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REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING CHINESE MBAs IN A COMPRESSED-TIME COURSE

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TEACHING ADVANCED STUDENTS, such as MBAs, in foreign environments and in compressed schedules presents additional challenges that are not present in home-country classes. To be successful, teachers must modify their home instructional strategies and tactics to match the backgrounds of the students and the teaching environment. There is a special challenge in teaching MBAs who have extensive work experience but inadequate language proficiency to take an active role in classroom discussion. The teacher therefore needs to find strategies and methods that enable the students to draw on their experience and integrate their knowledge with new theory input and that passes subject knowledge and experience over language and cultural barriers.

This article describes how I modified my instructional strategies and methods in teaching experienced and fully employed MBA students in China. Over a 2-year period and through teaching five courses, I developed the methodology that I describe in this article. These modifications were based on compressed time scheduling, the linguistic capabilities of the students as well as my bilingual language proficiency, the cultural background of the students, and the availability of simultaneous translation capabilities. I discuss the adaptations I made and close with some observations and advice on how to make equivalent teaching assignments in foreign environments more effective and enjoyable.

Course Description and Background Information

Organizational Behavior and Communication was a required MBA course of an Australian university's offshore program. The course was organized in two-weekend time blocks (four 10-hour weekend classes on Saturdays and Sundays, totaling 40 hours), with 2 weeks separating the teaching sessions and the final examination. The MBA students in

the course held full-time midlevel managerial positions in banking and automobile manufacturing industries, as well as in government agencies. Classes were held in rented office space and a hotel. Class size ranged from 50 to 60 students.

The teaching mode in the MBA program was English with simultaneous translation, except when bilingual instructors chose to use Mandarin. Approximately 75% of the students had limited English proficiency, 15% of them had adequate English listening comprehension skills, and 10% had both English listening and speaking competencies. Mandarin is my first language, but I acquired my professional language proficiency in English and teach entirely in English at my home university. My bilingual proficiency gave me flexibility because I could choose whether and when to communicate through or bypass the translators.

Description of the Adaptations

This section describes the difficulties I encountered and the modifications I made. The adaptations are organized in four areas: scheduling, languages, cultural differences, and translators.

Scheduling Adaptations

The compressed schedule (10-hour blocks) in two weekends (with a 2-week interval) presented teaching challenges and opportunities. I made adaptations to maintain student attention, reduce fatigue (on the part of both student and instructor), provide sufficient feedback, and provide performance expectations.

My overall strategy was to establish and maintain a predictable environment where there would be a flow of interrelated activities and the development of an interactive learning community. I maintained an established schedule of activities, explained in detail in the first hour of class and updated on each subsequent class day, where activities were broken into 1-hour blocks (45 minutes of class activity and 15 minutes of rest). The blocks were combined into segments. In each segment, I first presented a lecture (theory input), followed by a case or experiential exercise (application of theory input). At the end of each interrelated theory and application segment, I summarized and provided generalizations to cement and solidify the learning objectives of the segment.

The students from every course expressed anxiety about the examinations. To clarify and establish performance expectations and guide student study, I previewed the examinations and provided review sessions at the end of each weekend. In addition, I made one adaptation

to partly overcome the difficulty of providing feedback with the constraint of the compressed schedule. The midterm examination, consisting of multiple-choice questions and theory-application essay questions, was given during the first hour of the second weekend. As I did not have access to machine scoring, I usually picked three application types of questions and manually marked these questions on Saturday evening. To ensure timely feedback to help students prepare for their final examination a week after the course ended, I also sorted through the exams, quickly marked theory-application types of case analyses, and picked a few outstanding answers. Feedback was provided on Sunday. This activity took away from my needed rest but was a good compromise.

I also built in feedback throughout the course on student case presentations; to reinforce learning, I provided immediate feedback after each unit lesson through experiential and tutorial activities. This unit lesson feedback also gave students the opportunity to reflect on their learning. Peer feedback came from the small-group discussions and presentations, after which the coteacher and I provided further feedback to students. These sessions would start with a case study where student groups presented recommendations that were idealistic but that did not fit the realities of organizational life.

For instance, in the first case study in one class, the situation involved a worker who had a boring job and missed work on a regular basis without being disciplined. The student groups recommended that this worker be given a new and interesting job as well as a pay raise. In the feedback, I pointed out that a first-level supervisor would not have the authority to make these decisions and that this recommendation was inconsistent with reinforcement theory, which was the topic of the lesson. I also pointed out that recommendations should always fall within cost and authority considerations of the actual case decision maker. By pointing out the impracticality of the student presentations and offering a model answer tied to relevant theory, I not only provided immediate feedback but also established the standard for what was expected in the course.

Language Adaptations

Language adaptations involved deciding which course areas to teach in English or Chinese. Being a bilingual, I was able to use my language skills strategically in choosing whether and when to communicate through or bypass the translators. For example, in conducting lectures, I chose to use the translators for two reasons. First, having been

educated in the United States, where the linguistic input of my professional training was English, and currently teaching in Hong Kong, where the medium of instruction is English, I felt more comfortable and confident using English in a professional setting. Second, teaching through translators produced a consistency in teaching style with other courses in the MBA program and showed that the translators were an integral component of the course delivery. In contrast, when conducting case studies and experiential exercises, I was able to fully use my bilingual language competency to listen, observe, and selectively provide input and clarification during the small-group analysis. Communication in Mandarin was easier in small-group discussion, where interaction could be more informal and conversational.

In sum, when conducting the classes, I chose which language to use after weighing the relative advantages of conveying original versus translated information. This decision meant that I was using a dual-language approach. In addition, using Mandarin showed that I was making an effort to better accommodate the students while maintaining the practice of speaking in English to more fully and completely convey the course information in lecture blocks. An interesting side note is that approximately 20% of the students chose to listen to at least some of my lectures in English. The full bilinguals always chose to listen in English. The partial bilinguals found that listening to some English helped them to better understand the translated lectures, which remained the major channel for receiving information.

Cultural Adaptations

I also made adaptations that took account of cultural differences. According to Hofstede (1991), Chinese society is a collectivistic and high-power-distance culture. If high power distance is activated and becomes dominant over collectivism, hierarchical order exists even if the groups are all students. For example, in one class, all the students were from a Japanese joint venture automobile company where the students held positions ranging from mid- to upper-level managers. The small groups in the class functioned like a miniorganization that mirrored the structure of the automobile company. The students with higher organizational ranks dominated decision making and behaved authoritatively in their respective groups. The communication patterns also reflected their view of hierarchy in that they, conditioned by Confucian ethics, respected hierarchy and acted within the parameters established by hierarchy (Redding, 1990; Westwood, 1992). To de-emphasize and neutralize high power distance and also to protect the

face of those students with high-ranking positions in the automobile company, I established a rule requiring all students to actively participate in small-group discussions and to serve as group representatives.

Translator Adaptations

Communicating through a translator in the lecture segments allowed me to be more comfortable (preventing and reducing tension and stress) and to more fully and accurately deliver course material. I also had access to professional translators, which reinforced my decision to communicate through the translator. My objective was to make the translator a sort of coinstructor in a teaching team. I make it a special point to acknowledge and thank the translators for their efforts—not only for their dual language proficiency but also their subject knowledge.

To ensure the courses ran successfully, it was important to set aside time to work with the translators, as they are the ones to deliver the translated messages to the students. Ideally, these consultations should occur before, during, and after classes; however, because of time and energy considerations, we did not always achieve this ideal. My eventual best practice was to go over the material with the translator prior to delivery in class. As a practical matter, a comprehensive review of the material was conducted prior to the beginning of classes, as the translators usually arrived about a half hour to an hour before class time. This time frame allowed us to have a 20- to 30-minute meeting to provide an overview of the material, answer questions, and discuss logistics with the translators. As the translators received the lecture notes ahead of class and always had passages marked for clarification, it was possible to directly address these areas and remind the translators to pay special attention to particular sections of the teaching. This interaction also helped me to assess the translation skill and subject knowledge of the translators and so decide how best to adjust the style, pace, and possibly content of my lectures and presentations.

In essence, it is of utmost importance to establish a relationship with translators where they ask questions about areas they do not understand and that will allow them to gain face by doing so. The discussion of course materials should be seen as a mutual exploration of the best way to present subject matter rather than as a one-way dialoge. Giving face and enhancing translators' credibility are important steps in building a teaching team. For instance, after the first weekend sessions, I always acknowledged and personally thanked the translators for their good work. Endorsed by the instructors, the translators were treated by

Chinese students as part of the teaching team, rather than as people the institution hired to do the translating chore. On several occasions, the translators reported back to me that they felt they were respected and seen as important to the course success.

Concluding Remarks

I close by offering some personal reflections and observations for making teaching MBA classes in a foreign environment a more effective and pleasurable experience. Generally speaking, I believe that successful overseas teaching is a function of blending continuity and adaptation. For continuity, I emphasize teaching the same basic universal principles that are taught at home, while making modifications for language and culture to better fit the background of the overseas students. For language adaptation, when teaching through translators, I would do the following:

- Speak clearly and distinctly, as this serves the dual purposes of reducing translator hearing errors and slowing the pace.
- Stick to the PowerPoint slides. This made the teaching more organized and easier for the translators and students to follow the progression of the teaching materials.
- Concentrate on using proper academic language, without using slang and colloquial, idiomatic expressions. My experiences confirmed that translators, even the most experienced, found it difficult to translate messages with embedded cultural context.

As for culture, I made adaptations by taking into account not only the students' cultural backgrounds but also U.S. cultural backgrounds as a comparison. Cultures other than their own were gradually introduced to allow students to relate to their own cultural background. Where possible, examples were drawn from the consulting experiences in Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and the United States. I also carefully chose Asian cases for the first few lessons to facilitate understanding and to enhance students' confidence. As these MBA students were familiar with the background of local and regional examples, I did not have to spend much time on providing the background details of the cases. Gradually, toward the middle of the course, when students were familiar with American business practices and theories, I would balance the mix of Chinese and international examples so that students gained a balanced and comparative picture of organizational behavior operating not only in China but also in other parts of the world.

Reflecting on my experience in teaching MBA classes in China, I have learned that teaching compressed courses to nonnative English speakers and through translators is a three-way adjustment process between the students, the instructors, and the translators. Over time, I have gradually modified my way of delivering materials and designing courses. I have also developed and improved my sensing and delivering skills to cope with the physical fatigue arising from long teaching hours and interactions with translators. In this process, I have learned to unlearn certain behaviors and adjust to the environment, language, and cultural factors that arose in the compressed MBA courses I taught in China.

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TEACHING GRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS TO WRITE CLEARLY ABOUT TECHNICAL TOPICS

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GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS emphasize technical analysis in finance, accounting, marketing, and other core courses. Important business decisions—what market to target, which products to offer, how to finance an acquisition, whether to lease or buy equipment—require mathematical and statistical problem solving.

Management communication courses therefore need to help students write clearly about such technical subject matter. The most important writing many graduates do in their careers involves explain-