Authentic or Bespoke: A Discussion of the Application of Authentic Materials in Business English Teaching

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Abstract

The features of business English determine its particular demand for the teaching materials. Authentic materials have great significance in cultivating business communicative abilities for business English learners. This paper compared authentic materials and bespoke material in business English teaching and put forward some strategies of using authentic materials in business English teaching.

Key words: Teaching material; Authentic materials; Bespoke materials; Business English

INTRODUCTION

Teaching materials have great influence on what and how the teacher teaches. Selecting appropriate and qualified teaching materials have positive effect on the learners' learning styles and learning result. To some extent, the teacher's classroom management is determined by the teaching materials. As business English teaching is a newly developed field in foreign language teaching, the study on developing business English materials is poorly researched by researchers. Besides, business English course books have great demand on the writer's business knowledge and language proficiency. The right choice of authentic materials is crucial to motivate the learners' interest and build the ideal teaching effect.

1. BUSINESS ENGLISH AND ITS LEARNERS

The research and education of Business English is booming in recent years. Up to now, there are 236 universities or colleges that can enroll bachelor degree level business English major students in China and 60,000 teachers are engaging in business English teaching. From 2007, some universities and colleges can enroll students majoring business English. In September 2012, business English was listed in the *Undergraduate Program Catalog of Universities and Colleges (2012)* by the Ministry of Education of China.

Business English falls within the scope of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It shares the common features of ESP, such as needs analysis, course design and materials selection etc.. Thus the choosing of the teaching materials should caters to the needs of the learners of different levels in the field of commerce, finance, banking or accounting etc.. According to Ellis and Johnson (2002), business English learners can be divided into pre-experience learners, low-experience learners and job-experienced learners.

Pre-experience learners are those learners who are in educational institution such as special commercial colleges, colleges and universities, and business schools. They learn business English courses to prepare for their future career. Pre-experience learners are more open-minded than those who already done well in their careers and it is easier for them to adapt to the business context. However, they may lack confidence. Low-experience learners include junior company members and learners

who are frequently moving their jobs. Junior company members may be familiar with business in their own position or department and have a relatively better command of English than older employees, but they may not have enough experience to specific business skills, such as meetings and negotiation. For learners who are moving job, they know little about their new job. Job-experienced learners refer to those learners who have rich business experience and need to learn English for a new position which they do not have much experience. Such as establishing joint ventures in other countries, or being selected for a new project. The three kinds of learners have much difference in their needs, language proficiency and application of business knowledge. Compared with pre-experience learners, low-experience learners and job-experienced learners have more direct needs for English language and more specific communicative target.

2. TEACHING MATERIALS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING

In teaching process, teaching materials aid teachers to carry out their teaching activities and orient the class towards the desired goal. Course books are the most popular teaching material for they have structured learning systems and could provide learners with a holistic view of the knowledge system. For less experienced teachers, published course book, which could help them make pedagogic decisions, are safe and time saving. Besides, the teaching materials inside the course book have been confirmed and tested by teachers and learners already. Business English has its unique features and the teaching of business English should meet the needs of learners and stakeholders. Authentic materials and bespoke materials are important materials for business English teaching and learning.

2.1 Authentic Material

Authentic material is any kind of material taken from the real world and not specifically created for the purpose of language teaching (Ellis & Johnson, 2002). Authentic language materials are indispensable in foreign language classes. It bridges the gap between real world and classroom and has some influence on the teacher's view of language (Wajnryb, 1988). The importance of authentic language materials in modern foreign language teaching is undeniable (Ciccone, 1995). Alice (1993) thought that authentic language materials should be used in language teaching as much as possible.

A variety of authentic materials can be exploited in business English teaching. Those materials include: company-generated materials, such as the annual report, company magazines and publications, promotional materials, catalogs, and brochures etc.; multi-media materials, such as video documentaries, radio broadcasts,

audio recordings etc.; documentary materials, such as business correspondence, reports and memos, manuals and written instructions, journals, newspapers, and contracts etc.. In some teaching scenario, travel information such as hotel information, hotel brochures, restaurant menus can also be used.

Authentic materials are real business documents and are not simplified or distorted by attempts to include structures or expressions aimed at the language learners (Ellis & Johnson, 2002). The advantage of using authentic materials is obvious. In terms of contents, authentic materials have high accuracy, high credibility, and up-to-date information that will reflect the genuine purposes of business English learners. For pre-experience learners, authentic materials will provide a vivid scene of real-life situation or events that they may encounter in the future career. Meanwhile, authentic materials include the type of language that the learner may be exposed to in the future working position. For job-experienced learners, they are likely to be strongly motivated by the company-generated materials because of the relevance of the authentic materials to their familiar field.

However, there are not so many authentic materials available for business English courses. Authentic materials are commercially or legally sensitive. In business world where efficiency are emphasized, it takes time for busy business people to trawl through files and computer drives looking materials or to make an audio recording (Evan, 2005). Meanwhile, they may have concern for the confidentiality of the materials. In most cases, it is hard for business English teachers to find the right teaching material that rightly cater to the needs of the learners. The materials cannot be too advanced or too easy in language or content. If not properly selected, the authentic material may demotivate and demoralize the students who have varying levels. Besides these difficulties, teachers need to spend a lot of time thinking and planning the how to organize the class with these materials and prepare the suitable exercises.

2.2 Bespoke Material

It is not to say that the students can master the required skills in the context by using the authentic materials about the targeted language (Widdowson, 1983；Hutchinson & Waters, 1984). The feature of authenticity cannot assure its relevance. Authentic materials are only useful when it matches the communicative level and special demand of students (Robinson, 1980). The choosing of teaching materials is determined not by its loyalty to the targeted language context, but by its effects on developing students' abilities (Qiu, 2012).

If a piece of authentic material is altered by selecting, cutting, simplifying or transferring from one medium of communication to another, it immediately ceases to be authentic (Ellis & Johnson, 2002). The use of non-authentic material does not mean the material is dull

and irrelevant (Robinson, 1980). Bespoke materials are adapting materials that are designed to meet the specific needs of learners. With minor change to the authentic materials, bespoke materials may become interesting, motivating, and attractive. Learners are more likely to be involved in the class activities that organized by using tailor-made materials.

The most distinctive advantage for bespoke material is its adaptability to learners of varying levels. As stated above, it is quite difficult for the teacher to find the perfect authentic material. In most cases, teachers have to make some alterations to the authentic materials. For example, some commercial secrets should be omitted and highly specialized vocabularies should be altered in accordance to the learners' level. Besides, teachers need to take initiative in preparing corresponding activities and exercises. For teachers, the process of designing the tailor-made materials can be time-consuming. In most cases, it is so context-specific that they can only be used once. Sometimes bespoke materials are so perfectly designed that it is rarely used in real business situation. If being changed too much, the bespoke material may have artificial language that cannot reflect the real use of language in the real communication context. Having mastered complete language structure and standard grammar, learners may find that in real working position it is hard for them to start a small talk when meeting their colleagues in the corridor or waiting outside the bathroom.

3. STRATEGIES ON THE APPLICATION OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING

By using authentic materials, some tasks can be designed to train students the corresponding language techniques. Of course, the development of language skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing are interrelated and while training one language skill, other language skills can be trained simultaneously. The followings are the discussion on how to use authentic materials to develop teaching activities in business English teaching.

3.1 Reading Tasks

When authentic text materials are used, reading task is the most common activity that can be organized in business English classes. Compared with other tasks, a reading task is easier to design for the teacher. When selecting reading materials, the learners' interest is the prerequisite that should be considered. A long, boring and out-of-date reading material may possibly demotivate the learners from the topic and the activity. A reading task may take the forms of skimming, scanning, summarizing and contextualizing, gist reading, detailed reading, and answering questions etc.. The questions may be designed in forms of multiple choices or true or false statement, with the contents focusing on the text contents, vocabulary, verb uses, tenses, structures or conjunctions etc. The classroom activities, such as group discussion, debate can be organized by using adapted text on business topics to discuss. For example, to train the use of the useful phrases or words in the text, the teacher may remove the words or phrases before class to create gap-filling tasks, or assign the task in class to look for useful phrases or words and discuss their uses, or compare the use of a single word or phrase from different business texts. Sometimes, the teacher can also show the students the heading of different paragraphs and ask students to forecast the main ideas of the paragraph and then set time limit to read and confirm their ideas afterwards. Of course, the speaking, listening and translating skills can also be trained simultaneously by adopting text materials.

3.2 Writing Tasks

Some authentic materials are especially useful for designing writing tasks for business English learners. Such as numerical or graphic materials, business correspondence, reports and memos, and minutes of meeting etc.. A typical example would be business correspondence. The teacher may show students a business letter about complaints in international trade. The letter should be completely genuine (some confidential information should be omitted) to make the learner have a vivid impression of the layout and contents of the letter. The tasks for the students could be to write a reply to the letter, or to discuss the language feature of the letter (formal or informal, private or official), or to discuss possible improvement of the letter or rewrite the letter if the letter is not satisfactory. Gap-filling task can also be designed to train the use of the words that is used frequently. Numerical or graphic materials such as pictures, charts and diagrams, are especially important for job-experienced learners such as finance staff, sales and marketing staff, technical people, and pre-experience learners who will enter the relative field in the future. Other writing tasks could be describing trend, writing reports, comparing and contrasting or describing cause and effect. Other materials, such as job advertisements, are good examples for pre-experience learner to stimulate letter writing and CV writings. Besides, minutes of meetings, business articles from journals, newspapers and books are good material to write summaries in business context. Reports and memos are good examples for training the techniques of report or memo writing.

3.3 Speaking Tasks

By using authentic materials, speaking tasks can be designed and carried out. Transcribing what learners heard is an effective task that is adaptable to all kinds of authentic spoken materials. More tasks, such as comparing learner's understanding with the transcription are also workable. For numerical and graphic materials and company materials, presentation is a good way to train learners the speaking techniques. Pictures, charts and

diagrams are good models for visualizer to practice picture dictation. Company materials such as correspondence, reports and memos and sales literature can be used for job-experienced learners to intimate telephoning. Business contracts, product catalogs are ideal materials for simulating negotiation and telephoning. For example, students may be assigned a speaking task of describing Dow Jones index by giving audio or graphic materials. If audio materials are offered, low-level students may be asked to dictate the manuscripts and compare the pronunciation with the speaker. While dictating, students should pay special attention to some verbs that describing trends. Such as "to soar", "to peak", "to fall", "to plunge", "to stabilize", "to recover" or "to dip" etc.. When graphic materials are used, students could describe the specific points of a graph by using proper verbs. If video material is offered, simulation is effective class activity to stimulate certain business situations, such as a meeting. Certain speaking techniques, such as signaling the start, interrupting, asking for repetition, asking for clarification, introducing the objectives etc. should be emphasized during the process. Besides, students could swift their roles in a meeting to practice using different sentences.

3.4 Listening Tasks

Authentic audio and video materials are good models for listening tasks, because in most cases, specially recorded audio or videotapes are not natural speech. However, authentic business audio and video materials are relatively hard to obtain for the reason of confidentiality and time efforts. A lot of tasks can be designed to train the listening skills of students. For low-level learners, listening tasks such as listening for gist or summarizing the main idea of the material can be set. Detailed listening tasks such as note taking and minutes taking are ideal tasks for high-level learners. In English listening classes, guessing can reducing the burden of concentrating on specific words, sentence, and sound and make full use of the information stored in one's mind. The listening skill of predicting and guessing can be trained by stopping at "strategic points" and then asking students to predict what will happen next (Ellis & Johnson, 2002). During the process of exploiting authentic materials, the teachers are required to spend efforts preparing before class to know every word of the material and set appropriate tasks. For example, if the teacher is broadcasting a conversation of telephoning to students, some listening tasks could be designed. For example, summarizing the gist of the conversation, making a summary of some telephoning phrases or emphasizing on different topics, such as asking to speak to someone, what should be said when a person is not available, asking someone to wait, asking for the other person's name, or starting phoning again. Students may be assigned different phone roles, such as the caller or receptionist, in different given situations (such as the line is busy, the person who is wanted is not available,

interference on the line or getting wrong numbers) to perform a role-play classroom activity. Students are encouraged to summarize the phrasal verbs concerning telephoning techniques during the process, such as "to get through", "to put through", "to cut off", "to hang up" or "to hold on" etc..

CONCLUSION

The final goal of the language learning is to teach students how to use the language in the target situation. Authentic materials offer a real communicative situation to students and help to stimulate their learning interest. By applying authentic materials in business English teaching, learners could quickly adapt to the real working position right after they graduate from school. Unavoidably, authentic materials have some defects. If not being properly chosen, they could be demotivating. When exploiting authentic materials in the teaching process, business English teachers should target the learners' needs and levels to select the right material and finally work out appropriate teaching plan.

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