

## SUPPORTIVE SMALL-GROUP PREPARATION FOR INTERNATIONAL MBA MARKETING STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

The growing and changing populations of international students in MBA programs in the United States over the last five to ten years have presented the institutions they attend with new opportunities and challenges. In many colleges and universities, Thai and Taiwanese students have become significant majorities among international students.

The author has instituted a one-unit semester-long course addressing these students' particular difficulties. These difficulties stem from limited English facility, cultural differences, and limited business background and experience. The goal of the course is to better prepare new international MBA students to compete effectively with their domestic counterparts.

### BACKGROUND

As the population of international students in United States MBA programs has grown and changed over the last five to ten years, the institutions they attend are facing new opportunities and challenges. Significant shifts have taken place. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, the bulk of international students entering business programs came from the Middle East. Since the mid-1980's, the majority of international students entering both science and business programs at the graduate level have come from the Pacific Rim. More recently, the proportion of students from the Philippines, Japan, and Indonesia has dropped, with a concomitant upswing in the number of students from Taiwan and Thailand.

These students have typically studied English (often "British English" rather than "American English") in their native countries for five or more years. Some have begun their English preparation in kindergarten. Many students say their language study heavily emphasized "grammar, grammar, grammar," with a little reading, very little writing, and no speaking at all. Preparation was aimed at scoring well on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). In spite of this one-dimensional training and limited or no exposure to native English speakers, before coming to the United States, students

feel confident of their English and consider themselves fluent. Upon arriving in the United States, they are shocked at their limited ability to communicate.

Unlike their undergraduate counterparts who live on campus, often with an American roommate, who are immediately immersed in the American language and culture, graduate students are more often isolated, living with family and friends in enclaves where the business of living can be conducted quite nicely in Cantonese or Thai. Conversations in English are more often with international students from other countries, since it is their only common language, than with native speakers. One informal survey by the author suggested that these students' average exposure time to English is six hours per week—less than the time they spend sitting in the classroom! And in spite of their expectations and expressed desire to have "an American friend," such friendships seldom happen. This isolation contributes to serious depression in some students.

In spite of these disadvantages, some students adapt rather quickly and are able to function successfully in the more quantitative courses such as statistics and accounting. However, the "softer" subjects of management and marketing pose particular difficulties for them.


### CULTURE SHOCK

Whereas in the past, large numbers of Pacific Rim students in the United States concentrated their studies in finance, many are now electing a marketing emphasis, possibly due to increased pressures in their home countries to adapt American-style marketing and sales techniques to successfully penetrate American markets. At the same time, marketing classes present greater and more complex challenges for these students.

American marketing is inextricably entwined with American culture, and graduate-level marketing classes presuppose, in addition to cultural familiarity, an acquaintance with U.S. companies and U.S. business practices. This basis of familiarity is not accessible to the Pacific Rim students. Typically, Southeast Asian students go directly from their undergraduate programs (often in philosophy, religion, pre-law or other non-business disciplines) into MBA programs, with no intervening work

experience. Through this practice many are doubly disadvantaged. They have little or no practical business experience, other than brief stints in a family business. And they lack the underpinning of undergraduate business training. They are also young, 22-24 years old, compared with an average age of 35 for their domestic counterparts, particularly in MBA programs geared to the working professional. Without an experiential milieu in which to rest new concepts and constructs, students have a significantly reduced chance of mastering course material.

While these international students are struggling to understand basic questions concerning the American subordinate's relationship to the boss, the American work and social ethic, and the individual's relationship to the company, their domestic counterparts, many of them successful entrepreneurs and mid- to high-level managers, are planning flanking strategies, wrestling with how to position a new financial service, or devising sophisticated telemarketing strategies to qualify sales leads.

The case study (the darling of the marketing class) demands of students a sophisticated understanding of cultural subtleties and innuendoes: Why does the Price Club, a business whose forte is low prices, have such great appeal to upscale professionals? (And what is "upscale"?) Why have J.C. Penney managers had such a long struggle getting vendors of national name-brand merchandise to supply their stores? Why would an American baby boomer "rather be shopping at Nordstrom" as her license plate frame claims? This author once spent 45 minutes after class trying without success to explain to a group of Thai students why Izod abandoned the alligator logo. The concept demanded understanding of "preppies," the anti-preppy backlash (whose tongue-in-cheek symbol was a  sign superimposed on the alligator), the trouble with K-Mart as an outlet for designer fashions (what's a K-Mart?) and on and on. In contrast, the domestic students "got it" immediately.

### Academic Demands

In addition to difficulties resulting from limited assimilation of United States business practices and culture, these students have additional academic demands placed on them. While many domestic students may spend three, five, or more years in completing MBA requirements, enrolling in only one or two classes a term, international students' visa status dictates that they be "full-time" students. They also may experience heavy family

pressures to complete their studies in a year and return to their home countries. Time for contemplation and assimilation is drastically compressed.

A second area of academic difficulty may result from heavy emphasis in U.S. marketing classes on oral presentations and often confrontational class discussions. Typically, the Asian students' role in undergraduate studies has been that of passive note taking while the professor lectures, combined with reading, memorizing, and feeding back concepts verbatim.

### RESOURCES

Institutions are coping with these multi-faceted challenges in various ways. Most offer special English as a Second Language (ESL) courses in writing, listening and speaking. International student directors and advisors provide assistance in complying with documentation requirements. Schools may provide tutorial support through "buddy" systems, tutorial centers, writing centers, or teaching assistants. (However, some students fail to find their way to such resources until they are already "in trouble.") Some schools offer an entire year's "pre-MBA" program.

The author found existing services for these students well-intentioned and sensitively delivered but inadequate. With the support and encouragement of colleagues and administrators, research was begun to determine how special preparation could be provided within the existing organizational framework and with limited expenditure of resources.

While there were no preconceived ideas of the form such preparation might take, possible formats were expected to include summer intensives and semester-long classes. An increasing sense of urgency was generated by the fact that in the author's classes, the percentage of international students has increased from 30% to 65% in the last three years. Similar increases sparked campus discussion of issues such as whether the large international population was becoming a disincentive to domestic student enrollment, whether it was advisable to require higher TOEFL scores for admission, and whether international students should be segregated for at least a part of their program.

### Caveat

The author wishes to caution that no claim is made that the following findings are applicable to international student populations at other institutions and in other

programs. The sample was small and the research was exploratory and qualitative in nature. However, it is hoped that some of these indicated courses of action will prove useful to other marketing faculty and MBA program administrators as a starting point to institute new programs or expand existing ones.

### **Methodology**

Five focus group interviews were held with international MBA students in their first year of study. Students were assured of anonymity and told that their responses would be used to help them and international students who came after them to succeed more easily in their studies. The interviews explored "likes," "dislikes," and "wishes." Common themes follow.

#### **Likes**

Students appreciated faculty members who have traveled/ lived/ taught in Asia. They believe that these teachers "look for my ideas, not my grammar." They like small groups with domestic and international students mixed. They find videos of cases helpful, especially in conjunction with reading about the same case. They want instructors to address the difficulties of the "mixed" class up front and honestly, preferably during the first class meeting. They want feedback in the form of "did you understand my idea? Did I communicate?" They appreciate those faculty members who make their lecture notes available for student review.

#### **Dislikes**

The students dislike pressure for oral presentations in front of the whole class. They are frustrated by tutors who are not themselves native speakers. (The author received a very interesting revision of a Thai student's paper by a Puerto Rican student tutor.) They are annoyed with Americans who "talk, talk, talk" and never seem to come to the point. Faculty with accents cause them difficulty in understanding lectures. They are bothered by their inability to tell if a professor is joking or not. They feel racial discrimination. (One student spoke wistfully of an institute where the American students like and want to study with international students.)

Team projects cause particular difficulties. The international students dislike being left with the least desirable cases but, by the time their groups are organized, the domestic students have taken all the "best" cases. They resent the expectation by employed American students that the international students will carry the bulk of the research since they're "not working."

Students are sensitive to the perception of their education in their home countries. They complain that since they attend a "college" rather than a "university," people at home think that they are at a two-year college and are only getting an A.A. degree. They also are acutely aware that they will go home with a U.S. business education but in all likelihood will never have been inside an American business, other than as a consumer in a retail store.

#### **Wishes**

Students would like some way to preview classes to determine what the work load may be and how much demand there will be on their writing and speaking skills. This would permit them to balance their program semester by semester, taking the more difficult classes in conjunction with some easier ones. They would avoid taking the more demanding courses during the abbreviated summer session. (They lack the network that usually supplies domestic students with these kinds of information.) They would welcome field trips to local businesses. They would appreciate small informal "prep" classes.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Based on what the students indicated would be useful, the author, with the assistance of colleagues and administrators, implemented a one-unit one-semester course, U.S. Institutions. The course is anchored in the ESL department but has business content and is funded through the MBA program. It is required of any international student who does not test out of ESL. At the same time, the traditional ESL requirement has increased from a three-unit one-semester class to two semester courses, two units each semester. A special orientation meeting with the MBA Program Director was required of all new international students, at which the MBA program culture and requirements were addressed.

#### **Course Content**

Initially, students in U.S. Institutions as a group visited campus support services such as the computer labs, the tutorial center, and the library. They received a short welcome and orientation by faculty or staff working in the various centers.

The second class meeting focused on oral presentation skills. There was discussion of difficulties in being understood by domestic students. The instructor suggested visual aids such as flip charts, chalk boards and handouts, and demonstrated their effective use.

The importance of speaking slowly was emphasized. Students were encouraged to observe body language and other non-verbal cues to gauge their audience's understanding. Many of the students' observational powers are highly developed since their cultures deal much more in subtlety and innuendo than does American culture. The importance of speaking slowly was emphasized. Students were also encouraged to find their own comfort level and style, rather than emulating the more demonstrative domestic students.

In the third class, the instructor presented a case as the student would be expected to present. The importance of introductions, clear organization, transitions, and smooth conclusions was emphasized. ("That's all" is not an acceptable conclusion!)

In following meetings, each student presented at least two marketing case analyses. There was time for asking questions about the company, defining unfamiliar terms, and relating what was learned to home country experiences.

The class took three field trips, one to a manufacturer, one to a warehouse store, and one to an upscale department store where they were welcomed behind the scenes and sat in on a shoe vendor's presentation to the store buyer. In all three locations, managers conducted the tours. (Note: In later semesters, the class was joined by MPA students. To accommodate their interests, the group visited a hospital and heard a lecture on financial management in health care.) An unexpected difficulty has been to find local manufacturing firms who will allow the class to visit. Many do not welcome future Asian managers' viewing their internal operations.

### ASSESSMENT

Intuitively, the class, combined with the expanded ESL requirements, seems to be meeting some of the objectives of acculturation, business experience, and language proficiency. In successive marketing courses, fewer oral presentations have been unintelligible. Students have had first-hand experience with several local companies and managers. They have gained a supportive friend in the instructor. They have found their way to other resources on campus sooner. They have learned tactics that enable them to be more aggressive with the domestic students so that they don't always get left with the "bad" cases or the research drudgery. In subsequent classes, the instructor can assess the students' abilities earlier and judge how hard to push them.

As part of a more formal assessment, students will be

surveyed one year following their U.S. Institutions experience. They will be asked to evaluate the courses' usefulness and impact on their success in subsequent classes.

### Future

Is one hour a week enough to provide these students with the help they need? Of course not. Will the course be expanded beyond its current one-unit format? Probably not. Will some students continue to deliver oral presentations that can't be understood and submit papers that can't be read? Most likely. The gains realized are incremental but important, even if only in terms of the spirit and morale of both the faculty and the students, who see that something "can be done" about their problems.

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