

Applications of the situation-task approach to business English teaching in vocational technology colleges, based on ESP theories

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ABSTRACT: The efficiency of situation-task teaching of business English in vocational technology colleges is reported in this article. The author analysed the domestic and overseas reference documents on English for specific purposes (ESP) related theories to develop a situation-task teaching approach on the basis of students' needs analysis. Fully applying ESP principles, the author designed teaching stages according to real business situations and real business tasks. Through the comparison and contrast of experimental and control groups, the author found that the situation-task teaching approach is efficient in teaching business English. By creating real situations, the teacher motivates students to use English in real business activities, which can motivate students to learn by doing and improve their English level and communication competence.

INTRODUCTION

Communication in the business world seems to be important in international trade. Business English helps business people to acquire skills essential for effective communication in business. That is why business English attracts so much interest. As Mark Ellis and Christine Johnson have pointed out, business English implies the definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on a particular kind of communication in a specific context [1-5]. Therefore, business English must be regarded as English for specific purposes (ESP). Tony Dudley Evans and Maggie Jo St John have stated ESP today is a much broader activity, with EBP (English for business purposes) becoming increasingly important [6]. Business English teaching is one part of ESP teaching, as shown in Figure 1.

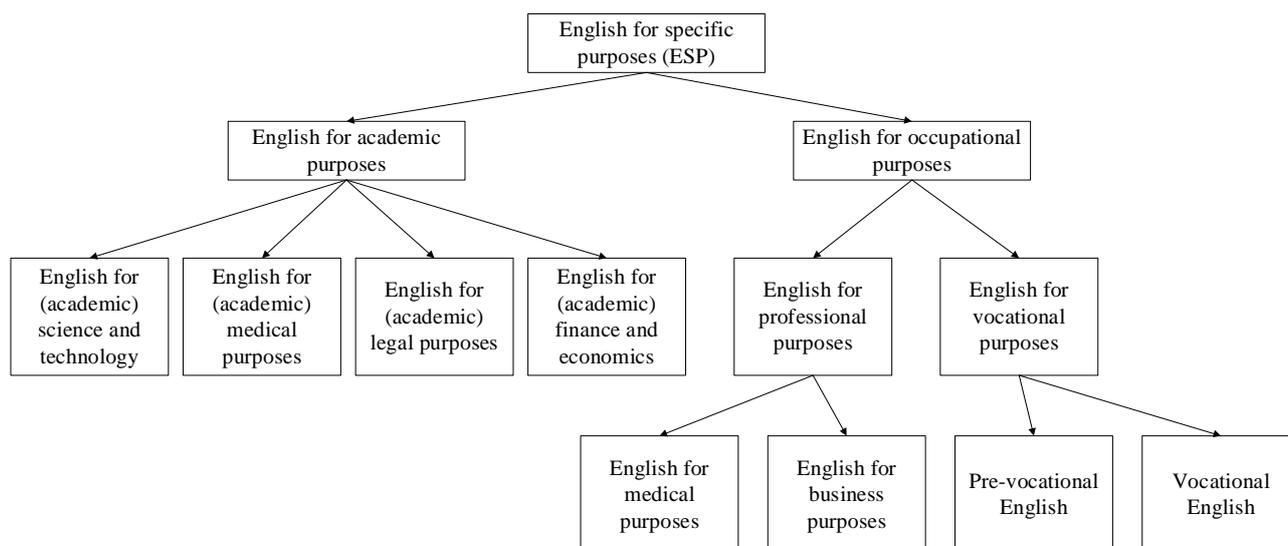


Figure 1: The structure diagram of ESP.

TRADITIONAL BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING

The teaching of ESP (English for specific purposes) has been separated from English language teaching (ELT). Fortanet-Gomez has stated, by far the most common ESP courses taught in Europe are courses in business English on

all levels [4]. This is not surprising, since business institutes have to cater to the needs of an increasingly globalised world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, special vocabularies of business-related words and terminology appeared. At that time, teaching focused on answering questions on the context in which words were used, doing vocabulary exercises and explaining paragraph structures. It seemed students achieved at least a moderate degree of proficiency, since they knew the vocabulary, could write sentences and could organise text into paragraphs. But what was not considered was how to apply the language in real life, such as how to interact in a meeting. The teaching was not helpful in improving students' interactive communication ability. In the 1980s, business English teaching focused on cultivating students' ability to express their ideas and opinions. The students were expected to express opinions, role-play, make presentations and so on, which placed the emphasis on teaching business skills. The need for students to be skilled with business communication has had a major impact on business English teaching.

In China, scholars at universities advocated that business English teaching must be useful for students and should combine applied English skills and professional knowledge. Li Shurong said business English teaching should emphasise practical training [7]. In addition to the use of task-driven methods, the students' perceptual cognition can be enhanced by using some teaching resources, such as training rooms. Ma Lijuan suggested a teaching mode, which placed an emphasis on mixing teaching and life, by trying to integrate students' lives, future job positions and English learning [8].

Although there has been ESP teaching and research for a long time in China and abroad, with significant contributions by former scholars, there is still much room left to improve the theoretical understanding of business English teaching. The teaching of ESP, and especially business English teaching, in China are based at vocational technology colleges.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAMME

Business English teaching methodology has developed gradually. Taking ESP-related theories as the main clue, the author has paid much attention to applying them to business English teaching in vocational technology colleges. The aim of business English teaching is to help students acquire business communicative competence in English in commercial situations. To realise this aim, all the teaching and learning activities should centre on the communicative purpose in a business situation using a situation-task teaching approach, which emphasises *learning by doing*. The language input to the situation-task teaching approach is real language. In business English classes, the situations are all real business activities closely related to future jobs. The effectiveness of situation-task teaching enables students to combine their development of language skills with improvements in other skills. First, in situation-task language teaching, students need to receive, deal with and convey information by language. Second, they should undertake some activity and finish tasks using language. Third, students need to co-operate, communicate and discuss during the process of completing tasks. The learning process involves emotional attitude and various knowledge and skills apart from the language skills, which help to fully develop a student's competence.

APPLICATIONS OF SITUATION-TASK TEACHING

Business English in vocational technology colleges is characterised by being practical and occupationally oriented. Employment-based business English can broaden professional horizons and give students experience in the purpose of business English. This turns the external requirement into an internal motivation to overcome learning difficulties. Only by this way can the teaching objective be achieved of fostering the talent required by industry. Therefore, the situation-task teaching approach can be characterised as theme-centred and student-centred.

THEME-CENTRED CURRICULUM DESIGN

The curriculum design of business English should be theme-centred, which changes the language programmes developed using target needs analysis. Task-based teaching, one of the theme-centred approaches, was used when the communicative approach was widely adopted by foreign language researchers. It has influenced language teaching and is based on significant research and practice. The task-based teaching method results from applying functional linguistics and cognitive psychology to the field of foreign languages. The core concept is to imitate all kinds of activities taking place in life and work that require language. The task-based teaching method combines language teaching with the application of language learners will meet in future business activities. Business activities are divided into several definite tasks and the goal of the teaching is to train students so that they possess the skills to undertake these tasks.

In task-based teaching, the tasks have three special characteristics: specific target or result, input, one or more relevant activities. Tasks require students to apply various learning strategies to improve their communicative competence when dealing with problems in simulated situations. Tasks are designed to be *real life*, that is, tasks require students to participate in activities they could meet outside the classroom. This coincides with the idea of making vocational classes

into enterprises. Tasks primarily are regarded as a part of an interactive process the rationale of which lies within a social and educational framework. There are three major elements: the individual, the group and others, which are called the *I, We and Them* dimensions of tasks. The model (see Figure 2) highlights the interactive nature of tasks and points to the futility of taking an over simplistic view of tasks in isolation without considering the role of the other elements.

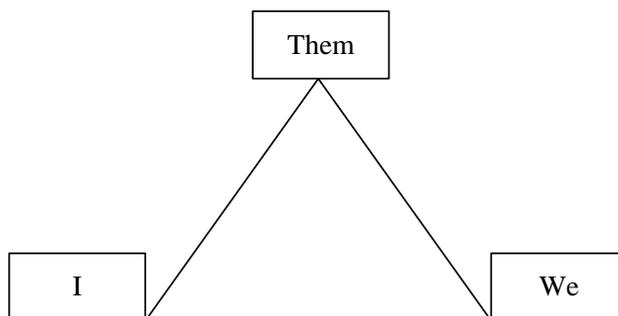


Figure 2: Theme-centred interaction.

In practical training, it is found that the theme-centred approach is the most important path to cultivate students' language communicative competence. This approach emphasises information exchange. Activities should be authentic requiring students to grasp how to apply language to finish tasks. It also guides students in grasping the rules of language in the process of dealing with problems. Working in pairs and group activities make language interaction more natural. Students are provided with more opportunities to apply language unconsciously. What is more, the interaction and intercommunication is not just mechanical practise.

STUDENT-CENTRED CLASS ACTIVITY

The student-centred approach means that students are the main part of class activity but students' practical abilities also should be considered. That is required for a class to be effective. The English level of students in vocational technology colleges is rather low and the level in a class can be remarkably diverse. Therefore, it is important to consider the difficulty of a task. After learning the problems students have, teachers should find methods to solve the problems. Sensible and practical tasks are designed according to students' abilities so that students can improve in the process of acquiring, dealing with and using information to improve language skills.

Needs analysis is a dynamic cyclical process the role of which is obvious in ESP teaching. In general, needs analysis means learners' needs should be considered during the teaching of English. Teaching efficiency is the priority in needs analysis. The biggest achievement of ESP is to place emphasis on the importance of the design syllabus and curriculum based on needs analysis. In ESP teaching, the steps are closely related to one another. The relationship between the steps is shown in Figure 3.

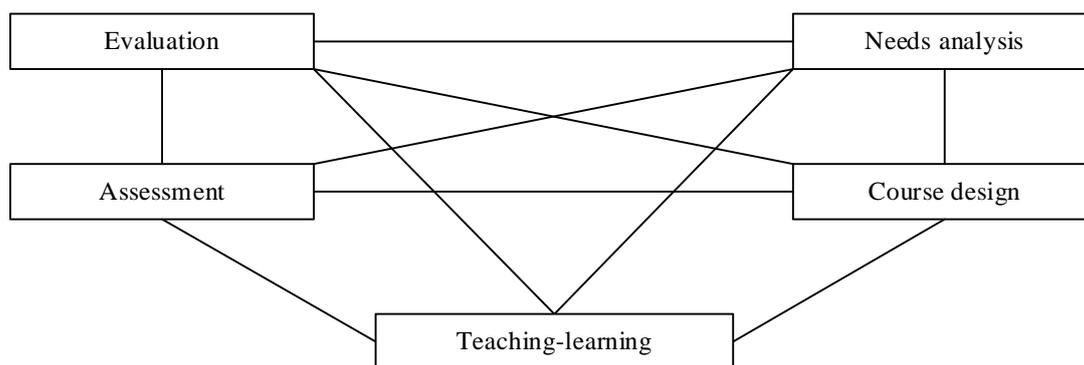


Figure 3: The relationship between teaching steps.

Assessment is part of the whole educational process of teaching and learning. It refers to the general process of monitoring or keeping track of the learner's progress. To give a reliable and complete assessment is by no means an easy job. That is because the situation-task teaching approach requires learners to use language as in a real-life situation. Generally, tasks involve group work. In order to avoid a group member letting others do all the work, it is necessary for individual student performance to be assessed and that the groups know the contributions of the individuals in completing the assignment. A student's classroom performance should be part of the assessment. A combination of both classroom performance and a final examination could form the assessment.

COMPLETING TASKS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES

A decisive factor in implementing situation-task teaching is the order in which tasks are conducted. Willis has described three stages in task-based teaching. The first stage is pre-task. In this stage, teachers set specific situations and assign tasks to students. The second stage is the task cycle. It requires students to organise groups to finish tasks and present to the whole class in oral or written form. The third stage is the post task. It includes analysis and conclusions. Students analyse the work of others under direction of the teacher [9] (see Figure 4).

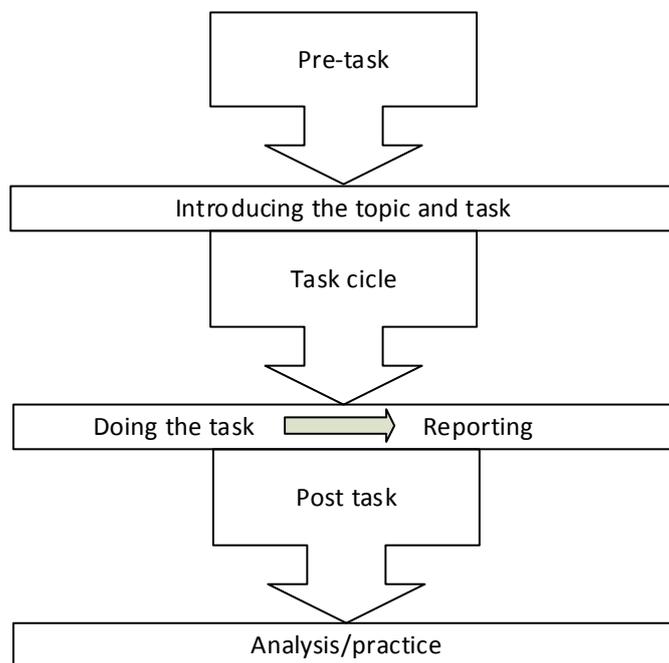


Figure 4: Stages in completing tasks.

THE EFFICIENCY OF SITUATION-TASK TEACHING

The following illustrates the effectiveness of situation-task teaching in business English at vocational technology colleges.

Results are presented for 60 students from the 2011 cohort. They are sophomores who majored in business English. An oral test of the language ability in business activities was used in the study. This was the model speaking test of the Business English Certificate (BEC). The speaking test includes three parts. The first part is an interview, the second part is a mini-presentation, and the third part is a collaborative task and discussion. Class one was the experimental group, and Class two was the control group, each group had 30 students. Both groups took business English classes twice a week. The situation-task teaching approach was applied to the experimental group, while the control group was taught using traditional teaching methods. The results are shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Four pairs of results are considered.

Table 1: Paired sample statistics.

| | | Mean (%) | N | SD | Mean standard error |
|--------|---------------------------------|----------|----|-------|---------------------|
| Pair 1 | Pre-test of control group | 83.27 | 30 | 9.74 | 1.78 |
| | Pre-test of experimental group | 82.87 | 30 | 11.87 | 2.17 |
| Pair 2 | Pre-test of control group | 83.27 | 30 | 9.74 | 1.78 |
| | Post-test of control group | 84.90 | 30 | 10.36 | 1.89 |
| Pair 3 | Pre-test of experimental group | 82.87 | 30 | 11.87 | 2.17 |
| | Post-test of experimental group | 86.30 | 30 | 6.03 | 1.10 |
| Pair 4 | Post-test of control group | 84.90 | 30 | 10.36 | 1.89 |
| | Post-test of experimental group | 86.30 | 30 | 6.06 | 1.10 |

Pre-test results show that the experimental and control groups are similar. The result of the *t*-test means that there is no significant difference between the two groups because the significance Sig = 0.90, which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, the two groups can be compared.

The scores of two groups are significantly different because Sig = 0.04 < 0.05. Therefore, one can say that the situation-task approach improves students' English competence.

Table 2: Paired samples test.

| | | Mean | SD | Mean standard error | t-test value | Degrees of freedom (df) | Sig |
|--------|---|-------|-------|---------------------|--------------|-------------------------|------|
| Pair 1 | Pre-test of control group - Pre-test of experimental group | 0.40 | 17.59 | 3.21 | 0.13 | 29 | 0.90 |
| Pair 2 | Pre-test of control group - Pre-test of control test | -1.63 | 6.61 | 1.21 | -1.35 | 29 | 0.19 |
| Pair 3 | Pre-test of experimental group - Post-test of experimental group | -3.43 | 8.59 | 1.57 | -2.19 | 29 | 0.04 |
| Pair 4 | Post-test of control group - Post-test of experimental group | -1.40 | 12.15 | 2.22 | -1.90 | 29 | 0.04 |

The results for the control group before and after experiments do not have obvious differences, indicated by Sig = 0.19 > 0.05. The experimental results before and after experiments are significantly different, because of Sig = 0.04 < 0.05. This means the English results for the experimental group improved more than for the control group, indicating the value of situation-task teaching in improving students' English competence. The speaking results for the experimental group increased more significantly than those in the control group. So, there was a significant difference in the speaking test results for the two classes, which clearly showed that situation-task teaching can effectively improve students' speaking skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Most students are aware of the importance of business English to their future careers. The activities in the situation-task teaching approach are more interesting and attract more students' attention than traditional teaching methods. Students are driven by tasks and are active in the classroom, thus, creating a relaxed class atmosphere.

Students can explore, summarise and co-operate better through a multi-level task design and various task activities. They no longer passively accept knowledge from teachers. The situation-task teaching approach is good for students and changes the old mode of learning by rote. It also changes the situation where students had no time for, or interest in, participating in English speaking activities. The real language material arouses students' learning motivations. The situations in the business activities decrease students' psychological barriers to using English. Students acquire language naturally, which strengthens their self-confidence and sense of achievement. The co-operation between partners can strengthen the sense of competition and, then, reinforce the team's co-operative spirit.

As for further study, it is theoretically and practically worthwhile to do further research on the following problems. First, there are many branches in the ESP classification and English for engineering and technology is one of them. How to use situation-task teaching methods in engineering and technology majors is a big problem. Second, compared with other language domains, English for engineering and technology has its own characteristics. There are distinctive stylistic characteristics, lexical characteristics, syntactic characteristics and technical terms in English for engineering and technology. To sum up, only with continuous and extensive research can ESP practice be further developed and promoted to meet the demands of education and of social and economic development.

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