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MANAGING AN ADVANCED BUSINESS
SPANISH COURSE WITH BUSINESS MAJORS
AND NATIVE SPEAKERS

A junior level commercial Spanish course has been taught at the University of Houston for more than twenty years. It was originally designed as a business letter writing course for Spanish majors who wanted to add a practical dimension to their BA degrees. In recent years, however, an increasing number of business majors and native speakers have enrolled in the course. The needs and interests of this new group have presented a daunting challenge for the instructor, whose original academic training was traditional studies in language, literature, and history. The organization and content of the course have changed profoundly. This article discusses four topics: 1) the urban and academic environment in which the course is taught; 2) basic course ground rules that keep the course focused and realistic in regard to both student and instructor expectations; 3) group activities that take advantage of the students' sophisticated linguistic, cultural, and business backgrounds; and 4) readily available extratextual materials used to enrich the class content and stimulate student interest.

In regard to the environment in which the class is taught, Houston, Texas, is an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-lingual city with an equally expanding role in international trade. At the present time, the city's population is estimated to be approximately 28% Spanish speaking and, according to recent Houston Chamber of Commerce figures, the port of Houston is ranked second in the nation for trade tonnage with Latin American countries. The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January, 1994, significantly increased the total volume of trade throughout 1994 between the US and Mexico, much of which passed through Texas. During 1994, Texas-based companies, in particular, experienced an export boom of goods and services headed for the Mexican market.

Global Business Languages (1996)

The combination of the city's large Spanish-speaking population, Houston's rapidly growing involvement in international trade, and the dramatic increase in the volume of trade between Texas companies and their counterparts in Mexico has had a direct impact quantitatively and qualitatively on enrollments in the University of Houston's junior level commercial Spanish course. The increasing number of business majors enrolling in the course in recent years reflects, in no small part, a change in orientation in the University's College of Business Administration. The latter, in response to the expanding internationalization of Houston's economy, is actively internationalizing its curriculum. Commercial Spanish is listed as one of the options for fulfilling the College's requirement of 18 semester credit hours of advanced level electives outside the College's course offerings.

As the size of Houston's Hispanic population has increased dramatically, so too has the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled at the University of Houston. As a result, the percentage of native and near-native Spanish-speaking students enrolled in commercial Spanish has also increased significantly. Many of these students have been raised in predominantly Spanish speaking homes; some of them were born in Spanish-speaking countries and came to the US in early childhood or during their elementary school years. Their speaking and listening skills tend to be well developed, though they frequently lack sophistication in their reading and writing skills. These students are aware of the increasing demand for bilingual, bicultural personnel in the business sector not only in Houston but also throughout the state of Texas. Some of the native and near-native students are, in fact, also business majors. The latter bring to the course not only highly developed Spanish linguistic skills, but also sophisticated knowledge and awareness of the business concepts that form the core of the course's content. What these business majors need from the course is specific vocabulary and terminology as well as writing practice.

This combination of traditional foreign language majors, native and near-native Spanish speakers, and business majors, some of whom are highly fluent, has required significant changes in the course's organization and content. In order to add greater intellectual depth and a broader scope to the class, the original one semester commercial Spanish course has been expanded to a two semester sequence entitled "Spanish for Business and Trade." The additional semester not only allows for greater

breadth of coverage related to business concepts and terminology, but it has also made it possible to add new materials and group projects. These include current articles from the business sections of Spanish-language newspapers, reports on current political and economic events from Spanish-language TV newscasts, and student presentations on the current economic and political circumstances of Spain and individual Latin American countries.

With the course's diverse student population, in terms of both linguistic skills and prior business knowledge, certain ground rules are established at the beginning and reiterated throughout the semester. The stated fundamental goal of the course is to present and reinforce business terminology in context so that both the meaning of the terms *and* the bilingual Spanish/English lexicon are essential. The instructor stresses the fact that the world of international trade is multilingual and multicultural, and that students may someday serve as the intermediaries of transactions. In this context, everyone has something to learn from the course, including native Spanish speakers who are responsible for equivalent English business terminology. Furthermore, the students are continually reminded that the function of the contextualized repetition of vocabulary, through various modes of presentation, is to help them easily recognize and complete all items in the vocabulary exercises, the central core of most foreign language business texts in Spanish. The clear verbalization and reiteration of this rationale makes it easier for students to accept the repetition. The use of visuals, particularly overheads, and articles, in which the vocabulary appears in context, helps to reduce the potential boredom related to repetition.

Beyond clearly stating the class's fundamental goal, the instructor must define the limits of the course. He or she repeatedly emphasizes that the class is not a Business course in Spanish, but rather a *Spanish class about business*. Furthermore, students are reminded that the appropriate level of the course is similar to that of an introductory business course taught outside the College of Business Administration. A course formerly taught in the University of Houston's College of Technology provides a good model. The textbook that was used in that course is helpful in determining what concepts are appropriate to cover in Spanish for Business and Trade (see Rachman).

In appropriately defining the limits of the course, it is important to reiterate that the class, despite its emphasis on a bilingual business lexi-

con, is first and foremost a Spanish course in which the primary, if not exclusive, means of communication is Spanish. In this respect, a fundamental ground rule in limiting the scope of the course is the clear and repeated policy that all concepts discussed must be clearly communicated in Spanish at a level understandable by everyone, including non-business students. Concepts that do not meet this criterion are deemed beyond the academic level of the class. Recently, while discussing in Spanish the higher level of the corporate tax rate as a possible disadvantage of incorporation, a concept presented in the textbook, a bilingual Finance major wanted the instructor to discuss and explain the use of corporate tax shelters as a means of avoiding the disadvantage of the higher corporate rate. His immediate response was that, while the question was appropriate in a Finance class, it was beyond the level of an introductory business course. After class, the student was invited to make a presentation on the subject; he immediately admitted that he had studied the subject in English and, even though he was bilingual, he did not possess the vocabulary in Spanish to present this complex topic for a general audience.

Two additional ground rules prevent the class from getting beyond the instructor's knowledge and also facilitate classroom management on a day to day basis. Though it is important to acknowledge national and regional variations in business vocabulary, the terminology presented in the textbook is considered standard; therefore, all students are required to learn the text's vocabulary for purposes of standardizing the grading of tests. Similarly, business students are welcome to challenge the textbooks interpretations and explanations, both in classroom discussion and in response to exam questions. All such discussions, however, must begin with a clear acknowledgment and understanding of exactly what it is the textbook says about the matter under consideration. If these final two ground rules are not followed, chaos can quickly develop.

Beyond these policies, learning activities need to be designed that take maximum advantage of the advanced experience and knowledge that some of the students bring to the course. In many advanced level foreign language classes, students complain that they do not have enough opportunity to build communicative skills, especially in standard literature and civilization classes in which they are learning new information or analytical skills. For this reason, among others, students are formed into groups to present, reinforce, or lead discussions on concepts or situations

presented in the course textbook (see Doyle, et al.). This also allows the instructor to assume more the role of facilitator of the learning process rather than an expert in business, which, in fact, many teachers of foreign language business courses are unable to claim. When the topic to be presented is related to business concepts or terminology, a business major is paired with a non-business foreign language major. When the topic is related to cultural differences, examples of which are presented in the course textbook, native-speaking Hispanic students are paired with non-Hispanic students. For paired group presentations, students are expected to meet and discuss the topic before their joint class presentation, since the experience constitutes a learning opportunity for both students, even for the business student who must verbalize the business concepts in Spanish for his/her partner.

The introductory business textbook, mentioned earlier, serves as a guide for the instructor in determining which topics to assign to students for group presentations and which to present themselves in a brief lecture format. There is, in fact, a direct correspondence between the concepts presented in the Business Spanish textbook and those presented in the introductory business textbook. Concepts that can be readily and profitably expanded are immediately apparent from consulting the introductory textbook. Such concepts are designated for short lecture type presentations, using visuals such as overheads. The concepts which are adequately developed in the Spanish language course textbook are assigned for student groups to present, reinforce, and, where appropriate, elaborate.

Items one and two of the appendix suggest how such presentations are organized. Item one presents an outline format, given to the student group, suggesting key concepts and terminology they might develop in their presentation. Item one presents two topics. The first topic, drawn from the course textbook, focuses on the differences between types of *mayoristas* or wholesalers. The second topic focuses on traditional and modern retail outlets or *minoristas* in the Hispanic world. The presenting team is asked to contrast customer/retailer relations in traditional and “modern” outlets. Since this contrast is not treated in the text and involves subtle differences readily observable to a native Spanish speaker, the presentation of these topics is assigned to a team composed of a business major and a Spanish speaker who has lived in Spain or Latin America.

Item two, which develops the important intermediary functions of *mayoristas* (wholesalers), is not covered in the Business Spanish text-

book, but this topic is amply discussed in the English language introductory business textbook. A discussion of the contrasts between two *canales de distribución*, one in which the *fabricante* markets his/her products directly to the *consumidor* and one in which the *fabricante* uses the services of a *mayorista*, provides the instructor with an excellent opportunity to reinforce the vocabulary with its contextualized meaning, while presenting important information not covered in the text. Two overheads are used to focus student attention. The first overhead delineates the responsibilities that must be assumed by a *fabricante* who markets directly to the public. The second overhead, shown in item two, defines responsibilities that the *fabricante* can shift to the *mayorista* if the former chooses to use this *canal de distribución*.

Another type of effective group learning activity is small group discussions of case studies, also presented in the course textbook. The class is divided into groups of four to five students. Each group has at least two business and two non-business majors (the overall class composition is usually 50% or more business majors). Non-native foreign language majors are evenly divided among the groups. Discussion guideline questions emphasize an analysis of the situation and recommendations for resolving the problem in a “win-win” manner. Appendix item three presents discussion guideline questions for a case study based on a historical incident involving Chilean terrorists in 1989 who injected cyanide into grapes exported to the United States. The guideline questions ask the students to consider both the economic and moral issues involved from the perspective of the Chilean farmers, the Chilean government, the marketing intermediaries, the US government, the retail outlets, and the US consumers. When the groups have finished their discussion, one group is asked to present its analysis and recommendations, and the other groups are invited to comment. With the instructor acting as moderator, the business students are usually quite willing to agree or disagree with each other as well as indicate advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action.

A final type of group learning activity is the researched country report, which is a course requirement for all students. The course textbook presents basic statistical information and a narration of the political and economic situation, current at the time of the book’s publication (1989), for Spain and 18 Latin American countries. Such information becomes very quickly dated. The focus of the report is to emphasize the current political

and economic circumstances of the chosen country during the past year. Appendix items four-a and four-b present the stated format guidelines for the reports as well as basic research sources for the information students are expected to provide. Our university's business librarian gives the class an orientation regarding additional resources available for more in-depth research. This bibliographical presentation is primarily designed for the business majors who, in their future job situations, may be asked to prepare a country profile for marketing or investment purposes.

In addition to group learning activities, current Spanish-language newspaper articles and video-taped TV newscast reports are used to both reinforce vocabulary and to stimulate interest in those current events that have a direct bearing on the business and economic environment of the Hispanic world. As a source for current newspaper articles in Spanish, the instructor receives by mail on a weekly basis the *sección de negocios* from local daily newspapers (*El diario de Juárez* and *El norte*) in northern Mexico. In contrast with the more sophisticated language and conceptual level of the *sección de economía* of the major newspapers of Mexico City, the simpler language and content of a regional newspaper are quite appropriate to a junior level business Spanish class.

In selecting articles to distribute to the class, relevancy of the vocabulary as well as the currency and importance of the topic discussed in the article are primary considerations. From the standpoint of both vocabulary and concepts presented in the article, the appropriate level corresponds to that of a layman's knowledge of economic and business issues typical of many articles in a regional newspaper. For class discussion of most articles, a business and a non-business major are paired and asked to present the article's principle ideas or theoretical focus.

"¿Cómo atacar nuevos mercados: tips para 'aprovechar' mercados emergentes," an article published in February, 1994, is a good example of an article written at an appropriate level for American students. Within the context of the then recently approved NAFTA accords and the resulting increased opportunities for marketing products across national and cultural borders, the article defines four strategies for penetrating new markets: 1) testing a new market on a small scale; 2) forming an alliance with a company in the new market that sells similar, but not identical, product lines; 3) establishing a franchise arrangement with an individual entrepreneur/investor in the new market; and 4) subcontracting with an exclusive sales representative on a consignment basis or subcontracting

on a *maquiladora* basis with a firm that both assembles and markets the products in the host country. The author points out the advantages and disadvantages of each option and the types of products or services for which each option is best suited. The article is very accessible to a junior or senior level undergraduate Spanish major with a layman's knowledge of business concepts and issues. Business students and native speakers can expand on, or critique, the advantages and disadvantages presented by the author, suggest additional options, or comment on cultural issues not readily apparent in the author's discussion of each option.

Finally, the nightly newscast on the Univisión (or Telemundo) Network, available throughout the United States on either cable or UHF channels, is an excellent source of current events that have an impact on the economies of the Hispanic world. Individual reports, which last two to three minutes each, can be shown several times in ten minutes of class time to insure student comprehension. In order to focus attention and concentration, the students are given a sheet with four to five questions on principal aspects of a specific report's content. After the final showing, an additional five minutes is spent discussing the questions as well as the relevance of the report with regard to general events in the specific country or region. Appendix item five presents the questions that were distributed for a report on labor unrest directed at Asian owners of *maquiladoras* in El Salvador.

In conclusion, the instructor has found, in teaching an advanced level business Spanish course to an increasingly diversified and sophisticated student audience, that clearly stating and reiterating the course goals and certain key ground rules keep the course accessible to language majors. At the same time, it keeps instructor expectations and those of the business majors and native Spanish speakers more realistic for a course of this type. Maintaining a balance between carefully arranged student-paired or group presentations along with short lectures based on concepts not presented in the text provides variety. It is important to take advantage of the enriched knowledge and experience base that many of the students bring to the class. Finally, regular use of extratextual materials such as current newspaper articles in Spanish or video-taped segments of Spanish-language TV newscasts not only reinforces the concepts and terminology presented in the class, but also adds a strong element of current events to which the students respond very favorably.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Doyle, Michael S., T. Bruce Fryer, and Ronald Cere. *Exito comercial: prácticas administrativas y contextos culturales*. Fort Worth: Holt, 1991.

El diario de Juárez. Ciudad Juárez, México.

El norte. Ciudad Juárez, México.

Rachman, David J., and Michael H. Mescon. *Business Today*. New York: Random, 1992.

APPENDIX

ITEM 1

Temas del libro de texto

1. Tipos de intermediarios al por mayor.

Definir las diferencias entre:

- los mayoristas comerciantes
- los agentes
- los proveedores directos

2. Tipos de mayoristas.

Definir las diferencias entre:

- los mayoristas por tipo de mercancía
- los mayoristas por marca
- los mayoristas de estantería

Temas de experiencia personal

1. Relaciones entre el minorista y su cliente en establecimientos tradicionales al menudeo en el mundo hispano:

panadería, carnicería, farmacia, los puestos de un mercado

2. Relaciones entre el minorista y su cliente en establecimientos “modernos” al por menor:

un supermercado, los grandes almacenes, la concesión o franquicia

ITEM 2

Canal de distribución

fabricante —> mayorista —> detallista —> consumidor

Responsabilidades del fabricante

dedicarse a fabricar el mejor producto posible al mejor precio posible para resultar en un volumen favorable de ventas

reducir a un mínimo responsabilidades de distribución inclusive financiamiento, embalaje, transporte, almacenaje, y personal de venta:

financiamiento: a más corto plazo (los mayoristas generalmente disponen de más recursos económicos que los minoristas)

embalaje y personal de venta: ventas en grandes cantidades a número reducido de mayoristas

transporte y almacenaje: FAB: fábrica o
FAB: almacén

Responsabilidades del mayorista comerciante

vender mercancía inclusive salarios y entrenamiento de personal de ventas

financiar la venta al detallista a más largo plazo (60 /90 /120 días)

embalar los productos en cantidades más pequeñas para revenderlas a los detallistas

almacenar los productos hasta que los detallistas los necesiten (utilidad de tiempo)

transportar los productos del almacén hasta la tienda del detallista (utilidad de lugar):

(Quién se encarga del transporte, tanto el costo y el servicio, es negociable entre vendedor/mayorista y comprador/detallista)

ITEM 3

Caso práctico: capítulo 9
La crisis de las uvas en Chile

1. Recuenten las circunstancias básicas de este caso.
 - a. ¿Dónde y cómo se dan cuenta del problema las autoridades chilenas?
 - b. ¿Dónde y cómo se dan cuenta del problema las autoridades norteamericanas y el público norteamericano?

En su opinión, ¿la discrepancia entre las respuestas a las preguntas a. y b. tiene una implicación negativa sobre la responsabilidad de las autoridades chilenas?

En su opinión, ¿Se debe de tomar en cuenta el hecho de que sólo descubrieron dos uvas dañadas entre los millones de uvas importadas en esta remesa?

¿Cuál es el precio de mercado de las uvas en Estados Unidos? ¿Cuánto recibe el agricultor chileno, Jaime Valdez, por las mismas uvas?
2. ¿Qué deben hacer o cuáles serían las acciones lógicas que tomarían las siguientes partes involucradas en el conflicto para tratar de resolver el problema de una manera favorable para sus intereses sin perjudicar los intereses de los demás?
 - los agricultores chilenos
 - el gobierno chileno
 - el gobierno estadounidense
 - los gerentes de los supermercados estadounidenses
3. En su opinión, ¿hay una manera de resolver el problema de tal forma que los agricultores chilenos no pierdan lo poco que ganan de sus cosechas y el público norteamericano, confiado de que no hay ningún peligro, pueda comprar las uvas chilenas sin preocupación?

ITEM 4A

Spanish 3394: Country Presentations

Objective: Using as a base the information presented in the textbook in the sections entitled “Vista panorámica” and “Actualidad económica,” update the information in the text, covering the years 1989–94, with particular emphasis on recent events during 1994.

Procedures

- A. Research four areas of information; each partner researches two areas and presents results to the class, using a handout or visual (overhead) for each area. The areas include the following:
- 1) a map of the country; indicate major geographical areas and location of key cities, ports, and natural resources within the country
 - 2) update selected statistical information (see attached) presented in “Vista panorámica,” explaining, where possible, any significant changes (look for explanations in research related to points 3 and 4)
 - 3) historical update of major political/economic events 1989 to 1994 with
 - 4) particular emphasis on current (1994) political/economic situation (most recent major events)
- B. Twenty minute presentation in class, each partner has 10 minutes to present results of research. *Organize presentation for each area around handout or visual.*
- C. In the week following your presentation, turn into the instructor a three to four page written summary of the two areas you covered in your part of the oral presentation. The oral presentation and written report is worth 10% of your final grade.

Basic Research Sources

- A. Current events (1989–1993):
Europa World Yearbook: 1994
Political Handbook of the World, 1993

ITEM 4B

B. Current events (1994–95):

Most recent current events available through Electronic Publication Center in University Library. (Skim and read selectively articles published during 1994/95 on your assigned country.)

Choose one:

New York Times (Full-Text)

Washington Post (Full-Text)

Wall Street Journal (Full-Text)

C. Statistical information:

The World Almanac and Book of Facts: 1994

The Universal Almanac, 1993

Statistical Abstract of Latin America

Countries to be presented, Spring, 1995:

Colombia, Perú, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay,
Cuba, República Dominicana, Cuba

ITEM 5

Problemas laborales: El Salvador

Meta: definir la base de los recientes disturbios en la industria maquiladora salvadoreña

¿Quiénes son los dueños de las maquiladoras donde ha habido problemas?

¿Cuáles son las acusaciones en contra de los dueños de las maquiladoras?

¿Cuál ha sido la reacción del gobierno salvadoreño?

Según algunos críticos de los huelguistas, ¿cómo están involucrados los sindicatos norteamericanos en los paros y los disturbios?

Según estos mismos críticos, ¿cuáles son los motivos de la intervención de los sindicatos norteamericanos en los disturbios laborales?