Business Language Column

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Teaching with Charts and Graphs to Reach Common Core Goals

The National Standards and the Common Core goals aim to "ensure that all students are college-, career-, and world-ready" – a goal that business language teaching fully embraces. Both also suggest that one way to ready students is through "the use of both literary and informational texts" (Alignment).

Though likely unintentional, the insinuation is that *informational* texts are the opposite of *literary* texts. If literary texts are the result of artistry, creativity, fantasy – even when based on real world experiences or facts – and open to a host of interpretations, then informational texts, in contrast, come across as straight-forward, dry, and yes, dull. We often think of information as raw facts in a neutral, objective state, not open to interpretation. Yet texts that exist solely to provide information, while straight-forward, can be quite thought-provoking, and yes, exciting, like this one:

Business language teaching uses brief and lengthy informational texts regularly – not merely to present information, but to move from lower to higher order thinking skills, from identifying and summarizing to synthesizing and interpreting. In this column, we'll focus on one genre of short informational texts: charts and graphs. Our aim: to show how these texts have much to offer in terms of teaching students skills more often linked to teaching literary texts, including evaluating and interpreting.

While it's possible to think of charts and graphs as mere "text features that support meaning" (Alignment), they are first and foremost texts unto themselves. Like a poem, they are often brief – sometimes containing a handful of words – but rich with content and interpretive possibilities.

They can be deceptively challenging. True, they are a quick way to expose students to vocabulary and data related to business decisions, like population statistics or consumer habits. Nevertheless, they sometimes introduce more questions than they answer! Having students chew on those questions is where deeper learning begins.

As with other texts, reading charts and graphs draws on and improves students' knowledge of the language and culture. They also engage students' visual literacy, since they offer visual representations of information, in addition to or in place of words.

One approach to guide students through the process of "reading" a graph is presented here. Tasks are linked to goals within the Common Core State Standards. An example of a graph (in German) used with these tasks can be viewed via the [Business German Module on the GW-CIBER website](#).

Tasks	Common Core State Standards
Topic overview / Summary • Title and general topic: _____ • Identify all major categories represented (years, population, amount of money, etc.). • Note down words new to you; use context or other resources to learn meanings; connect them to what you already know. • Now express the topic in your own words!	2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize key supporting details and ideas. 4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific words shape meaning or tone.
Source / Date • Is the source that created the graph different from the data provider? • Research the sources! What people/organization is behind them? • When was the chart/graph created?	6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Details / Examples • Describe how the information is expressed visually (lines, colors, symbols, numbers)? • What trends are revealed? • Single out one piece of information; explain it in detail. • Apply this knowledge in another class.	5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of text relate to each other and the whole. 7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
Analysis / Interpretation • Given any trends presented, what would you expect to happen next? • What strikes you as particularly unusual or even questionable? • Estimate the information's significance for the culture, nation, world, people you know, you personally.	8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Each task area invites expansion in a variety of ways, for example in order to
- hone additional skills: Have students do research to uncover the same information in their own culture, so that they can compare and contrast their findings to the information in the graph/chart;
- focus on forms, vocabulary appropriate to topic/context;
- encourage applying or acquiring multiple literacies: Challenge students to present the information in a different medium (video news report, Facebook posting).

Finding charts or graphs in the language you teach is often as simple as doing a Google search limited to the chosen topic in the target language. See also these detailed instructions on How to Create Charts/Graphs for Use in the Business Language Classroom.

References:
Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010.

Alignment of the National Standards for Learning Languages with the Common Core State Standards, 2012.