

The Language of Business

Foreign language proficiency is on the rise in global MBA programs.

BY ALAN DESSOFF

IN MOST PARTS OF THE WORLD, ENGLISH STILL IS THE STANDARD LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS, but it's not the only one in an increasingly global business environment, as more universities with master of business administration (MBA) programs are recognizing. From the familiar Spanish and French to the less familiar Arabic and Mandarin, administrators of many global MBA programs in the United States, aware of the ambitions of their students and the experiences of their alumni, are concluding that to operate effectively in business in another country, it helps to know its language(s) as well as English.

Accordingly, a growing number of business schools with global MBA programs are requiring their students to be proficient in at least one language in addition to English. At many schools, it is a requirement for admission to the program. Spanish appears to be the additional language that applicants most commonly present, although at some schools where significant numbers of students from other countries are applicants, English is the additional language in which they must demonstrate proficiency. Some MBA programs are bilingual, usually in Spanish or French as well as English. Other schools have built foreign language instruction into their programs and students learn while on internships in other countries.

Proficiency Increasingly Important

However they do it, administrators of global MBA programs agree on the importance of foreign language proficiency. "Students who want to do international business need to speak multiple languages if they are going to be successful. If you want to be involved in understanding how business takes place in a particular country, you need to live there and understand its history and culture and also be able to speak the language," declares Jeffrey E. Michelman, professor of accounting and director of the International Business

Flagship Program in the Coggin College of Business at the University of North Florida. Its two-year-old Ibero-American MBA program, with a focus on Latin America and two-thirds of its courses taught in Spanish, requires students to be bilingual in Spanish and English when they start.

"Especially in Central America or Latin America, if you don't know Spanish or Portuguese, I don't think you will be able to do business there," agrees Chino Rao, director of the international MBA program that was launched two years ago at the University of Texas at San Antonio and that also requires foreign language proficiency for admission. Knowing a country's language enables a better understanding of its culture, which is important in building relationships and demonstrating "a genuine interest" in the country to employers, business colleagues, and customers, Rao says. He adds that it also has "symbolic" relevance at home, assuring the MBA program's admissions committee that a student has a serious international interest in the first place.

Even if English is the language most commonly spoken in business interactions, "there are nuances that often are missed when people are conversing in another language," asserts Martin S. Roth, professor and chair of the Sonoco International Business

Department in the Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina. Language and culture training and immersion have been a core component of its full-time MBA program since it was launched in 1974, initially as a master of international business studies. It was rebranded in 2004 as an international MBA program “to make sure it had the MBA designation,” Roth explains.

The initial program required all students to be competent in two or more languages. Students in the program now do not have to know another language to be admitted but must learn it, “sometimes from scratch,” and demonstrate competency in reading and writing as well as speaking, Roth says. They learn on one of several language tracks as they move through the program. Spanish is the language most commonly studied, followed by German, French, and Portuguese, Roth reports. Students also can select other languages, including Chinese, Arabic, and Japanese, but “those are more difficult to learn,” he says. More often, students entering the program already have some language expertise from undergraduate studies and/or previous experiences abroad, he says.

Whatever their level of proficiency, they advance it in internships or other program activities in other countries. “The only way to really understand a country’s culture and how it nuances the behavior of

managers within an organization—how they think, communicate, interact, make decisions—is to have been part of that culture. That’s one reason we push our language training to be conducted overseas, with students doing an internship in a country where the language is spoken,” Roth explains.

Because “it’s not unusual” to have up to 70 percent of its candidates born outside the United States, English probably is the most common second language in which students must be proficient to be admitted to the Global Partners MBA program in the J. Mack Robinson College of Business at George State University Buckhead Center, reports Karen D. Loch, who directs the program. The 26 students in the class of 2011 speak 14 languages, she says.

Whatever the second language is, administrators knew when they were designing the program, which was launched in 2005, that proficiency in it was essential, say Loch. “We talked to senior management in major multinational organizations and consistently, one of the messages we got was that language skills are valued. It’s not just, can you ask for a drink? But can you really converse in the language in-depth? Can you sit through a meeting? Make a presentation? Work with your colleagues day-to-day? It’s the extrinsic value one gets from studying a language that makes a difference and is so important in this global arena,” Koch declares.

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“It is really amazing how quickly your language proficiency develops when you are fully immersed in a culture.”

Proficiency Level Verification Important to Business Schools

To verify during the admissions process that candidates for their global MBA programs are proficient in a second language, many business schools turn to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). South Carolina's Moore School requires all its students to pass an ACTFL examination and demonstrate competency in reading and writing another language as well as speaking it, says Roth. The University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, where a foreign language requirement has been part of its international MBA program since the degree was launched in 1995, requires its students to provide official documentation from the ACTFL that they have passed its oral proficiency interview in one nonnative language, says David Comp, associate director of international programs at the school. Under some circumstances, he adds, a student can waive that requirement by submitting documentation from another accredited type of language proficiency examination. He cites the Modern Language Aptitude Test, Defense Language Proficiency Test, and Interagency Language Roundtable as examples.

Not all MBA programs go that far. “Our verification is nominal,” Rao acknowledges at Texas. “If a student has coursework at the college level—say Spanish I, Spanish II—we accept that. If a student from the Middle East claims he knows Arabic or a Chinese student says she knows Mandarin, we take them at face value,” he explains. “We would like to have stronger verification,” he continues, but finding individuals qualified to interview applicants who claim proficiency in certain languages is difficult. “We can deal with Spanish, but Arabic and Mandarin would be a challenge,” he says. “As we have more qualified applicants, we will tighten the verification process. We would like them to be able to speak, read, and write, and particularly be able to do business correspondence in the foreign language.”

Many Advantages to Proficiency

Students in global MBA programs cite the value to them of proficiency in multiple languages. Caitlin Eshelman, a current student in the University of North Florida's Ibero-American MBA program,

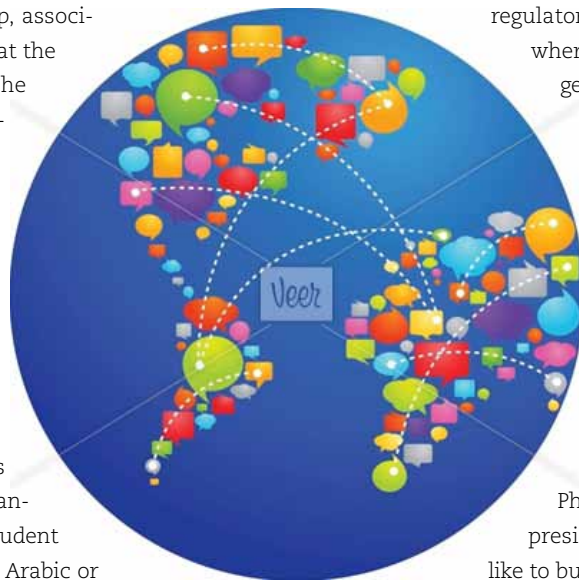
says its language component was one of its attractions to her. “With foreign markets becoming increasingly accessible, the ability to be proficient in another language is really invaluable,” she e-mailed from Spain, where she was ending a semester of study. “It is really amazing how quickly your language proficiency develops when you are fully immersed in a culture,” she added.

Matthew Blomerth, a student in the Booth School's international MBA program at the University of Chicago, says his proficiency in Spanish will be a big help in the job he has accepted from a major global chemical company. “My hope is to spend a significant amount of time working in Latin America,” he says, and although English is the standard language at the company, “my Spanish skills will help me interact with customers, better understand the regulatory and political climate of the countries where I do business, and also develop a stronger appreciation for my ex-pat home when I am abroad.”

Esther Kim, a current MBA student at the University of Texas at San Antonio, was proficient in Filipino and English as well as her native Korean when she entered the program. She also knew some Chinese. She says that when she graduates, she plans to return to her former employer, a mining, automotive, real estate, and investment banking conglomerate in the Philippines, where she was assistant to the president. “A lot of Korean investors would like to buy houses in the Philippines, and Chinese buyers are coming for auto parts. I can use my language talents for them” as well as “conversing easily” with Filipinos, she says.

The experiences of alumni of global MBA programs underscore what the students anticipate. Alexandre G. Mandy says he already was proficient in French, German, Dutch, and Japanese, as well as English, when he entered the University of South Carolina's Moore School, where he also learned Spanish and earned his degree in 2008. Now based in Brussels, Belgium, he heads the customer service department for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa for Tenneco, a leading supplier in the automotive equipment market.

“Being able to work in several languages” was a key factor in getting his job and “the ability to respond to many customers in their own language has proved to be an invaluable asset,” he e-mailed from Brussels. “There is no better way to understand how to work



with foreign countries than actually working in a language and culture that is not one's own," he said. He added that not everyone in his department is fluent in English and a "key success factor" in his career so far has been his ability to speak with many of them in their native tongues.

Leslie Brown, a graduate of the Global Partners MBA program at Georgia State, is an assistant brand manager in the external communications department of Sodexo, a French company that provides food and facility management services. She e-mailed from Paris that her proficiency in French is "a great icebreaker," helping her connect "on a personal level" whenever she meets someone new. Also, "if you are young like me, it gives you a chance to show off a little in front of the presidents and directors of the company and let them know you have some serious chops."

While foreign language proficiency is a relatively new requirement at many university business schools, it has long been an admissions criterion at some other international institutions, including the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California. Founded in 1955 as the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies, it now is a graduate school of Middlebury College. Spanish is "easily the number one language" that applicants to Monterey's Fisher international MBA program already know, but about 40 per-

cent of them come from other countries so "we check their English proficiency," says Fredric Kropp, professor and chair of the program.

At the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Glendale, Arizona, founded in 1946, the average student arrives already proficient in two or three languages, most commonly Spanish, "and sometimes more; it's amazing," says Carmen Carney, director of The Garvin Center for Cultures and Languages of International Management. She cites a growing number of students from Asian countries who already know English in addition to their native languages. "Most of them do not need to take another language" but many also want to learn Spanish as well, she says.

Administrators of global MBA programs seem to agree that while English remains the basic language of business, particularly in Europe, foreign language proficiency, whether at admission to MBA programs or learned later, will only grow as a requirement for success in international business careers. "You need to know the language to do things," says Rao at Texas. And it doesn't have to stop there. "Once you speak a second language, picking up a third or fourth language is pretty easy," declares Michelman at North Florida.

ALAN DESSOFF is an independent journalist in Bethesda, Maryland. His last article for *IE* was "Cultivating Branch Campuses" in the November/December 2011 issue.

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