Towards an integrated approach to teaching Business English: A Chinese experience

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Abstract

This paper reviews the practices in the teaching of Business English in China over the past 50 years and two perspectives on Business English that have been influential in conceptualizing a new approach to curriculum design. The review demonstrates that there has been an evolution from intuition-led practices to content-based teaching, and to more research-based practices. Two perspectives, ESP and business discourse studies, have both contributed insights into Business English and have led us to a working definition of Business English. On the basis of this new conceptualization, the paper proposes a tripartite curriculum for teaching Business English, which aims to cultivate business expertise rather than just teaching language skills and discrete knowledge of the subject areas as is often promoted in the ESP literature.

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1. Introduction

The teaching of Business English has had a history of over 50 years in China during which the curricula, syllabuses, courses, and materials have all gone through substantial changes. This paper first provides a historical overview of the practices in the teaching of Business English in China. It then reviews selected writings on Business English from...

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the perspectives of ESP and Business discourse studies, and proposes a working definition by pooling the insights from these two perspectives. Finally, the paper discusses the current interest in an integrated approach to teaching Business English in China and presents a tripartite curriculum for teaching Business English.

2. A historical overview

The teaching of Business English in the People’s Republic of China dates back to the early 1950s, when the College for Senior Cadres of Commerce, the first college of its kind specializing in training personnel for foreign trade, was established in Beijing (Chen, 2001). The college admitted students to its “English Translation” program with the goal of producing translators and interpreters in the field of foreign trade. To this end, students were required to master a foreign language oriented to foreign trade, learn techniques of foreign trade, and become familiar with China’s trade policies. The three successors of the college, Beijing College of Foreign Trade, Beijing Institute of Foreign Trade, and the University of International Business and Economics, inherited this tradition. They all admitted English majors whose English courses were oriented to foreign trade despite the gradual change of the names of the programs, for example, “English Translation for Foreign Trade” in the 1950s and 60s, “English for Foreign Trade” in the 1970s and 1980s, “English for Specific Purposes (international trade)” in the early 1990s, “English (economics and trade)” in the late 1990s, and “English” from 2000 up to the present.

The goal found expression in the contents of Business English. The 1954 curriculum, for example, comprised nine courses: Fundamentals of Marxism and Leninism, Political Economy, History of Chinese Revolution, Chinese, Physical Education, Theories and Practices in International Trade, Translation, Lecturing and Reading (including independent reading), and Practical Writing in Foreign Trade.

The last three on the list were English courses, which evolved into three core courses for English majors: Correspondence for Foreign Trade, Oral English for Foreign Trade, and Selected Readings on International Business and Economics from Western Newspapers and Journals. These courses were taught using textbooks compiled by experienced teachers or by teachers in collaboration with businesspeople. Correspondence for Foreign Trade, for example, was produced by veteran traders (Wang, 1997). The materials were taken from real-life business transactions and were organized by mimicking the procedures for foreign trade such as: establishing business relations, making enquiries, offers and counter-offers, applying for L/C’s, arranging for transportation, arranging for insurance and shipping. Lessons were made up of specimen letters, lists of words in the letters, notes on language features and jargon, and various exercises such as translation of business terms or sentences and letter writing.

Since the early 1980s when China opened up to the outside and moved towards a market economy, students of Business English found themselves having to learn not only the language but also the way of doing business. As a result, course offerings multiplied. In addition to the three traditional courses, such content-based courses as marketing, management, international co-operation were also offered in English. The intuition was that students would pick up the language while being immersed in the English-mediated instruction. Course materials with fancy titles multiplied (Wang, 1997).
The 1990s witnessed a boom in Business English teaching in China. The number of colleges and universities offering Business English programs increased significantly. An event worth noting was the accreditation of Business English by the Ministry of Education as one of the major ways of producing fuhexingrencai (multi-talents) apart from the literature and linguistics-oriented English teaching in departments of English at different universities (He, Yin, Huang, & Liu, 1999).

Over the last decade or so, there have been persistent efforts to upgrade the curriculum for students of Business English in China. Wang and Xu (1997) proposed a two-stage curriculum which attached importance to the learning of subject knowledge as well as language skills. Chen (1999) called for a more systematic Business English curriculum, arguing that subject knowledge and language skills could be incorporated. Partly in response to such input, the curriculum for English majors admitted to the University of International Business and Economics in 2000 included a range of courses in business subjects; for example, Western economics, business ethics, and business law. However, the business courses and language skills courses were rather independent and autonomous modules in the curriculum. In addition, the language skills courses generally excluded the concern with the disciplinary context and inadequately addressed the professional context, a sign that a coherent theoretical framework for Business English was lacking.

3. Understanding Business English

Until recent times, the teaching of Business English in China has largely been guided by intuition. As the teaching of Business English expands, so the concern grows about what Business English really is and how it is best taught. These are some of the questions that have been asked by Chinese teachers:

1. What constitutes Business English?
2. What distinguishes Business English majors from other majors who study business subjects as well as English?
3. How can we define “Business”?
4. Do teachers have to be both language experts and subject specialists? Or to put it more directly, how much do we have to know about business to qualify as Business English teachers? How much hands-on business experience is desirable or even compulsory?
5. In what terms do we describe the content we teach students of Business English?
6. How do we go about teaching Business English?
7. How can we fit Business English in with the national curriculum requirements for English majors (usually literature/linguistics-oriented)?
8. What does English-mediated instruction actually help learners to acquire?

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1 The language skills courses did introduce business procedures. For example, the writing course followed the trading procedures, e.g. enquiry, offer and counter-offer, shipment and insurance, etc., in presenting the writing activities. What was missing in the course was that which underlies the practices, i.e. the way business professionals perceive and act their professional roles, conventions of transactions, strategies and tactics for attaining various goals, politeness mechanisms in business, etc. Without an insight into this part of business culture, students would fail to understand certain business practices and would likely perform business tasks in a professionally inappropriate manner.
What are the communicative conventions or norms to be taught to Business English learners? Should they be those implied in Business English materials authored by Anglo-Americans?

These are all substantial questions each deserving separate investigations to be dealt with properly. The following section focuses on the first question, that is, what Business English is. It reviews two perspectives on Business English with a view to arriving at a working definition of Business English.

3.1. ESP and Business English

ESP was invoked to answer the question of what Business English is. There seems to be a consensus among researchers and practitioners in China and beyond that Business English is a branch or variety of ESP (Pickett, 1989; Robinson, 1991; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; St. John & Johnson, 1996; Wang, 1997; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Feng, 1999; Huang, 2000; Ellis & Johnson, 2002). While it is recognized that ESP does throw some light on Business English, it could be argued that it does not provide us with the answer we need to our question.

ESP was developed in the 1960s as a major reform in English teaching. It contrasts with General English teaching in terms of syllabus design and materials production. Munby (1978, p. 2), for example, defines ESP courses as “those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner, rather than by nonlearner-centred criteria such as the teacher’s or institution’s pre-determined preference for General English or for treating English as part of a general education.” Hutchinson and Waters (2002, p. 19) make this clearer by stating:

ESP must be seen as an approach not as a product. ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, pp. 4–5) resonate with this position. They define ESP by positing two criteria: absolute characteristics and variable characteristics, which are represented in Table 1.

It should be noted that these criteria take as given the knowledge of methodologies and activities of the particular disciplines as well as of the language, skills, discourses, and genres associated with the activities. In other words, ESP applies knowledge of language in use rather than discovering what the knowledge itself is in the first place. This point is supported by Nelson’s (2000) extensive review of ESP literature. The survey reveals that the heart of ESP is identifying learner needs and designing ways of meeting these needs instead of conducting a systematic study of English in use in the specific field or activity.

It seems fair to conclude that ESP was conceived as an approach to language teaching which is characterized by prioritizing learner needs. While it offers us some thinking devices and an operating framework for teaching Business English, it does not have much to offer concerning English in use in business. Ellis and Johnson (2002, pp. 7–9) is a good case in point. Following the principles of ESP, they provide valuable information on designing programs for both learners without work experience and job-experienced learners. However, they have not advanced our understanding of English in use in business any
more than the general observation that Business English is characterized by “sense of purpose”, “social aspects”, and “clear communication”.

3.2. Language-as-discourse view and Business English

The teaching of Business English requires a sound description of English in use in business. McCarthy and Carter (2004, p. 3) rightly point out:

Knowing how language works and how people use it is a first and indispensable step towards deciding what shall be taught, and is one of the components, along with knowledge of the psychology of learning and the social and cultural contexts of learning, which feed in to how we teach languages. We cannot hope to answer basic questions about the form and content of language teaching syllabuses and materials without subjecting their raw material, the target language, to close scrutiny.

The language-as-discourse view takes into account both language and the context in which it operates. Halliday’s (1978) conception of register is relevant here. Register is used to relate language forms to the context in which they are used. The variables of field, tenor, and mode in turn relate linguistic choices to the three contextual variables – subject matter, interpersonal relations, and the channel of communication. Although it is far too simplistic to conceptualize Business English as one monolithic register, the concept of register provides a useful framework for discussing its features.

At the level of field, we can say that Business English, which carries the semantic content of the business world, contrasts sharply with the English of the everyday world. Nelson (2000) demonstrates how the two worlds differ in terms of the lexis used. Business lexis and non-business lexis differ “along a series of dichotomous axes: business vs society, positive and shallow states vs conflicting and more philosophical states & qualities, emotive vs non-emotive and dynamic actions vs reflection”. It would be more useful to textualize the lexis by categorizing them as “participant + process + circumstance” according to their grammatical function in the transitivity system. In the business world, the participants are rather institutionalized and public (e.g. customer, contractor, manager, seller, buyer) whereas they are personal and private in the everyday life world (e.g. man, mum, wife, dad, baby). The circumstances involved, representing location (e.g. office,
The networks of interpersonal relations of the business world are understandably complicated. They involve business–customer relations, business–business relations, and relations between different departments/sections of the same business (Ellis & Johnson, 2002). The participants in the relational networks differ in many aspects such as access to knowledge of professional practice, market positions, power relations, and the frames of reference and cultural norms and conventions in the case of intercultural communication. Such differences play a significant role in interpersonal interaction as they help shape the structure of the interaction and induce strategic use of language.

For example, Button (1992) found that in a job interview, the interviewers, the powerful, virtually engage the interviewee, the powerless, in a question–answer sequence and that this sequence allows no opportunity for the interviewee to legitimately make corrections or repairs to his or her answers. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997, p. 209) report that at corporate meetings, the opening phase and the closing phase are the “most rule-governed” and nobody but the designated chair conventionally carries out the tasks. Participants may have more freedom of speech during the debating phase, but the overall process is still shaped by the chair, who nominates speakers and normally shifts topics for discussion. Charles’ (1996) study of British sales negotiations shows that the situation of buyer’s market gives the Buyer more power over the Seller in interactions.

The interpersonal relationship in business interactions is not rigid, though. Studies of business discourse reveal the way participants design their turns and orient to the task, the other party, and the local context during their interactions. Charles (1996) demonstrates that while the situation of buyer’s market gives the Buyer more power over the Seller in sales negotiations, the Seller can make full use of his turns to his advantage. For example, in response to the Buyer’s praise of his competitors, the Seller drew a parallel between his product and the rivals’. By doing this, the Seller gained some ground. This is even true of rigidly structured interviews. An experienced interviewee may make use of a turn to answer questions in such a way to elicit interviewers’ assessments of his or her answers rather than just waiting for the next question. In this way he or she can gain a chance to repair his or her earlier answers if they were not adequate in the previous turn(s). In other words, this turn-by-turn interaction has the potential of subverting the relative power of the institutional participants.

In the case of intercultural communication, where parties to the occasion are from different cultural backgrounds, there is an additional dimension to the interpersonal relationship. Whose frame of reference and code of conduct is to be adopted for the interaction? Findings vary and there are reports of various deviances from the Anglo-American norms. Marriott (1995) examined business negotiations in English between an Australian and a Japanese. She observed a “discord deviance” where the Australian complained that the Japanese did not respond to his proposals in the form and manner he expected. This deviance resulted from the status of the Japanese as an overseas representative of his home company as well as differences in cultural norms. In a study of impression management by local Chinese staff and Western expatriates at corporate meetings in Hong Kong, Bellow (1997) found that among other things, the Western staff used more directives and used them in explicitly direct forms. Their suggestions “are more commonly related to
the activities of specified listeners”. In contrast, the Chinese staff were more circumlocu-
tionary. They realised their directives in more formal linguistic forms and their suggestions
“more usually relate to activity by the group”. Bilbow attributes these differences to the
cultural norms of the two groups. For the Chinese, avoidance of directness is a strategy
for saving mianzi (face), to which is attached great social value in Chinese society.

Other studies suggest that parties to business interactions are not bound by their cul-
tural norms. Propelled by their business goals, they are likely to accommodate each other. Connor (1999) found that convergence is common in business negotiations. Marriott (1995) also notes instances of convergence in the negotiation between the Japanese and
the Australian. In both these cases, English cultural norms seem to be treated more like
interpretative resources rather than static and obligatory rules.

Regarding mode, businesses seem ready to apply the technology of their day. The media
of letter, telephone, telegraph, telex, fax, and email have all played a role in facilitating busi-
ness communication. But while business letters “are still very often the main means of estab-
lishing business relations with other organisations” (Taylor, 2005, p. 70), they “are
frequently either sent by fax or replaced by fax messages” (Taylor, 2005, p. 142). Telegraph
and telex have almost been replaced by fax and email (Wu, 1999, p. 164). The media are not
just means of transmitting messages. In fact, they bear significantly upon the style of lan-
guage use and may even affect the way business is conducted. For example, Liu (2004)
and Taylor (2005) have identified some linguistic choices and layouts characteristic of fax
and email messages. Powell (2005) portrays the way of doing business in this electronic age:

These days the telephone is a more automatic choice for problem-solving and negoti-
tiation than the boardroom. A lot of meetings are as likely to take place in pavement
cafes, office corridors, hotel foyers or in front of a webcam as they are seated around
a table with a formal agenda and a flipchart. In fact, 21st century Business English
might be better defined as a series of ongoing conversations – electronic, telephonic
and face-to-face – whether they are the cut-and-paste conversations of e-mail, the
interest-seeking conversations of negotiation or the public conversations of Power-
Point presentations.

Another aspect of mode is the multimodal nature of communication, in particular busi-
ness communication. For the sake of effect, Business English mobilizes multiple semiotic
resources, namely verbal, visual, and audio resources. A ready example is advertising. Cook
(1992) describes the complicated interaction between image, sound, and text in
advertisements to achieve desired effects. Zhang (2005) demonstrates the use of text in
anchoring the meaning of the image to achieve the goal of arousing viewer attention.

One more aspect of mode is that language is used to create messages in conventional-
lized forms that are appropriate to the communicative goals of the parties to an interaction.
Studies of business genres reveal that business interactions are staged and goal-driven. Bhatia
(1993), for example, identifies a seven-move structure in promotional literature. Corporate meetings also have describable structures. According to Bargiela-Chiappini
and Harris (1997, pp. 207–211), meetings are “structured into hierarchically ordered
units”, which consist of three consecutive phases: opening phase, debating phase, and clos-
ing phase. Each phase is made up of a number of exchanges and moves. There are tran-
sitional moves marking the boundaries between phases.

Studies of business discourse demystify the world of business interactions. Though not
intended to be comprehensive, this review has attempted to show that Business English is
more than just a list of specialized lexical, syntactic, and discoursal features. Language in use in business is a complex phenomenon subject to a congeries of factors. Representing a domain of social and economic life, it has its own subject matter, interpersonal relations, choice of media and channels of communication, and patterns of organizing messages.

3.3. A working definition of Business English

Both ESP and language-as-discourse views contribute to our understanding of Business English. Each provides unique insights. ESP offers an operating frame for teaching Business English. The discourse view, in turn, allows us to see the process of interaction between business and language, i.e. the activities and topics of business participants, complicated networks of interpersonal relations, strategies and tactics taken up for pursuing particular goals, dynamics of discourse, and features of linguistic realizations. The two combined give us the necessary information for defining Business English, developing Business English curricula, and designing course syllabuses.

By combining the insights gained from the two perspectives, a working definition of Business English has been reached:

Business English involves the teaching of the system of strategic communication in the social and economic domain of international business in which participants, adopting/adapting business conventions and procedures, make selective use of lexicogrammatical resources of English as well as visual and audio semiotic resources to achieve their communicative goals via the writing modality, speaking modality, and/or multi-modality.

4. An integrated approach to the teaching of Business English

That Business English is concerned with teaching communication rather than just language forms or skills would have a major impact on the design of Business English curricula in China. In fact, the teaching of Business English in China has not been form and language-oriented. There has always been a content which English serves to express, although at the earlier stages this may not always have been done with explicit theoretical guidelines. Another distinguishing feature of Business English teaching in China is that it is not a service industry, as Hutchinson and Waters (2002) suggest ESP is, but rather an independent form of language education conducted by English departments of the universities that offer Business English programs. In contrast, Alexander (1999) describes Business English as a service program for students of business administration, economics, or commerce.2

There is an increasing awareness that the teaching of Business English is an interdisciplinary endeavor and should be informed by research into three essential fields – subject knowledge, business practice and language skills, and that they should be

2 Alexander (1999, p. 6) refers to a content-based language curriculum in Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. The courses, run by the university’s Department of Business English, are organized around business topics, e.g. the business, contract of sale, marketing, personnel management, banking, international trade, etc., and are taught in English. Language is dealt with “in a functional fashion as and when deemed necessary by the lecturers.”
integrated. After all, communication requires knowledge of the subject matter of communication, the procedure of and strategies and tactics for communicating the message, and the disciplinary and professional contexts in which linguistic choices are made. Earlier curricula recognized to varying degrees the three fields as essential components to a complete curriculum, but they were often treated as autonomous and independent areas of study. For example, the curriculum in use at the University of International Business and Economics\(^3\) contains courses in business disciplines, language skills, and language studies, but they are not related as a coherent whole. Inspired by Bhatia’s (2002) conception of professional expertise – the specialist expertise in a particular professional community, I propose a curriculum framework that integrates the knowledge and skills required of students of Business English in China. Bhatia’s professional expertise comprises three essential parts: disciplinary knowledge, professional practice, and discursive competence. On the basis of this model, a tripartite curriculum has been designed (Fig. 1).

The curriculum incorporates the three areas of knowledge and skills. The vertical axis represents courses in business studies, like micro and macro-economics, marketing, finance, and fundamentals of business law. These courses do not involve the functional treatment of subject knowledge or use them as materials for developing language skills, as is the case in a content-based approach to language teaching. Instead, they treat disciplinary knowledge systematically and are important in that they carry the disciplinary knowledge students of Business English have to process. In a sense, they are part of the semantics of Business English. Moreover, they are partly the means of acquainting students with disciplinary cultures and preparing them for membership in their target discourse community, including its ways of perceiving, structuring, questioning, and hypothesizing in the domains of study. Finally, through an in-depth and systematic study of a discipline, students receive academic training, which was usually lacking in earlier curricula for English majors oriented to foreign trade. In practice, lectures in these courses are delivered in English as the language of instruction. Following this, students learn both subject knowledge and the way of handling the knowledge in their target language.

The courses represented in the horizontal axis acquaint students with the procedures, conventions, politeness systems, strategies and tactics for addressing various goals in the professional community. They constitute the other part of the semantic content of Business English. Courses in practices in international business, professional etiquette and business ethics are among the essential ones. As these courses involve procedural and

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factual information as well as critical awareness of business practices, ideal ways of running the courses include lectures plus seminars and computer-assisted learning. Lectures transmit basic information and seminars provide the stage on which students can discuss their understanding of the facts and demonstrate their awareness. Regular seminar sessions may be supplemented by inviting business professionals to explain professional practices by citing their own experiences. The computer can play a role when it comes to rather schematic business procedures. Computers with interactive programs allow students to work through business procedures and activities, which gives students valuable hands-on experience of business practice.

For courses in business practice, Chinese may appear to be an efficient medium of instruction, especially where some universal procedures are concerned. However, English is still the preferred working language. For one thing, students can practice English in settings and activities different from those of their subject of study. Obviously, describing a procedure is different from forming a hypothesis and thus requires a different set of lexicogrammatical items. For another, students would feel more comfortable talking about the practices in English which they have learned about through the English language.

Business discourse, represented by the oblique axis, plays a pivotal role in organizing Business English curricula. It is where language and business interact. Appropriate and successful business discourse requires subject knowledge on the one hand and insights into business practice on the other. As the level of business discourse rises, so do the levels of subject knowledge and business practice. Business discourse involves study skills, business skills, and language awareness. These three areas can be dealt with by invoking three sets of genres and activities. The study skills set centres on genres that are realistically handled in business studies, such as academic writing, discussion and presentations. The business skills set concerns such genres as meeting, negotiating, socializing, telephoning and corresponding. The language awareness set includes activities like the analysis of texts of different genres in terms of accuracy and appropriacy to enhance students’ ability to reflect on the use of language in business. The genres can be graded according to the generality and specificity of the subject knowledge and/or business practice involved.

The teaching of the genres is best done by using cases which are drawn from the study of business subjects and real-life business practices. Simulation sessions can be organized as follow-ups of case studies so that students can develop a feel for the types of business discourse through practice. For both case studies and simulations, students are guided, where necessary, to demonstrate their ability in handling business genres in English by using their knowledge of business subjects, of business practice, and of business discourse.

Thus conceptualized, the curriculum comprises three interdependent modules, i.e. business studies, business practice, and business discourse. Together, the first two modules cover the semantic content of Business English. Meanwhile, they are supported by the module of business discourse, where the skills required for their study are practiced. Business discourse, in turn, accommodates sets of genres which draw on information that is represented by the vertical and horizontal axes in the diagram.

By integrating the three components of business expertise within the tripartite framework, it is believed that students of English in China would develop language awareness in the sense that they know not only the lexical, syntactic, and discoursal features of business language but also the way these features relate to interpersonal relations and the way they are textualized for communicative goals. Students would become familiar with business practices and acquire essential business knowledge that would enable them to act as
well-informed professionals. In the words of Scollon and Scollon (2001), they are socialized, via language education, into the business community they would find themselves in.

5. Concluding remarks

The teaching of Business English has had a fairly long history in China and it has become increasingly research-led. Business English as English in use in business represents a domain of social and economic life, with its own subject matter, interpersonal relations, and choice of media and channel of communication. It thus deserves attention as an independent field of interdisciplinary study. From this understanding, the teaching of Business English in China, and presumably in similar situations elsewhere, derives its necessity and vitality. At the micro-level of implementation, Business English practitioners draw on ESP for tenets of teaching and methods of discovering learner needs, developing and selecting materials. They are further informed by studies of how business professionals use English in the workplace. Integrating and applying the insights into Business English from these complementary perspectives, we should feel more confident in our endeavor to educate students of English who aspire to business expertise.

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