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Recommended Citation

Zhou, Y. (2020). Preparing students for the global workforce: Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals on key employability skills. *Global Business Languages*, 20, 66-83.
Available at (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.4079/gbl.v20.5>

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PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE: CHINESE AND NON-CHINESE WORKING PROFESSIONALS ON KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

ABSTRACT

In this study, 79 Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals responded to an employability-skills survey. They were asked to identify key language and intercultural proficiencies that would allow non-Chinese professionals to work more effectively with Chinese colleagues and clients. All participants work or worked in multilingual and multicultural settings from a limited set of business sectors and job positions in mainland China. Quantitative data suggest that the participants consider intercultural competence to be the most valuable skill in global work settings. Intercultural competence includes the ability to collaborate with colleagues and clients of different nationalities, the ability to adapt to Chinese problem-solving norms when conflicts arise, and the flexibility to apply Chinese cultural practices inside and outside the workplace. Notably, a significant mean difference exists between the Chinese and non-Chinese participants concerning adaptability to Chinese norms around conflict. Regarding language proficiency, the participants identified conversational competence as the most important skill for interpersonal communication at work and beyond, placing less emphasis on the ability to read formal documents and correspondence in Chinese. This analysis attempts to suggest pedagogical guidance for Chinese and other business language educators seeking to develop sustainable business language curricula that meet the demand for a globally competent workforce.

KEYWORDS: business Chinese , business language educators, curriculum, employability skills, language proficiency, intercultural competence

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE

According to a national survey on Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses in higher education in the United States (Long & Uscinski, 2012), the number of LSP offerings has increased over the last twenty years. Due to the greater diversity of LSP courses, the percentage of business language courses trended downward relative to the total number of LSP courses, as reported by Grosse and Voght (1990). At the same time, the percentage of business Chinese courses among all business language courses increased from 1% in 1990 to 16% in 2011. This was due in part to a steady growth in the number of Chinese language courses in US institutions of higher education (Long & Uscinski, 2012). A recent preliminary report (Looney & Lusin, 2018) indicates that while Chinese language courses experienced a 13.1% decline in enrollment from 2013 to fall 2016, there was an overall growth in Chinese-language-course enrollment over “the decade-long span from 2006 to 2016” (p. 3). In addition, the ratio of students enrolled in introductory Chinese courses to those enrolled in advance Chinese courses is 3:1, which is lower than among the other fourteen most commonly taught languages; this suggests that students are increasingly interested in learning Chinese beyond first- and second-year studies, perhaps reflecting a more widespread intention to achieve the proficiency required for a future in the global workforce.

The growth in the number of Chinese language courses has been accompanied by an increase in the number of research studies on business Chinese curriculum development (Liu, 2004) and teaching methods (S. Li, Wang, & Wang, 2013; Yuan, 2006), of needs analyses for business professionals and textbook design (Wang, 2011; S. Li, 2016; L. Zhang, 2011; Du, 2012), and of related cultural studies (Hong, 1996a; L. Zhang, 2011; Gao & Womak, 2007; Gao, 2006). However, little quantitative research has been conducted to determine what Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals perceive to be the key employability skills for successful collaboration between non-Chinese employees and their Chinese co-workers, partners, clients, and customers. Among the questions that remain unanswered is whether, after two to four years of Chinese study in higher education institutions, language learners are equipped with “global fluency,” “the ability to understand and collaborate across the complexities of language, culture, and multiple time zones” (Crouse, 2013). An investigation of the employability skills demanded by the global job market could serve as a springboard for business language educators, scholars, and administrators in curriculum design, textbook development, and the teaching of language and cultural skills in business Chinese courses.

BUSINESS CHINESE IN US HIGHER EDUCATION

The practice of teaching Chinese for business purposes dates to the early 1980s (Hong, 1996b). With the expansion of business Chinese course offerings in US institutions of higher education over the last thirty years has come a concomitant increase in the number of business Chinese research studies, including publications, workshops, special panels on business Chinese education at the annual conference of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, and international conferences dedicated to business Chinese teaching and learning. Following the Sixth Business Chinese Workshop, held in conjunction with the Second International Conference on Business Chinese Education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in March 2018, a special interest group on Chinese for specific purposes formed via WeChat (a messaging and social media app); as of this writing, it comprises 128 Chinese instructors in the United States and internationally, most of whom teach business Chinese. The group hosts regular and enthusiastic discussions on business Chinese education and posts announcements on instruction, on course materials development (including textbooks and online authentic materials), and on conferences and workshops for business Chinese research presentations and professional development.

By reviewing business Chinese-related scholarly essays that appeared in US academic journals between 1996 and 2018—primarily the *Journal of Global Business Languages*, the *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association*, *Foreign Language Annals*, and the *Journal of Language for International Business*—the priorities of business Chinese research agendas in US higher education institutions coincide with the most popular research topics in LSP: curriculum development, methods and materials, and culture (Grosse, 2002; Long, 2017). Along with other research aims, business Chinese educators, researchers, and scholars are conducting qualitative analyses of business professionals’ perspectives on the importance of language and intercultural competence, with the goal of identifying specific ways to improve business Chinese curricula.

Responding to China’s fast economic development and increasing worldwide trade and seeing an urgent need for developing a business Chinese curriculum with clear instructional objectives, Chen (1998) argued for a balanced presentation of business content and cultural knowledge, with an emphasis either on all language skills or on specific language skills desired

by learners. He also pointed to the business-specific characteristics of being practical and purposeful of which business Chinese instructors should be aware and recommended they employ teaching strategies and materials appropriate for business Chinese classes. Chen's recommendations inspired a research trend toward designing innovative curricula for business school programs (Liu, 2004), particularly with regard to teaching methods and materials development. To attract more Chinese language students and enhance their understanding of business Chinese curricular objectives, instructors and scholars have adopted a variety of teaching methods and strategies, including task-based approaches, case studies (Yuan, 2006), and integration of real-world business documents and commercials into class teaching (Zhu, 2001; M. Zhou, 2008) and online teaching (H. Zhang, 2002).

Due to the emerging interest in developing needs-based business Chinese materials, instructors and researchers have conducted preliminary needs analyses among both learners (Chen, 1998) and business professionals (Wang, 2011). Shuai Li (2016) has recommended that business Chinese instruction emphasize, through textbook content and classroom exercises, the development of pragmatic competence, the ability to understand and use language appropriately in contexts. With regard to working with Chinese business professionals, available research has addressed the importance of intercultural competence more often than it has addressed other research topics (e.g., materials development, instruction, etc.); this may indicate that cultural issues are more interesting to researchers or that, for people working in a culturally diverse environment, cultural issues cause more problems than do language barriers. Through surveys and interviews of business professionals, business Chinese educators and scholars have identified specific cultural issues and conflicts resulting from these cultural barriers (Gao, 2006; Gao & Prime, 2010; L. Zhang, 2011), and suggested new approaches to enhancing cultural knowledge and improving overall intercultural competence among learners (Gao & Womack, 2007; Hong, 1996a; Y. Zhou, 2014).

While educators and researchers continue to investigate business Chinese-related issues and challenges, little quantitative research has focused on what specific skills Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals feel would make students more employable upon graduation. The expansion and enrichment of research agendas along these lines would enable practitioners, scholars, and language department decision-makers to design more viable business Chinese curricula and materials and to teach in ways that acknowledge the demands of a globalized world and that therefore benefit business Chinese learners by making them more immediately employable for jobs that require Chinese language and cultural skills.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Employability is generally defined as having the “skills and abilities to find employment, remain in employment or obtain new employment as, and when, required” (Crossman & Clarke, 2009). According to federal institutions and professional associations such as the US Department of Education and the Asia Society, “being employable” now includes possessing language proficiency, intercultural competence, and international experience (Damari et al., 2017)—that is, the skills that enable students to adapt to globalized work environments that rapidly and continually change. Duggan (2009), of the Language Flagship initiative, reported the views of 38 business-sector representatives, concluding that to sustain US economic leadership, US corporations should encourage the possession and development of global cultural awareness and language skills to attract top talents. Similarly, regarding the connection between intercultural

competence and employability, Busch (2009) comprehensively analyzed what European policymakers, company hiring personnel, employers, students, and universities perceived to be necessary employability skills, concluding that both academic courses of study and employment-preparation services lacked the curricular support necessary to improve employability. Facing the urgent need for a globally competent workforce in the twenty-first century, policymakers, academics, and employers in the United States increasingly emphasize the importance of promoting and implementing programs of study that better equip students for the globalized workforce.

A clear definition of employability skills and a better understanding of real-world demand for these skills will assuredly help business Chinese educators and scholars to develop solid, needs-based, and proficiency-based curricula and course materials, to adopt innovative teaching methods and approaches appropriate for business Chinese courses, to enrich the business Chinese research agenda by aligning with the non-English LSP research standard, and to more actively participate in LSP discussions and research activities. Identifying employability skills in business Chinese education from the perspective of business professionals is vital to the development of business Chinese curricula, business Chinese instruction, and course materials design and evaluation. This study seeks to fill the gap in the business Chinese research literature by exploring what skills Chinese and non-Chinese professionals consider key for students' global competence, with a focus on determining the language and intercultural proficiencies required to navigate the linguistic and cultural diversity of today's workplace.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through this survey, I sought to answer three specific research questions:

1. What language skills do Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals believe are important for foreigners employed by multinational companies or organizations in China?
2. What employability skills related to intercultural competence do Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals believe are important for foreigners employed by multinational companies or organizations in China?
3. What discrepancies, if any, exist between Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals regarding the employability skills deemed essential?

METHOD

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

In June 2016, I used Qualtrics to create a two-part online survey. The first part posed specific questions about language and cultural skills: it asked participants to rate the importance of various language and cultural skills for working in multilingual and multicultural environments on a scale of 1–5 (“not important,” “somewhat important,” “neither important nor not important,” “moderately important,” “very important”); it then posed an open-ended question, asking them to identify other skills they deemed important for foreigners to possess when working in multinational companies or organizations in China. The second part of the survey collected general demographic information: nationality, age, gender, job title, work experience in China, and prior Chinese language education (see Appendix).

PARTICIPANTS

Via emails, in-person visits, the Chinese social-media app WeChat, and phone calls, I contacted UNC–Chapel Hill alumni and friends to explain the purpose of this study. By March 2018, 79 Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals had responded and completed the survey. Two participants were excluded, as this study focused on those working professionals who work or worked in mainland China.

Of the remaining respondents, 49 were Chinese (67.12%), 20 (27.28%) were American, and 4 (5.6%) were from South Korea, Denmark, Britain, and Finland; 4 participants did not identify their nationality. Forty-four (60.27%) respondents were male, and 29 (39.73%) were female, with ages ranging from 20 to 69 years old. Their job roles comprised office administrator, stock-market trader, general manager, education consultant, lawyer, analyst, vice-president, school principal, project director, translator, sales/marketing/finance project manager, engineer, CEO, start-up founder, research associate, and coach. The work experience in China of the 24 non-Chinese professionals ranged from less than a year up to 20 years. Two participants had received no Chinese language education, while the others had received some degree of formal or informal education, via elementary school, high school, college, or private tutoring.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data was input in the Statistical Packet for Social Sciences and analyzed. For research questions 1 and 2, the results were quantified in percentages to determine the relative perceived importance of key language and cultural employability skills. For research question 3, an independent t-test was used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals' perceptions of language and intercultural skills.

How important is each of the following employability skills in your company or organization for a non-Chinese working professional?						
Language Skills	Partici- pants (n)	Not Important (1)	Somewhat Important (2)	Neither Important nor Not Important (3)	Moderately Important (4)	Very Important (5)
1) Ability to speak and converse in Chinese	73	15.1% (11)	22.7% (17)	4.0% (3)	28% (21)	30.7% (23)
2) Ability to write in Chinese for daily communications such as emails, etc.	74	36.5% (27)	13.5% (10)	17.6% (13)	20.3% (15)	12.2% (9)
3) Ability to read Chinese emails, etc. for daily commun- ications	72	20.8% (15)	18.1% (13)	12.5% (9)	22.2% (16)	26.4% (19)
4) Ability to read Chinese documents (e.g., government, legal documents)	73	32.9% (24)	19.2% (14)	9.6% (7)	20.5% (15)	17.8% (13)

RESULTS

Table 1 presents results for the first four items of survey question Q1, which address working professionals’ perceptions regarding the importance of language skills. As indicated, 58.7% of respondents considered the ability to speak and converse in Chinese moderately important or very important. Similarly, nearly half (48.6%) of respondents believed that the ability to read Chinese daily communications was moderately or very important. Conversely, however, half of respondents (50.0%) thought Chinese writing skills for daily communications were either not important or only somewhat important, and more than half (52.1%) felt likewise about the “ability to read Chinese documents.”

Table 1. *Importance of Language Skills by Percentage*

Table 2 presents results for items 5–8 of research question Q2, which address working professionals’ perceptions regarding the importance of intercultural competence. A majority of working professionals considered it moderately or very important to possess an understanding of corporate business etiquette, the ability to adapt to Chinese cultural practices and modes of problem-solving, and the ability to collaborate with people of diverse nationalities. Notably, when language and intercultural skills were ranked together according to perceived importance, the top four were all intercultural skills: “ability to collaborate with co-workers of different

nationalities to accomplish a project” (89.1%), “ability to adapt to the ways Chinese solve problems when conflicts arise” (71.9%), “ability to adapt to Chinese cultural practices inside and outside of the company” (71.2%), and “knowing the appropriate business etiquette of the company” (67.1%).

To answer research question 3, an independent t-test was used to discover mean differences between Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals in perceptions relating to language and intercultural skills. No significant differences were observed across all language and intercultural skills between these two groups, except one significant difference relating to survey question Q2, item 7, “ability to adapt to the ways Chinese solve problems when conflicts arise” ($t = 2.57, p < 0.05$). The significant mean difference (Chinese: mean = 4.16; non-Chinese: mean = 3.38) between these two groups indicates that Chinese and non-Chinese professionals differently value employee adaptability to Chinese cultural values in the context of conflict. The higher mean value among Chinese professionals suggests that they value this ability more highly than do those in the non-Chinese group.

Table 2. *Importance of Interultural Competence by Percentage*

How important is each of the following employability skills in your company or organization for a non-Chinese working professional?						
Intercultural Competence	Participants (n)	Not Important (1)	Somewhat Important (2)	Neither Important nor Not Important (3)	Moderately Important (4)	Very Important (5)
5) Knowing the appropriate business etiquette of the company	73	5.5% (4)	23.3% (17)	4.1% (3)	35.6% (26)	31.5% (23)
6) Ability to adapt to Chinese cultural practices inside and outside of the company	73	8.2% (6)	15.1% (11)	5.5% (4)	34.2% (25)	37.0% (27)
7) Ability to adapt to the ways Chinese solve problems when conflicts arise	73	4.2% (3)	18.3% (13)	5.6% (4)	29.6% (21)	42.3% (30)
8) Ability to collaborate with co-workers of different nationalities to accomplish a project	71	2.7% (2)	6.8% (5)	1.4% (1)	24.7% (18)	64.4% (47)

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that with regard to key language and cultural employability skills, both Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals placed more value on daily communication skills (conversational Chinese, ability to read basic Chinese business materials) than on advanced language skills. They also prioritized intercultural competence over language proficiency. A comparison of mean differences in perceptions between these two groups reveals no significant differences among seven of the listed key employability skills, but significant difference in the area of flexibility around and compliance with the rules and practices employed by Chinese when conflicts arise.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE SKILLS

That both Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals primarily value basic Chinese skills in speaking and reading is hardly surprising; not only is English the lingua franca of international business, but both groups assumed that their own existing English communication skills were sufficient for workplace efficiency and effectiveness. While they considered overall Chinese language skills to be useful for their work, they identified speaking ability as the most important skill for communication (Chen, 1998). Therefore, they did not deem it necessary to possess advanced language proficiency such as the ability to write emails in Chinese or to read Chinese legal and government documents, business contracts, and the like. From their perspective, Chinese language expertise is value-added, but not required.

The finding that working professionals downplay the importance of overall language skills is consistent with the findings of prior qualitative research studies, case studies, and national reports on business languages. Damari et al. (2017) reported that American “businesses continue to operate without clearly stated strategies” (p. 32) for finding employees with sufficient foreign language skills. They reported that employers valued other aptitudes, such as interpersonal skills and technical and subject knowledge, more highly than they valued language proficiency. Similarly, Grosse (1998) indicated that business professionals did not consider foreign language proficiency as key to success in conducting business abroad.

It is important to note that many businesses may underestimate the actual importance of overall language skills. In a case study of United Parcel Service in China, where English is the standard language for business, Gao and Prime (2010) argued that although American and Chinese employees understood English or Chinese for communication, their comprehension of either language was insufficient for them, in many cases, to convey their meanings appropriately. This lack of language proficiency in either language can create serious communication breakdowns when meaning gets lost in translation. Likewise, Duggan (2009) reported that most US companies “address their language needs through hiring in-country nationals and using translators” (p. 7), without realizing the real value conferred by employees with foreign language proficiency; she pointed to overseas and domestic cases of enormous business losses, the risk of losing revenue-generating opportunities, and a lack of trusting relationships with customers, business partners, and clients.

While the quantitative conclusions of this study are supported by previous research, responses to the open-ended question posed in this study provide a more complete picture of how Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals come to prioritize basic Chinese communication skills. One non-Chinese working professional commented:

I have studied Chinese. . . . I have worked at an international company. People were generally good at English. I would have [been] better at my job if I was fully fluent in Chinese, but I doubt that it would have made a huge difference. . . . There are many barriers, not only language barriers. Most importantly, I don't really know any foreigners who managed to get a good job in China [at big companies] due to their Chinese skills. It seems like language is secondary. . . . It seems like the job market undervalues Chinese language skills.

A Chinese professional shared a similar view when mentioning her company's situation: Ideally my company, [which is] based in [Hong Kong] and is expanding its client base into mainland China, would like to have bilingual or trilingual (Mandarin, Cantonese, and English) [employees]. But in reality we only have a couple of key personnel that meet the criteria. We are managing ok.

Another Chinese professional thought that Chinese language skills were the key skills primarily for social networking: "Language is important, but is often not the most important thing for many professions. It is incredibly socially useful." One Chinese respondent emphasized:

The language skills of speaking and writing depend entirely on co-workers' English proficiency and the projects on which they are working. There is little demand for Chinese proficiency if one is engaged in projects related to one's professional work." (translated from Chinese).

One person even noted the importance of English writing skills: "English is the most important language and this is an issue for some when it comes to writing." These working professionals appear to underestimate the value of Chinese language skills.

PREFERRED INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

In contrast to their tendency to downplay the value of Chinese language capacities, the global professionals in this study highly valued the ability to work with people of different cultural backgrounds. That they ranked all four intercultural skills above all four language skills addressed in the survey suggested that these working professionals see an urgent need for a workforce empowered with intercultural competence. Survey data further ranked these intercultural skills according to overall participant preferences, in descending order of importance: ability to collaborate with co-workers of different nationalities and personalities, adaptability to the ways Chinese solve problems when conflicts arise, ability to adapt to Chinese practices inside and outside the corporate setting, and familiarity with appropriate business etiquette.

These results coincide with prior findings in qualitative business Chinese research on the perceived value of effective intercultural communication, flexibility, sensitivity, and ability to adapt to in-country business etiquette and practices. Through in-depth interviews with American expatriates in various professional positions in China, Gao (2006) delved into the obstacles they had to overcome when entering the Chinese cultural environment. According to her

comprehensive analysis, these obstacles originated in insufficient Chinese proficiency, unrealistic perceptions of China, and a lack of flexibility in intercultural adaptation. Her findings are remarkably consistent with the survey data presented here. They also provided context for Chinese professionals' expectations of non-Chinese professionals as documented in responses to this study's open-ended question regarding additional intercultural skills considered important for foreigners working in multinational organizations in China. Chinese participants stated that "foreigners working in China, or indeed any other country, need to be flexible above all else," to possess the "ability to deal with ambiguity" and "not to judge," and to learn "the concept[s] of giving, receiving, and saving face."

The most preferred intercultural skill—ability to collaborate with co-workers of different nationalities and personalities to accomplish a project—likely reflects a belief that cultural incompatibilities can cause delays or incompleteness of project work, that individual differences in work style, personality, or communication modes can lead to conflict or misunderstanding, and, therefore, that respect for cultural and individual differences is the key to successful collaboration. Chinese professionals commented that when they work on projects with foreign nationals, they highly appreciate "patience," "respect [for] Chinese colleagues' views," and those who "know the Asia[n] personality [and who] value and understand [their] way of thinking." Interestingly, the study participants also valued cultural and social networking both inside and outside of the company. One Chinese respondent suggested that non-Chinese global professionals demonstrate "openness to participate in extracurricular events such as team building ([playing] basketball, hiking, [going out for] drinks, etc.)" and willingness to teach English and "unique skills outside of language that aren't common in China (i.e., China has lots of software developers, designers, photographers, etc., but less abstract thinkers, etc.)." This suggestion likely has origins in the Chinese business cultural practice of fostering relationships and connections not only at work but also personally (L. Zhang, 2011). In building business trust and relationships, Chinese professionals consider it equally important to establish personal relationships and to make friends across cultures (Grosse, 2005; Wang, 2011).

DISCREPANCY AROUND INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The significant mean difference ($p < 0.05$) between how Chinese and non-Chinese professionals perceive the value of adapting to Chinese conflict-management norms clearly suggests a discrepancy between these two groups regarding how to solve problems and how to reduce or resolve conflict. This finding is also confirmed in Li's assertion (2010) that given increasing diversity in the workforce and among clientele, "language barriers, cultural nuances, and value divergence can easily cause unintended misunderstanding and low efficiency in internal communication in a multinational environment" (p. 114).

The discrepancy may be also caused by an intercultural communication gap identified by Gao (2014), who stated that disparate belief systems may affect the ways people behave and communicate when problems arise. Profoundly influenced by Confucianism in Chinese cultural values and belief systems, people in the public sphere respect collectivism, *mianzi* (face-saving) and long-term relationships (Gao, 2006; Gao & Prime, 2010; Li, 2010; Wang, 2011). They behave primarily as community members and tend to conform to group norms to avoid offending others. Their workplace communication style is similarly intended to foster harmony and obedience. When working with non-Chinese nationals, Chinese may subconsciously expect them to follow the "unspoken rules" of conformity and compliance (Wang, 2011). However, people of

other cultural backgrounds are often unaware of Chinese cultural nuances and values. The gap between Chinese expectations and non-Chinese cultural literacy can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications. Such challenges may be intensified with Westerners, in particular, as they strongly value leadership, initiative, and candor. In his case study of a U.S. student working in China after his graduation, Zeng (2018) observed that although the student demonstrated advanced proficiency in Chinese, his attempt to change conventional Chinese expressions creatively and playfully yet understandably by his Chinese counterparts was often nicely praised as “foreign flavor” (p.671) and received with an expectation of him to conform to communicative conventions that reflected Chinese counterparts’ “deep adherence to Chinese cultural values” (p. 671).

When entering an entirely new cultural work environment, non-Chinese professionals tend to rely on the conflict-resolution and problem-solving strategies they internalized in their home countries. Gao (2014) found in a case study of a Sino-American company that Americans’ directness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and rule-based work styles resulted in ineffective communication on both sides. Complicating the intercultural communication process is that many non-Chinese professionals have only short-term career goals with regard to working in China and thus are less motivated to acquire intercultural competence.

This study’s written responses also cast light on the discrepancy between the two groups’ perceptions regarding intercultural flexibility and compliance with implicit Chinese cultural values and belief systems. The Chinese professionals felt that non-Chinese professionals should build “a good relationship with (Chinese) colleagues,” be “modest, humble, working hard with an equal mindset and empathy,” “respect Chinese colleagues’ views,” “be respectful,” focus on “harmony,” “tolerate the differences in communication,” aim for “flexibility in schedule and lifestyle, open-mindedness and empathy,” and understand “Chinese culture and Chinese English,” “ambiguity”, and “Chinese interpersonal relationships.”

While the non-Chinese professionals agreed that “foreigners working in China [need] to be flexible above all else,” they focused more on career development and compensation packages. One respondent wrote that “living here long, especially more than 3 years, makes people take you more seriously. Most people leave rather quickly because life here is difficult for foreigners, especially if you don’t have a nice expat package with a big company.” Another non-Chinese respondent commented, “I do know a few foreigners who managed to add a lot of value for their companies and they increased their salary very quickly, but they had to go through a few years of getting very low salaries. It might be worth it but it is a big sacrifice.” Professional development and financial benefits appeared to be the primary drivers for the non-Chinese global professionals in this study; they were not striving for long-term career-development goals in China. Consequently, their motivation to improve language proficiency and cultural competence was most likely low.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study provides new insight into the employability skills related to language skills and intercultural competence demanded most by global professionals, a few limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. First, of the 64 respondents, 42 (68%) held middle management positions or higher. According to the previous surveys of the business demand for language skills, corporate executives valued international experience, business and interpersonal skills more than language skills (Fixman, 1990; Kedia & Daniel, 2003).

Consequently, the findings may most likely represent their perspectives. Second, the Chinese respondents (67%) outnumbered the non-Chinese professionals (33%), an imbalance that could skew the results toward Chinese views on the value of these competences. Third, a possible lack of clarity in the wording of a survey question regarding “nationality” could affect the accuracy of the survey results if there was a relatively big number of respondents who considered themselves culturally “Chinese” but identified themselves as being the citizens of different nationalities such as those from the countries or regions outside mainland China. Finally, none of the survey questions were answered by all respondents, which suggests that the wording of survey could have been improved.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

According to the results of the employability skills survey, both Chinese and non-Chinese working professionals considered intercultural competence the most valuable skill in global work settings. With regard to language proficiency, the participants identified conversational Chinese as the most important skill for interpersonal communication at work and in social life. The data also revealed a significant difference in the value that Chinese and non-Chinese global professionals assigned to the ability to adapt to Chinese problem-solving norms, likely due to the differences in cultural values, belief systems, and career focus between these two groups.

This study attempted to complement prior qualitative business Chinese research with a quantitative perspective, to provide pedagogical guidance for business Chinese or, more broadly, business language curriculum development, to contribute to teaching and learning and course materials design, and to narrow the gap between academia and business regarding key employability skills relating to global competence. More specifically, this research has uncovered information that can be “clinically” useful to business language educators: that is, it can directly inform curricula and modes of teaching that have direct bearing on the classroom. It is also to be hoped that these insights will promote collaboration among educational practitioners, business professionals, and policymakers.

For business Chinese curriculum developers and practitioners, knowing that the key employability skills are foreign-language competence sufficient for routine communication, intercultural awareness, flexibility, respect, tolerance, and open-mindedness will help them clarify business Chinese curriculum objectives geared to the needs of global professionals and students. With clearer goals in mind, educational practitioners could adapt to the employability needs of their business Chinese classes by adopting more targeted and innovative teaching methods from instructional examples and models offered in prior research (Hong, 1996a; Zhu, 2001; Kuo, 2005; Yuan, 2006; S. Li et al., 2012; Abbot, 2017). Furthermore, needs-based business Chinese course materials that offer “explicit pragmatics information” (S. Li, 2016) and that attend to overlooked but essential aspects of Chinese culture would allow students to increase their linguistic and intercultural communication competence in targeted ways. In globalized workplaces where the target culture is greatly different from one’s own culture, it is of significant importance to possess intercultural communication competence, that is, the ability to collaborate with colleagues of diversified nationalities and personalities, plus the flexibility to adapt to the target cultural practices and the business etiquettes. By providing students with a better understanding of key employability skills for language proficiency and cultural competence, business Chinese research and teaching can help college graduates position

themselves more successfully in the global job market, as well as further their interest in developing effective linguacultural communication (Risager, 2007).

It is equally important to understand that greater levels of language proficiency among global professionals would promote more effective communication across multinational coworkers (Duggan, 2009). Although educators should target curricula to emphasize the skills preferred by on-the-ground global business professionals, they should not underestimate the potential value of language proficiency and should make students aware of how advanced language skills could benefit their careers and the companies for which they work.

Business language educators must recognize and embrace the multiple roles they serve: they function as informal career counselors (Abbott, 2017), as facilitators who engage students in linguacultural activities, as liaisons between business professionals and students to encourage mutual support for acquiring appropriate language proficiency and understanding the values of the target culture, and as advocates for raising awareness among policymakers, in both government and higher education, of the importance of language and intercultural competence. Proactively incorporating key language and intercultural skills into the curriculum would ultimately benefit business Chinese and the business language field, helping graduates be more competitive by equipping them with levels of language proficiency and intercultural competence appropriate for a global workforce.

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APPENDIX

BUSINESS LANGUAGE EDUCATORS SURVEY

You are receiving this survey because you work or worked for a multinational company or organization in China. The purpose of this survey is to find out which employability skills are necessary for non-Chinese working professionals to work in China. (您收到此问卷调查是因为您为中国的跨国公司工作或工作过。该问卷调查的目的是想了解在中国公司工作时外籍员工应具备的技能。)

Q1. How important is each of the following employability skills for non-Chinese working professionals in your company or organization? (请选择以下外籍员工在公司或机构工作时所需技能的重要性?)

	Not Important 不重要 (1)	Somewhat Important 有点重要 (2)	Neither Important or Not Important 无关紧要 (3)	Moderately Important 比较重要 (4)	Very Important 很重要 (5)
1) Ability to speak and converse in Chinese (说中文及会话的能力)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2) Ability to write in Chinese for daily communications such as emails, etc. (用于日常交流如 email 等的中文书写能力)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3) Ability to read emails, etc. for daily communications (阅读日常交流信件如 emails 等的的能力)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4) Ability to read Chinese documents (e.g., government, legal documents) (阅读中文文件的能力 如政府、法律方面)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5) Knowing the appropriate business etiquette of the company (了解公司的商务礼节)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6) Ability to adapt to Chinese cultural practices inside and outside of the company (对公司内外部的中国文化的适应能力)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7) Ability to adapt to the ways Chinese solve problems when conflicts arise (对中国人解决冲突的方法的适应能力)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8) Ability to collaborate with co-workers of different nationalities and personalities to accomplish a project (与不同国籍和性格的员工共同完成项目的合作能力)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q2. In addition to the above-mentioned abilities, are there any other skills you think are important for foreigners working in multinational companies or organizations in China? (除上述技能外, 您认为还有哪些其他技能外籍员工在与中国同事工作时应具备的?)

The last set of questions are to learn more about you. (个人信息)

Q3. What is your nationality? (您的国籍?)

- Chinese 中国人 (1)
- United States 美国人 (2)
- German 德国人 (3)
- French 法国人 (6)
- Korean 韩国人 (7)
- Japanese 日本人 (8)
- Indian 印度人 (9)
- Other (please specify) (5) _____

Q4. If you are not Chinese, click one of the options below: (如果不是中国人, 请填写下面的选项)

- I have been working in China for (enter years) (我一直在中国工作, 写出“年数”) (1) _____
- I am not currently working in China, but I have worked in China for (enter years) (我现在不在中国工作, 但曾在中国工作过 写出“年数”) (2) _____

Q5. Did you have any Chinese language instruction prior to working in a Chinese company? (Please click all that apply) (在中国公司/机构工作前, 您是否学过中文? 请填出所有适于您的选项)

- None 无 (1)
- Formal class instruction in high school or secondary education (高中学校的中文课程) (2)
- Formal class instruction in college/university (大学中文课程) (3)
- Private tutoring (私人教师) (4)
- Other (please specify) (其他) (请写出) (5) _____

Q6. If you are Chinese, do you have experience working with foreign nationals at your company or organization? (如果是中国人, 您是否有在公司/机构与外国人的经验?)

- Yes (是) (1)
- No (否) (2)

Q7. What is your age? (您的年龄)

- 20–29 years (20–29 岁) (1)
- 30–39 years (30–39 岁) (2)

- 40–49 years (40–49 岁) (3)
- 50–59 years (50–59 岁) (4)
- 60–69 years (60–69 岁) (5)
- 70 years or above (70 岁或以上) (6)

Q8. Are you: (您的性别:)

- Male (男) (1)
- Female (女) (2)

Q9. What is your job title? (您的工作职位?)

Q10. The researcher may be very interested in your answers and would like to interview you at a later time for 10-15 minutes. Would you like to provide me with your contact information? Your survey responses will stay anonymous. Thank you for your cooperation and support! (您的答复可能特别具有意义, 研究人员希望有机会回访您 10–15 分钟。您是否愿意提供您的联系方式? 您的问卷答复中有关个人信息都不会被公开。感谢您的合作和支持!)

- Yes, my email or Wechat is (好, 我的电子邮件或者微信号是) (1)
- No, thanks (不, 谢谢) (2)

