



Reform and Practice of Business English Letter Writing Project-Based Teaching under the Guidance of Production-Oriented Approach

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Abstract. Business English Letter Writing is a course for Business English and International Trade majors requiring the integration of theory and practice. Despite of substantial teaching reforms conducted, there are still large room for improvement. This paper analyzes the application of Production-Oriented Approach, a new English teaching theory proposed by professor Wen Qiufang, in the project-based teaching reform of Business English Letter Writing course. Findings are that Production-Oriented Approach is an effective way to enhance teaching outcomes and this attempt proves to be a success.

Keywords: Business English Letter Writing; Production-Oriented Approach; Project-Based Teaching; Teaching Reform and Practice

1 Introduction

In international trade, English letters serve as one of the main means of communication and negotiation, and play a significant role in the successful conclusion of a transaction. Under the background of economic globalization and the mass development of cross-border e-commerce, business English writing ability becomes increasingly important for employees in the line of foreign trade. Business English Letter Writing, one of the core courses for students majoring in Business English or International Trade, focuses on the cultivation of students' ability to communicate with clients overseas in written English regarding specific trading issues. The mastery of this kind of ability requires not only the knowledge of English but also the knowledge of business, not only the knowledge from textbooks but also the experience from practices. Therefore, the integration of theory and practice is the key to the course teaching of Business English Letter Writing. In reality, problems like too much learning less practicing, overemphasizing on the linguistic knowledge and less focus on communicative skills extensively exist in the classroom instruction of Business English Letter Writing. This paper tries to solve these problems by conducting a course teaching reform underpinned by a well-known teaching theory, Production-Oriented Approach.

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2 Production-Oriented Approach

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA), proposed and developed by Professor Wen Qiufang, is a teaching model trying to integrate the strengths of Western instructional approaches with Chinese contextual features so as to overcome the weaknesses in English instruction in tertiary education in Mainland China^[1]. The POA is composed of three components, namely, teaching principles, teaching hypotheses and teaching processes. Learning-centered Principle, Learning-using Integrated Principle and Whole-person Education Principle are the three teaching principles, focusing on the activating processes of learning, the combination of learning and language using, and the realization of both humanistic and instrumental goals in English language teaching respectively. The three major hypotheses proposed by Professor Wen are Output-driven Hypothesis, Input-enabled Hypothesis and Selective Learning Hypothesis. The Output-driven Hypothesis reverses the order of learning by starting with output instead of input so as to achieve better learning outcomes. Input-enabled Hypothesis believes that output-driven learning with enabling input materials can lead to better outcomes and carefully selected input materials enable students to approach their zone of proximal development. Selective-learning hypothesis advocates selecting input materials which are useful for the assigned productive activity to improve learning efficiency.

Under the guidance of three teaching principles and hypotheses, Professor Wen put forward three phases of teaching: motivating, enabling and assessing. Phase one, motivating, includes three steps: first, describe the scenarios; second, ask students to try out the given productive tasks; third, explain the learning objectives and productive tasks. Phase two, enabling: first, explain the productive tasks, enabling materials and learning objectives; second, segment a large productive task into several mini-tasks and offer enabling materials accordingly; third, provide guidance while students using the given materials selectively; fourth, students finish the mini-tasks. Phase three, assessing, consists of two kinds of assessment: classroom assessment and achievement assessment. Throughout the three phases of POA teaching, teachers play a role being a mediator, guiding, designing, and scaffolding in addition to facilitating and consulting^[1].

Since its formal proposal at the 7th International Conference on English Language Teaching in China in October, 2014, POA has been widely acknowledged and adopted as a new teaching model. Statistics from CNKI shows that, from July 20, 2015 to May 20th, 2023, there are 2,689 related studies subjected “Production-Oriented Approach (POA)”, among which, 1579 academic journals, 430 dissertations (149 master’s theses, 2 doctoral theses) and 49 conference papers (36 domestic conferences, 9 international conferences). Compared with data collected in July, 2021 by Fan Jiayao, Wu Biyu^[2], great progress has been made. The total number of relevant research publications increases year by year, peaks in 2022 and descends in the first half of 2023. Researcher Yang Yufei pointed out in her study^[3] that, the authenticity of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching coincides with the teaching philosophy of POA. Therefore, in spite of its initial purpose of serving for College

English Teaching^[2], POA is also applied to ESP teaching, like Medical English, Aviation English and Business English.

3 The Status quo of Business English Letter Writing Teaching

So far, there are massive studies conducted regarding the application of POA in English Teaching, 1193 journal articles found in CNKI database. Among them, there are only 9 articles in relation to Business English Teaching in higher vocational colleges. As for Business English Writing in higher vocational colleges, there are only 3 journal articles presenting the adoption of POA in the course teaching. Xie Yanjun^[4] stated a five-step POA-based instruction model for Business English Writing in higher vocational education, i.e. warm-up, output-motivating, input-enabling, multi-dimensional-assessing and feed-back. On the basis of POA and Xie's study, Ding Lujuan and Lin Liqin^[5] conducted another teaching practice. Unlike Xie and Ding, Lin, Yan Qilin and Dai Xin^[6] focus solely on the Enabling stage in POA instruction and designed step-by-step enabling activities by implementing the three criteria-gradual enabling, aligned enabling and varied enabling in Business English Writing for Higher Vocational Education. Until May, 2023, there is no related research article regarding the application of POA in Business English Letter Writing course in higher vocational colleges. Despite great efforts have been made by numerous researchers, there are still some problems in the classroom instruction of Business English Letter Writing course, especially in higher vocational education system. The status quo of Business English Letter Writing course teaching in higher vocational colleges is elaborated as follows.

First of all, the majority of students in higher vocational colleges have a lower level of English writing, lack of confidence and feel a sense of great anxiety to write in English^[7], not to mention for business's purposes. Business English, as one kind of ESP, requires more than general English, that is, business knowledge and technical terms. Business English learners are expected to write English letters with business formats and languages. Those requirements can be a great challenge for these students and many of them show less enthusiasm for learning to write business English letters, greater tendency to acquire this knowledge passively and fail to apply it into good practice.

Second, a number of teachers pay more attention to explanation instead of practice in the course instruction, focus more on linguistic knowledge rather than communicative skills. That is to say, teachers spend more time on teaching vocabularies and sentences and correcting students' grammar, instead of leaving students more time to practice writing^[8]. Some of the teachers lack a comprehensive understanding of the process of international trade, resulting in their teaching in Business English Letter Writing course showing no difference from English Writing course and disconnection from actual work. Some innovative teachers, on the other hand, do make great efforts to the course reform, like project-based teaching or task-based teaching, thanks to the availability of various project-based textbooks. Based on personal experience of the author, project-based teaching in Business English

Letter Writing indeed have made some progress regarding students' willingness and achievements. The weaknesses, however, are also evident, just as Professor Wen pointed out: 1) students' knowledge base, language system, and discourse patterns cannot be effectively expanded; 2) students' production occurs without a teacher's systematic guidance^[1].

In view of the above-mentioned status quo of Business English Letter Writing course, this paper presents an attempt of project-based teaching reform guided by the Production-Oriented Approach, with an intention to solve these problems and improve teaching quality.

4 Teaching Reform and Practice

Project-based Teaching is a student-centered teaching strategy which focuses on developing students' critical thinking as well as skills like problem-solving, decision-making and investigating by engaging them in authentic, meaningful projects. In international trade, a good deal will be made after many processes, mainly including inquiry, offer, counter-offer, conclusion of business, etc. Those processes can be regarded as or divided into different projects, suitable for project-based teaching in the classroom.

In accordance with the actual working process in foreign trade and the basic concept of Project-based Teaching, the whole class were required to form 2-person groups, playing the role of importer and exporter. Each group started their own companies and they were the manager of import and export department respectively. And the teaching content of this course was divided into 12 projects, including inquiry, offer, counter-offer, etc. POA was adopted for the accomplishment of each project. Payment, one of the projects, was taken as an example. The following is the teaching procedure of Payment negotiation based on the three phases of teaching proposed by Professor Wen.

4.1 Motivating

In the phase of motivating, POA requires the teacher to present the scenarios of this project and ask students to try out without guidance and then, the teacher elaborates the learning objectives of this project. In the project of Payment, short videos showing importers and exporters negotiating for terms of payment were presented to the students as the communicative scene at the very beginning. After watching the videos, students were asked to discuss with their partners main methods of payment in international trade in groups, and how to write a letter regarding terms of payment. During the discussion, students realized that their lack of related professional and linguistic knowledge would be a big obstacle preventing them from successfully finishing the writing task and that was the driving force of active learning. The last step of motivating phase is the teacher's explanation on the learning objectives and writing task, mainly including communicative objectives and linguistic ones^[8]. Students should master the words and phrases, sentence patterns as well as discourse

structure related to the terms of payment and apply this knowledge into letter writing and simulation of negotiating for terms of payment.

4.2 Enabling

The Enabling phase of this project includes three steps. First, the teacher described the writing tasks in details: for importers, proposing an easier payment of Document against Acceptance; for exporters, refusing the proposal and insisting on the payment of confirmed, irrevocable Letter of Credit at sight. Second, materials related to the payment methods (Remittance, Collection and Letter of Credit) were provided, students chose their learning materials for selective learning based on their writing tasks. In this process, the teacher played a role of facilitator from the aspects of language, content and structure. The teacher guided students to choose their learning materials based on the role they played, for example, guiding the importers to study the specimen letter asking for easier method of payment. Third, students finished the writing tasks as required and commented on their counterparts' work.

4.3 Assessing

Traditionally, Business English Writing course is dominated by the model in which teacher gives a lecture, students finish the writing task, like a composition, and then teacher reviews students' work and comments on it. The whole process is unarguably a heavy load for the teacher. What's worse is that, students tend to pay more attention to the score after receiving the teacher's feedback, rather than the teacher's specific review and suggestion for improvement. Teacher-student Cooperative Assessment (TSCA) is a new evaluation system proposed by Professor Wen and her team to improve the efficiency of course evaluation. There are two kinds of assessments in POA, ongoing diagnostic and formative classroom assessment and achievement assessment ^[1]. In this project, the whole learning process of each student was assessed by the teacher, including performance during the discussion and selective learning and the writing tasks. Peer-assessment was used for each student to comment on their counterpart's letter. Besides, self-assessment was also encouraged after this project. As to the achievement assessment, a simulated business negotiation for terms of payment was held to check whether the learning objectives of this project being achieved.

5 Conclusion

With the rapid development of international trade, business English letter writing becomes one of the core competences for those who work in this industry. Current Business English Letter Writing course teaching is in urgent need of reform and improvement considering the heavy workload on the teacher and students while less output from this course. Production-Oriented Approach is an innovation of English teaching in Chinese context. Based on the actual working process and in view of the

limitations of project-based teaching method pointed out by Professor Wen, this paper was a new attempt to combine the project-based teaching with production-oriented approach in Business English Letter Writing course in higher vocational college. The Practice shows that the application of POA in Business English Letter Writing project-based teaching has greatly enhanced students' willingness, confidence and competence in English writing.

This paper is one of the achievements of teaching reform of the Business English Letter Writing Course (Item No. YJKG2021006).

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