An International Course in International Business Writing: Belgium, Finland, the United States

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Since 1994, a course in international business writing has been taught simultaneously at institutions in Belgium, Finland, and the United States. The course, which grew out of earlier, shorter-term activities involving Belgian and U.S. students, has three components: (a) instruction; (b) a simulation, in which students exchange business documents internationally; and (c) case studies of business people who communicate internationally in writing.

Since 1994, a course in international business writing has been taught simultaneously at Åbo Akademi in Turku, Finland; the Handelshogeschool Antwerpen (Antwerp Business School) in Antwerp, Belgium; and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) in Indianapolis. At all three institutions, the objective of the course has been to give students instruction and practice in international business communication in writing. This article briefly describes the course.

Background
This course grew out of the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project (AIP), a classroom exercise conducted by Davis, De Rycker, and Verckens from 1990 through 1994 as part of existing courses in business communica-
tion (in Dutch) and business English in Belgium, and courses in business writing in the United States. For the next four years, students at both institutions wrote résumés and application letters for simulated internships in each other’s countries, evaluated the résumés and application letters received from each other’s countries, and wrote response letters either requesting or not requesting interviews.

Throughout the life of the AIP, Davis, De Rycker, and Verckens discussed the possibility of expanding the project into a full-length course. In the summer of 1994, with the support of a grant from the IUPUI Network for Excellence in Teaching, Davis incorporated contributions from Connor, De Rycker, and Verckens into a syllabus and supporting materials for a full-semester course in international business writing.

The course was taught for the first time in the autumn and winter of 1994-95 by Connor (on a visiting appointment) and Phillips in Finland, by De Rycker and Verckens in Belgium, and by Davis in the United States. In the summer of 1995, all five instructors met in Antwerp to evaluate the course and plan further offerings. The course has been taught every fall and winter since 1995 and is described by De Rycker and Veckens (1995) and De Rycker (1996) and cited by Connor (1996) and Verluyten (1997).

**Course Description**

In Belgium, the course has been offered as an elective 30-clock-hour graduate course. Titled “International Business Communication Project,” it has to compete with other electives such as “Investment Analysis” and “Business-to-Business Marketing” in attracting students. Enrollment so far has been modest, with eight participants on average. Students are in their early or mid-twenties and of both genders. The Belgian class has met twice monthly in two-hour classes for about 12 to 15 weeks.

In Finland, the course has been taught to first- and second-year undergraduates with a foreign language (such as English) as a major subject and business studies as a minor subject. In its first offering, the class had more than 20 students, and in its second offering, it had 9; roughly a dozen students are expected to take part in future offerings. The course has met twice a week for 14 weeks, each class meeting lasting 90 minutes.
In the United States, the course was first taught as a special version of an existing upper-level undergraduate course titled "Business and Administrative Writing." The 20 students each year represent a variety of majors and reflect the diversity in age, ethnicity, work experience, and educational experience of IUPUI's urban campus. The course has met at night in a networked computer classroom for 15 weekly class meetings of two hours and 40 minutes each. Beginning in 1996, the course has been offered under its own title, "International Business Writing."

At all three institutions, the course has three components: (1) instruction in international business writing; (2) a simulation, in which students exchange business documents internationally; and (3) case studies of business people who communicate internationally in writing.

**Instructional Component**

The instructional component of the course uses reading, lectures, discussion, and other classroom activities to teach principles and concepts of effective international business writing. This instructional component focuses on three areas: *principles, process, and particulars*.

The first area, *principles*, provides students with ways of thinking about international business writing, first by looking at the components of all communication (participants, context, mode, and message), then by looking at the three overlapping classes of communication that together define international business writing (international communication, business communication, and written communication). Among the classroom exercises that have been used in this area are "Thirdia" by Oomkes and Thomas (1992), *Barnga* by Thiagarajan and Steinwachs (1990), and an adaptation of a simulation by Jameson (1993).

The second area covered in the instructional component of the course is the *process* of becoming a more successful international business writer. Students explore four strategies for growth (participant-centered, context-centered, mode-centered, and message-centered), then learn a model of stages for increasing success, a model based on the work of a number of theorists, including Beamer (1992). As a way of understanding cultural generalizations, or stereotypes, students
read descriptions, from a number of international sources, of the cultures of Belgium, Finland, and the United States.

The third area in the instructional component of the course is particulars: the specific ways that cultures vary and the implications of those variables for international business writing. Some of these variables are communication-related: variables of language itself and variables of the role of context in communication. Other variables are in the ways cultures live together, including the variables measured by Hofstede (1984, 1991) and Trompenaars (1993) under such labels as "individualism and collectivism," "universalism and particularism," "masculinity and femininity," "power distance," "achieved status and ascribed status," and "equality and hierarchy." Still other variables determine how cultures change, including such variables as "inner-directed and outer-directed," "analyzing and integrating," "uncertainty avoidance," and "time as sequence and time as synchronization."

Victor (1992) and Varner and Beamer (1995) have served as supplementary texts for the instructional component of the course.

Student performance in the instructional component of the course is evaluated by examinations and writing assignments. In the United States, for example, students write five letters and memos: one describing their international, business, and writing experience; one characterizing U.S. culture; one characterizing Belgian or Finnish culture; one advising a reader how to write for a more high-context audience; and one advising a reader how to write for a more collectivist audience. In all three countries, performance in the instructional component counts as one-third of each student's grade for the course.

**Simulation Component**

The simulation component of the course is conducted in the eight-week window in which the diverse schedules of the three universities overlap. In teams of two to five, students act as members of companies doing business internationally. Their international communication is in English, the common language of the students; communication within companies is in local languages. The simulation is carefully structured to give students authentic experience in initiating, and responding to, written communication with their counterparts in the other two countries.
Specifically, teams of students in each country form at least one company in each of three industries: publishing, recruiting, and training. Through four carefully designed phases, each publishing company attempts to "internationalize" by hiring a management trainee from another country and by arranging training in international business communication for its present managers. Concurrently, each recruiting company helps a local publishing company with its recruitment process and attempts to sell its services to foreign training companies; in addition, individual students in each recruiting company apply for one or more management trainee positions in foreign publishing companies. At the same time, each training company attempts to sell its services to foreign publishing companies and seeks help with its recruitment procedures. Appendix A reproduces the instructions for the three companies.

Although the instructors sometimes communicate by electronic mail, students, at least so far, have exchanged documents only by fax. In our experience, this medium is still a more common one for transatlantic business communication; in addition it adds a certain international texture to the experience, letting students see differences in paper sizes, handwriting, and the like. The only major problems in the simulation so far have resulted from occasional student failures to meet faxing deadlines.

At the end of the simulation, members of each team submit a portfolio of their simulation documents as well as a jointly written report evaluating their learning and a simulation "log" detailing everything that has happened within the team. This portfolio is graded and counts as one-third of each team member's course grade.

Case Studies Component
In the case studies component of the course, each student identifies a business person who communicates internationally and interviews that informant about his or her experience with international written communication. For consistency, students follow a structure (see Appendix B). Each student then prepares a brief case study for presentation, in writing, to the students in all three countries.

The case studies provide many benefits to students: They encourage contact with the real world of business, foster a bridge between the theoretical concepts of the course and practice, encourage inter-
national communication in their own voices outside the simulation, and provide exposure to the business communication practices of all three countries. The case study presentation counts as the final third of each student’s course grade.

Currently under consideration are plans to enrich the case studies component by asking students to conduct more than one interview with their informants and to collect and analyze samples of their informants’ correspondence.

**Conclusion**

While the primary purpose of this project is instructional, it has also led to some interesting findings about cross-cultural differences in business writing presented elsewhere. For example, the documents produced by the project participants yield insight into the application letter as a specific textual genre, and the application process provides evidence for cross-cultural differences in job applying strategies (Davis, De Rycker, & Verckens, 1994; De Rycker & Verckens, 1993). In comparing letters from the three countries, Connor expected to find confirmation of an earlier finding (Connor, Davis, & De Rycker, 1995) that U.S. students write long letters that describe their supporting arguments in detail, while Flemish students write shorter and more direct letters. Finnish students, based on previous contrastive research on academic writing (Mauranen, 1993), were expected to write more like Flemish students.

However, these cross-cultural expectations based on previous contrastive research were not confirmed. Instead, the students from Belgium, Finland, and the United States seemed to write in a fairly similar manner. Most letters were a page long; U.S. students wrote less and Belgian students wrote more than in an earlier AIP study. The Finnish students wrote letters similar to those of the other two groups.

Why this unexpected result? Connor and Phillips, as instructors of the Finnish students, speculate that the instruction about different cultural expectations offered as part of the new course caused students to adjust their writing toward the norms of the other countries, resulting in letters that were relatively homogeneous in length.

One could speculate that the final letters represent an “international style” of letter writing, which contains fewer national features.
so that it can be received well globally. Further research, using letters written for the course in future semesters, is needed.

The course is still too young to enable objective conclusions about its value, but it does confirm that information technology and the increasing exposure to potential international partners in such organizations as ABC allow almost no excuse for not giving business communication students experience in actual communication with their international counterparts.

References


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Appendix A
Simulation instructions

A Companies
You are a member of a small company that publishes business and management textbooks. Your company has just begun to sell its books internationally. However, all your managers are natives of your country, with little or no international experience. So you decide to hire a management trainee from another country to work in your main office and bring an international viewpoint to your management team. The trainee should have some postsecondary education and can have any business specialty (you should specify no other requirements, so that all students in the other two countries are eligible to apply). You have a contract with a recruitment consulting company (a B company in your own country) to help you select the trainee.

You have also begun thinking about contracting for a training course in international business communication for your managers, but you have not begun to explore what courses are available.

Your goals are to find several suitable trainees to interview and to arrange for some management training.

Phase 1
Organize your company and give it a name, beginning with the letter “A.” Write a one-page job description for your management trainee position, with 11 November as the application deadline. Make sure that the job description reaches foreign B companies by 28 October.

Phase 2
You have received sales letters from two or more training companies (the foreign C companies). Based on these letters, and on your own sense of what training your managers need, write a request for proposals, in which you discuss your training needs and ask for proposals to meet those needs. Make sure that your request for proposals reaches foreign C companies by 11 November.

Phase 3
You have received a number of applications for your management trainee position. With the help of your recruitment consultants (a B company in your own country), decide which, if any, of the applicants you would like to interview. Write each applicant either an interview invitation or a polite rejection. Make sure that these letters reach the applicants by 25 November.

Phase 4
You have received two or more training proposals in response to your request for proposals. Decide which, if any, of these proposals you will accept, and write an acceptance or rejection letter to each proposing company. Make sure that these letters reach the foreign C companies by 9 December.
B Companies
You are a member of a small company that provides recruitment consulting services to other companies; that is, you help them select employees. One or more of your client companies, a small publishing company (an A company or companies in your own country) is just beginning to do business internationally and has told you that it will soon want your help in selecting a management trainee from another country.

You realize that other companies that are just beginning to do business internationally may need the same kind of help. So you decide to try to sell your services to two or more training companies (C companies in the two other countries).

Meanwhile, each of you, as a student, decides that you may be interested in applying for a management trainee position in a foreign company.

Your goals as a company are to provide the best possible service to your client(s) and to sell recruitment consulting services to as many companies as possible. Your goal as an individual student is to obtain as many interviews as possible for management trainee positions in foreign companies.

Phase 1
Organize your company and give it a name, beginning with the letter “B.” Write a letter, trying to sell your services to the foreign training companies. Make sure that this letter reaches the foreign C companies by 28 October.

Phase 2
As individual students, you have seen job descriptions for management trainee positions in foreign publishing companies (the foreign A companies). Apply for one or more of those jobs, using only your own actual qualifications. Make sure that your application letters and resumes reach the foreign A companies by 11 November.

Phase 3
Your local client (an A company in your own country) has asked you to help select interviewees from among applicants for a management trainee position in your country.

Meanwhile, you have received, from the foreign companies you sent sales letters to, requests for proposals. Write proposals for your recruitment consulting services. Make sure that your proposals reach the foreign C companies by 25 November.

Phase 4
While you wait for responses to your proposals, step outside the simulation and write helpful, student-to-student critiques of the application letters and resumes submitted to your local client A company. Make sure that your critiques reach the students in the foreign B companies by 9 December.
C Companies
You are a member of a small company that conducts management training for other companies. Because more and more companies are doing business internationally, you have decided to design and market training courses in international business communication. You have heard about two or more small publishing companies that are beginning to do business internationally (the foreign A companies), so you decide to begin your marketing effort with them.

Meanwhile, you have begun to discuss the possibility of expanding your company, perhaps internationally, by recruiting new trainers and other staff.

Your goals are to sell international business communication training programs to as many companies as possible and to plan ways to recruit new employees.

Phase 1
Organize your company and give it a name, beginning with the letter “C.” Write a letter, trying to sell your services to the foreign publishing companies. Make sure that this letter reaches the foreign A companies by 28 October.

Phase 2
You have received sales letters from two or more recruitment consulting companies (the foreign B companies). Based on these letters, and on your own sense of what help you need, write a request for proposals, in which you discuss your recruitment needs and ask for proposals to meet those needs. Make sure that your request for proposals reaches foreign B companies by 11 November.

Phase 3
You have received, from the foreign companies you sent sales letters to, requests for proposals. Write proposals for your training services. Make sure that your proposals reach the foreign A companies by 25 November.

Phase 4
You have received two or more recruitment proposals in response to your request for proposals. Decide which, if any, of these proposals you will accept, and write an acceptance or rejection letter to each proposing company. Make sure that these letters reach the foreign B companies by 9 December.
Appendix B

Case Study Instructions

Find a business person who communicates internationally, in writing, as part of his or her job. Interview that person about the following topics. Use questions like those listed, but in terms the person will understand.

I. Background information (Principles)
   A. What international business writing do you do? With whom do you communicate? What is the context? What is the mode? What is the message?
   B. How much of your business communication is in writing? What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing? How much of your business communication is international? How has the amount of international business writing in your job changed?

II. Process
   A. What strategies have you used to become a more successful international business writer?
   B. What stages have you gone through in becoming a more successful international business writer? What have you learned along the way?

III. Particulars
   A. What variations have you found in the way communication is conducted in different cultures? What have been the implications of those variations for your business writing?
   B. What variations have you found in the way people balance individual and collective interests in different cultures? In the way people deal with gender differences? In the way people deal with authority? What have been the implications of those variations for your business writing?
   C. What variations have you found in what causes people to change in different cultures? In how people feel about change? In how people think about time? What have been the implications of those variations for your business writing?