

On the Instruction Design of the Course *Business English Writing* Based on Blended Learning Model

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning based on information technology, emphasizes students' central position and teachers' leading role in teaching and learning. In view of this, the author attempts to apply the model to the instruction of the course *Business English Writing*. In the instructional design, the author navigates students to enhance the input of sample texts on the basis of web-based autonomous learning and organizes cooperative learning so as to increase students' writing practice, thus improving their research ability and communicative skills. Consequently, the two major problems—deficiency in language input because of limited class hours and lack of interaction owing to the large size of classes can be effectively solved.

1. Introduction

Business English writing belongs to ESP writing, which is the creation of written business discourse to meet the needs of business communication. It is not only the extension of traditional English writing, but also the application process of business knowledge and business language.

In 2014, China became the world's largest trading country in goods. With the rapid development of China's foreign trade and the increasing frequency of international business exchanges, business English writing, as one of the main ways of communication in international business activities, has become one of the core skills of international business practitioners. Therefore, it is of increasing significance to enhance business English writing teaching

with the aim to cultivate students' business English writing ability.

Undoubtedly the cultivation and improvement of writing skills requires a lot of writing practice, but in reality the class hours of business English writing are very limited. In the limited class hours, what methods can teachers adopt to ensure that students get sufficient input of sample texts and effectively implement writing practice? What can teachers do to review more than 60 students' essays in time and give a comprehensive feedback of students' performance in writing? In consideration of all these problems to be solved, the author tries to use the "blended learning" model in teaching practice, take students as the center, fully mobilize students' enthusiasm and creativity, guide and supervise them to read more, analyze more, write more and communicate more, and realize the mutual

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promotion of "input" and "output", so as to effectively improve students' ability to use English language to engage in foreign-related business writing.

2. About Blended Learning

Blended learning is a concept under continuous development and has long existed in traditional teaching [6]. However, it was not until 2001 when e-learning abroad reached a plateau that people began to reflect on the pure technology environment, and the discussion on "blended learning" gradually increased. In the 1990s, with the rapid development of network and information technology, e-learning flourished and has the potential to replace the traditional classroom. However, after less than a decade of practice, people gradually find that it is impossible to completely replace classroom teaching with digital/e-learning [1]. In digital/e-learning, learners encounter such problems as lack of human-computer interaction, proneness to boredom, limited personal learning ability and high dropout rate, so the learning effect is not guaranteed. In view of this, researchers try to combine traditional classroom teaching with digital / e-learning and make full use of their advantages, so "blended learning" came into being. This model makes full use of constructivism theory, in which students are emphasized as the centre of learning activities and expected to change from passively receiving external stimulation and instilled knowledge to actively processing information and constructing knowledge [2]. In the meantime, the model does not ignore the leading role of teachers.

The meaning of the word "blended" is mixed or combined, and the meaning of "blended learning" is the combination of various learning methods. For example, the learning method of using audio-visual media (slide projection, audio and video recording) is combined with the traditional learning method of using chalk and blackboard; The combination of computer-aided learning and traditional learning; The combination of autonomous learning and cooperative learning.

Based on the review of relevant literature at home and abroad, the author believes that the "blended learning" model can be summarized as follows.

First, the advantages of teachers' leading role and students' initiative complement each other. The theoretical basis of "blended learning" is inseparable from constructivism, that is, it emphasizes the role of learners' independent discovery, independent exploration and independent construction in the cognitive process, and highlights the central position of students in the learning process. At the same time, "blended learning" also reflects the importance of traditional classroom teaching. Because the advantage

of traditional classroom is that teachers can play a leading role, the "efficiency" of collective teaching is high, and it also has great advantages in sociability and interaction.

Second, face-to-face teaching and e-learning complement each other. From the perspective of teachers, "blended learning" means not only making full use of rich and convenient network resources, but also giving full play to teachers' leading role in guiding, enlightening and monitoring the teaching process. Consequently, in this model, the advantages of classroom teaching and e-learning complement each other with equal attention paid to learning and teaching and the teaching effect is optimized.

Third, "autonomous" and "cooperative" learning methods complement each other.

Autonomous learning refers to learning that is completely based on individual learning needs and self-control of learning pace. Cooperative learning is a learning method with cooperative learning group as the basic organizational form. In this method, group members share the same goal, jointly set certain reward mechanism and collaborate to obtain the best learning results through cooperation, discussion, communication, mutual help and other interactive ways. Cooperative learning can effectively promote the development of students' cognitive ability and language skills.

Autonomous learning is the basis of cooperative learning, and cooperative learning is an effective way to cultivate autonomous learning ability. The rational use of cooperative learning can extend English learning from in class to out of class, mobilize students' enthusiasm and initiative, stimulate their personal potential, and effectively enhance their internal motivation of autonomous learning. Moreover, students are able to perceive their own internal cognitive gaps through the collision of different views among group members, and the perception of such cognitive gaps will promote the reconstruction of students' individual knowledge and contribute to the development of their cognitive ability in autonomous learning.

3. Necessity of Blended Learning Model in the Course *Business English Writing*

First, cooperative learning is in line with the business attribute that can not be ignored in the instruction of business English writing. The business characteristics of the course require the cultivation of students' communication and cooperation ability. After all, transnational business is conducted by people and its success largely depends on the relationship and cooperation between people from different cultural backgrounds. This makes it necessary to carry out cooperative learning. On the one hand, the organizational form of cooperative learning is conducive

to carry out business simulation practice, so as to improve students' perceptual understanding of business activities and stimulate their innovation ability; On the other hand, cooperative learning is not only a cognitive process, but also a rewarding occasion for interpersonal communication, which is beneficial to the training of team spirit and communication skills.

Second, the stylized language characteristics of business English make autonomous learning possible. Business English writing is less difficult than literary creation and other types of writing, because it basically follows a certain paradigm. Specifically, there are many stylized expressions and sentence patterns in content structure and language use. If students can have a good command of these expressions and sentence patterns, business English writing will become relatively handy. Such expressions and sentence patterns can be analyzed and summarized by students themselves after reading and assimilating a certain quantity of sample texts, which is in line with the "Zone of Proximal Development". Rather than students being the passive recipient of the knowledge instilled by teachers, it is better to "take students as the center" and guide students to collect and analyze sample texts, give play to their inquiry and analysis ability, and cultivate their autonomous learning ability. As Dewey, an American educator, said, learning is a process of finding and solving problems and there is no real learning without the learner's personal experience of this process.

Thirdly, time-sensitiveness is one striking feature of business English and this feature requires that reference materials and information provided should keep pace with the times. Moreover, Business English writing is closely related to practical work. Therefore, students should be required to make more use of the Internet to obtain the latest information and materials to ensure that the acquired knowledge is currently in use and practical. After assigning the writing tasks and providing relevant network resources for students' reference, teachers should hand over such tasks of collecting sample texts and relevant materials, analyzing and summarizing the characteristics of sample texts to students to complete independently. In completing these tasks, students can obtain the most recent information and update their knowledge. In doing so their skills to retrieve data online and their ability to analyze, judge and explore data can also be cultivated. Both the data-retrieving skill and critical thinking ability are what students urgently need.

Fourth, the cultivation of language output capacity requires highlighting the central position of students in the learning process. Writing itself is the process for language output, and business English writing is no exception. The cultivation and improvement of language output capacity

can only be realized through a large number of writing practice on the basis of a large number of understandable language input. In other words, the improvement of writing ability largely depends on students' individual autonomous learning, such as the quantity and quality of language input, the amount of writing practice, learning strategies and so on. Therefore, teachers should go out of the old classroom teaching mode of "emphasizing knowledge instillation and neglecting skill training". Instead, they should truly take students as the center in the teaching process, pay attention to the inspiration, guidance, supervision and evaluation of students, provide necessary information resources and organize cooperative learning, and change from the feeder of knowledge to the helper and promoter of students' independent construction of knowledge^[5].

In addition, the course is normally taught to a class of 60-70 students. With such a large number of students in each class, each teacher often has to undertake the workload of teaching such four large classes. So it is difficult and almost impossible for teachers to carefully review and check each student's writing task from beginning to end. In view of this, it is advisable to entrust the task of supervision and inspection to the cooperative learning group. Such a pattern not only promotes the mutual supervision, inspection, encouragement and help between members of the group but also gives teachers time to review and comment on the representative works submitted by each cooperative learning group in a complete and detailed manner. Thus timely feedback from teachers and positive demonstrations by students can be achieved.

4. Application of Blended Learning Model in the Instruction Design of the Course *Business English Writing*

The guiding concept of using "blended learning" model in the course Business English Writing can be summarized as "dual drives", "dual leading positions" and multiple evaluation system. The so-called "dual drives" means "task-driven" and "language output-driven". Tasks assigned by teachers drive students to continue their learning from in class to after class and the requirement for language output drives students to unite learning and use as well as reading and writing^[4]. "Dual leading positions" means the change from "teacher-centered" to "teacher-led" and the corresponding change from passively receiving knowledge to actively acquiring knowledge on the part of students. Multiple evaluation system refers to the diverse formative assessment methods such as students' self-evaluation, peer evaluation with the learning group, peer evaluation between learning groups and teacher's evaluation.

According to the teaching plan of the course Business English Writing each genre of business writing is allocated 4 class sessions on average. Teachers can increase or decrease 2-4 class sessions depending on the difficulty of the genre. The instruction design of each genre is generally divided into two stages - language input and language output. Each stage includes two sections—before and during class, and involves two forms of learning—autonomous learning and cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is carried out in groups. Because it is taught in large classes of about 60 students, each group usually has 6 members and grouping is completed on a voluntary basis at the beginning of the course. The teacher sometimes needs to make adjustment to the grouping based on the students' English level, personality and gender so that group members complement each other in ability, personality, etc and all groups are comparable with each other in ability and English level.

Stage One: Language Input

(1) Before class - collection and study of sample texts

Before class, teachers assign tasks for autonomous learning and cooperative learning according to the teaching plan and teaching content, and provide network resources for students' reference. The task of autonomous learning is to take the textbook sample text as an example, use the Internet to search for at least three sample texts of the same genre, study and summarize the common structure of such writing genre, commonly used phrases, chunks of words and sentence patterns as well as the language features, etc. After that, students share the collected sample texts in the group via QQ group or other online social tools^[8]. The task of cooperative learning for group members is to have a face-to-face discussion of the summaries on learning sample texts prepared by each group member and select 6 sample texts which are approved by group members to be the best for the whole class to learn from. Each time, one delegate from each group is responsible for recording the main discussed ideas, summarizing and reporting to other groups their discussion in the form of PPT in class. Group members take turns to perform such tasks in the process of cooperative learning to ensure the full participation of each student.

(2) In class - share and comment on the summaries on learning sample texts

In class, first, each group will report and share the summary on learning sample texts. In order to guide students to provide the key points and improve classroom inefficiency, teachers should specify in advance the key points to be included in the summary, such as sources of the sample texts, common structure of the writing genre, language features, list of business terms, etc. At the end

of each group's report, other groups give oral evaluation, followed by teachers' comments. The teachers' comments are expected to fulfil two purposes—recognizing the advantages of each report so as to protect students' enthusiasm in participation and pointing out the problems in the report so as to effectively grab students' attention to the problems. After all groups make reports and comments, each group will score the reports prepared by other groups and the average score is recorded as peer evaluation between learning groups, which forms part of the formative evaluation. Then, the teacher makes the final summary, highlight the essential knowledge and key language points that students are expected to gain from preparing the summary and then assign the corresponding writing tasks.

Stage Two: Language Output

(1) Before class - individual writing practice and mutual evaluation of group works

Before class, individuals should complete the writing task independently, and then members of the group should review and correct each other's written text. On this basis, the best written text is then selected as the representative work and submitted to the teacher for review by e-mail. The teacher will upload all these best written texts submitted by all groups to the class QQ group for all students to read and comment.

(2) In class -- Comment on representative works and complete the reflective report

In class, the teacher prints all these best written works together with the review, distributes them to each group, comments on each representative work and explains the typical mistakes spotted in the work. Each student modifies his/her written text according to the teacher's comments and explanation. Finally, each student spends 15 minutes independently writing a reflective report on the learning process of the writing genre^[3]. In order to guide students to complete the construction of knowledge and the cultivation of meta-cognitive strategies, teachers should specify in advance the main content of the reflective report, which is usually required to include three parts: writing skills, business knowledge and learning methods and habits to be improved.

5. Conclusions

In the first stage, both autonomous learning tasks for individuals and cooperative learning tasks for groups effectively urge students to search network resources and read a certain number of English sample texts after class, virtually guiding students to extend English learning from in class to after class, enhance language input and expand their knowledge. A large number of language input is the

basis of language output. Moreover, to perform the tasks assigned by teachers, students are steered into the rewarding habit of paying attention to the form and features of the language, which helps students overcome the weakness of only focusing on ideas, enhance their attention and sensitivity to the language itself, and improve the quality of language input. However, even if the quantity and quality of language input are guaranteed, all information is just stored in the memory. To turn such information stored in the memory into knowledge students can assimilate and ability students can acquire, language output through writing practice is inevitable and crucial.

In the second stage, that is, the language output stage, whether completing the writing task or reviewing others' written texts, students should rely on what they have learned in the first stage, thus putting what they have learned into practice and realizing the combination of learning and application. In order to complete the writing task, students also need to constantly re-read the sample texts so as to "borrow" language and in this process the aim of "promoting reading by writing" is attained.

Of course, the effective implementation of teaching activities also needs the stimulation and guarantee of evaluation mechanism. Teachers should adopt multiple formative evaluation in teaching activities inside and outside the classroom and make sure that the evaluation runs through the students' whole learning process through students' self-evaluation, peer evaluation with the learning group, peer evaluation between learning groups and teachers' evaluation. Timely evaluation can stimulate students' learning, motivate students to effectively adapt their learning process and promote their continuous development of comprehensive language skills. Self evaluation helps students to effectively monitor and adjust their learning plans and learning processes. The peer evaluation between students plays an important role in setting examples and promoting their learning from each other. In short, teachers should give full play to the positive backwash effect of multiple formative evaluation on individual learning and cooperative learning and promote the improvement of students' learning effect and learning ability.

Applying the blended learning model to the teaching of business English writing not only highlights the central position of students in the teaching process but also emphasizes the leading role of teachers, which is conducive to the cultivation and improvement of students' autonomous learning ability, inquiry ability, cooperative learning ability and data-retrieving skill. The instruction design of the course is task oriented and aimed to realize the zero distance and seamless integration between learning and application, input and output. In the future practical teaching work, the author will put the design into practice, and

continuously improve the instruction combined with empirical research and data feedback.

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