A Study of Business English Writing Multimodal Teaching

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Abstract

The integrated research of multimodality and language teaching is still at its infant stage in China. Multimodal studies abroad and home focus more on theoretical discussion; empirical studies need to be strengthened. This paper tries to make up for the deficiency, combining the theory and empirical research together to bring multimodal research findings into business English writing class. The paper first covers a literature review on multimodality of both abroad and home. And then, based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Kress and van Leeuwen's image grammar, a teaching model for the present study is proposed. Finally, multimodality-based experiment is done to verify the results of multimodal teaching. It testifies the feasibility and effectiveness of multimodal discourse analysis on pedagogies in the business English writing class.

Key words: Multimodal; Business English writing; Teaching method

INTRODUCTION

Business English (BE) is a branch for the English-language system, which is the English for specific purposes (ESP) in the international business activities of this particular professional discipline services. Along with the increasing of global economic integration, a lot of universities and colleges in China have set up the BE major, aiming at developing the international-generic BE and training talents who both have the knowledge of business and English language skills. As a core course of BE major, Business English Writing (BEW) aims to teach non-native college students in economic fields how to convey clear, simple, concise and courteous messages and avoid verbosity or flowery on different forms of business writing from traditional business letters, reports, and memos to e-mails and other electronic communications. It is based on the common English grammar, vocabulary and syntax, but with a specific language phenomenon and performance of content. Then the truth is a large number of students usually do not know where to start when assigned a BEW task. Therefore, help students to generate ideas during writing processes are urgent for all of the teachers.

Meanwhile, with the rapid development and renovation of science and technology, images, sound, animation, diagrams, colors and layout, especially the modern multimedia, are used to deliver the information by means of the form of multimodal discourse in the modern society, thus the multimodal features of discourse are attracting a growing number of attention. Since 1990s, many researchers at home and abroad have made great contributions to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) from different perspectives. There are also a lot of studies on college English teaching, for the purpose of meeting the need for worldwide cultural diversity and communicative multimodal development. Moreover, the application of MDA to English teaching meets the requirements of English teaching reform and improving the standard of English teaching.

So far, the study about the MDA on BEW teaching is still at the initial stage, there are few studies analyzing the

multimodality on BEW class. This thesis chooses BEW course and the students from BE major as the objects of study. From the perspective of social semiotics, derived from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, the application of MDA to pedagogies will be discussed through the quantitative and qualitative methods in this thesis. Also the feasibility and effectiveness of multimodal BEW teaching will be analyzed in this thesis.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is necessary to state a term before we go to define multimodality. Mode (also often used as modal or modality) would seem to be an easily definable term. Zhu (2007) states that modes are as channel or medium, they include language, technology, image, color, music, etc.

As a matter of fact, multimodality is as old as representation itself and crucial to an understanding of almost forms of communication. This term is introduced to highlight the importance of taking into consideration semiotic modes rather than language-in-use, such as image, gesture, and so on.

1.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis Abroad

One of the earliest researchers of multimodal discourse is Barthes, who published "Image-Music-Text" in 1977, in which he discussed the interaction of pictures to language in meaning expressing. Then MDA, which was booming in the 1990s, has become a hot issue in the linguistic research. Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) put forward the concept of multimodal discourse and constructed visual grammar. They extended the concept of modality to image, focusing on the phenomenon of multimodality expressing the meaning; including visual pictures, color grammar and the fact that layout of newspaper will function on different media. They also made researches on the relationship between modality and media. Multimodality as defined by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) is the use of several semiotic modes and their combination within a socio-cultural domain which causes a semiotic activity. Actually many forms of text in our daily life belong to multimodal discourse, which includes newspapers, magazines, course books, TV commercials, even the dynamic scenes on television with vivid pictures and sounds.

The New London Group (1996) was the first one to apply multimodality in language teaching. After that, more and more scholars have conducted study on multimodality and language teaching. Royce (2002) examined different semiotics being complementary in multimodal discourse and being cooperative in multimodality of second language teaching. Norris (2004) offered a clear methodology to help the reader to carry out the integrative analysis. O'Halloran (2004, 2011) researched the theoretical construction of multimodality and specifically studied the multimodal phenomenon in math discourse, then developed the systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis approach, which explored the meaning arising through the use of language and visual imagery in printed texts.

1.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis at Home

Comparing with the flourishing researches on MDA in the western countries, the Chinese scholars began to introduce this subject and do some research on it. Li (2003) reviewed Kress and Van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar, which is based on images. Li firstly introduced this new theory to China's linguistic research, which presented the framework of social semiotic work of image analysis and the significance of MDA for teaching. From then on, more and more domestic scholars began to set foot in this new field. Gu (2007) distinguished the concept of multimedia learning and the concept of multimodal learning, and introduced the theory and methodology of MDA and discussed the relationship between multimodalities and educational technology. Limited by scientific technology, few people carried research on multimodality before, but with the development of multimedia and corpus, the study on multimodality becomes more and more practical (Zhu, 2007). Hu (2007) defined that multimodality means the diversity of communicative approaches in society. Multimodality refers to the combination of different semiotic modes. Yang (2009) discussed the nature of multimodality and emphasized the close relationship of language and different modalities in MDA. Zhang (2009) explored the theory of MDA and the application of multimedia in foreign language teaching, and constructed the theory frame of MDA on the basis of systemic functional linguistics. He states that Multimodality is a phenomenon which is communicated by means of various ways and semiotic resources, such as languages, pictures, sound and actions.

Until now, many researchers at home and abroad have made great contributions to MDA from different perspectives, and published articles in different angles. Such as D. L. Zhang and S. J. Zhang (2010) states the compilation principles of foreign language textbooks with multimodal characteristics; Wang (2010) discusses about how to develop multiliteracies ability in English reading teaching; Kang (2012) explores the relationship between all-encompassing and interpreting teaching and learning with multimodality. These researches have very important enlightening meaning for Chinese EFL Teaching Reform.

As has been mentioned above, few studies analyze the multimodality on Business English class. So based on the previous studies, this paper applies the visual grammar of Kress and Van Leeuwen as the basic theoretical framework, and conducts an empirical study on multimodal analysis of BEW class.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to test whether multimodal BEW teaching is better than traditional BEW teaching methods, a research is conducted. The design of research, including research questions, subjects, instruments, materials, and procedures are talked about in detail.

2.1 Research Questions

The study aims to test the feasibility and effectiveness of multimodal BEW teaching. It attempts to answer the following questions:

a) Is the effect of multimodal BEW teaching method better than traditional teaching method?
b) Can multimodal BEW teaching method improve the students' interest in writing?
c) Is there any difference between these two teaching methods for improving students' BE writing ability?

2.2 Subjects

The subjects in the study consisted of 98 students, among whom there are 88 female and 10 male. Both groups are sophomores of Business English major in the same local university in Shanxi, China. In order to make comparison between the two teaching methods, the author divided students into two groups, each group has 49 students (N=49). Control Group (CG) used the traditional BEW teaching method, while experiment group (EG) carried out the multimodal teaching method. Before the experiment, a pre-test was given to assure there was not any significant difference between the two groups regarding to their writing proficiency. Both two groups participated in the same pre-test of BEW, and after the experiment both two groups took part in the other post-test of writing. Two groups were supposed to finish the composition under the same direction within the same time.

2.3 Instruments

An experiment, questionnaire and interviews were applied by the researcher so as to achieve the purpose of the study. Pre-test and post-test on BEW were designed to compare the difference of two groups. Questionnaire and interviews were also used to find out the students' effect and attitudes towards BEW teaching method.

The 17-week research was conducted from March, 2016 to July, 2016 to collect scientific and reasonable data. In the experiment, SPSS 17.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to compare the score in the BEW and to observe whether there is statistical significant difference among students' score in pre-test and post-test. When the significant difference occurs, then it can be concluded that multimodal teaching can improve students' BEW ability. In addition, more detailed analysis would be made to investigate whether multimodal BEW teaching method can improve the students' interest in BEW.

In order to make the questionnaire scientific and reasonable, it adopted Likert scale. A Likert scale is a psychometric scale commonly involved in research that employs questionnaires. It is a five (or seven) point scale which is used to allow the individual to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement. The format of a typical five-level Likert item could be "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Don't know", "Agree", "Strongly agree", ranging from 1 point to 5 points.

2.4 Materials

The designed pre-test and post-test papers involved in the research are randomly selected from *Cambridge BEC Vantage 2*. With a Cambridge English: Business Vantage (BEC Vantage) qualification, students show employers that they are ready to work successfully in international business. The exam could help candidates when applying for new jobs, getting a promotion, or developing career. Business Vantage is the second level of the exams. The content for the exam is based on everyday work and business tasks and is designed to develop the candidates' business English skills (http://www.cambridgeenglish. org/exams/business-certificates/business-vantage/). *Cambridge BEC Vantage 2* includes four test papers, each has two writing tasks (part one and part two). Part one was chosen to test the students' BEW ability.

In this research, the author asked students of EG to submit their homework to Juku Correcting Network (Juku) http://www.pigai.org/. It is an online autonomous scoring system in China, assisting teachers in correcting English compositions, which can effectively reduce the workload of teachers correcting task. The network can automatically identify the common mistakes such as vocabulary spelling, collocation, grammar, and give some suggestions of modifying immediately.

2.5 Procedures

During the course of experiment, CG was instructed according to the traditional BEW teaching, while EG received multimodal BEW instruction. In traditional BEW teaching, teachers attached more importance on the grammar, vocabulary and syntax. Of conveying meaning, only verbal language was used to illustrate different structures varying from different business letters without the assistance of multimedia and considering the related context. Samples were also provided to analyze its strengths and weaknesses. When gave a topic, students were required to discuss the structure, points and phrases going to use, assigned to finish writing task within 30 minutes and then hand in writing papers. The training model of writing and an integrated teaching activity can be diagrammed as below (see Figure 1).
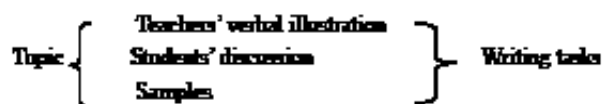

Figure 1
Specific Procedures of BEW Teaching in the Control Group

It can be seen clearly that students were not available to integrate information without the assist of multimedia, since their skill and knowledge of writing were mostly from teachers' verbal illustration and explanation, and classroom activities are relatively tedious.

In multimodality-based BEW class, the teacher prepared available teaching materials in multimodal ways in order to instruct and impress EG to learn writing. After 15-week (except the first and the last week) different writing instruction, both groups were given a post-test, which also from *Cambridge BEC Vantage 2* for the sake of reliability and validity. The attached flowchart (see Figure 2) from Xu and Xia (2013) unfolds the whole process of multimodal writing teaching.
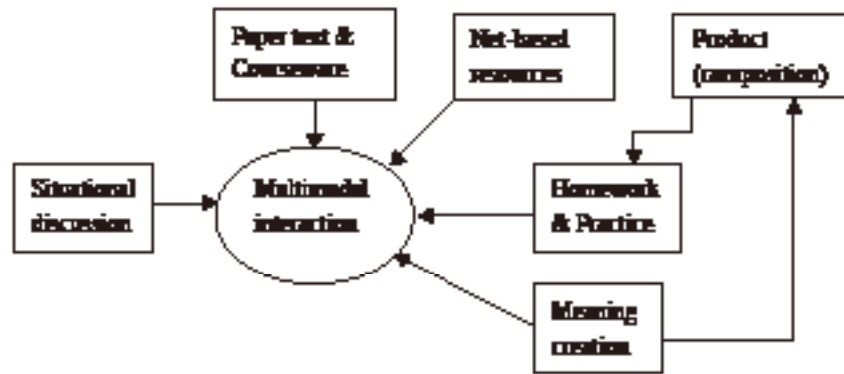

Figure 2
Specific Procedures of BEW Teaching in the Experiment Group

The specific design of multimodal writing instruction can be reflected by the following teaching sample selected from *Business English Writing (Second Edition) Chapter 3 Business Correspondence, 3.5 Letters of Complaint*.

Step 1: Before class

For preparing lessons, teachers first get familiar with the relevant theory of multimodality, plan teaching strategies according to the requirements of BEW course outlines and the writing level of students. They attempt to consolidate various teaching materials, including text material, supplementary materials, PPT courseware, case analysis and video, cartoon, pictures, graphs related to the teaching content.

Step 2: In class

The classroom was equipped with computer-assisted teaching instrument and students were available to the integrated information with ease.

(a) The class began with playing a video about damaged package, which resulted in some articles destroy. In the video, several articles were received but with problem of packaging, which have been scuffed and scored. The receiver was angry about the situation, a letter of complaint was about to be written to the seller. By supplying some correlated damaged packaging pictures (see Figure 3), students were requested to provide its illustration.

Figure 3
Pictures of Damaged Packaging

(b) The teacher presented them a graph which is about the trend of damaged packaging problem existed in the recent years. When the students' visual and acoustic sense was stimulated, a task of writing a letter of complaint was requested by the teacher. Then the students' workshop were made a discussion about the situation, showing the spirits of teamwork in business, and put down the words, phrases and sentences which they thought useful.

(c) The teacher guided them to exchange ideas to the task and the representatives of each workshop

were required to show the public their opinions. In the mutual interaction, teachers gave them feedback on their performance. As some new words and expressions appeared in the given language materials, the teacher explained them with the aim of images of texts in order to impress students. At last, students were required to write a letter of complaint based on the multimodal material provided by the teacher. They are supposed to make the whole letter simple, clear and unambiguous as possible, and then provide their own comments.

Step 3: After class

After class, teacher asked students to send their homework to Juku Correcting Network (Juku). Through Juku, the students can hand their compositions in, make some changes with the computer automatically correcting and make evaluations by peers. It makes the writing classroom move to their dormitory, their life, makes writing whenever and wherever they like. Moreover, it is necessary for them to create profile of their own writing, thus the progress of each learner can be established. Students can proceed at their own speed anytime and anywhere after class. Teachers can also make some relevant researches based on building the writing corpus.

Teachers can also upload some excellent typical business samples through Juku's personal website after class. There will be a true interaction between teachers and students through discussion, sample analysis, feedback and communication via internet. Besides, teachers can choose some interesting topics that are related to the students' life and study, and organize some interesting writing activities, such as blog writing, making comments online, group writing, etc. Students will have fun and

improve their writing when they comment on other's blog and create their own blog.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Experiment, questionnaire and interview were used in the study in order to make it more scientific, reasonable and complete. Some data was collected from the marks of pre-test and post-test, while others were the answers from the questionnaire and interviews. To keep the consistency and originality of the data, the whole research procedure was administered by the researcher as participants.

3.1 Results of the Pre-Test

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, and get known students' English proficiency as well, pre-test was conducted. The design of pre-test aims to test whether there is significant difference between CG and EG. During pre-experiment limited 20 minutes, two groups have finished the pre-test in the first week of the semester. The test paper is e-mail writing from one of the test papers in *Cambridge BEC Vantage 2* (see Appendix A). In order to get scientific data, the students finish the test in the natural environment without prior notice. After 20-minute pre-test, three teachers who have experience of teaching BE for 3-5years, evaluated the papers. The mean number of the three teachers' marks was the final results of each student. Both two groups' pre-test scores were typed into the SPSS 17.0, where descriptive analyses, independent sample t-test were conducted. In regard to all statistical analyses, the significance value is defined as $P=0.05$.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Experiment Group (EG)	49	44.00	81.00	62.021	8.655
Control Group (CG)	49	37.00	73.00	59.265	8.567

In order to make the results clearly show the difference between the two groups, independent sample t-test analysis was made, the results was in Table 2:

Table 2
The Pre-Test Comparison

Mean difference	Std. error	t	Sig.
2.755	1.748	1.576	0.118

As for the pre-test scores, the mean difference of the control group and the experiment group was 2.755, and the value of p was 0.118 as the data were shown in Table 2. Because $p>0.05$, there was no significant difference between the two groups. From the above data analysis, no significant difference of the writing level between the two groups could be seen in the pre-test, which meant the writing level of both two groups was at the same level

before the experiment. Therefore, the two groups were allowed to do the empirical study and be compared with the difference of writing performance after their receiving different BEW teaching method.

3.2 Results of the Post-Test

The post-test was conducted after the teaching experiment (at the last week of the semester) to check whether the application of multimodal BEW teaching was effective than traditional teaching method. The test paper is also e-mail writing from one of the test papers in *Cambridge BEC Vantage 2* (see Appendix B). All the test scores of the two groups were still typed into the SPSS 17.0 and carried out the independent sample t-test. Through presenting the analysis results, the improving amplitude has been reflected in Table 3:

Table 3
The Post-Test Comparison

Mean difference	Std. error	*t*	Sig.
8.328	1.809	4.604	0.000

As for the post-test scores, the mean difference this time was up to 8.328, much higher than the mean difference (2.755) of the pre-test. Besides, the p values of the two categories indicate statistically significant differences between the two groups (p=0.000<0.05). As a result, significant difference exists between the two groups. So the writing level of the EG was significantly better than the CG. The multimodal teaching model was obviously better than the traditional classroom teaching, and the new teaching model was efficient in improving students' writing level.

It also indicates us that the traditional writing teaching method and multimodality-based BEW teaching indeed have impact on students' writing proficiency. Clearly, the latter is more effective.

3.3 Results of Questionnaires and Interviews

After the whole experiment and post-test was finished, all the students take part in the questionnaire investigation (see Appendix C) related to the multimodal BEW teaching and their attitude towards the teaching method. After collecting the data and discarding the invalid ones, 95 valid questionnaires had been chosen for data analysis. Then, ten of the students in EG were selected randomly to have a 10 minutes' interview (see Appendix D), which aimed to have more details about their attitude of the BEW teaching and worked as the supplement to questionnaires.

The main question items of the questionnaire were from the following three aspects: using the internet technology, the methods of classroom teaching and the interest of learning BEW. The results of the questionnaires are shown as follows (see Figure 4):
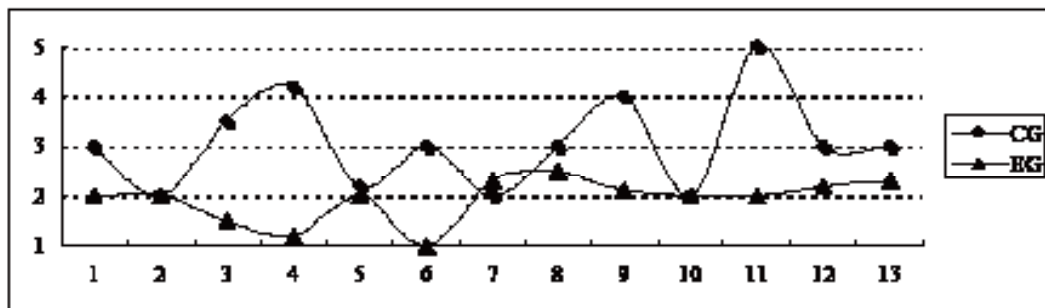

Figure 4
Results of the Questionnaires

As for the using of internet technology, most of the students in EG emphasized with the aid of translation apps on the internet and the resources on the internet, such as the product pictures, company's graphs etc. In the question 3 of "Directly hand in homework via internet, instead of via paper", students in EG were more likely agree with the point, while it is contrary to in CG.

In terms of the classroom teaching methods, students in EG prefer to some dynamic comparing figures rather than static ones provided by teachers. For questions 5, 7 and 10, two groups have little difference. Both of them emphasized PPT courseware, the proper use of vocabulary, grammar and collecting sentence patterns and BE terms. However, for questions 6, 8, 9 and 11, big gaps existed between the two groups. Students in EG group were mostly emphasized the teaching aids, such as pictures, graphs, videos. They paid more attention to teamwork and the feedback from peers and teachers, besides they preferred to make some on-the-spot observations to find out the problem and then analyzed, contrary to the CG.

For their performance and interests on BEW, the majority of students in EG were more willing to write something whenever and wherever via different channels than before.

As it has been mentioned before, ten students in EG were selected randomly to have a 10 minutes' interview. There are six interview questions for them to answer. All the students interviewed believed they liked the multimodal teaching method. Eight of them thought the multimodal teaching method can improve their BEW ability. Seven of students interviewed held the view that under the multimodal teaching environment, they were more active than in the traditional writing classroom. Pictures, graphs, videos and audios were all attractive their eyes in the classroom. Additionally, funny class activities prepared by teachers indeed increased the interaction between students and their passion to learn BEW.

In the course of interviewing, those who did not come up with positive answers to the questions also mentioned their reasons. "The multimodality-based BEW teaching is indeed interesting but the information is so complex that I sometimes cannot grasp the main information", "sometimes I will be distracted by the integration of different modals." Therefore, the multimodal interaction is advised to be well combined. In other words, it

is better for the teacher to reduce some unnecessary information in BEW teaching.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the results and discussions of writing tests, questionnaires and interviews presented above, the application of multimodality-based BEW teaching approach offers us several pedagogical implications as the following ones.

Firstly, despite that learner-centered teaching should be advocated, it is necessary for teachers to provide appropriate instruction in that teachers are one of the most key factors in teaching practice. Moreover, the combination of different modalities are largely determined and affected by teachers' teaching belief, styles and attitudes. Therefore, teachers are required to cultivate noble affection and have a better understanding about BE major students' cognition level and emotional attitudes so as to reach the teaching goal.

Secondly, teachers' teaching design consisting of teaching style, procedure and teaching strategies should be completed and closely connected. Actually, the teaching plan can be realized by means of selecting the proper teaching multimodality involving teachers' postures, gestures, action, eye-contact, facial expression, language, image, sound and other mediums. Then, how to collocate them is the key element to deeply impress and stimulate students to positively attend BEW class.

Thirdly, students under this approach are enabled to cultivate their interest in BEW and thus actively take part in writing practice. With the aim of the computer-assisted equipment classroom, teachers are no longer difficult to present teaching contents more vividly, which is easier to catch students' attention. Serving as an acoustic modality, the teachers' verbal explanation in the class could intensify students' visual modality effect. The multimodal method assisted by computers was more effective and interesting than a blackboard only.

Fourthly, it can help students to understand the writing task completely and thoroughly. The teacher put forward some relevant topics in advance on the PPT courseware in order to help students to consider the topic profoundly. The stimulation of acoustic and visual modality can reinforce students' memory and impression about the teaching content. For the explanation of phrases, paragraphs and samples, the teacher set a real situation with the aid of sound, music, video, pictures and images, which assist the learners in applying the language point properly.

CONCLUSION

This research states the belief that the cultivation of multimodal method is very important in the teaching design of BEW and it is necessary and possible to develop a multimodal teaching approach. Taking an ESP course— BEW as an example, the researcher presents in detail how to design, prepare, organize and implement the multimodal BEW teaching. An empirical study aims to test the feasibility and effectiveness of multimodal BEW teaching was conducted. The effect of multimodal BEW teaching method is better than traditional teaching method, which can be proved by the statistical analysis made between CG and EG. The results of pre-test and post-test have shown that there was significant difference between the two teaching methods for improving students' BE writing ability. Furthermore, the results of questionnaires and interviews indicated multimodal BEW teaching method can effectively improve the students' interest in writing.

As a summary, the author hopes the thesis can provide a new angle on the study of BEW teaching, enrich the application of multimodal in BEW class, and bring implications to BEW teaching.

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APPENDIX A

You are a sales manager and you want to arrange a meeting with your team at the end of the month.

Write an **email** to your team:
- Explaining the purpose of the sales meeting
- Saying how they should prepare for the meeting
- Telling them what they should do if they cannot attend.

Write **40-50** words.

APPENDIX B

You need to inform your marketing team about a radio campaign for one of your company's new products.

Write an **email** to your team:
- Remanding them which new product it is
- Explaining why you've chosen to advertise on radio
- Saying what you expect the advertising campaign to achieve.

Write **40-50** words.

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire on Business English Writing Teaching

Dear students,

Here is a students' Business English Writing Quo questionnaire for scientific research. The purpose of this survey is to investigate the teaching method and learning strategy used in BEW. This survey can help teachers improve their teaching methods and create a relaxed learning environment for you. There is no right or wrong answer to each of the items in the questionnaire, but the valuable information you provide will be taken seriously and kept secret to others. Please answer each question in the quiz seriously based on your situation to ensure the research scientifically and help you truly understand yourself. Thanks for your cooperation!

1. Strongly disagree   2. Disagree   3. Don't know   4. Agree   5. Strongly agree

On using of internet technology

1. Emphasize resources on the internet, such as the product pictures, company's graphs etc.

2. Emphasize with the aid of translation apps on the internet.

3. Directly hand in homework via internet, instead of via paper.

4. Emphasize collecting information via internet.

On methods of classroom teaching

5. Emphasize PPT courseware

6. Emphasize the teaching aids, such as pictures, graphs, videos etc.

7. Emphasize the proper use of vocabulary, grammar etc.
8. Emphasize the feedback from peers and teachers.
9. Emphasize teamwork.
10. Emphasize collecting sentence patterns and BE terms.
11. Emphasize on-the-spot observation.

On the interest of learning BEW

12. Emphasize refer to the lately industry information on the internet.
13. Emphasize writing something whenever and wherever via different channels.

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions
1. Do you like this teaching model?
2. Do you think this teaching model can improve your BE writing ability?
3. Does this teaching model improve your study interest in your English learning?
4. Which aspect do you like in this teaching model?
5. What's the problem for you in this teaching model?
6. What is your suggestion for future multimodal BEW teaching?