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## A Proposal for Transcending Barriers of Intercultural Communication in Global Business: An Instructional Innovation

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A PROPOSAL FOR TRANSCENDING BARRIERS  
OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION  
IN GLOBAL BUSINESS:  
AN INSTRUCTIONAL INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION

Geographical borders and boundaries are becoming increasingly irrelevant in today's global market. In Thomas Friedman's (2005) term, the world is "flat" now. Friedman describes how the emergence of technology development makes it possible for people everywhere to compete with the biggest and the best. He further notes that one of the unintended consequences of the flat world is the possibility of connecting the world knowledge power (e.g., the smartest engineers and the most ambitious entrepreneurs) together to collaborate and to compete in the global market. As a result, societies that differ are in much greater direct contact with one another. Therefore, it is critical for global citizens to be aware of cultural variations, to develop intercultural communication skills, and to become more effective at working across cultures.

Christine Grosse (2005) points out the importance of trust and personal relationships in Asian businesses, which are often overlooked by US business partners doing business in Asia. Grosse reports that building up trust and establishing personal relationships with Asian partners are inextricably related to fundamental business practices. These practices (or customs) are shared across cultures in Asia. For example, knowing the language and culture of Asian clients, greeting appropriately, showing respect, and gift giving are paramount. Stefanie Stadler (2009) reports some obstacles that a number of British teams encountered when trying to work on an eLearning project with several Chinese universities. She reports that the collaboration between British and Chinese universities was very difficult and unproductive in the first two years mainly because of communication problems. Initially, the British teams were unable to identify the right person to talk to because of the significantly

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different roles of individuals within the East and West working cultures. Moreover, the Chinese partners felt disadvantaged because of the choice of the working language, English, which they thought was problematic and unfair. The recent studies by Grosse and Stadler indicate the significance of intercultural communication competency and show that some fundamental aspects of intercultural communication and business values that should seem obvious are still often overlooked. This can pose unexpected problems while doing business in the global market. As a Chinese language instructor, I constantly ask myself how I can better prepare my students at Morehouse College for the “flat” world in which China is emerging as a global economic power. At present, China has one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Given the increasing prominence of China in world business, companies that want to conduct business in China need to have a sophisticated understanding of Chinese language and culture in order to be successful.

#### CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

One way of preparing students to be aware of Chinese business culture and to develop intercultural communication competency is through a business language course. However, most Business Chinese courses in the US have a prerequisite of two years of Chinese language courses.<sup>1</sup> I surveyed 50 institutions that offer Chinese courses, and 21 of them offer Business Chinese. But, 15 of them require students to have four to six semesters of Chinese language courses before they can take a Business Chinese course. Only one institution offers a Business Chinese course without prerequisites.<sup>2</sup> The requirement of taking four to six semesters of Chinese language prevents undergraduate students from taking a Business Chinese course if they become interested in learning Business Chinese culture and values in their third or fourth year at college. Students simply cannot meet the two to three years of requirements for taking Business Chinese before they graduate. Two questions arise at this point: First, can Business Chinese be taught only to students who already

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Business Chinese (Chinese 321) at Georgetown University has a prerequisite of 3 years of Chinese language courses. The Business Chinese course (Chinese 310) at University of San Francisco requires students to have 3 semesters of Chinese. Cornell University’s Business Chinese course (Chinese 3309/5509) has a requirement of 2–3 years of Chinese knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> The 50 institutions were randomly selected from the following Web site: <<http://www.csulb.edu/~txie/programs.htm>>. The Web site, created and maintained by Dr. Tianwei Xie at the University of California at Long Beach, contains a list of institutions that offer Chinese courses. For a list of these 50 institutions, please see the appendix at the end of this article.

have two to three years of Chinese? Second, is it possible to teach a Business Chinese course at the 101 level?

### PROPOSAL

Knowing cultural practices is as critical as being able to speak the local language. One can combine beginning Chinese and business culture into an introductory business language course, and teach it through “task-based instruction” with the application of instructional technology. An introductory business language course helps students and business leaders to learn basic vocabulary, local life style, and basic business concepts. Through task-based instruction, students have the opportunity to incorporate their own life experiences when performing the task given in class and learn about the similarities and differences of how the task is processed in the target country compared to the US, and “seeing is believing.” Through instructional technology, such as a SMART Board, instructors can provide students with lively images, videos, and texts in class, which can facilitate students’ comprehending differences. Moreover, SMART Board software provides instructors many interactive and multimedia activities to apply in the classroom in order to increase students’ participation in class.

According to a Modern Language Association (MLA) report, released in November 2007, Chinese was one of the most popular languages on college campuses in the fall of 2006, and its enrollment had increased 51% since 2002.<sup>3</sup> There is an obvious demand for Chinese language courses. But, what makes students want to learn Chinese? Students’ motivation for taking a language course is critical, and students are more likely to continue learning that language if their needs are met. I conducted a survey in two Chinese 101 classes at Morehouse College in the first week of the fall semester of 2008. Students in these two classes were the very first to study Chinese at Morehouse because the Chinese Studies program was introduced in August 2008. As their instructor, I wanted to find out the students’ reasons for taking Chinese instead of Spanish or French. The survey resulted in 28 students’ responses, among which 13 students said it was out of necessity because of China’s growing stature in the world of economics and business. Four students indicated that it was because of China’s political influence. The remaining

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<sup>3</sup> MLA surveyed 2,795 accredited, not-for-profit colleges and universities in the United States and reported that there was a growing interest in languages such as Arabic (up 127%), Chinese (up 51%), and Korean (up 37%) even when the study of the most popular languages Spanish (up 10.3%), French (up 2.2%), and German (up 3.5%), continued to grow (2).

11 students said they wanted to learn about the language and culture because it is going to be useful in the future. Every student in the surveyed classes recognized the need to learn Chinese because of the practical side of knowing the language, not because they were interested in literature. They wanted to apply the language skills and cultural knowledge they learned to facilitate their future professional careers.<sup>4</sup>

Students increasingly recognize the importance of China in world business, which might provide an explanation of the trend in Chinese language enrollment at US colleges and universities. The MLA report also shows that students are nearly five times more likely to be enrolled in introductory (first- and second-year) language study than in advanced language classes (2–3). We as language educators need to have a new perspective on business language course design. We need to offer courses that meet the needs of students, especially when they have professional interests but do not yet have a high level of language proficiency.

The economy in China is booming as never before as thousands of Americans go to China to seize great opportunities. Books about Business Chinese for Americans have emerged, and the most popular topics include: meeting and greeting people, business card etiquette, the Chinese banquet, gift-giving, *mianzi* ‘face,’ *guanxi* ‘connections,’ and politeness (e.g., Ambler and Witzel, 2000; Brahm, 2003; Dunung, 1995; Lee, 2003; Seligman, 1999). These topics are important for understanding Chinese business culture and values; therefore, a good understanding of them is essential. I have compared the popular business topics (I place them in the Business Chinese 101 category) with the topics I offer in my Chinese 101 class in Table 1. Notice that there are many overlapping topics between Business Chinese 101 and the regular Chinese 101 course. Both courses teach: greeting (business partners vs. family or friends), introducing oneself (with or without a business card), eating (formal vs. informal), gift giving (proper objects to give), and politeness (addressing someone with an appropriate title to show respect). Moreover, the topics in Table 1 are related to both verbal and nonverbal communication, which can

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<sup>4</sup> Coria-Sánchez (2004: 79) suggests that the number of students who learn Spanish is not reflected in the traditional Spanish major. He provides a specific case, Clemson University, to support his observation. He reports that in 2004 there were 195 students majoring in Languages and International Trade with different language tracks, while there were only 35 majoring in Modern Languages—Spanish, German, or French. This is another case to show that today students look at the practical side while they learn a foreign language. They are thinking about how a language can facilitate their future careers.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF POPULAR BUSINESS TOPICS  
WITH CHINESE 101 TOPICS

<b>Business Chinese 101</b>	<b>Chinese 101</b>
Meeting & greeting: business partners	Meeting & greeting: friends, teachers
Business card etiquette	Introducing self and others
Chinese banquet	Eating and food
Gift giving	Identify objects
Politeness; <i>mianzi</i> 'face'	How to address people

be introduced through basic vocabulary and simple sentence learning. Examples of how to teach these topics in an introductory Business Chinese class will be provided below.

An introductory Business Chinese course is as important as a traditional Business Chinese course, which is normally conducted at an advanced level. The former can help students to learn basic vocabulary, local life style, and basic business concepts, while the latter can provide students with in-depth training on how to conduct business in the Chinese-speaking world. Business is all about people. One of Grosse's (2005) findings is the importance of knowing the business partner's language and understanding the other culture. The question is: "How much language is expected?" Grosse reports that one Chinese respondent in her study said "Learn to speak a little bit of Chinese" such as "How are you?" "Good morning," "Thank you," and "Good bye." This again shows that having some introductory knowledge of a language can make a significant difference.

## METHODOLOGY

An introductory Chinese business course can be taught through "task-based instruction" with the application of instructional technology. It is necessary to point out that there are two kinds of tasks: target tasks and pedagogical tasks. "Target tasks" refers to those that occur in the real world beyond the classroom, while "pedagogical tasks" refers to those given in the classroom. Michael Long (1985: 89) argues that a target task is something that people do in everyday life, at work, and at school. David Nunan (2004: 2) points out that Long's definition of "task" has a nonlinguistic outcome. For instance, typing a letter, making a hotel reservation, and painting a fence do not require a person to talk while working on the tasks.

Jack Richards et al. (1986: 289) define a pedagogical task as “an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language.” They further elaborate that a pedagogical task may or may not involve the production of language. Like Long, they also highlight the significance of having a nonlinguistic outcome, such as drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to instructions, and performing a command.

One important purpose of using tasks in classroom teaching is to motivate students to participate in the activities and to incorporate their personal experiences into the learning process. As Nunan (2004: 22) points out, “learners should not be expected to generate language that has not been made accessible to them in some way.” The application of task-based language teaching provides students with opportunities to engage in an authentic and meaningful context and to apply language they already possess.

The most important goal of a business language course is to prepare students to succeed in the target country. Today, most students learn a foreign language because they want to apply the language skills and cultural knowledge learned in the classroom to their future professional careers. As mentioned above, an introductory Business Chinese course includes a wide range of verbal and nonverbal communication. Task-based instruction, which focuses on both linguistic and nonlinguistic outcomes, is an effective approach for this kind of course.

We can take, for example, the topic “Business Card Etiquette” for illustration. Let us follow Nunan’s (2004: 31–35) six-step procedure to demonstrate how we can transform a real-world task into a pedagogical task.<sup>5</sup> First, to practice Schema Building, the instructor invites students to imagine how Chinese people exchange business cards in a formal setting. Students with no knowledge of how this occurs are most likely to apply their own personal experiences and perform just the way they did before. The instructor, as a facilitator, observes how students process the task and asks students to identify key words in this setting, such as the Chinese name for business cards, and vocabulary that Chinese would use while they exchange cards. Second, to use Controlled Practice, the instructor demonstrates how a business card should be presented in a Chinese setting. Students then write down the similarities and differences between their performance and the instructor’s. While

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<sup>5</sup> Nunan (2004) proposes a six-step pedagogical sequence for introducing tasks: Step 1: Schema Building, Step 2: Controlled Practice, Step 3: Authentic Listening Practice, Step 4: Focus on Linguistic Elements, Step 5: Provide Freer Practice, and Step 6: Introduce the Pedagogical Task.

observing the instructor, students not only see the nonverbal aspect but also hear the target language in a meaningful context. Third, to develop Authentic Listening Practice, the instructor can show videos, clips, or movies that involve a number of native speakers greeting each other in a formal setting and exchanging business cards. The purpose of this step is to expose students to authentic conversations in which speakers might have diverse accents and use the language differently from what the instructor demonstrated.

Fourth, to Focus on Linguistic Elements, the instructor introduces key linguistic elements and structures after students have seen how linguistic forms are related to communicative meaning. This is a suitable time for the instructor to inform students that the Chinese surname always comes first, not last. Moreover, the instructor needs to emphasize to students that, unlike in the US, they should never call a person by his or her first name soon after meeting for the first time. In Chinese culture, a given name is reserved for family members, close relatives, or friends. Furthermore, knowing how to address someone with an appropriate title is extremely important. After receiving a business card, one should carefully read the card and find out the appropriate title for the addressee. This is seen as a key indicator of the level of respect paid to the addressee. Also learners need to be aware that in Chinese culture the title follows the surname such as Yang *zhuren* ‘Director Yang.’ In a business setting, titles are closely related to *mianzi* ‘face,’ which does not have a counterpart in English. Doing business in China is more difficult if one does not understand how important the concept *mianzi* is in Chinese culture. In China, in order to give customers *mianzi*, salespersons often purposely call customers by titles that are at least one rank higher than what they actually are. On the other hand, in order to receive service promptly, customers often call shopkeepers *laoban*, which is the title of “owner.” In Chinese business practice, when addressing someone whose title bears “deputy” or “vice,” like Deputy Director or Vice Chairman, Chinese customarily omit the “deputy” or “vice” and just address that person as Director or Chairman (Dunung, 1995; Seligman, 1999).

In addition to the linguistic forms of address, the instructor can introduce simple greetings such as *ni hao* and *nin hao*. Both expressions mean “How are you?” The difference is that the second is a respect form, used for superiors or seniors. After discussing the key vocabulary and simple sentences for greeting, one important nonverbal component about business card etiquette must be introduced. That is how one offers a business card to a person. One needs to present the card with both hands, and the front of the card has to face upward. This shows respect when offering the card. In return, the receiver



needs to use both hands to accept the card. After receiving the card, one should not place it into a pocket right away. One needs to look at the card carefully, and treat the received card with the respect one shows the person who gave the card. Students might have observed the instructor or actors in the video clips exchanging cards, but it is critical to reintroduce it explicitly to confirm students' understanding. It is very important that cultural concepts are included in language instruction, so students are aware of the traditional values in the target country. To check students' language comprehension, the instructor can design some activities through SMART Board software, which can provide learners with both visual and audio inputs.

Fifth, to Provide Freer Practice, the instructor can pair students up and let them practice what they have learned in Steps 1 to 4 after students go through what Nunan (2004) calls "reproductive" language work. Information gap activities like role plays are effective practices at this stage. The last step in Nunan's procedure is the sixth, Introduce the Pedagogical Task. During this step, students participate in group work discussion and practice more of what they have learned.

In addition to Nunan's six-step procedure, a seventh step can be added into syllabus design consideration, which is practicing pedagogical tasks in the real world. Since Chinese communities or Chinese stores can be found in major cities or small towns in the US, instructors should encourage students to visit local businesses and carry out the pedagogical tasks learned in class in the real world.

## CONCLUSION

It is critical to be aware of cultural variations in today's global business arena. Developing intercultural communication competency can help people from different cultural backgrounds develop mutual respect and better working relationships. It is critical to combine a beginning language course and business culture into an introductory business language course. More introductory business courses should be available for students in higher education in the US. Cultural concepts and languages for business can be taught effectively through task-based instruction and can be taught creatively through instructional technology. Applying technology to provide students with verbal and nonverbal inputs not only gives them a clear context but also shows them how foreign customs occur in real life.

## APPENDIX 1

In the following table, I list only the 21 institutions that offer Business Chinese (from 50 contacted). Information can be found at the following Web site: <<http://www.csulb.edu/~txie/programs.htm>>.

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Business Chinese Courses</b>	<b>Prerequisite</b>
Brown University	CHIN 0920D: Business Chinese	Prerequisite: 6 semesters of Chinese
Cornell University	CHIN 3309/5509: Business Chinese in Cultural Context	Prerequisite: 6 semesters of Chinese
Emory University	CHN 351: Business Chinese	Prerequisite: 5 semesters of Chinese (Chinese 301)
Georgia Tech	CHIN 3692: Business Chinese (only in summer)	Prerequisite: 4 semesters of Chinese
Georgetown University	321, 322: Business Chinese I, II (3, 3)	Prerequisite: 6 semesters of Chinese
Michigan State University	CHS 105: Introductory Chinese with Business Emphasis	Beginning-level speaking, listening comprehension, and reading for Chinese in business-related contexts. Economic conditions and business culture in China.
NYU	Advanced Business Chinese I, II	Prerequisites: 4 semesters of Chinese
Purdue University	CHNS 224: Business Chinese	Prerequisites: 3 semesters of Chinese
Rutgers	01:165:361: Business Chinese 01:165:362: Business Chinese II	Prerequisites: 5 semesters of Chinese Prerequisites: 01:165:361

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Business Chinese Courses</b>	<b>Prerequisite</b>
San Francisco State University	CHI 580: Introduction to Business Chinese	Prerequisites: 5 semesters of Chinese
Stanford University	Business Chinese 131, 132, 133: Business Chinese	Prerequisites: 4 semesters of Chinese
Tufts University	126: Business Chinese	Prerequisite: 6 semesters of Chinese
University California, Los Angeles	102A: Advanced Chinese for International Business (4)	Prerequisites: 2-4 semesters of college-level Chinese
University California, San Diego	CHIN165 A-B-C: Business Chinese	(You are <i>required</i> to interview Dr. Jane Kuo and receive approval prior to enrolling)
University California, Santa Barbara	25A-B: Elementary Business Chinese for Intermediate Students 125: Business Chinese	Prerequisite: 4 semesters of Chinese  Prerequisites: Chinese 25A-B or equivalent; upper-division standing
University of Chicago	Business Chinese I, II, III (CHIN 30100-30200-30300)	Prerequisite: 4 semesters of Chinese
University of Florida	CHI 3440: Business Chinese	Prerequisites: 4 semesters of Chinese
University of Michigan	405: Chinese for the Professions I	Prerequisites: 6 semesters of Chinese
University of San Francisco	CHN 310: Business Chinese	Prerequisites: 3 semesters of Chinese

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Business Chinese Courses</b>	<b>Prerequisite</b>
University of Southern California	EALC 412a/b: Business Chinese I and II	Prerequisite: 4 semesters of Chinese
University of Virginia	CHIN 403/704: Business Chinese	Prerequisite: Instructor's permission

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