Course Design for Business English

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Abstract. Business English, as the area of the greatest activity and growth in ESP, has attracted correspondingly interest in China's ELT. According to the features of it, we should decide the teaching program, select teaching materials, design teaching contents and carry out appropriate evaluation to complete the course design.

1. Introduction

Business English as a well-known branch of ESP can not exist without the development of ESP. In order to classify the types and attributes of ESP, western scholars used to first divide ESP into two types – EAP and EOP. Business English belongs to EOP. It is the fastest and the most active branch of EOP. (Dudley-Evans, 1998) In the last two decades, Business English has attracted increasing interest and awareness. Business English courses are offered by many language schools worldwide, including in China.

In China, although the study of ESP begins relatively later, yet its development is rapid. The essence and characteristics of ESP result that learners' needs are the starting point and center of ESP. The development of Needs Analysis goes through several phrases, that is, rhetorical or discourse analysis, target-situation analysis, skills and strategies analysis and then learner-centered approach. Relatively speaking, the importance of teaching is shifting from language to learners' particular needs.

2. Business English and its development

Business English and its teaching differ from other English for specific purposes. In the first place, scholar English stresses a command of knowledge while business English pays more attention to actual communication ability. In accordance to teaching target, "ability is more important than the teaching aims and language itself." (Ellis, 1994) In the second place, the language users' background is different. The communication of scholar English used to happen between user for English as first language and user for English not as first language. Last but not least, their language cultures differ from each other. Scholar English requires the precision and standard of language while business English attaches great importance to effective communication. Business English owns more generosity for the characteristics of users' language culture. In the light of language, business English comparing to other English for specific purposes prefers stressing the transition between professional English and general English. (Pickett, 1989)

There have been many developments in the ways in which teachers and course designers look at Business English. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the principle underlying these earlier Business English course books was to present target specialist vocabulary. In the mid-1970s and 1980s, following the trends in General English, Business English teaching began to focus more and more on functional areas. This kind of teaching was supported by lists of 'gambits' derived from the Kellor corpus from Canada. (Ellis, 1994) the conversations on cassette were followed up by functional language practice and role play. Since the late 1980s, Business English teaching has drawn on aspects of all the previous approaches, but also places much more emphasis on the need to develop the skills for using the language learned.

3. Course design

There are many types of course design projects in English teaching. According to the features of business English, we acknowledge the learners-centered course design is appropriate to activate learners' responsibilities and to promote learners' enthusiasms in the teaching activity.

3.1 Course background information

This course is designed for sophomores majoring in international business. They are typical pre-experience learners. Most of them wish to work in relative professional field of international business. The training aims are to master the basic skills of handling international business activities. So, the concrete object is to make students familiar with international business conventions.

In general, pre-experienced learners will be more open-minded than those who are already well ahead in their careers, and this has implications for what can be done in the classroom, however, they may lack confidence in their ability to deal with business subject matter. It is certainly the case, as witnessed by the types of textbooks often used with such learners, that they need to be given a lot of information from which to work.

3.2 Course target and participant background

The participants of this course are sophomore majoring in international business. There are about twenty students in one class. Their language ability is at the mediate level. They have never participated in any practical international business activity but they all wish to work in the field of international business in future. Comparing with learners studying general English, business English students have stronger motivation, more expectancy for promoting their language ability, as well as more willing to participate in classroom activities.

This course aims to promote learners communicative ability while they are using English in international business activities. It also aims to enhance learners' basic knowledge on international business and their skills in solving general business affairs.

3.3 The choice of teaching materials

In order to realize course teaching target, we should make a combinative use of textbook and self-deprecating materials. One book is a good recommendation, that is, *Cambridge Course for Business English* written by Jones Macziola, S and White, G Getting Ahead, which is published by Cambridge Business English Press and Huaxia Press in 1994. This book is well-written according to the teaching principle of communicative teaching.

The self-depreciating materials should be various covering different aspects. Because the existing textbook used to stress language phenomenon according to the aim of teaching language, self-depreciating materials should supply this gap between textbook and practice in order to create a real environment for daily language use. (Ellis, M, 1994) Self-depreciating materials are more credible, more effective thus it is more interesting to the students.

When we are choosing materials, we should take interests, learning experiences and previous knowledge into concern. When we are carrying out teaching plan, the teaching contents could be changeable rather than unalterable according to learners' needs and class negotiation. The percents for using textbook and self-depreciating materials can also be adjusted so as to bring learners' activation and participation into full play.

3.4 Course contents design

This course covers sixteen weeks. And the planning period is four hours a week. The seventh week will be arranged to be mid-semester review week. The eightieth week will be arranged three hours for learners to do personal report or team report; the last one hour to do mid-semester evaluation. The sixteenth week will be arranged two hours for review and two hours for written report. According to textbook and self-deprecating materials employed, the teaching contents could be as following: interview, introduction, communication; applying for a job, taking up an occupation, inviting application for a job; profession division, personal affairs, office tattoo; asking way, going shopping,

traveling; oral communication–telephone, office politics; written communication–business letters, E-mails, fax, informal notes; social communications, invitations, banquets; market research, western and eastern festivals; problems and solutions, apology and lodging...

There are certain cultural differences which the Business English trainer needs to take into account. Many trainers have noticed that in meetings, for example, people from different countries may behave quite differently. The reaction of the group to constant individual criticism will be different to that of groups from other countries–i.e. the group will often feel uncomfortable. Cultural similarities and differences, and how they influence what foes well in a class and what does not, are major factor to consider when dealing with the course contents designing.

The role of the trainer has also to be considered. In certain cultures, there is a great power distance between teacher and learner, which means that the learner accepts everything the teacher says and expects him or her to make decisions and to be in control. In other cultures, teacher and learner work closely together: the learner participants in determining the content of the course and are assertive in demanding particular activities.

3.5 Needs Analysis

As Dudley-Evans thought, Needs Analysis is the characteristics for ESP teaching, thus it is also the beginning for ESP course design. According to Dudley-Evans, Needs Analysis could be divided into four types – target situation analysis, learning situation analysis, present situation analysis and means analysis. (Dudley-Evans, 1998) Target Situation Analysis is the most basic one. Teachers should acquire relative information of "target situation analysis" according to the features of international business major and the development of international business. Present Situation Analysis could be a combination of oral examination and written examination: (1) analyzing their English scores in previous semester; (2) oral testing, analyzing their language abilities. The data of Means Analysis could be acquired through formal questionnaire and informal talk between teacher and students. Informal talk is more relaxed but not casual. It aims to comprehend learners' language experience, studying styles, interests, attitudes, motivations and so on.

Pre-experience learners will have two kinds of needs: (1) their present situation may require them to read textbooks in English for follow lectures in English in order to gain the qualifications they are seeking. A major component of their English training may therefore be the development of reading and listening skills, with a strong emphasis on the vocabulary of the subject. In addition, they may have to attend seminars or write papers in English. These will then constitute important skills objectives for any language training program they follow. (2) they will need to prepare for their future working life in business. In this regard, their teachers may include in their language course such skills as commercial correspondence, participating in meetings, or presenting information or social interactions, depending on the kind of jobs they are preparing for.

Besides gathering information mentioned above, learners' needs analysis should also be carried out during the process of course. The dynamic development and needs analysis is inseparable for the success of the whole course.

3.6 Syllabus design

People around the world conduct business meetings in English even though English may be a foreign language to all those present. The language that they use will be neither as rich in vocabulary and expression, nor as culture-bound, as that used by native speakers, but will be based on a core of the most useful and basic structures and vocabulary. Business people do not always need to know the full complexities of English grammar and idiom. Fine distinctions in meaning may not be important in a business context. On the other hand, in a Business English course some structural areas may require more attention than in a conventional course: for example, conditionals in negotiating, or modality for expressing possibility or politeness. There is consequently a need for syllabus designers to be selective when addressing the needs of Business English learners.

The Business English syllabus is likely to be defined primarily in relation to business performance skills such as meetings, presentations, socializing, or report-writing. Within these skills areas, certain concepts are typically discussed and expressed: for example, describing changes and trends, quality,

product, process, and procedures, strategy. These concepts can be broken down into the more linguistically powerful functional areas such as comparing and contrasting, expressing cause and effect, recommending, and agreeing. The language defined in the syllabus may include grammatical or lexical items, and elements of spoken or written discourse.

There are different opinions in syllabus design. Breen is favorable in the theory of "prefix-syllabus shifting from process-syllabus". (Yalden, 1988) This theory is appropriate for teaching Business English. This course will make a combination use of process syllabus and target-centered syllabus. Only in process syllabus, teacher's classroom decision, classroom evaluation and learners negotiation will affect in a thorough way. In the other way, target-centered syllabus could meet for students' needs, simulate a real environment for international business activity so as to achieve better teaching effectiveness. Of course, every syllabus is not exclusive from each other. It is common to employ several syllabuses simultaneously in teaching Business English.

3.7 Evaluations

There is a need to emphasize performance. This is one main characteristic of Business English. The learners should be trained to become operationally effective. In Business English, these performance criteria need to be seen in the context of specific business situations which the learner will be involved in.

Therefore, evaluations could be divided into learners' evaluation and course evaluation. Learners' evaluation could depend on the basis of Needs Analysis. Different coursed should employ various methods to access learners' studying effectiveness. The purpose of ESP analysis is whether "learning effectiveness and efficiency" is able to meet the teaching target. (Dudley-Evans, 1998)

The evaluation of this course should be a combination of classroom evaluation, continuity evaluation and examination. Concretely speaking, classroom performances take up 20% -- classroom discussion, role performances, argumentation, etc; continuity evaluation takes up 30% -- business report or team report; written test take up 50% -- a final examination in the sixteenth week.

4. Summary

Business English, as the area of the greatest activity and growth in ESP, has attracted correspondingly interest in China's ELT. According to the features of it, we should decide the teaching program, select teaching materials, design teaching contents and carry out appropriate evaluation to complete the course design.

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