

# Analysis of The Best Practices Followed By The Top Business Schools in The United States When Teaching Business in Spanish

Virginia Cortijo, Stonehill College, Easton, MA, USA

## ABSTRACT

American institutions of higher education are keenly aware that Spanish is becoming one of the world's key business languages and they are consequently beginning to offer courses and programs that combine basic instruction in business and economics with Spanish language and communication skills in a professional context. These programs promise to help students thrive in today's competitive global economy, and they are becoming essential to the practice of teaching and learning Business.

The objective of this paper is to explore the scope, content, and structure of "Business in Spanish" course offerings in the US. To that end, I examine a variety of courses offered by top business schools in the U.S., with an ultimate goal of identifying and learning from the best practices these institutions have followed.

The leading practices identified here fall into five categories: hands on learning, international study, diversity, flexibility, and the application of information and communication technologies. Additionally, this article explores college students' perceptions of the benefits and professional development opportunities of second language study in developing the personal and social skills required by today's business organizations.

**Keywords:** Business in Spanish, higher education institutions, second language acquisition, managerial skills.

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of foreign language study is on the rise in today's globally-interconnected world. Besides the role that foreign language competency can play in achieving high-level objectives--national security goals and international economic competency, for example--learning a second language can have a positive impact on students' cognitive development and, more generally, life skills (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2004; Trimnel, 2005).

Research has shown that second language study benefits not only basic skills development (Lapkin *et al.*, 1990; Ratte 1968) but also higher order, abstract, and creative thinking (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Hakuta, 1986; Landry, 1973). In addition, foreign language study fosters cultural awareness and competency (Carpenter & Torney, 1974; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004) and enhances career opportunities (Carreira & Armengol, 2001; Weatherford, 1986). A study from Pennsylvania State University argues that the ability of multilingual people to switch between two systems of speech, writing, and structure makes them good multitaskers; researchers trace the source of these improved multitasking skills to the ways in which bilinguals mentally negotiate between or among languages (Penn State, 2001).

According to the Pew Research Center, Spanish is, by far, the most spoken non-English language in the United States. The number of Spanish speakers in the U.S. is growing significantly, and the number of companies owned and operated by Spanish speakers is on the rise. The 2014 Annual Report published by Geospace, in collaboration with the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (Geospace, 2014), states that Hispanic businesses, which contribute nearly \$500 billion in revenue to the national economy, are growing at more than twice the rate, compared to U.S. firms as whole. Significantly, the buying power of Spanish speakers is increasing, with Spanish speaking consumers representing the fastest growing market in the country (Jiménez & Narbona, 2012). In the coming years, with a growing population and rapid economic change, Latin America will be one of the major business centers of the world. Consequently, Spanish is rapidly becoming one of the world's key business languages.

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. are well aware of the fact that teaching Spanish for Business provides students with important skills in a globalized world. For this reason, a large number of universities and colleges are already teaching "Business in Spanish," and some of them have developed interdisciplinary programs that combine courses in Spanish language and Hispanic culture with selected courses in business and/or economics. These

programs provide students with a basic understanding of business and economics along with instruction in basic Spanish language skills, in a professional context.

Importantly, these programs all help students to thrive in today's competitive global economy by teaching what have become essential intercultural and communication skills. This paper explores the scope, content, and structure of "Business in Spanish" course offerings in the U.S., examining a variety of course types offered by top U. S. business schools, with an ultimate goal of identifying and learning from best practices followed by top institutions. This paper goes on to explore college students' perceptions of the benefits and professional development opportunities of second language study in developing the personal and social skills required in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workplace.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews and classifies current practices in teaching "Spanish for Business" followed by the top business schools in the U.S.; Section 3 identifies the best practices followed by these institutions; Section 4 discusses the benefits of "Business in Spanish" for college students; and Section 5 concludes.

## ANALYSIS OF CURRENT PRACTICES FOLLOWED BY THE TOP 100 BUSINESS SCHOOLS

The classification of current practices in teaching "Business in Spanish" followed by the top 100 business schools in the U.S. is based on a review of 100 institutions compiled from the Ranking: Best Undergraduate Business Schools 2014, published by *Bloomberg Business Week* (<http://www.bloomberg.com/bschools/rankings/#5>).

The course offerings identified and analyzed can be classified into three main categories:

- **First level:** this is the most advanced level and includes the business schools that offer "Business in Spanish" degrees (34% total sample). There are many different options at this level, ranging from Business Spanish Minors and certificates in Spanish Studies for Business Majors (offered by language departments) to bachelor's and master's degrees.

At this level, collaboration is a common practice, because business schools typically offer "Business in Spanish" degrees in partnership with departments of foreign languages. Sometimes, collaboration goes beyond the limits of the university and involves partnerships with international institutions from Spanish speaking countries. A good example of this would be Georgetown University. Georgetown offers a degree in Global Entrepreneurship & International Marketing in partnership with ESADE (*Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección Empresas*), a prestigious Spanish business school. Similarly, Northeastern University offers the option of completing part of the Bachelor of Science in International Business in ICADE (*Instituto Católico de Administración y Dirección de Empresas*), one of the most highly-regarded business schools in Spain. St. Louis University goes one step further and has its own campus in Madrid, where students from more than 65 countries may enroll in undergraduate & graduate courses toward either a U.S.-based 4-year undergraduate degree, graduate degree or, in the case of study abroad students, credits towards degrees at their home institutions.

- **Second level:** this group (52% total sample) is comprised of institutions that offer "Business in Spanish" courses, typically through their language departments. The most common titles are: "Spanish for Business," "Business in Spanish," "Commercial Spanish," and "Spanish for Professional Purposes: Business." Other courses, such as "Business communication and correspondence," and "Business writing in Spanish," are heavily focused on the development of oral and written communication skills. A third category of courses (including "Language and Culture in Business," "The economy and politics of Latin America," "Latin American Culture in a Business Context") concentrates on the cultural aspects of Spanish speaking countries.

Some of these courses have an international travel component that allows students to explore an alternative business, government, or cultural paradigm in order to better appreciate the differences and similarities in business environments and, ultimately, to make more informed business decisions. Courses such as "International Consulting: Latin America," "Spain & Portugal Start-up Strategy," and "Chile & Peru: Analyzing Entrepreneurial Opportunities in Latin America," are usually divided into two different segments. During the first weeks of the semester, students complete a research project in the USA about a company from a Spanish speaking country. They prepare a recommendation/evaluation report using libraries, databases, interviews, and international communication via phone, fax, and email. The final part of the course involves a visit to the client's office to deliver their presentation in person.

The final subgroup of courses focuses on topics that are becoming very popular in the business field, such as social innovation (“Spanish for social innovation”), corporate social responsibility (“Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility in Costa Rica”) and entrepreneurship (“Spanish and Entrepreneurship”).

- **Third level:** this category (14% total sample) includes business schools that offer courses in “Spanish and Business” separately but do not offer courses that combine the two fields. At this level, the best options for students who want to develop a career in Spanish speaking companies or countries would be either to combine a Spanish major with a Business minor, a Business major with a Spanish minor, or to double major in Business and Spanish.

## BEST PRACTICES

An analysis of the data reveals a variety of best practices, which may be classified into two main categories: 1) methods of delivery; and, 2) program attributes that maximize potential benefits.

### Methods of delivery.

- **Hands on learning:** hands on learning allows students to make connections between what happens in the classroom and their lives and the outside world. In addition to case studies, which have long been used in business schools, the educational institutions in this study offer a wide variety of opportunities to explore the application of business concepts to real world scenarios, such as simulations, case studies, internships in Spanish speaking companies, or Community Based Learning.

According to the *Glossary of Education Reform*, “Community-Based Learning (CBL) refers to a wide variety of instructional methods and programs that educators use to connect what is being taught in schools to their surrounding communities, including local institutions, history, literature, cultural heritage, and natural environments.” Many studies have demonstrated that CBL (or service learning) has a positive effect on students’ personal development, on their interpersonal skills, on their ability to work well with others, and on their leadership and communication skills (Astin & Sax, 1998, Astin *et al.*, 2000, Driscoll *et al.*, 1996, Giles & Eyler, 1994). In addition, research has shown that service learning has a positive impact on students’ learning because it improves their ability to apply what they have learned in “the real world,” and contributes significantly to their career development (Keen & Keen, 1998; Markus, *et al.* 1993; Tartter, 1996; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).

Institutions of higher education, aware of the benefits, are offering an increasing number of CBL courses. For example, the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign offers a course titled “Spanish & Entrepreneurship,” where students do community-based learning in non-profits serving the local Spanish-speaking community, thereby building language skills, acquiring cultural knowledge, and gaining hands-on experience with social entrepreneurship. Another example is the course, “Business Spanish I (Service Learning),” offered by Belmont University. In this course, students conduct research about the Nashville Hispanic Community, volunteer at least 8 hours for a Hispanic business or non-profit organization, and learn Spanish vocabulary related to business organizations, practices, and cultures.

- **Study abroad programs:** these types of programs are an invaluable resource when learning a foreign language. Besides increasing their foreign language fluency, students have the opportunity to strengthen their cross-cultural communication skills and their analytical skills, because the interaction with locals abroad requires them to analyze new situations with precision and realism. At the same time, these interactions, which usually involve adapting to new circumstances, increase their international knowledge base, flexibility, and problem solving skills, as well as their ability to work as part of a team and even, where appropriate, take on leadership roles. As a result, students who study abroad gain a competitive edge that will increase their job prospects (Dwyer, 2004; Norris & Gillespie, 2009).

Similarly, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES Abroad) conducted a survey in March 2012 to assess the impact study abroad has on recent graduates’ prospects in securing employment and/or attending graduate school directly after earning four-year college or university degree in the United States. This research found that study abroad may be one of the best ways for college students to find jobs--sooner after

graduation, related to their majors, and at a higher starting salary. Another finding of the survey was higher acceptance rates to graduate and professional schools for students who studied abroad (IES Abroad, 2012).

- Internships in Spanish speaking countries: this best practice combines hands on learning with international study. Participating in an internship while studying abroad has a significant impact on students' career development and on some aspects of their intercultural development. According to the IES Abroad 50-year Alumni Survey, overseas internships have a significant impact on subsequent career choices and on the development of specific skillsets for the workplace. This survey also showed that these internships correlate with higher levels of intercultural competence, as measured by continued contact with host nationals, involvement in community activity, and sustained engagement in exploring other cultures.

#### **Attributes of the programs that link Business and Spanish.**

- Flexibility: business schools should be flexible in order to adapt their curriculum to the educational needs of their students. Students' level of proficiency and knowledge of foreign languages is different. For that reason, it is desirable to create elementary-, intermediate-, and advanced-level courses of "Business in Spanish." However, "Business in Spanish" should not be the only option available to those students who want to develop future careers in Spanish speaking companies or countries. They should have the option of taking additional courses focusing on a variety of topics, such as the culture and politics of Latin American countries, corporate social responsibility, entrepreneurship, or social innovation. Everyone processes and learns new information in different ways, so, if we want to reach the majority of our students, we should try to incorporate various approaches into our teaching. Collaboration between professors from different areas and departments should also be encouraged.

Students' background and previous experiences should be considered as well. Many of the schools analyzed in this research offer courses for "heritage language students." According to Valdés (2001), heritage learners are (1) raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken; (2) either speak or merely understand the heritage language; and (3) are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language. These "native speakers" have learned the language from their families and friends in the way that native speakers acquire the language. In contrast, "Second Language Learners" are taught from books, with structured language lessons. Since their learning styles are different, they need specific courses that can address their linguistic needs. Additionally, and following the recommendation given by Wiley *et al.*, (2012), the use of untapped heritage language speakers in foreign language immersion programs should be encouraged, a strategy that can leverage heritage speakers in the classroom while helping them retain their own language skills.

- Information and Communication Technologies (ICT): ICT, when properly used to support an existing educational system, has the potential to enhance the learning process by extending the traditional boundaries of the classroom. ICT-supported learning promotes active learning, allowing students to choose what and when they need to learn and encouraging interaction and cooperation among learners, educators, and experts, regardless of their specific location (Bates, 2000).

Web 2.0 provides a wide variety of online resources, such as social network sites, blogs, wikis, folksonomies, and virtual communities, that allow users with common interests to meet, share ideas, and collaborate (Brown & Adler, 2008; Maloney, 2007). Several research studies have illustrated how social network sites<sup>3</sup> can improve the learning experience by enabling interaction, collaboration, active participation, information & resource sharing, and critical thinking (Mason, 2006; Selwyn, 2009; Tapscott & Williams, 2010).

"Business in Spanish" courses should take advantage of the potential of ICT in general--and social networking tools in particular--to enhance the teaching-learning process. In fact, all the institutions analyzed capitalize on the benefits of ICT and use a wide variety of ICT-supported tools, such as conference calls, email, databases, course management systems, blogs, and forums. Language education social network sites, such as Live Mocha,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites (SNSs) can be defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system."

Busuu, and Italki, are particularly useful when learning a new language because they promote interaction with native language speakers from around the world.

- Diversity: research has consistently shown that students who experience the highest level of exposure to different dimensions of diversity<sup>4</sup> report the greatest gains in thinking complexity, reflective thinking, and critical thinking (Gurin *et al.*, 2004; Pascarella *et al.*, 2001).

According to Thomson & Cuseo (2014), diversity should be promoted on college campuses because it expands worldliness and enhances personal and social development. As a consequence, students will be better prepared to work in a global society and will have brighter job prospects. Moreover, the authors state that diversity promotes creative thinking because it allows students to analyze problems from multiple perspectives and vantage points. The business world is also acutely aware of the fact that a diverse and inclusive workforce is necessary to drive innovation, foster creativity, and guide business strategies. A survey conducted by *Forbes* revealed that 85% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that diversity is essential to driving innovation in the workplace (*Forbes Insights*, 2011).

The benefits of diversity can be even greater for students who take courses like “Business in Spanish,” which focus on international and cultural topics. The continuous interaction with foreign professors and classmates, especially from Spanish speaking countries, can promote language fluency through a wide variety of strategies, such as tandem programs. In language tandems language learning is promoted through student partners who share their native languages and cultures. The concept of language tandems is that international students can learn and practice English and become familiar with the American culture, whereas American students can learn and practice Spanish and begin to internationalize themselves.

#### **BENEFITS OF BUSINESS SPANISH FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS.**

The last part of this paper, based on my own teaching experience, explores college students’ perceptions of the benefits of second language learning in developing essential personal, social, and professional skills.

After carefully analyzing the personal, social, and professional skills required by business organizations, it can be concluded that college students greatly benefit from second-language study. According to the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC, 1998), the National Association of Colleges and Employees (NACE, 2010), and the International Accounting Education Standard Board (IES), effective application of knowledge requires critical thinking and problem solving skills as well as cross-cultural and language abilities. In addition, professionals need to be receptive to the ideas of others so that they can communicate and collaborate with people from different backgrounds.

All of these skills are fostered by second language study, as the previous research cited demonstrates. Most of these studies have focused on the positive impact that language learning can have on primary and secondary education; however, similar outcomes can be observed at the college level. This section analyzes the benefits of a specific course for college students and summarizes their experiences and perceptions. The course, “Business in Spanish,” was offered in the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. A total of twelve students (nine Business majors and three non-Business majors) enrolled in this course. This course, offered by the Business Administration Department of a selective liberal arts college located in the North East, was listed as an elective and, although the course was not restricted to Business majors, an understanding of business terminology was expected. Because of the small number of students surveyed, conclusions must be tentative and approached with caution. And yet the results are suggestive of a significant pattern.

Students’ perceptions of the benefits of second language learning were explored through an online survey that was administered as part of the course evaluation process developed by the college. Students were asked to assess how the course helped them develop their skills and abilities on a scale from 1 to 5, with one indicating strong disagreement and five expressing strong agreement. The analysis of students’ responses for the course “Business in

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<sup>4</sup> The dimensions of diversity include gender, religious beliefs, race, marital status, ethnicity, parental status, age, education, physical and mental ability, income, sexual orientation, occupation, language, geographic location, and many more components (Penn State of Agricultural Sciences, 2001).

Spanish” (see Table 1) revealed that students strongly concur with the conclusions stated by the previously cited research on the benefits of language learning.

**Table 1: Excerpts from course evaluations.**

- **This course required me to do at least one of the following (on a scale of 1 to 5):**

	Response Count	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1. Think at a deeper level or use critical thinking	12	4.42	4.00	+/-0.51
2. Use problem solving	11	4.36	4.00	+/-0.50
3. Acquire a new skill	12	4.75	5.00	+/-0.45

- **The types of assignments completed in this course and the feedback provided by the instructor has enabled me to improve in some of the following skills and abilities (scale 1 to 5):**

	Response Count	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1. Writing	12	4.25	4.00	+/-0.45
2. Public speaking/ oral presentations	12	4.58	5.00	+/-0.51
3. Qualitative and/ or quantitative analysis	12	4.17	4.00	+/-0.72
4. Working collaboratively	12	4.67	5.00	+/-0.49
5. Integrating and applying knowledge from different disciplines	12	4.67	5.00	+/-0.49
6. Examining questions that matter beyond the classroom	12	4.75	5.00	+/-0.45
7. Exploring differences (e.g. racial, ethnic, gender inequality)	12	4.58	5.00	+/-0.51
8. Reflecting upon my experiences	12	4.67	5.00	+/-0.65

According to their survey responses, my students concluded that “Business in Spanish” required them to think at a deeper level or use critical thinking, practice their problem solving skills, and acquire a new skill. As a consequence, they reported that the course helped them improve personal, social, and professional skills, such as communication and presentation skills, the ability to work in teams, and decision-making skills. In addition, they stated that the course helped them to reflect upon their experiences and become more culturally sensitive and aware.

## CONCLUSIONS

Institutions of higher education in the U.S., aware of the benefits of foreign language study and of the increasing number of Spanish speakers and Spanish-speaking companies, are presently offering a wide variety of courses and programs that provide students with a basic understanding of business while learning to communicate in Spanish in a professional context.

Our analysis of current practices followed by the top 100 business schools reveals that all of the institutions offer Spanish and Business, although the levels of integration vary. A variety of options are available, ranging from not offering a course in “Business in Spanish” (but allowing students to take courses in both fields) to offering an extensive array of courses and degrees that integrate Business and Spanish.

The best practices identified can be classified into five categories: hands on learning, study abroad programs, diversity, flexibility and ICT. Based on the philosophy of “learning by doing,” schools should offer a wide variety of activities that explore how business concepts can be applied to real world situations, such as simulations, case studies, internships in Spanish speaking companies, or community based learning. Study abroad programs can be particularly beneficial because they allow students to improve their language fluency while honing their social and problem solving skills.

Flexibility should be one of the guiding principles when creating “Business in Spanish” courses and degrees that respond effectively to students’ individual needs. This flexibility can be enhanced by the use of ICT, which has the potential to enhance the learning process by extending the traditional boundaries of the classroom.

As a final recommendation, diversity should be promoted and fostered in higher education, because diversity, in its most positive sense, strengthens students’ foreign language proficiency and interpersonal communication skills, both of which are essential in our globalized society.

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**Virginia Cortijo** is an Associate Professor of Accounting at Stonehill College (MA). She holds a Master's in Education and a Ph.D. in Accounting from the University of Huelva (Spain). Virginia's research is focused on information technologies, business reporting, international financial reporting standards, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. She has published in leading academic journals including the *Journal of Emerging Technologies in Accounting*, the *International Journal of Accounting Information Systems*, the *International Journal of Disclosure & Governance*, and *Computers and Education*.