

A Comparison Between University Curriculum Design and Practical Ability Requirement of Business English Majors

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Abstract

The cultivation of Business English talents is of great significance to Chinese people's promotion of international cooperation and economic growth. However, the colleges and universities in China are still exploring how to best achieve this goal. By interviewing four Business English graduates who are currently working in the sector of international trade, this study attempts to investigate the gap between the curriculum design and the actual ability requirement for Business English majors. The analysis shows that gaps exist in all the six aspects, namely comprehensive quality, theoretical knowledge, practical experience, industry knowledge and general knowledge. The lack of practical experience and industry knowledge are most prominent. This study reveals that there is room for improvement in the current training programs for Business English, especially the modules of parallel classroom, theoretical courses, practical teaching, cooperation between schools and enterprises and general courses.

Keywords: business English, curriculum setting, graduates, foreign trade

1. Introduction

Business English has become an increasingly popular undergraduate program in China in recent years as China grows into a major economy in the world. Recently, the construction of Shanghai Free Trade Zone will certainly further promote the vigorous development of Business English in Eastern China. Business English major is usually set to develop the basic knowledge of basic English language skills, rich knowledge of international business, related subjects of international economy, management and law. In short, it enables the students to use English as a working language in the international environment for business, trade, management, foreign affairs and other complex English tasks. Under this background, it remains a priority for us to cater to the changing market demand and to improve the curriculum design of Business. Therefore, we should be clear of the current situation of the training of business English majors and the needs of employers, constantly adjust the talent training model according to the actual situation, optimize the curriculum and teaching in order to better train and transport business English professionals for the community. This paper, explores the current situation of Business English teaching and also working setting for the graduates, hoping to shed some light on the improvement of teaching of Business English in Chinese universities.

2. Literature Review

There have been many studies on the reforming method of curriculum setting in Business English majors. The studies of Huba (2000) and Angelo (1995) indicated that we should reform our curriculum setting in line with the demand of students and teachers should give priority to the liberty of students. Some researchers like Zhao (2019) studied it under the background of eco-linguistics: the use of eco-linguistics can create a sound and scientific learning environment for students. To some extent, these studies have led to some improvements and adjustments to the curriculum setting of business English majors. However, there are few comparative studies on the practical needs in work and curriculum design in universities. This leads to the gaps between the two, a problem that is seldom investigated.

At present and for a long time in the future, Chinese English teaching will inevitably continue to take the road of "compound" (Lu Ying 2008; Zhuang Zhixiang 2010, etc.). Business English major is a new major established to meet the needs of China's social and economic development, and opens up a new way to cultivate compound English talents. From 2007 to 2012, the number of universities approved or registered by the Ministry of Education to establish business English majors expanded from 3 to 62. In 2013, 83 universities added new

majors, which shows the rapid development of business English majors. However, after the "hot" development of business English major, we should calm down and think rationally (Lin Tianhu 2010:17), especially to build good professional courses to realize the benign development of business English major. At present, although the business English major of each university basically follows the Undergraduate Teaching Requirements of Business English Major (Trial) (Chen Junmin et al. 2009), there is still great room for improvement and development space in the curriculum. Business English major generally evolved from English major (business direction), and the course setting of English major (business direction) basically refers to the talent training mode of language and literature (Liu Dagong 2009). The existing research on business English professional curriculum mainly describes the problems such as disproportion or disconnect between English courses and business knowledge and skills courses, but rarely discusses how to solve these problems. If these curriculum problems are not properly solved, they will inevitably restrict the development of business English major. Therefore, it is urgent to identify the key problems of the scientific reconstruction of business English professional courses, effectively promote the curriculum construction, accelerate the process of students' business English skills adapting to social needs, and effectively realize the talent training goal of business English majors.

3. Research Design and Data Collection

This study is basically a qualitative analysis, mainly employing the tool of interview. As the purpose of this thesis is to make a comparison between the course setting and the working ability of Business English majors in colleges and universities, the subjects of this interview are the foreign trade practitioners who graduated from Business English majors. They have a deep understanding of Business English courses, foreign trade work situation. Also, they have rich work experience and strong language marking ability. Thus they are the most suitable for the interview. This interview selects four foreign trade practitioners working in Yangjie Technology, who are working in three different occupations in the foreign trade sector. Yangzhou Yangjie Electronic Technology Co., Ltd is a Yangzhou based factory they are working in. It was set up in 2006. As a listed company in the electronics industry, the country's main business is the development, manufacture and sale of semiconductor discrete device products such as discrete device chip, power diode, rectifier bridge and power electronic module. This company is actively expanding overseas markets. The specific situation of the interviewees was shown as follows:

The Interviewee A is now working in Yangjie Electronic Technology Co., Ltd and serves as foreign trade merchandiser. She graduated from Jiangsu Ocean University majoring in Business English. The Interviewee B is now working in Yangjie Electronic Technology Co., Ltd and serves as Foreign Trade Manager. She graduated from Yangzhou University majoring in Business English. The Interviewee C is now working in Yangjie Electronic Technology Co., Ltd and serves as foreign trade salesman. She graduated from Yangzhou University majoring in Business English. The Interviewee D is now working in Yangjie Electronic Technology Co., Ltd and serves as foreign trade salesman. She graduated from Yangzhou University majoring in Business English.

The interviews took place in the workplace of Yangjie Group. The interview time for each interviewee was about an hour. In the course of the interview, the researchers asked questions according to the outline of the interview and give appropriate feedback and response. When the interviewees mentioned some valuable points, I would ask them to give me some extension so as to have a clearer understanding of the views of the interviewees. I took the firm of sound-recording in the process of my interview. My Interviews began on 10 January 2020 and ended on 20 January 2020.

4. The Gaps Between the Acquired Ability and the Practical Need

The training plan of Business English at Yangzhou University shows that there are five modules that intend to cultivate corresponding abilities of the students. The modules and abilities are presented as in Table 1.

Table 1. The modules of the training plan

Modules	Abilities
Theoretical courses	Theoretical knowledge
Parallel classroom	Integrated ability
Practical teaching	Practical experience
School-enterprise cooperation	Understanding of the industry
General courses	Common sense

Through interviews and surveys of graduates, we found that corporate requirements for business English

graduates can be summarized in the following five modules, namely Theoretical knowledge, Integrated ability, Practical experience, Understanding of the industry and Common sense. However, in the process of interviewing with students, we learned that in the actual work, students still have deficiencies in the handling of the above five problems. There are still some problems to overcome for business English students under the training plan. The author summarizes the students' opinions based on the feedback of the respondents as following.

4.1 The Insufficient Theoretical Knowledge

Theoretical courses are set to help students learn about business knowledge, including the knowledge of economics, management, international business law, international finance, human resource management, financial management, business operation procedures, and information technology, etc. But the fact is that some enterprises find that graduates of business English are still lack of the ability to have full-fledged relevant knowledge in their work.

Thus we interviewed the students about their feelings and suggestions to knowledge of the curriculum arrangement of business English major theory course. By doing so, we can understand the feedback of graduates to the theory course, and to make suggestions.

According to interviewee A, "Theoretical courses took up a large proportion. My theoretical courses include business English interpretation, international trade theory and practice, business English reading, business English writing, cross-cultural communication, business translation practice, basic English, combined with work experience." She thought for a student in her undergraduate years, the proportion of theoretical course is too much. Interviewee B said that the study of theory course has a great improvement in the reading, writing and translation of business English majors, and the course arrangement was more mature. But she thought that there was still room for improvement in the training of industry knowledge in some business majors and foreign trade industries. Interviewee C thought teachers in theoretical classes should combine his teaching to the current situation. She said: "Curriculum setting in Business English needs to be improved. The theoretical knowledge learned in practical work is not the same as in books, and some theoretical knowledge is not completely absorbed and mastered by students. I think the theory course should be taught combined with practices, not just to impart theoretical knowledge alone." Interviewee D also insisted that teachers should avoid using some outdated materials in their class.

We can find that according to the feedback of the interviewees, they generally think that theoretical courses are very important. But their feedback also shows that the curriculum setting of theoretical courses still have many problems. For example, theory teaching does not conform to work content; the curriculum setting is lack of demand analysis; Also, the authenticity of textbooks and business cases is not enough.

4.2 The Feeble Integrated Ability

The Parallel classroom consists of four aspects: ideological growth and physical and mental development, social practice and volunteer service, academic technology and innovation and entrepreneurship, artistic activities and skills. A total of 6 credits are set. The school set curriculum setting to train students to be outgoing, to have a good ability of speaking and communication. But according to the feedback of enterprises, many graduated students are lack of such ability. So we interviewed the four interviewees about their suggestions on the reforms of the Parallel classroom.

According to interviewee A, the second class serves as an important platform for the integration of knowledge and learning, language expression, speech ability and so on, and these abilities were very needed in their daily work in the future. However, her undergraduate school did not pay attention to the second class study, this is something that still need to improve. The interviewee B said that the chance to taking part in the Parallel classroom was a good experience and opportunity for her. In her opinion, the form of the second class, such as simulated business negotiation, simulated business speech as well as real simulation of business situation, was very necessary for undergraduates majoring in business English. Both interviewee C and interviewee D insisted that the second class encourages students to take the initiative to learn, to explore relevant knowledge, to exercise their self-learning ability and language expression. As what interviewee D said, "Many graduates, including myself, find themselves still in need of greater exercise in their actual work."

Therefore, through the interview we found that according to the feedback of the interviewees, the second class can bring a lot of benefit to students in their language expression ability, comprehensive ability and learning ability. The second class room should contain the following four aspects: ideological growth and physical and mental development, social practice and volunteer service, academic technology and innovation and entrepreneurship, artistic activities and skills. The second class can also enhance the studying enthusiasm of the

students. Also the second class has great advantages to students majoring in business English, the survey shows that the second class was not given relevant priority in their study. According to the three respondents, the second class has a light weight in their undergraduate studies. Moreover, the second class also faces some problems such as incomplete coverage, which also reflects some problems in the curriculum setting of business English majors. So we found it necessary to improve the status of the Parallel classroom and enrich the content and form of the Parallel classroom.

4.3 The Lacked Practical Experience

Colleges set practical classes to help students to have a rich experience and be familiar with their work in the future, which serves the demand of enterprises. Also, practice class aims to help students to foster Emotional adjustment ability, including curiosity, openness, self-confidence, perseverance, cheerfulness, fairness, honesty, modesty, eagerness, and tolerance. But it is very common for enterprises to find that the students cannot meet their requirement. So we asked the relevant students about their suggestions on the curriculum setting of practice class in business English major.

Interviewee A thought that practice classes in many colleges are not enough. As she said, 'I suggest schools to add foreign trade practice and arrange more practice study...During my undergraduate period, the number of language teachers are comparatively enough. But the theory and practice of business specialty does not meet the teaching needs. Colleges and universities should strengthen the practical course. According to interviewee B, If students majoring in business English want to engage in foreign trade in the future, they can go to practice in the sophomore year and junior year... When they face some problems and find their shortages in their work, they can turn back to schools and do further study. According to graduate C, during his undergraduate period he went to a foreign trade company in my hometown for an internship. At the beginning of the practical course, he got to see how an approval certificate can be made. Such a practice made he feel clear that how the knowledge was linked by society and foreign trade... According to interview D, "the practice class is particularly important, and the practice class can consolidate their knowledge in the classroom and provide the students with practical opportunities. More importantly, practical classes can improve the comprehensive ability and work ability of students, and provide help for students" future employment. Not only that, practical classes can also help students to set employment goals and employment directions."

Through the interview we found that the practice conditions of many colleges and universities are restricted, the practice mechanism inside and outside the school is not perfect. Also the students have few practical opportunities. Many schools are lack of perfect tutor management supervision system, evaluation system and incentive system. The interviewees suggest that the training effect is not obvious, and the depth and breadth of cooperation between schools and enterprises need to be strengthened.

4.4 The Low-Level Understanding of the Industry

School-enterprise cooperation has great significance. It can not only provide talented people General business skills and professional business skills, including office secretarial skills, information research skills, public speaking skills, business etiquette skills, as well as business negotiation skills, trade practice skills, e-commerce skills, marketing skills, human resources management skills, and financial management skills, etc. But according to some enterprises, many graduates are lack of the qualities above. So we asked graduates about their opinions.

Interviewee A proposed that some students living in remote areas lack the opportunity to practice in enterprises. She said, "Due to insufficient investment, the conditions and opportunities for training in schools are limited." The interviewee B argued that the colleges and universities did not strike a balance between enterprises and colleges. She also agreed that as she has said, "cooperation between schools and enterprises is very necessary. For enterprises, cooperation between schools and enterprises can enable enterprises to conduct targeted training of talents, so that students receiving training can be more in line with the requirements of the enterprise. For students, cooperation between schools and enterprises can allow students to access more employment information and obtain employment opportunities during school. "The interviewee C suggested that schools should use the bilateral cooperation as a tool by which students can strengthen students' employment competitiveness. The interviewee D also agreed that school-enterprise cooperation should be strengthened and enhanced. She suggested the enterprises to give more opportunities to students at school.

According to the interview, we found that the content and method of school-enterprises cooperation still stay on the surface. Most of the collaborative training programs are limited to only practice base and other shallow cooperation. Schools place too much emphasis on the role of industry mentors, while school teachers' guidance is relatively lacking. At the same time, the school-enterprise cooperation also lacks the perfect tutor supervision system, the appraisal system and the incentive system. So the training effect is not obvious. It can be said that the

depth and breadth of cooperation between schools and enterprises need to be strengthened.

4.5 The Weak Guidance in Public Selective Courses

For students in business English, they must master comprehensive knowledge. Public selective class can provide them with access to different range of knowledge which can be applied in their daily life. But many graduates are still facing different kinds of difficulties, and they still need to learn about different types of business knowledge, including the knowledge of foreign literature, European and American culture, business culture, and Chinese culture. So we interviewed the four graduates about their suggestions

The interviewee A suggested students who want to engage in the foreign trade industry to choose public elective courses like Marketing, Economics, Office Automation. Interviewee B recommended courses like e-commerce, computer, personnel management. Interviewee C recommend that students majoring in business should choose the office software operation class and other classes that teach business knowledge. According to interviewee D, As a comprehensive strong industry, the foreign trade industry demands students to master all kinds of knowledge. He thought that the school should strengthen the guidance on the choice of public elective courses for students. Also she added that If students wanted to improve employment competitiveness through public elective courses and prepare for future work, they can choose related courses such as office automation, international trade and so on.

According to the feedback, teachers in business English majors can guide students to choose public elective courses that teaches business knowledge and software skills. Schools should strengthen the guidance on the choice of public elective courses for students. Public elective courses can help business English majors expand their horizons and improve their comprehensive level.

5. Deficiencies of the Modules of the Curriculum

5.1 Deficiencies of the Module of Theoretical Courses

The most obvious feature of business English is the close combination of language skills and business background knowledge. This objectively requires not only paying attention to the learning of language knowledge and language skills training, but also to the teaching of business knowledge in teaching. In business English teaching, these three elements should be closely linked, complementary and indispensable. Business background knowledge is an important part of teaching, its content is very broad, including international trade, finance, marketing, law and many other fields of knowledge. It depends on the specialization of the students and the nature of future job hunting. The content of the business background determines the language and communicative skills to be used in the situation. Language skills are the necessary skills for business communication activities, manifested in answering phone calls, negotiating, demonstrating, writing letters, reports, memos, etc. In setting up the theoretical courses of business English majors, colleges and universities should carry out timely innovation of teaching materials and teaching methods. Schools should give priority to the characteristics of this major and ensure the ontological characteristics of English majors. The proportion of theoretical courses, including Management, Integrated Business English International Marketing, Simulation of Business Project Design Business English Viewing, Listening and Speaking, can be increased.

5.2 Deficiencies of the Module of Parallel Classroom

According to the interviewees, the arrangement of second class is not enough. Many colleges consider the second class useless and time-wasted. But according to the feedback of graduated students, they can learn a lot of knowledge in the second classes that cannot be learned from common classes and common textbooks. If students have to write standard, appropriate and effective business letters and documents, and have the ability to communicate with customers, you need to do a lot of input and output exercises. In teaching, teachers need to provide typical models for students to read, comment and analyze. The model essay provided is not simply for students to imitate, but as a material for discussion and analysis. Through this process, the general principles and special principles of business English writing are deduced, whose purpose is to let students can understand and master the basic style, format, communication strategies and language characteristics of business English writing. On this basis of a lot of practice to achieve better results. In line with the results of our research, I suggest that colleges and universities should place the second class to a more important position and should establish a scientific and reasonable Parallel classroom evaluation system. Also, universities need to facilitate the help of social forces so as to expand the Parallel classroom space. Universities should pay greater attention to the diversity of the Parallel classroom form. For example, colleges can encourage students to build English corner, English speech contest, drama contest, business negotiation contest, business terminology contest, all-English business practice contest and other kinds of second classes. By doing so, universities can train students in a

multidimensional way.

5.3 Deficiencies of the Module of Practical Teaching

It is difficult to achieve the expected result in some practical teaching of business English majors. And the evaluation method is single. Some teachers and students do not have enough understanding of practical teaching, so teachers simply think that in practical teaching, they do not need to attend classes, and students think that they are “practice” instead of “learning”. Therefore, in practical teaching, teachers ignore their guiding role, and students cannot understand how to make better study plans in line with the characteristics of the curriculum. To solve this problem, we should take actions. For teachers, we should strengthen the guiding role of teachers and implement evaluations in stages in forms of a variety of evaluation tools. In the practical course of Business English major, we should strengthen the connotation construction of the course practice and expand the multiplied practice ability. At the same time, universities should refer to the evaluation opinions and pay greater attention to the dynamic development of the practice process. Moreover, they need to take actions to strengthen the cooperation between schoolteachers and enterprise teachers, and integrate the practical teaching resources inside and outside the school.

5.4 Deficiencies of the Module of School-Enterprise Cooperation

Colleges and universities should further strengthen cooperation between schools and enterprises and increase cooperative enterprises and cooperative platforms, giving business English students the opportunity to practice in school. Colleges should carry out the cooperation between schools and enterprises in the four-year study of students' universities. At the same time, colleges and universities should also expand the content of cooperation between schools and enterprises, so that enterprises can not only provide students with internship opportunities, but also carry out many aspects of cooperation, such as excellent enterprise representative speech, excellent enterprise post propaganda, job propaganda and so on. By doing so, we can enable students to understand their future employment and workplace, and make them clarify the direction of employment and facilitate future employment.

5.5 Deficiencies of the Module of General Selective Courses

According to the feedback from the students, the business English major is deficient in the public elective course at present, and the guidance provided by the universities are not enough. In addition, the course selection presents a disorderly state. Public elective courses can help business English majors to expand their professional knowledge and cultivate professional literacy. However, the current situation is that the junior students of business English major have not yet formed a complete understanding of the teaching plan, and their understanding of their major is not clear enough. Thus their course selection may be useless, invalid and untargeted, making students lose their interests to learn. Professional teachers and class teachers should take actions to strengthen the guidance of course selection. I suggest teachers to publish their expertise and course information on the relevant teaching platform, so as to facilitate students to have basic understanding of the relevant course information. Since many students in Business English want to take foreign trade as their Career orientation, Teachers should lead these students to choose public selective courses that are relevant to economic knowledge, computer skills and computer operation.

6. Conclusion

Business English Program formed as a result of inter-disciplinarity has been gaining ground rapidly at universities on a national scale. We as one practicing body have observed its curriculum differences among universities in China, and hold it necessary to review representative theoretic approaches to Business English (BE) curriculum design in domestic journal articles and other professional literature prior to and after the granting of the Program. Thus we may distinguish the current approach from its preceding ones and foresee its future trend, so as to push forward BE curriculum development. In this article, we make a review of three typical approaches to BE curriculum design and follow it with an extensive discussion. The study concludes by pointing out the trend of synchronizing the development of both business knowledge and language skills—it implicates an urgent curriculum requirement of qualified BE teachers in China.

Our interview of four Business English graduates shows that there are obvious gaps between the curriculum design and the actual ability requirement. These gaps can be classified into six categories, namely the comprehensive quality, theoretical knowledge, practical experience, industry knowledge and general knowledge. The comments of the interviewees reveal that the lack of practical experience and industry knowledge are most prominent. Schools should not only take action, update the training plan according to the latest employment situation, and combine theory with practice. The training of schools should pay attention to students' future

employment prospects and career direction, and help for students' future career development planning. This means that there is still much room for improvement in the current training programs for Business English, especially the modules of parallel classroom, theoretical courses, practical teaching, cooperation between schools and enterprises and general courses. These problems may exist not only in the university under investigation, but also in other colleges and universities in the country.

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Appendix:

Questionnaires that were prepared for the respondents:

1. Could you talk about something about yourself and your job?
2. What difficulties are encountered in the work and how to overcome? What do you think is the best skill or characteristic you have learned in a college class?
3. What kinds of the second class do you have in Business English major during your undergraduate years? What positive or negative effects were brought by the second class in your actual work? What suggestions do you have for improving the second class?
4. What kinds of trade knowledge did you study in your undergraduate course? Which of those theoretical courses have a positive effect on current work? Which of those theoretical courses have a positive effect on current work? What theoretical knowledge do you think is not covered in the undergraduate course system? Is there an effective combination of theory and practice in the subsequent work?
5. What are the forms of practice class during your undergraduate years? How do you think of the practice class in your undergraduate year? What improvements do you think should be made in the practical courses of business and English in colleges and universities in order to be more conducive to the employment of students?
6. Is cooperation between schools and enterprises necessary? Should we strengthen the proportion of practice in business English professional courses? In the learning process of whether communication with the business mentor, what suggestions has the tutor put forward for your career plan?
7. In the following list of public courses, what courses do you think can be recommended to students majoring in Business English so that they can supplement their knowledge of business and foreign trade?
8. When you look back on your four years of undergraduate study, what work abilities do you think are best improved, and what abilities do you develop after work?

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