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BILINGUAL PROFESSIONAL WRITING
An Option for Success

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Professional writing instruction has changed considerably during the twentieth century as practitioners have worked to develop usable theories of technical and business communication. As a new century opens, United States demographics show Hispanics emerging as the fastest-growing minority, already overtaking African Americans as the largest U.S. minority group. Census data indicates that "the Hispanic school-age population is growing faster than any other group in the country" (Gehrke 2002, 4A). Concentrations of Hispanics remain high in coastal states and are growing at astonishing rates in the Midwest and South. This demographic shift suggests the need for educators to adapt, create, and grow further as the century turns.

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) has developed a Bilingual Professional Writing Certificate program as a method for increasing opportunities for English and Spanish bilingual graduates in the fields of business and industry. This program can serve as a model for other institutions of higher education fortunate enough to boast large numbers of Hispanic students. The model also has possibilities for adaptation to other bilingual or multilingual situations.

Located on the U.S.-Mexico border, UTEP is a comprehensive public urban institution, a midsized commuter campus located in the world's largest binational metropolitan center. The student population ranges from 60 to 70 percent Hispanic, mainly Mexican American and natives of Mexico who cross the border daily to attend classes. Approximately 3 percent African Americans and 4 percent Asian American, Native American, or international students from non-Hispanic countries comprise the rest of the non-Anglo population. This university is well situated to try new programs that encourage the success of Spanish-background students as well as other students interested in becoming fluent in the two languages.

THE PROBLEM

Fluency in two languages should give students advantage in school and later as job seekers, but this has generally not been the case. One language tends to be dominant over the other in all students except the most totally bilingual, a rarity because dual proficiency requires the same degree of education in each language. Many Hispanics raised in the United States understand Spanish because they hear their parents, and particularly their grandparents, speak it regularly; however, they may not speak it well themselves and often do not know how to read or write it at all. Recent immigrants and Mexican nationals use Spanish as their dominant language and may have severe difficulties reading texts and producing technical or business documents in English.

The major manifestation of dual language backgrounds is that students speak and write with an accent. Rather than being an indication of a special talent and therefore an advantage, their accents hinder their classroom success and serve as an obstacle in their job search. Our program aims to change this situation and to make bilingualism an asset.

Stereotype threat presents one challenge for Hispanic learners. C. M. Steele (1997) explains *stereotype threat* as a situation wherein members of a minority group, even those who have been successful in school and at work, fear they will be labeled as inferior. Steele believes that "susceptibility to this threat derives not from internal doubts about their ability . . . but from their identification with the domain and the resulting concern they have about being stereotyped in it" (614). This stereotype means that even Hispanics graduating from secondary schools with high grade point averages may worry that their talents will not be recognized in college. They fear the stigma that "people like them" belong in low-paying jobs that require only high school diplomas. Students suffering from stereotype threat need reassurance and a sure sense that their talents have worth. L. I. Rendon (1994) argues that universities must validate students. Their aim should be "to remove obstacles to learning, to instill in students a sense of trust in their ability to learn, to liberate students to express themselves openly even in the face of uncertainty, and to know that the way they construct knowledge is as valid as the way others construct knowledge" (47). Our program attempts to validate students in these ways.

Traditional teaching methods represent another challenge that confronts Hispanics in higher education. Despite many pedagogical

innovations over the last decades, most college and university classes still follow the lecture-exam pattern. Some classes include discussions, and many enlightened teachers require some group work. However, as pointed out in Goodlad and Keating (1994), "the needs of students whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds tend to be outside the traditional mainstream are typically not met by what might be characterized as one-size-fits- all education" (273). Technical writing classes, falling under the jurisdiction of different departments, have been somewhat slow to incorporate new instructional pedagogy. Certainly, the language of instruction and production tends to be English and only English. The model presented here suggests a new pedagogical approach through a linking of two languages.

THE PROGRAM

The Bilingual Professional Writing Certificate program at UTEP grew out of the frustrations of attempting to teach technical writing and business communications classes to junior-level students who suffer from second-language interference. Two professors, one in English and one in languages and linguistics, surveyed students about their interest in English/Spanish professional writing courses that would satisfy a university requirement and let them practice both languages. The response was overwhelmingly favorable, and the professors began planning a pilot program.

Fortuitously, the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, issued a call for grant proposals. The guidelines seemed a close match for the pilot. UTEP's successful grant proposal provided almost $223,000 to implement a three-year trial program.

The program structure is quite simple, requiring participants to complete two English courses and two translation courses and then to pass an exit exam. The entry course into the program is either a bilingual section of Technical Writing (English 3359) or a bilingual section of Business Communication (English 3355) in the Department of English or Introduction to Translation (Translation 3359) in the Department of Languages and Linguistics. One or another of the English courses is required for many majors or minors, including business, criminal justice, professional writing and rhetoric, computer information systems, marketing, and management. The translation class is the first course

required for minors in translation. Thus, instructors have an opportunity to assess students' interest and expertise in bilingual situations when they are college juniors and to invite them to work toward a certificate. By taking an additional three classes in their final two and a half years, they can gain the benefits of certification.

Class requirements included the following courses:

1. Either English 3355 or 3359 (bilingual sections)
2. Translation 3359
3. English 4300 (This senior-level technical writing practicum reinforces students' abilities to write proposals and reports in both languages and places them in an unpaid internship with a local client.)
4. Either Translation 4381 (Business and Legal Translation) or Translation 4382 (Translation for Information Media) or Translation 4383 (Literary Translation)

Students must also successfully complete an exit exam that requires them to produce original documents (such as memos and letters) in both languages and to translate documents from English to Spanish and from Spanish to English.

Recruitment

Students are recruited into the program through introductory courses. We also distribute informational brochures campuswide, particularly utilizing advisors in the various related departments. During registration for each semester, we post large flyers around campus and hand small flyers to registrants. We also post bulletin broadcasts on student-accessed email. The school newspaper carries articles about our program several times a year.

Although advertising brings in students, the best recruiting tool seems to be word of mouth. Students who finish a course or two and find the experience useful recommend the program to others. Our bilingual technical and business communication classes always fill early in the registration process.

Student Profile

Student profiles have been gathered at the beginning and end of each bilingual section of English 3355 and 3359 throughout the three years of the program's existence. Academic majors varied for enrolled students,

with the largest numbers in computer informational systems, marketing, management, and English. When questioned about their reasons for selecting the bilingual section, students reported that they were interested in both languages and that they felt good bilingual skills would be an advantage in achieving their professional goals.

Specific numbers vary from semester to semester, but in one representative survey, at the beginning of the semester 60.9 percent of enrolled students rated their fluency in conversational Spanish as excellent, and 26.1 percent rated these skills as adequate. In spoken English, 43.5 percent considered themselves excellent, and 34.8 percent rated themselves as adequate. Almost all had studied both English and Spanish in school for at least a year, but in terms of writing Spanish, only 26 percent felt capable of writing a short business letter or a technical report. Only 26 to 30 percent felt capable of producing these documents in English.

By semester's end, over 90 percent felt above adequate in speaking both languages. All students felt capable of writing a short business letter, and more than 80 percent felt comfortable writing a report in either language.

When asked what they had gained from taking the bilingual course, students in all semesters reported a positive experience:

"I actually learned how to write formal business letters."

"I gained a sense of team work and a better sense of technology."

"Technical writing skills. I learned how to focus on the audience."

"I have gained experience in writing in both languages. Also more confidence to write in a formal way."

"I've learned all the great ways to apply technology to school projects both in English and Spanish."

"A thorough understanding of the professional writer in the business environment."

The program now offers two bilingual sections per semester, with an enrollment of twenty-five each. All sections regularly enroll fully and early in the registration period.

Advantages

As most enrolled students seem to recognize, this program turns the perceived handicap of learning English as a second language into the advantage of being able to function effectively in two languages. Rather

than thinking of themselves, or being thought of by potential employers, as inferior because they speak or write English as a second language, certificate holders may be selected over monolingual candidates because of their special training. This undergraduate program also holds promise for students who want to enter UTEP's new Ph.D. program in rhetoric and composition, which offers a unique bilingual option, allowing students with certificates to do graduate work in translation and cross-cultural rhetoric.

The program has the further advantage of highlighting business and technical exchanges with Latin America, one of the fastest growing and most neglected economic markets. Students who can communicate across cultures and language borders will find satisfying work while improving international relations.

THEORY

Strong theoretical support underlies our model for bilingual professional writing in the areas of intercultural communications, collaboration, audience response, and writing process theory.

Intercultural Communications

Technological advances in the twentieth century drew nations and cultures increasingly closer. Business and industries aiming for success in the twenty-first century must begin with the understanding that they operate within a global community unlike any before—a community demanding the fluent use of many languages. Perhaps more importantly, they need awareness of different cultures and how they do business and of the ability to hire employees who can comfortably cross physical and cultural borders. A look at statistical compilations shows that in 1997 about 335,000 Americans worked for foreign-owned companies either in the United States or overseas. More than 30,000 American companies exported goods to other countries. Even before NAFTA, the U.S. earned $33.3 billion a year from exports to Mexico alone.

Within the United States, growing numbers of Spanish-speaking buyers require advertising and marketing campaigns that differ from those designed for English speakers. They also need Spanish-language product user manuals, information sheets, assembly directions, and other documents. In the interest of safety and efficiency, multilanguage documents and signs have to be provided in workplaces that employ workers whose dominant language is Spanish. Obviously, employers need

professional communicators prepared to take on the task of producing these materials.

Speaking, reading, and writing a second language go a long way toward helping employees serve the changing needs of U.S. companies in a global community. As Iris Varner (2000) points out, "If business partners do not speak a common language, the entire intercultural business communication approach will be influenced by the dynamics of interpreters" (48), which can slow down or otherwise hamper transactions. Furthermore, language skills must be supplemented with "insights into social behavior, attitudes toward morality, self-perception, and the role of hierarchy" (41). The effective cross-cultural communicator avoids stereotyping, while recognizing that members of a given culture share attitudes and practices that influence their response to outsiders. Corporate cultures differ even within the United States; in an international community, styles present much greater variety. A lack of information can cause embarrassment and loss of business, even in something as seemingly basic as setting and keeping a meeting time. Thus, educators interested in training professional writers must teach them the complexities of cultural difference.

Collaboration

Teamwork and collaboration have long been staples of U.S. business and technology. Today's workers must expand the ability to work with others within their own culture to an expertise in working with people from different cultures. Students learn to cooperate on the job by experiencing collaborative learning in the classroom. Furthermore, students learn more quickly, remember better what they have learned, and form stronger bonds of friendship and mutual respect with classmates and teachers when they take part in collaborative learning communities. Theorists (Johnson and Johnson 1988; Schmuck and Schmuck 1997; Slavin 1990) show that working on group projects in semester-long teams helps minority students (women, lower-class students, nonnative English speakers, and others) gain confidence in their abilities. This confidence helps in job interviews and creates independent workers.

Audience Response

When writers produce messages, they engage in a process of encoding. As they do this encoding, they assume that the recipient will be able to decode the message without significant difficulty and with a low degree

of error. It is easy to see how important this can be if the message includes, for example, specifications for materials used in the construction of a bridge or calibrations of equipment for use in hospitals. Audience response theory concerns itself with the proper encoding of messages and with the importance of directing attention toward the proposed receiver.

Differences between senders and receivers can cause confusion within a given company, city, state, or country because no two people have the same life experience. Confusion or misunderstanding looms even larger when the sender lives in a different country from the recipient and larger yet when one speaks a different native language from another person. Clearly, anyone engaged in bicultural communication or translation must be aware that "when a message reaches the culture where it is to be decoded, it undergoes a transformation in which the influence of the decoding culture becomes a part of the message meaning" (Samovar and Porter 1988, 21). Bilingual professional writers have to think forward to the decoding process and anticipate problems caused by ambiguity or lack of accuracy. They may need to use what has been called "back translation" (having one writer translate the document in the second language and another writer translate it back into the original) to check for potential problems (Samovar and Porter 1988). They also need to decide when this rather time-consuming operation is necessary and when it is not. Such decisions require skill that can come only with practice.

Process Writing

The theory of writing as a process drives most college English composition classes and offers useful assistance to bilingual professional writers. Theorists (James Britton 1975; Lester Faigley et al. 1985; Donald Murray 1972; Janet Emig 1971; James Moffett 1968) and many others urge teachers to emphasize the way people write rather than focusing only on the final product. This matters a great deal in the field of technical communication where workers are accustomed to sending rapid email messages, memos, and letters as they conduct business. These communications in English, and even more in multilingual situations, may be poorly worded and ambiguous. Writing teachers can guard against these problems by encouraging students to think about what makes good writing. They can stress the value of putting a message aside briefly and then

reexamining, revising, and correcting their writing before sending it. They can also urge writers and translators to submit work to an editor—a supervisor or coworker—to make sure it communicates effectively.

THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

Technical communication students do not study theory in isolation. They must have opportunities to put theory into practice. Our junior- and senior-level technical writing courses require students to do what they have read about. In their junior year, students work in classroom companies to complete teacher-directed projects or community projects for which their teams can produce written documents. In their senior year, students act as interns in U.S. or Mexican companies on either side of the border. Each of their projects includes creating original documents (manuals, brochures, newsletters, information sheets, and such) in two languages and/or translation of existing documents. Students at UTEP have worked for hospitals, clinics, nonprofit associations, and for-profit businesses and industries both in El Paso and in Ciudad Juarez. These activities create real or realistic situations where students work together producing a bilingual product. As they collaborate, they are challenged to achieve more than they have previously and are aided in this collaboration by other group members with more experience or more skill in a particular area. This challenge is especially effective in classes like ours where some students are more proficient in English and others more proficient in Spanish. The effect is a social and professional situation that replicates the working world and encourages cognition and creativity. By working and learning as a team, all the students develop greater skill in both languages as they also develop their professional writing skills.

QUESTIONS OF ETHICS

Essentialism

People from one culture who work with people from another culture must always guard against the dangers of essentialism, that is, the viewing of others as a group rather than as a collection of individuals. Professional writing educators have a responsibility to teach about cultural differences while warning students that not all members of a culture are the same. U.S. citizens certainly share certain qualities and

understandings, but a young white woman raised in Mississippi differs in basic ways from an elderly black man from the same state. Nor is she much like a middle-aged Hispanic raised in New York City. These people speak the same language and pledge allegiance to the same flag, but they do not fit a simple pattern. Any attempt to categorize them as "typical Americans" will lead to stereotyping and essentialism.

How much more complex is it, then, to try to put labels on Latino Americans who do not share a federal government, a monetary system, or, in the case of Brazil, even a common language. Doing business in Latin America, or anywhere in the world, requires careful study and time in a target area because "the world does not divide into neat cultural packages that can be labeled, sorted, and inspected with ease" (Brake, Walker, and Walker 1995, 80). J. Leigh (1998) reminds us that learning another language brings the learner into another world, but the learner "must be able to look into, not at, the culture of the other" (90). Professional writers must not only know about the customs of other countries but also make allowances for individual differences among citizens from those countries.

Translation

The specialized work of translation presents a wide range of ethical considerations. Translators can, intentionally or otherwise, create "a screen between cultures and have the potential to apply only their meanings to the words spoken in either language" (Leigh 1998, 41). Thus, they can skew the reading of any given text. This skewing opens doors to power abuse, where the translator debases one culture or elevates another through subtle uses of language. People living and studying in the United States tend to recognize the country's many freedoms, its economic stability, and its international prominence. An incautious translation can show a preference for these qualities and the accompanying middle-class standards prevalent in the United States to the detriment of people from other countries who will read the translation.

According to L. Venuti (1998), translation is subjective and unscientific. Translation teachers must warn students to be as objective as possible and to avoid imposing their personal standards on the text and its future readers. Moreover, both teachers and students have an ethical responsibility to study and remain sensitive to social and cultural difference. The translation element of our program alerts students to the philosophical implications of navigating between languages and warns

them to work carefully. Students also learn to submit their translations to ethical editors and to revise as necessary before seeing the translation into print.

Although some errors in translation can be amusing, others lose business, cost money, or endanger lives. A classic example of lost business is the well-known Chevrolet campaign to sell its Nova in Latin America. Someone should surely have realized that *no va* in Spanish means *it doesn't go.* Needless to say, the campaign did not sell many cars.

More dangerous are errors that stem from faulty understanding of vocabulary for measurements, materials, and other important specifications. Poorly translated manuals and assembly guides are annoying for consumers trying to assemble a desk or a bookcase; they can be fatal when technicians use them to assemble life-care systems or airplanes.

Bilingual professional writing programs offer excellent opportunities to teach ethics. Essentialism and translation should be discussed, but these also provide a strong introduction to more general issues of ethical practice in business and industry.

PROBLEMS AND TRANSITIONS

Faculty members of the Bilingual Professional Writing Certificate program and staff at UTEP continue to examine and modify practices. The program takes from two to three years to complete, and we find that too few students who come aboard in their junior year manage to finish all four required courses. Thus far, only one candidate has received a certificate. Others are close, but many students tend to go on to graduate school or find jobs—due partly, we believe, to the skills they gain in our courses—before finishing all certificate requirements. In an effort to get students interested in the program earlier and to plan all four classes into their last two years of undergraduate work, we will attempt to make sophomores more aware of the certificate and its benefits. We have also met with the deans from the colleges of business and engineering and have sent brochures to all faculty who advise students. We hope these faculty members will not only allow time in their class schedules for completion but also urge more students to enter the program.

Another problem that other institutions adopting our model will certainly encounter is the need for skilled bilingual faculty. Although we have been fortunate in hiring an English-Spanish bilingual professional writing teacher, we have also taught the class with a team approach,

including an English professor in combination with one from languages and linguistics. We continue to train existing faculty to teach in our program, as demand for our courses increases. Flexibility should play a role in staffing certificate classes.

Currently, no textbook exists that meets the needs of a bilingual technical writing class. We have been using bits and pieces of available texts plus quantities of teacher-developed material. Elaine Fredericksen and Carol Lea Clark are writing a more suitable textbook that should be published within the next few years. This resource will include translation exercises, cultural notes, and a strong emphasis on relationships with Spanish-speakers within the United States and with Spanish-speaking countries around the world.

MODEL DISSEMINATION

We consider our program a moveable feast. Simplicity characterizes the model and makes it readily transportable to other institutions. The model also leaves room for adaptation to other target languages and to other regions. Our program focuses on two languages: English and Spanish. With qualified faculty, schools could include a number of languages in the same class, making it a multilingual rather than bilingual experience. Because our campus sits on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, students have ready access to businesses and industries working in two languages. In areas without such access, instruction can be supplemented with guest speakers, videoconferences, and email communication.

Although adopting any new program takes planning, we believe this model can be put into place with a minimum of preparation and little expense. Our experience suggests that the effort will be worthwhile.

CONCLUSIONS

As business and industry take on a more international flavor, the need for well-trained bilingual (or multilingual) professional communicators continues to grow. These personnel can be either English or other-language dominant but must have good skills in reading, speaking, and, especially, in writing both (or all) languages. J. Gilsdorf and D. Leonard (2001) point to the advantages of hiring nonnative English employees, "including exposure to new markets and suppliers, additional talent and skill, and lower costs" (441). Bilingual professional writers reduce

dependence on costly translators, improve relations with non-English-speaking associates and customers, and eliminate embarrassing or dangerous communication errors. Educators have placed too little emphasis on these advantages and have often overlooked the potential of bilingual students as future technical and business writers. A certificate program like the one at UTEP can give these students the impetus they need to find jobs and succeed in a global business community.

This program offers particular promise in a world where technology has changed "national and international economics, demographics, and the structure of society" (Tebeaux 1989, 138). Our program prepares students to meet these changes in positive ways. Their specialized training equips them to work in the border community where they now live and also to move into other multicultural communities as the evolving workplace requires. Rather than continuing to be identified as an underrepresented and underemployed minority, these bilingual communicators will take their place as a vital element of the contemporary workforce.