Yes You Can (Teach Business Language)
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Many teachers fear teaching business language because business is not their area of expertise. The common refrain I hear is this: "I can't teach business language. I don't know anything about business." Perhaps because of the increased focus on the integration of content from other fields, such as STEM, into language learning at all levels, language teachers are feeling somewhat overwhelmed and underprepared.

But language teachers may be surprised to learn that they are actually well qualified to teach business language. The key is to focus on and build upon what we *do* know and flaunt that expertise in this different context. Here are a few ways to do that:

Focus on cross-cultural communication. Cultural issues, such as misunderstandings based on lack of cultural knowledge, stereotyped perceptions, etc., hinder communication in any relationship or interaction including business-related ones, ranging from simple call center conversations to complex multinational mergers. As experts in a second language and the cultures of that language, language professionals obtain knowledge that is a key to relationship-building, which is crucial for winning customers and making sales, and to maintaining good relationships – essential, for example, for fostering customer loyalty.

Hager (2010) outlines this brand of culture teaching that goes well beyond providing a list of culture tips and into fostering students' intercultural competence. Starting point: confronting students with the idea that their own culture is not the norm and the standards and values of their culture are not universal. Teaching culture through such cross-cultural comparison is at the core of what we language teachers do and do well.

Capitalize on our own "experience" in business. Most language teachers have never been CEOs, and some have never worked for a business. But we've all got business knowledge from simply living in a society where we are constantly engaging in business transactions as consumers. We make business decisions daily, when we select which gas station to use or when we decide to pay the extra 50 cents for organic milk. These decisions can be related to the area of marketing, where enormous weight is given to research on consumer behavior and opinion.

The topic of marketing makes a direct link between talking about (literal) products and perspectives: Advertisements provide an accessible and often entertaining tool for students to apply and stretch their cultural competence to critically analyze the potential effectiveness of advertising approaches in the target culture and in students' native culture. Recommendations on how this can be done effectively are already available, e.g., for French, Chinese, Russian.

Stress the *language* in business language. Teaching language through business content gives us the option to introduce, practice, rehash, play with, and test all aspects of the

second language in an exciting new context. Language faculty, funded by the Center for International Business Education and Research at the George Washington University (GW-CIBER), who developed business language courses and units found a useful propinquity between certain business content and language forms they wanted to address in their course.

One example: The GW-CIBER Business Russian course developer, Richard Robin, knew that the concept of the verbs of motion was one of the hardest for students to grasp, so he developed a chapter on business travel to give students additional exposure and practice with it. The chapter manuscript is available online, along with the supporting video:

CIBER Business Russian: Unit 2 - Travel
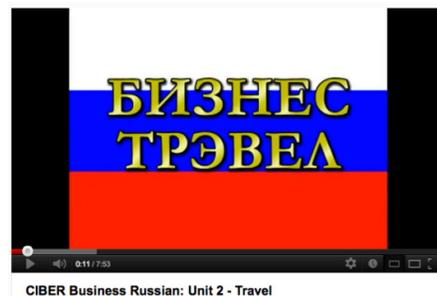
Call on our business connections. Language teachers themselves (or a good friend or colleague) may not be CEOs with years of experience to draw on, but we usually know someone in business who would be willing to serve as a guest expert. Some may be lucky enough to know a local business owner who speaks the target language and who would allow the class to visit, or even invite students to shadow them for a day or develop an internship.

Other options include a Skype class session with a business person in a target language country, or an email interchange with the class. Alternatively, teachers can make a short video recording of a tour of the business the next time they are abroad, so that students get a sense of what that business actually looks and feels like.

Explore unfamiliar topics in international business. Language teaching professionals are generally an intrepid lot, unafraid to explore unfamiliar territory and to put their egos on the line (willingly!) for the sake of learning. Why not take that attitude about business language teaching to embrace the concept and our ability to teach it? Yes, you can take an introduction to international business course at a local or online school. Yes, you can find good reference tools to familiarize yourself with basic business concepts and theories.

But most important, you can actively connect with other language teachers interested in trying to expand their own knowledge into the area of business. Like-minded colleagues are eager to share their experience and the resources that helped them at the annual National Business Languages Conference. Hope to see you there!

References:

[Angelini, Eileen M. and Frederico, Salvatore (1998) "Understanding French Culture through Advertisements Networking and Technology," Global Business Languages: Vol. 3, Article 10.](#)

[Hager, Michael (2010) "Teaching Intercultural Communication in a Professional Language Course," Global Business Languages: Vol. 15, Article 9.](#)

Robin, Richard (2012) "Business Travel," chapter in the *Business Russian* online [textbook](#) and [video](#).

[Six, Irina (2006) "What Do Ads Add to the Classroom," Global Business Languages: Vol. 11, Article 8.](#)

[Zhou, Min (2008) "Teaching Chinese Language and Culture through Chinese Commercials," Global Business Languages: Vol. 13, Article 8.](#)