------|---|----|-----------|
| Semesters studied | 2 | 4  | 6 or more |
| High School       |   |    |           |
| Spanish:          | 4 | 69 | 20        |

French:	1	4	0
College			
Spanish:	101	2	
French:	11	0	

3. I consider myself a \_\_\_\_\_ speaker of French/Spanish.  
 Spanish Native: 10; Semi-native: 78; Non: 37  
 French Native: 2; Semi-native: 3; Non: 6
4. The introduction of the Major-based readers (Circle one):
- a. has had a positive impact on my ability with the language  
 Spanish: 80                      French: 11
  - b. has had no effect on my ability with the language  
 Spanish: 21                      French: 0
  - c. has had a negative impact on my ability with the language  
 Spanish: 6                      French: 0
  - d. been a waste of time and should be discontinued  
 Spanish: 0                      French: 0
5. If your answer to question 4 was (a) circle all that apply.
- a. my vocabulary has increased  
 Spanish: 68                      French: 11
  - b. my reading comprehension ability has improved  
 Spanish: 59                      French: 10
  - c. my speaking ability has improved  
 Spanish: 43                      French: 4
  - d. Other: Confidence increased: 15 in Spanish
6. If your answer to question 4 was (c) or (d) please write down your comments here: (See student comments in Appendix C).
7. In your own words what are the strengths of major-based instruction: (Only most common comments are represented.)
- |                                 |             |           |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Applicability to Major:         | Spanish: 78 | French: 9 |
| Vocabulary Acquisition:         | Spanish: 51 | French: 8 |
| Improved reading comprehension: | Spanish: 26 | French: 6 |
8. In your own words what are the weaknesses of major-based instruction: (Only most common comments are represented.)
- |                                |             |           |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Difficulty of readings:        | Spanish: 15 | French: 0 |
| Too little time spent on them: | Spanish: 20 | French: 0 |

Texts for all majors not available: Spanish: 14 French: 0

9. How would you test the materials presented in class? (only most common comments are represented:

Vocabulary tests: Spanish: 24 French: 1

Essay tests: Spanish: 22 French: 0

Oral test by major: Spanish: 10 French: 0

By oral presentation: Spanish: 13 French: 7

No test Spanish: 11 French: 0

10. How would you combine the teaching of regular grammar with this concept?

Combine with the vocabulary in the regular text:

Spanish: 2 French: 0

Teach grammar in Fall/ Schaum Reader in the Spring:

Spanish: 3 French: 2

Teach Schaum Readers in a separate course:

Spanish: 8 French: 1

11. Suggestions/Final comments: See Appendix C.

## APPENDIX C SELECTED AND ABBREVIATED STUDENT COMMENTS

### FRENCH

I would continue this program. It greatly benefits the students.

I liked the fact that we get to make up our own syllabus, it helped me to keep organized and felt like it was my responsibility to see if I was up-to-date on the chapters.

I enjoyed reading the book and I have learned a great deal of vocabulary that relates to the business world. It is a great help.

### SPANISH

My confidence in speaking Spanish at work increased dramatically! Even my mother, who is a native Mexican has noticed an improvement.

With a larger vocabulary, I am not as hesitant to speak Spanish.

I really like this program, but to be truly effective it requires a lot more time devoted to it. I will, however, definitely keep the book for future reference.

I have learned a lot more from this reader. I plan not to sell it back because it is indeed a helpful tool for my studies.

It has helped me to understand all that I have learned in other classes & translate it into Spanish.

You learn about your career choice. It is beneficial! My sister went on an interview where one of the sessions was an interview in Spanish. She was thrown out because she didn't know many words in her related field. These books start helping us with these types of problems.

To me it was helpful to know how to translate accounting terms into Spanish since I'm thinking about going to work in Mexico.

The answers to the questions should not be given in the back of the book. (Common comment)

It was good to actually see how you can communicate thoughts & expressions that are related to your field in Spanish. It just seems more practical. This was a positive learning experience and should be continued.

Use only this book or make a separate class for it.

I learned things about my field of study—helped me to communicate across cultural diversity, especially living in South Texas.

It enabled me to gain skills to communicate with Spanish-speaking clients. It give me a competitive advantage over accountants who do not know the accounting Spanish terminology.

This book is worthwhile. I like it. (common comment)

Great opportunity to learn about my major in Spanish.