

Chapter 25

Business Education across Cultures and Languages

Yamen Koubaa

The Brittany School of Management, France

ABSTRACT

This chapter first presents the effect of culture and language on the efficiency of business education across cultures and languages. It begins with the effect that culture and language may have on the amount and the quality of knowledge transferred from business educators to business learners when the educator and the learner are affiliated to different cultural backgrounds or when the language of education is different from the native language of the educator, of the learner, or of the two. Then, it defines several concepts related to business education across English and several other languages. Secondly, an investigation among business educators across cultures and languages is conducted. Findings reveal that culture and language have a significant impact on the perception of business concepts and on the ways business educators deliver their knowledge. The research involves seven languages namely Arabic, Chinese, French, English, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish, and their respective cultures.

INTRODUCTION

An Arabic proverb says “each nation has its own pounds” (the author translation). Although the pound is a unit of weight clearly defined across countries, the perception of the value of the pound and of importance at a measurement for weight is different across nations. The proverb stresses the fact that apparently similar phenomena, objects and/or concepts can have disparate meanings and

uses across nations, hence across cultures and language. Said (2009) states in the same vein that “discussing whether Jack has a sense of humor or Jill has charisma depends on establishing a clearly defined, commonly agreed-upon meaning for the terms involved.”. The meaning nonetheless, is culture-dependent and language-specific (Chapman, 2009).

In terms of business education, Chadraba & O’Keefe (2007) stated “although marketing (i.e. business) fundamentals are universal, the applica-

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tions of concepts are local.” Not only do the different languages give reasons for misunderstandings in worldwide education; but the same content can provoke different interpretations by people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Today business relations are becoming more and more complex and international implying an increasing need for mutual understanding and harmony. Jurists have set well defined concepts and codes of conduct to organize deals and/or solve disputes between partners from different nations or users of different languages. Financials across countries as well have fixed terminologies to conduct transactions between each other. Managers have set guidelines and principles to harmonize disparate participants’ efforts working for the sake and under the shade of the same organization. To meet that harmony leading to mutual understanding, partners are in need to get to each other and learn about each other’s specificities; and education has served as a channel of exploration and learning.

Driven by the desire of establishing fruitful and sustainable business deals, for decades, educators and learners have crossed borders to exchange knowledge and to get enlightened about the other’s conception of business theory and practice. The American University is an appropriate example. Several business schools as well are opening campuses in different countries teaching business courses to culturally disparate audiences; and most business schools have set modules where students are taught about cultural disparities and business across cultures. Most times, these schools provide courses in a language different from the language of the country where it is established; and English is the most frequent language of teaching business. For instance, the American university in Cairo provides courses in English while Arabic is the native language for most Egyptians. The French Institute of High Commercial Studies (HEC) provides courses in French and English languages in China, and so on. Anecdotically, psychological and educational

researches (Burlaud, 2007) have proved that learners taught in a foreign language tend to translate the concepts meanings into their native languages and then the information is processed and stored in memory. Surprisingly, most cultural studies have focused on teaching differences between people’s values, beliefs, customs, languages, and interpretations across cultures and the implications for consumption and business doing, but gave less importance and devotion to the study of the philosophies leading to these discrepancies. The study of the manifest culture took much of the attention of scholars and discrepancies among basic terminologies of business theory and practice went less examined. Consequently misunderstandings between business educators and learners affiliated to disparate cultural and linguistic backgrounds have arisen. In this sense, Nevet & Usui (1999) argued that there are differences between the philosophies of business teaching between cultures and languages leading to disparate perceptions of business concepts and teaching methodologies. The authors argued, for instance, that the American and Japanese systems of marketing education are built upon quite different philosophies due to the differences in the philosophies of employment and success. Similarly, Peltier, Hay, & Drago (2006) found that the Americans and the British perceive and conceive business programs differently due to differences in the terminologies of business concepts.

Recently, while fulfilling my duties as a business educator at my new school in France, I found myself somewhat away from the French business educators’ understanding of business concepts and business teaching. I decided then to spend time comparing business education between the United States, France, and Japan based on my educational and professional experiences in France and Japan and on the experience of an American colleague working in France. First findings show a wide gap between the three cultures when it comes to defining several business concepts such marketing, business, management, education, etc and adopt-

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