



Tentative Approaches to Practical Teaching of Business English Undergraduate Programme

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Abstract: Practical teaching of Business English Undergraduate Programme in the context of Chinese mainland can be a complex issue, deserving an in-depth inquiry. Typically, its practical teaching is based on certain experiential education programs. Two small-scaled questionnaires were conducted in this study. One was designed to gain the feedback of businesses and organizations on recruiting business English graduates, and the other was made for knowing the feedback of business English students on practical teaching. The findings of the two questionnaires indicate that changes should be made to the practical teaching. For enhancing practical teaching for business English Undergraduate Programme, tentative approaches to practical teaching are proposed and analyzed.

Keywords: Business English Undergraduate Programme, Practical Teaching, Experiential Educational Programs, Tentative Approaches

1. Introduction

The Business English Undergraduate Programme (hereinafter called “the Programme”) in higher education was approved by the Ministry of Education of China to be instituted in Chinese mainland in 2007. Thereafter it was officially placed on the list of the Undergraduate Specialty Catalogue of Higher Institutions. The National Standard of Undergraduate Teaching Quality of Business English Specialty in Higher Education Institutions was drafted in 2015. The steady development of the Programme seemingly indicate a promising future. However, currently importance is attached to classroom teaching of the Programme while its practical teaching is undervalued or ineffective. Without sufficient knowledge of the job recruitment demand of businesses as well as the awareness of expectations of business English students, it can be an illusion to carry out an effective practical teaching. Therefore, to obtain such knowledge shall be one of the priorities of the Programme. Then efforts should be made to explore how to implement an effective practical teaching. Four tentative approaches to practical teaching are offered and discussed in this paper.

2. Method

For knowing the demand on the part of businesses and organizations of business English graduates and the real situation of practical teaching of the Programme, two small-scale questionnaires were made. The first questionnaire was designed and delivered to businesses and organizations for ascertaining their demand of business English graduates. It is a bit disappointing that only 13 entities responded to the questionnaire, among which there are eight state-owned enterprises, two private enterprises, one foreign-invested enterprise, one joint venture and only one public institution. The second questionnaire was given to business English undergraduates for their feedback on the practical teaching. Fifty students participated in the survey.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 The feedback of employers

According to the results of the first questionnaire delivered to businesses and organizations, it finds that these

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employers surveyed are willing to recruit business English graduates with practical skills. The jobs they offer are typically business interpreter or translator, receptionist, and administrative clerk. Certainly, the job vacancies are largely dependent on the nature and the business scope of a given business or organization. Therefore, it is no wonder to find that in the first questionnaire business English graduates account for less 10% among the job applicants of these enterprises. One more fact deserves noting is that 51.54% of these employers believe the most important knowledge business English graduates should acquire is English knowledge and skills, while only 7.69% of them stress business knowledge and skills. When it comes to business knowledge, 53.85% of them stress the practical English proficiency of business English graduates, while 23.08% of them emphasize business practical capabilities. The findings seem to be inconsistent with the general belief that a balance should be maintained between English competency and specific business knowledge. Undeniably the findings of the first questionnaire, which can be collaborated by the results of the survey on online job recruitment, has something to do with the different types of enterprises surveyed. If more enterprises specializing in businesses were surveyed, enterprises of this kind would attach more importance to business knowledge and skills. Generally speaking, enterprises expect graduates to be proficient in English and to have practical skills relevant to a specified position.

3.2 Current practical teaching for business english students

Practical teaching embodies the notion of experiential learning, which differs from classroom learning and encourages the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied.[1] Practical teaching in higher educational institutions is typically based on “experiential education programs such as internships, field projects, and classroom experiential learning exercises”.[2] As far as practical teaching for business English students is concerned, two major experiential educational programs are being implemented for enhancing their traditional academic studies. One is an internship program, and the other is the field projects initiated by universities or colleges. Unlike university students in the United States who in most cases have to find an internship by themselves, business English students in Chinese mainland depend more on the university. Certainly, some can work as a summer intern at a business company. However, there are only a handful of internships available, which means not all of them can have an opportunity to find an internship. It is also worth noting that even students are lucky to land an internship only to feel disappointed that the internship is not rewarding. In other words, there lacks quality internship programs in businesses or organizations. In coping with the situation, some universities or colleges cooperate with businesses in an endeavor to improve the practical skills students need for their future careers. The forms of cooperation can be varied, such as tailored training programs, short-term workplace visiting, professional experts retaining. It seems that the cooperation between universities and businesses can be a win-win situation to strengthen the practical skills of business English students. However, it turns out that the cooperation does not go as smoothly as expected. Capitals available for students’ internships cannot guarantee a high-quality internship. Take the university where the author works for example. The money assigned for internships in each academic year is about 220 yuan (approximately \$30) per business English student, which can in no way cover the cost reasonably incurred in internships. This financial difficulty may result in the shortening the time for internships for cost control.

3.3 The feedback of the business english students on practical teaching

Based on the analysis of the practical teaching for business English students, it is necessary to know their feedback. It shows from the second questionnaire mentioned above that, among the 50 students surveyed, 14% of them dissatisfied with the practical teaching of the Programme, 16% believe that the practical teaching has become a mere formality and has no any effect, and 50% claim that the practical teaching is not very rewarding enough and the experiential educational programs involved should be revised. Although the survey is problematic in terms of its small scale, the results do indicate that reforms of existing practical teaching shall be made.

3.4 Tentative approaches to practical teaching

For improving the practical skills of business English students, four approaches are proposed as follows. Firstly, strengthen the cooperation between universities and businesses. The main reason why business English students dissatisfied with the existing practical teaching is that there is a shortage of teachers with rich knowledge of business

in business English department. This shortage has something to do with the short history of the Programme. With the institution of business English department, some teachers in the English department transfer or are chosen to work in business English department. However, the majority of the teachers in business English department used to teach English majors with little or no contact with businesses. Certainly, there are feasible solutions available to this shortage. On the one hand, internal cooperation between business English department and business school within the university can be strengthened. In this way, English medium instruction (hereinafter called “EMI”) can be introduced. Ernesto Macaro, et al. define EMI as the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself in countries or jurisdictions where the mother tongue is not English.[3] In fact, the Programme differs from traditional English teaching in that many business courses in the former are expected to be taught through EMI. With the mechanism of internal cooperation, business courses through EMI can be more effectively implemented, and teachers from the business school can be helpful in teaching practical business courses. On the other hand, external cooperation can be introduced or reinforced. There are various forms of external cooperation. Two major forms of cooperation deserve to be encouraged. One is to retain professional experts in the business world, who can help business English students acquire practical business skills. During the course of the cooperation the business English teachers can also benefit from cooperating with these retained professional experts. The other is the tailored training programs offered by businesses, which partly resembles outsourcing. This kind of training can be rewarding in that it enables students to acquire authentic working experiences and have more competitive edges in the job market in the near future. Undeniably, this kind of external cooperation is nothing new. It has been a typical teaching practice in universities in the United States. It is also worth noting that, such cooperation can be costly and requires a change to be made in view of the currently inflexible teaching system. Secondly, to create simulation laboratories for business affairs can partly help students acquire certain practical skills. Similar to moot court or clinical legal education, business simulation laboratories serving as one of experiential education programs involve practical business knowledge, including business negotiations, business management practice, cross-border electronic commerce, and customs declaration and clearance, etc. Students can really benefit by making full use such simulation laboratories. However, it can be costly for the creation, and it also needs professional guidance for students. Thirdly, to reinforce the financial support for implementing practical teaching should be a priority set by the university authorities. Unlike the traditional English specialty, business English Undergraduate Programme has been stressing from the very start practical skills useful for students’ future careers. To guarantee the acquisition of such skills by business English students, financial support should be available. Without sufficient capitals, all these approaches proposed here, including retaining professional experts in businesses, creating simulation laboratories, and strengthening the cooperation between businesses and universities, stand no chance to be implemented. The last but not the least, it is necessary to encourage business English students to find an internship or a summer job in businesses by themselves so that they can be more independent to gain working experience. Although in this highly competitive age, they may fail to land an internship, but what really matters is that with critical self-reflection they can take lessons from their failures. Actually, it is also necessary to establish and sustain quality internships, including partnering with businesses and organizations so that students have the opportunity to build new knowledge and skills in the real world.[4] This is exactly the embodiment of the spirit of experiential learning.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the two questionnaires and discussion above, the first priority of the Programme is to improve the English proficiency of business English students. It is equally important to value and improve the practical teaching. Taken into consideration the job requirements by businesses and the dissatisfaction of business English students with the current practical teaching, experiential educational programs in practical teaching shall be reformed to be innovative and feasible. Therefore, four tentative approaches have been proposed. To begin with, it is worth strengthening internal cooperation between business English department and other departments or schools within the university. Such cooperation enables English medium instruction in business courses to be effective. External cooperation should also be reinforced. With professional experts from the business industry to be retained, the quality of practical teaching for business English Students can be improved. Secondly, to create business simulation laboratories

has similar implications in enhancing the practical skills of business English students. To ensure financial support is the third approach proposed. It is indispensable in that it can guarantee the implementation of practical teaching. The last approach focuses on cultivation of the independence of business English students to land an internship by themselves as well as partnering with businesses and organizations. The tentative approaches proposed here can encourage more in-depth research on this issue, hence facilitating a steady growth of the Programme.

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