Chapter 39
Multilingual Education for International Business:
Insights on Undergraduate Program Design From Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Education for future international business (IB) practitioners must be linked to a clear multilingual and multicultural approach. In this chapter, the authors present a case of study of the setup, aspects, and implementations of an IB undergraduate program carried out mostly in a foreign language (English). The program here presented also requires students to acquire a third language, and thus has become the first IB program of its kind in Colombia. The consequences, challenges, and opportunities derived from this multilingual approach to business education are then discussed in this chapter. Through data collected from the study program, it is possible to draw attention to the link between linguistic skills and academic performance, which leads to a short overview of the cognitive correlates to multilingualism and the learning process aspects associated with the use of a foreign language in the classroom. Finally, the authors draft some recommendations for educators and professionals designing IB study programs with a multilingual approach.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the authors address multilingualism in international business (IB) from the perspective of education for future international business professionals. Undertaking this enormous task requires a departure from understanding language simply as a tool for communication or a cultural outcome, and seeing it also, as stated by Claire Kramsch, as the creator of socially shared realities or cultures (Kramsch, 2009). The role of language in representing and organizing knowledge (Budin, 1996) is also a key concept that justifies the great importance of this issue for IB students. These perspectives will help to understand how language and diversity are core training elements for IB students in effectively reading and communicating in international business contexts. This chapter is of special relevance for educators and administrators in higher education in IB and other programs taught in a foreign language, as it discusses observed implications of and provides recommendations for these kind of programs, and it highlights the importance of language in IB, both for its training and its subsequent professional practice. Based on a case study of the first IB program in Colombia to be taught mostly in a foreign language, namely English, the ramifications of multilingual business education for the program, educators and students will be evinced. The chapter begins with a review of the importance of multilingualism in international business and continues with a short description of and background information about the program and the mechanisms the university has put in place to ensure multilingualism, including an overview of the linguistic profiles of students upon enrollment in the program. After a short summary of the cognitive correlates of multilingualism and the general effects of language in a classroom setting, the authors then discuss the observed effects, obstacles and advantages of a multilingual approach to education in international business.

The chapter concludes with several recommendations to further improve the status quo in the case study analyzed. This chapter aims to provide international business educators with information and insights to positively impact their design of IB learning programs.

MULTILINGUALISM IN IB

In approx. 440 BC, Herodotus wrote in his Histories, Book 4, often considered the founding work of History: "The Carthaginians also relate the following: - There is a country in Libya, and a nation, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, which they are wont to visit, where they no sooner arrive but forthwith they unlade their wares, and, having disposed them after an orderly fashion along the beach, leave them, and, returning aboard their ships, raise a great smoke. The natives, when they see the smoke, come down to the shore, and, laying out to view so much gold as they think the worth of the wares, withdraw to a distance. The Carthaginians upon this come ashore and look. If they think the gold enough, they take it and go their way; but if it does not seem to them sufficient, they go aboard ship once more, and wait patiently. Then the others approach and add to their gold, till the Carthaginians are content." (Wikisource contributors, 2018)

Whether or not this description of what might be termed international trade in Classical Antiquity is in fact accurate or not, this depiction of silent trade captures the imagination in this day and age precisely because it is so far removed from modern practices. Verbal communication is a *sine qua non* in International Business today, and it is therefore mediated through language.

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