

A Survey of the Status Quo of Business English Discipline in Universities in China: Take Universities in Shanxi Province as an Example*

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Abstract—The Business English discipline in colleges has developed into a new phase since it was firstly granted by the Ministry of Education in 2007. The paper aims to investigate the status quo of Business English discipline in universities in Shanxi Province in China on the basis of the results of the investigation and tries to find the existing problems. The suggestions for the future development are accordingly made.

Index Terms—Business English, status quo and discipline development

I. INTRODUCTION

The Business English teaching in China has a history of more than 50 years, but it is not until the 21st century that Business English becomes an independent discipline. In 2007, the Ministry of Education has granted BA programme of Business English to the University of International Business and Economics for the first time, which marked that the Business English was formally established as a discipline in China. Afterwards, Business English experienced a vigorous development. According to incomplete statistics, at present, nearly 2000 public or private universities or colleges have set up Business English as an independent discipline or a subject orientation (Lin, 2010).

However, the history of Business English teaching in Shanxi Province is relatively short due to its unfavorable geographical location in the northern part of China, underdeveloped economy, few foreign trade companies and trade activities and insufficient education investment from the government. Therefore, a comprehensive survey on the status quo of Business English discipline in Shanxi Province will be of great significance and give insight into its future development.

II. BUSINESS ENGLISH RESEARCH IN CHINA

There are many researches about the development and the current situation of Business English discipline in China. In 2006, Theoretical Research Group of Business English of the University of International Business and Economics, a leading university on Business English research, reviewed the history of Business English teaching and investigated the current situation of the discipline by discussing the object of study, the discipline orientation and the development trend of Business English. The group pointed out that Business English would maintain its status as a practical interdisciplinary field of learning for a long time.

In 2009, in their paper *Developing National Curriculum for BA Program in Business English of China (For Trial Implementation)*, Chen and Wang analyzed the development of Business English discipline from the perspectives of setting background, theoretical basis, cultivation goal, curriculum, teaching requirements, and teaching principles and methods (Chen and Wang, 2009).

In 2009, Liu discussed the tortuous development history of Business English discipline, the evolution and development of Business English in China, the discipline orientation and the elements essential to the development of Business English discipline. He also gave some practical advice for the future development.

In 2010, Lin proposed that it was necessary to have a rational reflection on the development of Business English as a discipline. He provided some practical suggestions on planning a moderate development scale, keeping the steady and mature development, and achieving better results in the cultivating the inter-disciplinary talents of English.

In 2011, Wang and Li Lin explored disciplinary mission and developmental path of foreign business language after reviewing the history of Business teaching and the status quo of Business English discipline.

In 2014, in his paper *The Beginning, Evolution and Development Trend of Business English Teaching in China*, Ye reviewed the development trend of Business English teaching in China, gave a brief introduction about the causes and effects of the establishments of Business English, and explained the close relationship between the establishments of Business English and the development of foreign economic and trade. In this research, the author proposed that the cultivation goal was supposed to put emphasis on the cultivation of internationalized talents in accordance with the

* Research Project Supported by Shanxi Scholarship Council of China (No.2012-058)

changed situation (Ye, 2014).

Different from the above researches on the discipline development, Lin's paper explored the establishment of Business linguistics as a new and independent discipline in the field of applied linguistics. He appealed that given its solid theoretical foundation, the long history of Business language and prominent features of Business discourses, it was time to establish Business linguistics as an independent discipline (Lin, 2014).

There are also many quantitative studies on Business English research, among which is the distinguished research of Wang and Li. In 2013, Wang and Li quantitatively surveyed the development of Business English research in China from 2002 to 2011. Their findings are as follows: (1) the number of the academic papers and research projects on Business English is showing a yearly increasing trend but there are few high-level achievements; (2) there are a wide range of research areas, and hot areas include Business English major, Business English teaching, Business translation; (3) non-empirical research predominates over empirical research (Wang & Li, 2013). Their paper provided insightful suggestions for Business English research in the future.

Researchers in China also study the Business English discipline from the perspective of teacher competence. Wang and Zhang's study indicated that Business English teacher competence was composed of many factors including teaching ability, broad knowledge of business and language, and research ability. They suggested that business teachers were required not only to improve professional quality, but also to strengthen their comprehensive competence (Wang & Zhang, 2011).

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research mainly adopted the questionnaire investigation and was complemented by interviews with some Business English teachers to acquire more information. All the data collected was input into the computer software SPSS17.0 to make a quantitative analysis of the results.

A. *The Subjects of the Research*

The subjects in the research included 6 universities in Shanxi Province that have established Business English as an independent discipline or a subject orientation. The universities are Shanxi Normal University, Shanxi University of Finance and Economics, Datong University, Changzhi University, Yuncheng University, Business College of Shanxi University and 54 Business English teachers from these universities.

Among the 6 universities, the two universities Shanxi University of Finance and Economics and Business College of Shanxi University are both located in Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi Province, and they both belong to the financial and economics university. The other 4 universities are all normal universities, located in four different cities in Shanxi Province.

B. *The Research Design*

The questionnaires in the survey were designed on the basis of *The Questionnaire on the Current Situation of Business English Discipline in Chinese Universities and Colleges*, developed by the China Association of International Business English and appropriately modified by the author according to the actual situation. There are two sets of questionnaires. Each of the questionnaires has 10 questionnaire items. Questionnaire One *The Questionnaire of the Status Quo of Business English Discipline of Universities in Shanxi Province* mainly aims to investigate the basic information about the Business English discipline, including cultivation objectives, curriculum, teaching equipments and facilities. While Questionnaire Two *The Questionnaire of the Status Quo of Business English Teaching in Universities in Shanxi Province* aims to survey the following four aspects: background information about Business English teachers (such as age, academic degree, professional title, academic background), information about the teaching process (teaching model, teaching method and the challenges in the teaching process), teachers' expectations on the professional training as well as teachers' suggestions for the future discipline development. Pilot test was conducted in order to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaires and appropriate modifications were accordingly made.

C. *Data Collection*

The process of data collection in this survey is as follows: the author sent the questionnaires to one teacher in each university by E-mail, who printed and distributed the questionnaires to their colleagues. Questionnaire One was completed by the department deans according to the actual situation of the discipline. Questionnaire Two was distributed to the Business English teachers and finished at their staff meeting which was very convenient for the questionnaire distribution and data collection. The questionnaires were collected and sent to the author by mail. The ratio of recovery of Questionnaire One is 100% with handing out 6 and taking back 6, and the recovery ratio of Questionnaire Two is 93% with handing out 58 and collecting 54.

In the process of data collection, the author also interviewed five Business English teachers from five universities by telephone to have an in-depth understanding about the status quo of the discipline and the teaching process of Business English in the 6 universities.

IV. THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

A. The Curriculum

The landmark document *Developing National Curriculum for BA Program in Business English of China (For Trial Implementation)* (Curriculum hereafter), issued by the Ministry of Education in 2009, proposed that Business English courses are composed of four modules, each accounting for a certain proportion: English knowledge and skills (50%~60%), business knowledge and skills (20%~30%), cross-cultural communicative competence (5%~10%) and humanities (5%~10%) (Chen & Wang, 2009).

The survey shows that there are several problems existing in the curriculum of Business English in universities:

(1) The four modules of the curriculum are incomplete. The proportion of English language and skills courses far exceeds 60% as suggested by the Curriculum while the other three modules: business language and skills, cross-cultural communicative competence and humanities are severely overlooked. Among the modules, the proportion of business language and skills module is far less than the requirements of the Curriculum. And it is very common that the courses of BE in some universities still follow the traditional training model of English Language and Literature discipline or English Education discipline, only adding one or several business courses, which do not reflect the discipline nature of Business English.

(2) Even though some business-related courses are on the curriculum in some universities, some courses such as economics, international trade, business negotiation have to be taught in the native language of Chinese by teachers employed from other economics schools. In spite of having finished the teaching task in the short-term, it fails to meet the standards of the Curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education that business courses should be lectured and tested in the target language of English. From the long-term perspective, the students are not familiar with English terminologies and are not competent at the job after learning the courses (Liu, 2009).

(3) Some business courses are finally canceled, restricted by teachers' professional competence and the poor educational condition in some universities. These courses are replaced by language courses, granting the students the corresponding credits.

The possible reasons for the incomplete modules of the curriculum are as follows: the first reason is that there is not any authoritative standards for universities to follow until the Curriculum was officially issued in 2009, therefore given the brief history of the discipline, the curriculum arrangement is not scientific and systematic. The second reason is lack of professional teachers. BE teachers have to be proficient at both English language and business knowledge. While most of them are EFL teachers who do not have the business background and they are not competent to teach the courses. The third reason is that BE discipline is marginalized and ignored in some universities because the administrators do not attach great importance to it.

B. The Background Information about Business English Teachers

The result of the survey shows that among the teachers of Business English major, the majority are the young teachers under the age of 35, accounting for 61%; the number of teachers from 36 to 45 takes up 30%; the number of teachers from 46 to 55 accounts for 7% and the number of teachers above 55 years old is only 2% (see Figure 3.1). In the aspect of academic degree, the number of teachers who have a doctorate is very small, only accounting for 2%; the number of teachers who have a master's degree takes up 90%; the proportion of the teachers who possess a bachelor's degree accounts for 8% (see Figure 3.2).

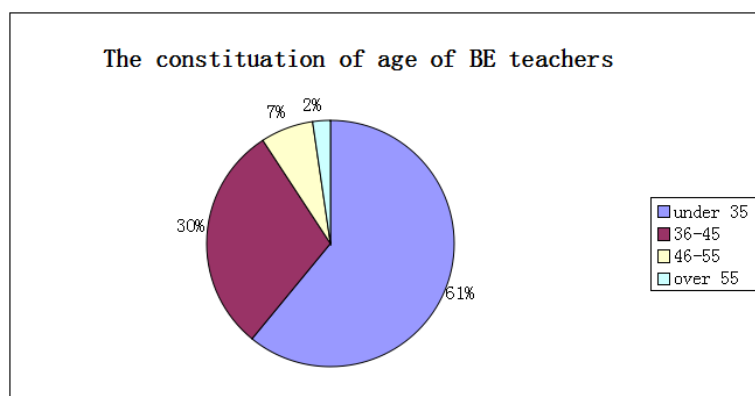


Figure 3.1 The constitution of age of Business English teachers

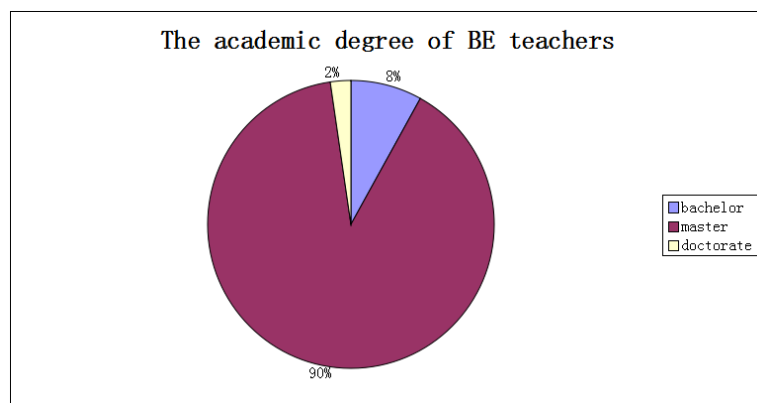


Figure 3.2 The academic degree of Business English teachers

As for their professional title, the proportion of professors is only 1%, associate professors take up 12%, and the proportion of lecturers and teaching assistants is 56% and 31% respectively, which constitutes the main part of the teachers (see Figure 3.3). With regard to education background, the number of teachers who have a degree in English language and literature accounts for 92%, the number of teachers obtaining the master's degree of Business English accounts for only 5%, the number of teachers with background of economics and finance takes up the proportion of 3% (see Figure 3.4). Among the faculty, 90% of them are full-time teachers, 6% of them are part-time teachers, while the rest 4% of teachers are guest professors from other prestigious universities.

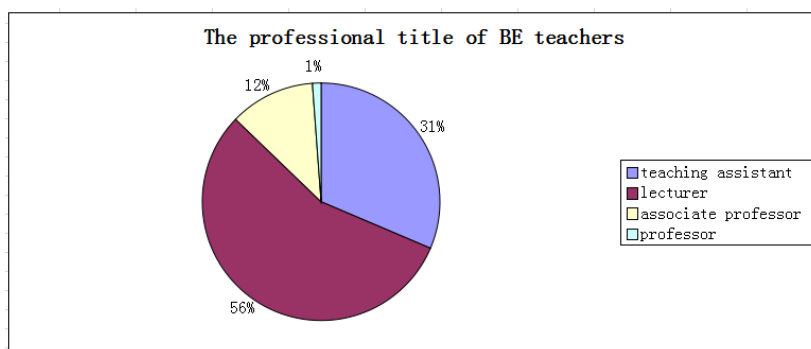


Figure 3.3 The professional title of Business English teachers

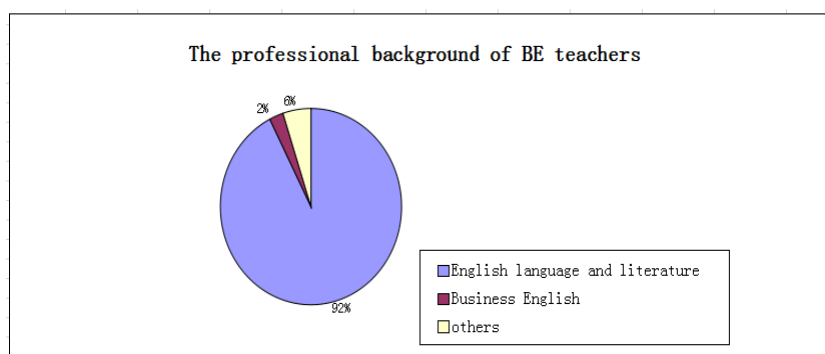


Figure 3.4 The professional background of Business English teachers

From the above statistics, it is easy to find that there are several problems in the faculty of the Business English teachers: the first problem is that young lecturers and teaching assistants under the age of 35 years old constitute the majority of the teachers, while professors and associate professors take up a small proportion; secondly, the proportion of teachers with a doctorate is very low, suggesting that teachers' academic degree remains to be further enhanced; thirdly, the majority of the business teachers are EFL teachers, and teachers with business-related background such as economics, trade, and management take up a small proportion; fourthly, the number of part-time teachers and visiting professors is at a relatively low level.

C. Teaching Methods

The results of the survey indicates that in the teaching process, 56% of teachers adopt the teaching model with students as the central position and teachers as the leading role in the teaching process; the traditional teaching model, model based on students' autonomous learning and comprehensive teaching model are with the same proportion of 22%.

With regard to teaching methods, 65% of the teachers mainly use task-based teaching method. In addition, the comprehensive method and the communicative approach are also frequently employed by the teachers, the proportion being 46% and 33% respectively. According to the questionnaire results, it is shown that the advanced teaching model with students as the central position and teachers as the leading role is adopted by more than half of the teachers. Teachers' teaching models and teaching methods are no longer limited to a certain kind, but are more diverse and more rational.

D. Teaching Facilities

The Business English teaching activity are mainly conducted in the traditional classrooms and classrooms equipped with multimedia teaching facilities. In some universities with good facilities, the percentage of using multimedia facilities to assist teaching is as high as over 80%; while in other universities the proportion is very low, less than 20% because of outdated and deficient equipments. When it comes to teaching facility construction, all 6 universities have established language labs which could meet the need of normal teaching. But more advanced and professional equipments are still insufficient. For example, none of the six universities have established the modern multimedia network language laboratories or purchased Business English teaching software which simulates the actual business activities.

E. Challenges in the Teaching

When it comes to the challenges in the Business English teaching, the results show that 81% of the teachers believe that the professional knowledge and terms in economics, finance, law are a real challenge in the Business English teaching; 48% of the teachers think the background knowledge, the timeliness of teaching content are real challenges in Business English lecturing; 22% of the teachers think that the selection of textbooks and teaching materials are very challenging; only 13% of the teachers believes that the use and selection of teaching methods are challenging.

F. Teachers' Expectations on Professional Training

In the process of investigating, the survey indicates that at present Business English teachers urgently want to promote their business knowledge, improve teaching methods and overcome the teaching difficulties. 78% of the teachers believe that it is necessary to receive the professional training of business-related knowledge. 72% of the teachers think that they should receive the training of the research methods of Business English. 35% of the teachers hold the view that they are supposed to receive the training of the teaching methods of Business English language. In the items of training ways, teachers think that they should learn by studying at prestigious universities at home (78%), short-term training (57%), visiting programme at abroad (54%), and participating in academic conferences (44%) and so on. As for training time, 53% of the teachers think that it is more reasonable and effective to carry out medium-term training (6 months) and long-term training (12 months).

G. Scientific Research on Business English

At present, achievements in scientific research on the Business English in Shanxi Province are very few and contents are very single. Most of academic papers are about the characteristics of Business English language and translation studies, while there are hardly any research achievements dealing with the topics about the discipline development, teaching methods, textbooks and teaching materials, the research methods and assessment of Business English teaching (Wang & Li, 2011). This phenomenon suggests that Business English teachers are still at the struggling stage and adjusting stage due to the short history of the discipline and their EFL background (Zhou, 2008).

H. The Teachers' Suggestions for the Discipline Development

In the questionnaire, some hopes and suggestions were put forward by English teachers, mainly concentrating on the following aspects: firstly, curriculum should be planned more scientifically and reasonably. The proportion of business-related courses and practical courses should be increased while the proportion of language knowledge and skills courses should be reduced. Secondly, professional training, visiting programmes at home and abroad and communications among universities should be provided to further improve the qualities of the teachers. Thirdly, the knowledge of language and the knowledge of business should be systematically integrated in the teaching process; Fourthly, the cooperation between universities and enterprises should be strengthened to provide more opportunities for students to enhance their practical ability; Fifthly, more investment on the more advanced teaching facilities is required to improve the poor educational situation.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCIPLINE DEVELOPMENT

A. To Adjust the Curriculum Arrangement

The landmark document *Developing National Curriculum for BA Program in Business English of China*, issued by the Ministry of Education (Chen & Wang, 2009), points out that Business English courses are composed of four parts, each accounting for a certain proportion: language knowledge and skills (50% - 60%), business knowledge and skills (20% -30%), cross-cultural communicative competence (5% -10%) and humanities (5%-10%). Currently, it is common that language knowledge and skills courses take up a very high proportion, while business-related courses proportion is

relatively low. Therefore, universities are supposed to reduce the proportion of language skill courses and accordingly increase the proportion of business courses, cross-cultural communication courses and the humanities courses. In this way, teaching plans would be able to actually reflect the discipline feature of Business English and contribute to cultivating students into inter-disciplinary talents who have a good proficiency of both English language and business knowledge.

B. To Strengthen the Teachers' Competence

The characteristic of Business English discipline determines that the teachers not only have a good proficiency in English knowledge and skills, but also possess the Business professional knowledge and the cross-cultural communication ability (Wang & Zhang, 2011). Colleges and universities can strengthen the construction of Business English faculty through the following ways: first of all, universities are supposed to introduce talents majoring in Business English or Economics and Trade to improve the structure of the discipline background; Secondly, universities could send promising teachers to visit the prestigious universities at home and abroad for academic conference and to improve their language proficiency, business knowledge, and teaching methods. Thirdly, universities can also encourage teachers to further improve the teachers' competence by the way of self-study, self-reflection and group discussion in the teaching symposium. Fourthly, teachers are encouraged to be engaged in the research of Business English and combine the theory with practice to better promote the teaching. Fifthly, colleges and universities may hire some experts, professors, and experienced practitioners to give lectures to make up for the lack of competent professional teachers. Through the above ways, colleges and universities can gradually form a team of interdisciplinary teachers with good command of English language and broad business knowledge.

C. To Increase the Investment in Teaching Facilities

At present, there are still problems of obsolescence and shortage of multimedia facilities in colleges and universities of Shanxi Province. Most of the Business English teaching activities remain to rely on the traditional classrooms. Although some courses are carried out in classrooms equipped with multimedia, but they are just limited to the use of the form of PPT presentation during the course teaching which certainly cannot satisfy the needs of modern teaching. Therefore, universities are supposed to increase investment to establish modern multimedia laboratories and purchase advanced teaching software, making the use of modern network technology to assist teaching.

D. To Enhance the Construction of Practice Base

The survey shows that problem with Business English practice is more serious. Some universities have such problems as no off-campus practice bases, unrelated practice content and insufficient time in practice. Business English, as a kind of practical English, focuses on cultivating students' professional skills. Therefore, the rich social practice is especially significant for students of Business English. Universities which have established Business English discipline should positively enhance the cooperation between universities and enterprises, expand the business English practical bases and provide more social practice opportunities for students, which in turn could make a great contribution to making students integrate theory with practice, improve their practical ability and comprehensive quality, and lay a good foundation for the professional development in the future.

E. Summary

As a brand-new discipline, Business English needs the united support from many resources, including the provincial government, the administrators of the university and teachers to guarantee the sustainable and healthy development. The provincial government should formulate policy and coordinate the cooperation between the universities and foreign trade enterprises. The universities should endeavor to increase the capital investment to improve the teaching condition, by purchasing teaching facilities and providing more training opportunities to build up teachers' professional competence.

VI. CONCLUSION

Currently, with the accelerating pace of economic globalization, the opportunities and challenges coexist in the development of Business English discipline. On the one hand, some colleges and universities have seized the good opportunity to establish the Business English discipline, which meet the trend of the times. On the other hand, there still exist many problems such as curriculum, faculty construction, professional training and teaching facilities and so forth. Reflecting on the status quo of Business English discipline can help us better understand the problems and deficiencies existing in the development, and will be conducive to provide feasible and practical suggestions for further development in the future.

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