A Study on Problems and Strategies of Business English Curriculum Design and Teaching[*]

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A large portion of the current business English course designs in China's colleges still employ the mode of general English course design and teaching in a traditional way and this has brought about many problems. This paper mainly discusses the problems in detail and underlying causes, and then tentatively proposes several practical and feasible strategies on how to address these problems from the perspective of needs analysis.

Keywords: business English, course design, needs analysis, strategies

Introduction

With the advancement of globalization and China's entry into WTO (World Trade Organization), market-economy in China has been developing very rapidly. Thus, more and more companies need application-oriented talents. Business English (short for BE in the following part), as a branch of ESP (English for Special Purpose), essentially aims to provide practical knowledge and skills for English majors and foster professionals who will be fit for market-economy which has been developing rapidly in China. But as a discipline, has BE evolved in a practical market-economy direction? This paper aims to discuss the existing problems of college curriculum design of English business, explores the existing problems in curriculum design of English business, and proposes some scientific and constructive solutions.

Problems in Curriculum Design and Teaching

Unbalanced Curriculum Design Structures

Most of the current curriculum designs still follow those of general linguistics mode with slight modification. Many basic and compulsory courses are equally or similarly set with other English orientations, such as Education English. These courses occupy a great portion of academic credits and a small portion of curriculums are set for BE. This mode focuses on language competence instead of business knowledge and skills. Consequently, what students learn is mainly linguistics rather than business and they lack practical skills.

Delayed Specialized Courses

Even though specialized courses are set in some colleges for BE majors, yet they are started too late. Some

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specialized courses are not provided for BE students until the fifth term and last for only one semester which is far from sufficiency for them to acquire business knowledge and skills, such as international marketing. These courses are actually crucial and helpful for their job application and future job. Once students start to hunt for a job, they find what they learn from practical course is too late and limited.

Specialized Courses Focusing on Theory

Many specialized courses aim to offer theoretical knowledge for learners and the class hours of theoretical courses outweigh practical courses. Once they begin to apply for a job or get down to work in a company, they find what they need is both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. In addition, even though practical courses are set, they are implemented roughly only for completing tasks. Teachers also consider theoretical learning significant and focus on textbooks. Most of tests and exams aim to check students' theoretical learning.

Unprofessional Faculty

Business English is a subject, focusing on students' practical skills training. Faculty plays a paramount role in carrying out the practice. However, most faculty major in foreign language teaching rather than business English. Even though they graduate as business English majors, they have had few practical work experiences related to business English in a company and never participated in business activities, which has bad effects on students' practical training process and course efficiency.

Problems in Curriculum Design

The fundamental reason why the mode of such curriculum design is not scientific and ineffective is that learners' needs and society's needs are ignored in business English curriculum design. In other words, needs conflicts incur these problems. Thus when needs are met, the problems will not exist. The following part will illustrate the specific reasons.

Needs Conflicts Between Students and College

For one thing, colleges require their students to pass a range of tests or exams for achieving their immediate goals of regularly running a school, so students have to spend a large amount of time on every course and preparation of any test or exam. The consequence is that students spare no time to acquire practical skills. For another, what students need to learn is practical knowledge or skills which make a good preparation for job application or future work. The fact is that they spend most or even all the learning hours in class. In addition, what they learn from their teachers' instruction is not part of what they need for future work for their teachers lack practical work experience on business English.

Needs Conflicts Between Students and Society

BE students acquire most language and business knowledge and competence from textbooks rather than practical work. They learn many skills of how to pass various exams. However, market-economy in society requires that graduates should be armed with practical skills once graduation. Obviously, students usually fail to meet their potential employers' expectation for their knowledge from textbooks cannot help them to solve practical problems and their potential employers need an employee who can get down to work and make profits for companies. Therefore, this type of social needs conflicts arises as a major conflict.

Analysis of Causes

There are two major reasons why needs conflicts arise. First and foremost, the curriculum design fails to meet students' actual needs. It is evident that students' needs are a paramount element in the teaching process which curriculum designers and teachers often overlook in teaching methods and evaluation systems (Brown, 2001). They fail to do survey and indentify the specific and necessary knowledge and skills that are indispensible for future work. For another, the curriculum designers of BE fail to take society' needs into consideration. Probably, they are not aware of the course nature of BE which is closely related to practice. Have they done a survey based on society's or employers' needs before they design the course system? Have they sought advice from some professionals on the curriculum design? Have they really done a survey for each graduate and traced their employment satisfaction? The answers are self-evident for many colleges or universities. Lots of curriculum designs are probably the outcomes of designers' subjunctive assumption.

Feasible Strategies to Addressing the Problems

As a branch of ESP, business English is a comparatively new subject in China with around 30 years. It is common that the above-mentioned problems arise in this field. In this part, the author explores to come up with some feasible approaches to cope with them.

Identification of Society' and Students' Needs

The main task for curriculum designers is to identify society's and students' actual needs (Colin, 2004). However, they are not equally important. The former dominates and determines the latter. What curriculum designers should do first is to do a survey whose theme should center around the specific description of an skilled employee that is expected for a potential employer. Curriculum designers should dig out what type of knowledge and skills the potential employer attaches importance to. Distribution of academic credits can be based on the classification of different levels of actual needs. With regards to students' needs, they may include learning motives, learning attitudes, and future career. Learning needs mean what the learners need to do in order to learn, such as learner's motivation, attitude, interests, personal reasons for learning, learning styles, resources, and time available (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 59). Both designers and faculty should do needs analysis that will provide a great amount of useful and effective information. In the light of clear learning motivation and aims, courses will be motivating. Students' needs analysis can be carried out by multidimensional means, such as interviews, questionnaires, and tests.

Selection of Course-Based Teaching Materials

Selection of BE teaching materials is great contribution to successful and smooth complementation of curriculum set. Wise selection of BE teaching materials should be based on combination of both theoretical study and practical training and of linguistic acquisition and business operation (Mackay & Mountford, 1978). However, a good balance between them should be kept. Many experts appeal to a cut-down of the proportion of class hours and theoretical study. Traditional and old-fashioned textbooks are still employed in some colleges, which are not fit for current business activities and cannot meet the needs of today's society and students. Thus, apart from the reform of curriculum designs, the corresponding teaching materials for business English courses also need adjustment featured with diversity, novelty, and practicality. The textbooks with sufficient case

analysis should be adopted. The experienced teachers may flexibly revise textbooks or compose their own handouts based on students' learning process.

Reform of Teaching Methods

Teaching methods are also significant instruments to implement a proper BE curriculum set. The teacher-centered teaching method and valuing theory teaching are obviously ineffective for educating BE majors. As it is mentioned above, students' needs should be observed and paid great attention to. Thus, adoption of student-centered rather than teacher-centered teaching method can actually meet students' needs (Nunan, 2005). The business English class should center around interaction between lecturers and students, students' timely feedback and students' self-learning competence. Such a teaching method can also help teachers to identify students' individual characteristics, strengths, and shortcomings in their BE learning process. Adoption of teaching modes like task-based, theme-based, and case study is effective for combination of English learning and specialized business knowledge.

Elevation of Faculty Quality

The lack of practical knowledge and skills from faculty directly influences graduates' weak specialized knowledge. Organizations should recruit faculty with practical work experience in enterprises, especially those in foreign trade firms. Also, they may encourage and dispatch their staff to firm for periodical training or further education. Besides, they may invite experienced professionals from enterprises to give lectures and guides for faculty. After a series of trainings, these faculty not only are familiarized with what kind of potential employees are desirable for a company, but also give their lectures based on their own work experience in firms. For another, students prefer those teachers' lectures integrated with illustration of rich and real cases, which may arouse their keen interests in learning business English, rather than general and vague analysis.

Enhancement of Training Courses

Successful implementation of training courses largely lies in infrastructure, including software and hardware. Business simulation software, which allows students to experience the whole process of foreign trade activities in a simulated international trade environment, should be installed in the laboratory. In addition, training bases beyond campus are also indispensable. Long-term cooperation between colleges and enterprises should be established to provide a platform for students' training. It is better for each student to get access to one or two weeks' training in a semester. Admitting the real training practice, students can put into practice what they learn on campus and will find out what kinds of knowledge and skills they lack for their future jobs. These training courses should be listed in the curriculum design and supported in policy.

Reform of Evaluation System

Evaluation systems may lead to teaching and learning in a right and proper direction and offer feedbacks on students' learning process. Due to their practicality, tests for business English courses should be conducted in various ways—combination of pre-course and post course evaluation, summative and process evaluation, paper test, and operation test. For example, summative evaluation is suitable for theoretical learning, while process evaluation for practical training. Only in this way can the learning achievement and shortcomings be identified through the learning process.

Conclusion

As a branch of ESP, business English should be market-oriented. It is extremely urgent that reform and transformation of current curriculum systems of business English should be implemented. How to bridge the gap between academic curriculums on campus and actual needs in society has become a constructive approach to the solution of the current contradiction. As a curriculum designer, it is always better to trace the needs of society and students than to fix eyes on "impractical fabrication" before starting a curriculum design. As a teacher, it is wise of him or her to select course-based teaching materials and adopt student-centered teaching methodology. With regards to colleges, it is necessary that they should recruit and train professional faculty with practical work experience in enterprises. Besides, training courses should be exclusively valued and carried out on and beyond campus.

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