

An Approach to the Cultivation Pattern for Business English Writing Ability

Le Guobin

School of Foreign Languages, Huaihua University
Hunan Province, P. R. China 418008

Guo Songdan

The College of Professional and Continuing Education,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Hong Kong

Abstract—As an ESP, Business English is strongly characterized by practicality and professionalism. In practice, English output ability, namely oral and written expression ability, is the key to the success of business English teaching. By means of the task-based teaching method and guided by the memetics, this article explores related modes for the cultivation of Business English writing ability. With appropriate analysis, this article proposes an action plan together with related teaching techniques, aiming to integrate teaching and learning and to help students steadily but surely enhance their writing ability.

Keywords—Business English; Writing ability; Cultivation mode; memetics

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, in order to effectively improve students' writing ability, researchers have been trying to break through the traditional framework of result-oriented teaching method (product approach). The teaching methods of process, genre, content and task were proposed and advocated in succession in the 1970s and the 1980s. (Luo Mingli, 2008: 96-99)[1] The above teaching methods have both advantages and disadvantages, and the discussion on the teaching of writing and the cultivation of writing ability is still continuing and deepening.

Business English is a new major in English language and Literature. It was officially approved in 2010. The major of Business English was born with the development of international trade. Almost all international business activities need to be supported by written English, so writing as an important language skill of business English deserves special attention. As a basic language skill, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation have always played an important role in language teaching. Listening and reading as language input skills have provided language materials for speaking, writing, and translation. Business English as an English for special purposes is more prominent in terms of application and professionalism. In business practice, how to make English output more effective and how to improve students' ability of oral and written expression are the key and difficult points in business English teaching.

II. DEFECTS IN CURRENT CULTIVATION MODES FOR BUSINESS ENGLISH WRITING ABILITY

At present, there are dozens of mainstream textbooks for English writing. For basic writing, A Basic Course in Writing (Ding Wangdao, Higher Education Press) emphasizes the basic skills of English writing, including punctuation, choice of words, construction of sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc [2]. Having been revised in several many editions, the textbook can be described as "classic". Teachers can adjust their teaching emphasis according to students' respective language proficiency.

In terms of practical writing, A Practical Writing Course for College Students (Fu Shiyi, Peking University Press) is unique and comprehensive, covering almost all common applied writing subjects [3]. The textbook is not only comprehensive, but also boasts a good selection of examples, thus suitable for students' memetic self-studies. The only drawback is that some of the writings paradigms seem rather complicated for students to practice.

As for professional writing, Business Correspondence and Dialogues (Ling Huabei, China Business Press), as an old textbook for foreign trade major, has also been updated in many editions, keeping up with the trend of international trade, and has strong features of application and professionalism [4]. The only drawback lies in the fact that it neglects to help students sort out the complete flow of international trade and the correspondence of foreign trade letters, which may cause students not to see the wood for the trees.

The mainstream business English writing textbooks, as mentioned above, teach students how to produce sentences, how to straighten out syntax, how to organize paragraphs, and how to link paragraphs into articles. Less attention has been paid to the substantial content of writing, including how to enrich business English vocabulary in order to improve their own expressive ability, and how to use business English knowledge to solve business problems. Many students write English compositions in monotonous language without much substantial content, which is in urgent need of correction. In addition, compared with those key universities which have been prioritized by the central government in terms of both funding and policies, local universities usually have much weaker professional foundation for business English: the knowledge of related basic subjects is less than satisfactory,

and the humanistic literacy is relatively low. This has made it difficult for the aforementioned writing textbooks and methods to give full play to their roles. In view of this, the course of business English writing needs to integrate a variety of resources, and to form an effective training mechanism to help students gradually develop their basic English writing ability, practical writing ability and professional writing ability.

Whether the writing class should be regarded as a skill class or a content training class has long been controversial in the circle of foreign language teaching. Based on a comparative study of the mainstream writing teaching methods at home and abroad, this article builds on the actual situation of English majors in local undergraduate colleges and universities, takes the training goal of applied talents as the guide, the task-based teaching method as the foundation, and linguistic memetics as the theoretical guidance, with a view to studying the effective teaching method and writing training mechanism of business English writing.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF MEMETICS IN GUIDING THE CULTIVATION OF BUSINESS ENGLISH WRITING ABILITY

The term “meme” is a copy of the word gene (gene), meaning “imitated object”. Genes reproduce by inheritance and memes propagate through imitation. Meme is cultural gene, and language is one of its carriers. It is not only conducive to the development of language, but also can be copied and transmitted by language (He Ziran, 2005: 54-64)[5]. In language acquisition, memes influence (infect) the language user (Host A) or learner (Host B) through the medium of language. Learners first recognize the language materials they are exposed to and then reproduce relevant language content. During this process, learners need to imitate the expression of others before they can freely apply the language knowledge they have learned (Ellis, 1999: 129-131)[6].

Blackmore believes that humans are distinguished from animals by their ability to imitate (Blackmore, 1999: 3)[7]. Many people underestimate the importance of imitation and consider it a low-level copying act without initiative or originality. Blackmore, however, argues that human creativity lies in the renewal and recombination of ideas (Blackmore, 1999: 15-27)[8]. In his book *Republic*, Plato argues that imitation begins at an early age and continues to influence the course of life, and finally develop habits that shape the “second nature” of man, and then affect his body, voice and mind.

Human thinking is guided by imaginal thinking, as is the process of language acquisition. Imitation is not blind following; innovation often originates from imitation. In the process of language acquisition, people’s abilities of analysis, imagination and creation will always play a synergistic role, and the differences in people’s ability to imitate will eventually lead to individual language styles. As language is not inherent in nature, its development must be based on effective inheritance, and the key of inheritance lies in imitation. In the process of business English writing teaching, linguistic memetics can encourage students to write in English

first by means of imitation and then ingeniously, and help students to transform their writing skills and language knowledge into strong memes so as to effectively improve their language output ability.

Memetics is implemented in language learning by imitation. In the process of teaching business English writing, teachers should guide students to transform their writing skills and language knowledge into strong memes through imitation, so as to radically improve their writing ability. The formation of strong memes goes through four stages: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission. The expression of meme requires a stable material carrier or medium, such as books, audio materials, video materials, photos and so on. Heylighen (1999: 418-423)[9] It is believed that a strong meme can be successfully passed through the above four stages and can be reproduced and disseminated periodically.

IV. STEPS AND METHODS FOR DEVELOPING BUSINESS ENGLISH WRITING ABILITY

In the first stage (for freshmen and sophomores), students should gradually master the basic theories and English writing skills under the guidance of memetics. Based on the actual language proficiency of students, the teacher of writing guides the students to practice writing gradually according to the basic writing norms, and to be familiar with and master the basic writing styles.

In the second stage (for sophomores), students should gradually master task-based writing ability under the theoretic guidance of memetics, and lay a good foundation for practical writing in the future. The teacher of writing should design a variety of writing tasks simulating scenarios of business English workplaces and guide students to understand and master writing ability in business field.

In the third stage (for juniors), students should apply the foreign trade knowledge they have acquired in Business English courses such as International Trade Practice, International Trade Documentation, Electronic Commerce, etc., under the theoretic guidance of memetics in preparation for their career development. In this stage, the teach of writing can cooperate with related professional teachers in introducing international business knowledge and guiding students to use English to solve professional writing tasks.

In the above three stages, the teacher of writing should guide students to imitate good language expressions in and after class, integrate the teaching materials of business English writing and the training requirements of business English majors on the basis of task-based teaching methods, and adopt training methods such as “direct substitution”, “homonyms” and “synonyms” to help students to transform their writing skills and language knowledge into strong memes, so as to effectively and naturally improve students’ language output ability.

In addition, teachers of business English writing should strengthen the synergy between business writing courses and other relevant courses, especially with such professional courses as International Trade Practice, International Trade Documentation, Electronic Commerce, and so on. In order to

achieve the best teaching effect, teachers of business English writing should coordinate with teachers of relevant major to adjust the teaching progress and pace, and let the students combine the theoretical knowledge and writing ability of the business major to achieve the best teaching effects. In order to achieve the expected teaching effect, teachers of business English writing can combine formative evaluation with summative evaluation in the process of teaching. Formative evaluation includes students' composition self-evaluation, peer evaluation and teacher evaluation, while summative evaluation is mainly based on the final exam. (Wang Xuefeng, 2011: 52-55) [10].

V. DIFFICULTIES IN THE CULTIVATION OF BUSINESS ENGLISH WRITING ABILITY AND SOLUTIONS

How to change language memes into strong memes is the key problem to solve. This article endeavors to promote the formation of strong language memes by strengthening the synergy between business writing and other professional courses in business English. Since the formation of strong memes goes through four stages: assimilation), retention, expression) and transmission, teachers of writing can combine students' self-evaluation, peer evaluation and teacher's evaluation, and give students timely feedback on the revision of the composition. In the writing class, students keep each article (including self-evaluation, peer evaluation, teacher's evaluation, etc.) in their own writing portfolio. At the end of the semester, students choose an article they consider most satisfactory as the basis for formative evaluation. Teachers take final examination as the final evaluation. Taking previous formative evaluation, teachers can get the final assessment results.

The combination of memetics and the task-based approach should run through the three stages of the cultivation of writing ability. In the first stage, students shall be guided to acquire the basic English writing skills, including choice of words, sentence-making, development of paragraphs and texts, etc. In the second stage, necessary materials shall be integrated for practical English writing. In the third stage, on the basis of task-based teaching method and under the guidance of memetics, priority shall be given to students' professional writing ability, such as the writing of foreign trade English letters, the writing of business reports, and so on.

Teachers of writing can employ the methods of case analysis and questionnaire to track and analyze students' mastery of business English writing ability. Firstly, as the course of business English writing is mainly practical, Students' writing products (compositions) will be one of the main objects of study. Teachers can handpick a certain number of students' compositions and find out the common problems and errors for case analysis, with a view to exploring solutions and improving teaching effects. Case analysis is helpful for researchers to form general conclusions with concrete examples, and to solve the common problems in students' writing practice to the maximum extent. Secondly, in the process of task-based writing, teachers can constantly adjust the process and allocated time of writing in line with the nature of writing tasks. The diversification of classroom teaching modes is helpful to arouse students' enthusiasm for

learning. Along with the adjustment of the teaching mode, teachers can carry out a questionnaire-based survey in or after class, with a view to finding out the problems in the teaching mode and making timely adjustments.

After collecting, supplementing and organizing necessary materials for business English writing, teachers can develop a business English writing teaching module with practical and professional tasks as individual units of teaching. This module shall include syllabus, teaching plan, etc. Under the theoretic guidance of memetics and in collaboration with the specialized courses such as International Trade Practice, International Trade Documentation, Electronic Commerce, etc., the business knowledge of the related specialized courses of Business English is incorporated into the writing class. As such, teachers of Business English writing can adjust and perfect the teaching module in accordance with students' feedback and help students to improve their writing ability of business English in a phased manner.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fund Projects:

2017 Hunan Provincial-level Teaching and Research Project for Regular Higher Education Institutions "A Study of Applied Writing Ability of Business English Majors at Local Higher Education Institutions (Xiang Jiao Tong [2017] No. 452/423)"

2017 Hunan University Key Teaching and Research Project "A Study of Applied Writing Ability for Business English Majors (Huai Yuan Fa [2017] No. 76/15)"

REFERENCES

- [1] Luo Mingli. Review of Foreign Language Teaching Methods for Writing [J]. Foreign Theoretical Trends, 2008 (11): 96-99. (In Chinese)
- [2] Ding Wangdao. A Basic Course in Writing [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2010.
- [3] Fu Shiyi. A Practical Writing Course for College Students[M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007.
- [4] Ling Huabei. Business Correspondence and Dialogues[M]. Beijing: China Business Press, 2009.
- [5] He Ziran. Meme in Language [J]. Linguistic Sciences, 2005 (6): 54-64. (In Chinese)
- [6] Ellis, Rod. Understanding Second Language Acquisition [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1999: 129-131.
- [7] Blackmore S. The Meme Machine [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 3; 15-27.
- [8] Heylighen, F. What makes a meme successful? Selection criteria for cultural evolution. Proc. 15th Int. Congress on Cybernetics (Association Internat. de Cybernétique, Namur, 1999), p. 418-423.
- [9] Wang Xuefeng. Formative Evaluation feedback cycle Model and Evaluation principles and measures of English Writing Teaching [J]. Journal of the Institute of Foreign languages of the peopleundefineds Liberation Army, 2011 (1): 52-55. (In Chinese)
- [10] Chen Linxia. Memetics and College English Writing Teaching [J]. Journal of Foreign languages, 2008 (1): 88-91. (In Chinese)
- [11] Feng Yan and Wen Mingsheng. Memetics and College English Writing Teaching [J]. Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition), 2010 (2): 149-152. (In Chinese)