Snapshots from the 2013 National Conference on Business Languages

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There is nothing quite like a conference to recharge your professional batteries. For language teachers, attending conferences means connecting with colleagues, grabbing new ideas, sharing woes and worries, bucking each other up for challenges, and celebrating successes. This year's CIBER Global Business Languages Conference provided all of that and more to business language teachers. In this issue's Business Languages column, we'll share some snapshots of that conference, highlighting what we saw as recurring themes from the keynote speeches, presentations and workshops, as well as more informal interaction with fellow teachers.

The 15th annual conference, titled "The Business of Language: Educating the Next Generation of Global Professionals," took place on the Indiana University campus in Bloomington from April 4th through 6th. Activities over the three day period focused on "an exchange of ideas on how to make the teaching of business language and culture a priority in the academic setting" (CIBER Business Language Conference, 2013).

The lovely campus of Indiana University, host of the 2013 Business Languages Conference

While some recent CIBER Business Language Conferences have had a specific theme, this year's more general focus allowed for a wide range of presentation and workshop topics.
Teachers represented all levels (e.g., K-12, college, and in-service) and any language, and from a variety of areas, including "[c]ommercial sectors for goods, services, and professions including financial, tourism, high tech, banking, transportation, engineering, law, and security" (CIBER Business Language Conference, 2013). Representing this wide range were talks such as
Differences between Academic and Business Writing in Spanish
Affect and Effect: The Turkish and Swahili Flagships
Legal Arabic: Principles and Syllabi
Promoting Authentic Cross-Cultural Communication through Technology

(For the 2012 full program, see http://kelley.iu.edu/cblc/agenda.html.)

Even within this topic diversity, we noted several recurrent themes, described below.

Theme 1: Reaching younger language learners

The second day of the conference kicked off with a panel discussion with four speakers providing *Perspectives on Educating the Next Generation of Global Professionals*. A stand-out among them was David Bower, a recent graduate of Indiana University, now employed as a consultant with the international firm Simon-Kucher & Partners. Hired in part because of his Spanish language skills, Bower spoke passionately about how an early study abroad experience in Central America had first motivated him to study Spanish and then make it integral to his career in business. During his talk, Bower stressed the importance of getting kids interested in languages early by connecting the language to real world experiences (like short-term study abroad or volunteer opportunities) but also by "reaching the young students on their own turf" through connecting language learning to social media and sports.

Conference participants talking with the panelists after a session

Theme 2: The key role of language skills in landing a job
Another recurring theme was the notion that language skills are essential in international business careers, and particularly for landing that first job. This comes as no surprise given survey results from the Graduate Management Admissions Council. In the 2011 Corporate Recruiter Survey a key finding was that 86% of corporate recruiters at 127 graduate business schools worldwide seek hires with "communication skills," a percentage even higher than for "professionalism" (78%) and "initiative and integrity" (77%) (GMAC, p. 2). Assuming recruiters are demanding communication skills in the native language when they are hiring our business graduates, they surely gain much more from candidates who can also demonstrate such skills in a second language. International business professionals who master a foreign language can access the global marketplace and take advantage of opportunities to develop new business and entertain current business contacts. (For more on desired advanced language skills for the business context, see What Business Wants).

For language educators, it's refreshing to hear business professionals identify language skills as the differentiator that actually gets someone hired into an international business position, all other skills being equal. And those other skills are often technical, and thus unstable, i.e., needing frequent updating. Employers often prefer to train employees in these areas once hired, while simultaneously benefiting from "slow skills" such as language proficiency. Notable also is that language skills open doors to international work beyond the original language: The professionals at the conference described being transplanted into other cultures and language spheres based on their knowledge of one foreign language. As odd as it sounds, in international business, language can be a transferable skill.

Theme 3: The importance of cultural knowledge for success in business
Precisely because language students inherently become astute observers of culture and human/social interaction, they are more attuned to cultural differences in general. Repeatedly we heard testimonies about the importance of face-to-face interactions and how some of the best transactions are clinched over sharing a meal. Knowledge, but also curiosity, and an "open mind" about other cultures' cuisine can help business people bond with overseas partners. Dan Sirota from Cook Medical, a featured panelist, indicated that his most productive business relationships had been developed during shared meals. A number of these business contacts have also become good friends -- something that will stay with him long after he has moved on to another company.

Works cited

CIBER Business Language Conference (2013). Available at http://kelley.iu.edu/cblc/

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