



SO YOUR SCHOOL IS STARTING A BUSINESS CHINESE PROGRAM?

CHINA HAS BECOME A REAL FORCE in the global economy over the past decade, and analysts are predicting a growing need for professionals with Chinese language skills in the business arena. Language departments and business schools are responding with a wave of business-oriented Chinese courses. But before teachers and administrators climb on the bandwagon, they need to evaluate their resources and then carefully consider their approach to this new breed of language students. For insight on how to best serve the needs of learners of business Chinese, Cheng & Tsui Company interviewed Jane C. M. Kuo, director of Chinese Studies at the University of California - San Diego, and Wan-wen Kuo (not related), a lecturer in East Asian languages at the University of Pennsylvania. Here are some of their suggestions:

- **Know Yourself.** Business students expect business competency in their teachers, but as Jane Kuo points out, few language teachers have that knowledge from the start: “They are usually native language instructors who step into the specific purpose of business.” Such teachers must take extra steps to feel comfortable speaking about business, and they should take these steps well in advance of their first class. Reading business and economics journals and trade papers—both Chinese- and English-language versions—is vital. Teachers might also register for a faculty development program at one of the 30 Centers for International Business Research across the country (see below *Resources*). Company visits and other business field trips are essential for gaining first-hand knowledge of contemporary Chinese business practices. Jane Kuo went even further by doing an externship with a Chinese company. An externship is typically shorter and less formal than an internship, but if you have the right spirit and self-directed attitude, it can help to build practical knowledge of the Chinese business climate. Kuo used her externship time to translate the business’s documents from Chinese to English, and dove into day-to-day operations of the business to get a feel for how language was used in various contexts throughout the company.

- **Know the Territory.** Most non-natives are unaware of how diverse China’s economy is, with many sectors and regional differences. They will need to understand these differences to be truly effective, so teachers should prepare to discuss the economic, political, and cultural climate not only in China, but also in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Wan-wen Kuo further notes that many foreigners are trying to do business with China’s middle class, which in fact remains a small minority. The working class makes up the bulk of the population, and hundreds of millions still live outside of the major metropolitan areas like Shanghai and Beijing, says Kuo. “People who are interested in earning money in China will need to go to regional markets, not just international cities.” This makes understanding language, dialects, and local communities and cultures even more important.

- **Know Your Audience.** Students of business Chinese have goals that are often more practical than aesthetic or literary. In other words, they may want to gloss over clear enunciation or graceful, well-formed characters and head straight for contract negotiations. Teachers should bear this in mind as they set up the course outline and establish classroom priorities.

“Typical language classes are for undergrads, and emphasize the foundation of the language, pronunciation, grammar, drills,” says Wan-wen Kuo. “I design business courses very differently.” In her beginning business Chinese courses, Kuo directs the students’ energy toward functional proficiencies, and she places less emphasis on things like pronunciation, as long as less-than-perfect pronunciation skills don’t affect students’ comprehension. “Students always make mistakes on tone, but I won’t always correct them,” she says.

- **Customize Content.** For any language class, creating relevant content helps instructors keep students engaged. This is especially true of business language courses. “It’s wonderful to teach students

with a specific purpose,” says Jane Kuo. “You just have to understand what their purpose is.” Some students may be looking at high finance, others may specialize in corporate or copyright law, and still others are eager to learn about start-up ventures or software development. These interests can guide instructors in locating authentic materials to illustrate lessons and industry jargon, and can also serve as inspiration for individual and group projects.

- **Match Level to Need.** Beginning students may need more time doing drills and role plays on social interactions, which are essential to success in business communication, whereas higher-level students will respond well to authentic materials and more complex and task-oriented learning objectives. More advanced students will need to be familiar with idioms, business phrases, and relevant literary references, says Jane Kuo. “They will make you seem more educated by Chinese standards, and people there will respond better to you.”

At every level, students must feel equipped with an understanding of the specialized and highly complex relationships that are implicit in Chinese business interactions. But in the end, teachers must remember that some things can’t be taught. Gaining cultural competency takes time, ethical standards are different, and business rules and regulations can change very quickly. “It’s impossible to teach them everything,” says Jane Kuo. “I teach them to be flexible.”

Resources

Phone conversation, Jane C. M. Kuo, professor emeritus and director of the Chinese Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego

Phone conversation, Wan-wen Kuo, faculty lecturer, East Asian Languages and Culture University of Pennsylvania.

Asia Business Today www.asiabusinessstoday.org

China Business Review www.chinabusinessreview.com

China Economic Review www.chinaeconomicreview.com

CIBER Network. Thirty regional centers link the United States business community with the international education, language training, and research capacities of universities across the country. Online at ciberweb.msu.edu

Cheng & Tsui Company. Publisher and distributor of Asian-language textbooks and supplementary materials. www.cheng-tsui.com

This information circular is provided by Cheng & Tsui Company as a service to teachers and administrators who are thinking about starting a business Chinese program in their schools. We welcome feedback, and encourage you to send us questions and challenges that you are facing in your work, for possible inclusion in future circulars.

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