

Research on Business English Listening and Speaking Based on Multimodal Discourse Theory*

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Abstract—It is an undeniable fact that the world emerges as a global community with all the countries competing and collaborating with one another. This world calls for graduates from the universities equipped with abilities to communicate with people from different countries to push forward the development of all aspects. Business English Listening and Speaking course should help students, not just English majors but also students of other specialties to better adapt to their future work by providing them with necessary knowledge of business etiquette, cultural differences, speaking manners and the like so that they can be more confidently engaged in their work. Studies on business English and on multimodal discourse are not lacking today, but very few of them have adopted this theory in the Business English Listening and Speaking course. This paper aims to analyze the different modalities in this type of classroom and how these modalities combined can improve the effectiveness of students' learning. Hopefully this paper will give some lights on future related studies.

Index Terms—Business English Listening and Speaking, modality, multimodal discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

People from all parts of the world are connected as a result of globalization which as Cameron sees is “*the ongoing integration of the world economy.*” (Larry A., 2012, p.03-05). Business events are reported on radios, TVs and newspapers. Business people are traveling around the world every minute of the hour. No matter what line of work you are in, you are bound to encounter some problems in business communication, especially when you are communicating in a language other than your mother tongue. Therefore, today sees a growing number of students and working adults sign up for training courses in business English and a lot of universities and colleges have also opened Business English courses which are optional for students. These people wish to seize the opportunity when it comes and get prepared. However, it is found that many students complain that the Business English courses they have in schools only give them some theories and without practice, they can not really get the essence of the message. Actually, Business English Listening and Speaking classes can provide such an environment where students can to some extent practice those theories at school before they carry on any business communication once they step foot into society. However, the real situation is the other way around. This research is necessary in that it tries to find the problems existing in the current course and explore better ways to help students practice what they have learned and not feel like a novice when they need to communicate across cultures. This paper is based on the study of the students in Southwestern Petroleum University.

II. BUSINESS ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING COURSE

This course is opened in many universities in China, previously for English majors only, but now available for a wider group of students. It is usually an optional course in university comprehensive English curriculum. One of its main tasks is to enhance language skills in application especially in international business field. The students are expected to learn basics on how to make a proper self introduction, understand the job description and responsibilities, answer and make calls, make introduction of one's company and its products, make greetings, hold meetings and go on business travel and visits. Attention is paid to practice in different business activities and students are supposed to understand and get familiar with certain trade processes and terms during the course.

A. Requirements for the Teachers and Students

The teachers for this course should first of all study in Business English or have obtained degrees in related fields, for example, international trade, business English, etc. They also should have worked as business people, or have studied many business cases themselves, or else they would just be teaching from the books, which is not beneficial for the students. Secondly, they ought to master the international trade practices and rules, understand the jargon, and know the

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different business cultures and customs. It is preferable if the teacher has acquired certain certificates in business English or interpreting, the skills and methods of which may prove to be useful in teaching.

For the students, it is suggested that this course is better for those students who have at least passed college English test Band Four, for the reason that business English courses in speaking and listening are more demanding in that students should at least have no problem in understanding speeches in English and be able to convey their ideas correctly. It is impossible to expect a student to host or be an interpreter at a business meeting when he or she can not even understand everyday English. Secondly, it is all the better that the students have already learned some basic knowledge in international trade, and understand certain concepts or words such as trade volume, FOB, settlement, and acceptance in financial sense. Otherwise, they can hardly survive the course.

B. *Current Business English Listening and Speaking Class and Its Problems*

The current course includes 32 class sessions in one semester, and a text book is required to go with this course, focusing on the basic and necessary business knowledge. Classes are held in the language labs once a week. Yet, the actual sessions can not live up to expectations, neither the teacher nor the students are quite satisfied with the results. There still exist many a questions. It is said that little difference can be found between the Business English Listening and Speaking classes and other listening and speaking classes, except that in the first class, some ideas or concepts of business will be imparted which the students barely get a chance to practice.

As its name suggests, this course intends to fulfill certain important goals as mentioned before, and one of which, also the most basic one, is to help students learn to carry out intercultural communication in a business setting. *“Doing business internationally means that you will come into increasing contact with individuals who speak different languages and live in different cultures. Even the most simple form of communication will become a challenge...Merely knowing the language, though, is still not enough to be able to effectively communicate. You must have some understanding of thought patterns, values, societal norms and of how individuals from different cultures process information to be an effective communicator.”*(Charles Mitchel, 2008, p.67-76) After the semester, according to the feedback from the students, it remains difficult for them to carry on conversations with foreigners in business occasion due to lack of practice. Secondly, some students find the text boring and they spend little time going over what they have learned in class, saying that since it seems quite easy to just answer and make calls, they don't need spend time reviewing. What's more, when it comes to terms and jargon, most of the students can not remember what that word means after a few days. Thirdly, spending nearly two hours in the language lab doing listening and speaking on the headphones, and finishing exercises on the text is not so fascinating for most of the students, and some of them start fidgeting. Fourthly, some teachers want to make the most use of the time so that they just sit in front of their computers playing listening materials or asking some questions that for most occasions meet few answers from the students. Last but not the least, when the students are invited to do some oral practice, they feel embarrassed or indifferent to the participation.

This class is supposed to be informative and fun instead of being dry, so changes need to happen to make this course come alive. By analyzing the influential elements in the class, hopefully, some improvements can be made.

III. MULTIMODALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

In this part, the definition of certain concepts will be explained to help us further understand the following design of class arrangements.

A. *Definition of Modality, Multimodality and Multimodal Discourse Analysis*

1. Modality

Wei qinhong mentions in her book that in linguistics Halliday says that *“modality refers to the area of meaning that lies between yes and no-the intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity...”* *“...in visual communication, the concept of modality is also very important because visuals can represent people, places and things.”*(Wei Qinhong, 2009, p.48-52 My translation) Also, in social communication, there is more than one modality or mode coexisting around us, for example, language, music, image, the internet and so on. Combined they help us better interpret meanings. Take a commercial as an example, usually on TV, we can see moving pictures, hear background music and maybe do some TV program interaction.

2. Multimodality

“Multimodality is the study of interrelationships and interdependence between different communicative modes, no matter they are written or oral, visual or auditory. It is also a way to transcribe the meaning of discourse composed of different semiotic modes.”(Wei Qinhong, 2009, p.2-3) Therefore, an advertisement is multimodal, and a picture alone can also be called so since it has figures, colors and maybe words on it. They combined convey the exact meaning of the message. The relations of different modes are yet to be further explored, and new media has created new modes with the development of modern science and technology. This paper is to discuss some effective combinations of modes in the teaching process to improve learning.

3. Multimodal discourse analysis

Just as been said above, new media has created new ways of combination of different words, it is necessary for us to

understand the hidden meaning of certain messages. “*Multimodal discourse refers to the new forms of text in which words, typography, sound pictures and other semiotic resources are woven together to make meaning. Multimodal discourse analysis is the analysis of several or all of the different semiotic modes in a text or communicative event. The aim of multimodal analysis is to integrate and correlate the representational, interactive and textual meanings realized by these different elements. It analyzes how they work together to create a unified text or communicative event.*” (Wei Qinhong, 2009, p.7-10) You can not get the floor price of the product by simply reading an offer without engagement, or even when you are sitting across the negotiation table, you can not guess the real intention of your business partner without reading his body language, finding subtlety in his words or tones. All the modes have to be analyzed when combined.

B. Multimodality in the Classroom

In the Business English Listening and Speaking class, the teaching should be an effective cooperation among different modes. “*From the perspective of multimodality, the teaching carried out in the classroom involves a coordination of diverse modes. The first one is oral mode, it is embodied in the conversations and communication between the teacher and the students; the second one is presented in PPT slides, including pictures, words, videos and sounds; the third one is in-class activities between the teacher and the students; the fourth, the gestures and body languages, the fifth, the facial expression of the teacher and the sixth is the setting and space arrangements of the classroom.*” (Jiang Yufeng, 2015, p.64-76 My translation) The previous classes are characterized by simple listening and speaking practices, mostly using the blackboard and a computer to play the listening materials.

C. Changes of Class Arrangements Based on Multimodal Discourse Theory

To reform the teaching mode of this course, several changes are made to make up for the inadequate modality, making the course more attractive, educational, vivid, impressive and effective for the students.

1. Specification of class sections

Unlike the previous class session characterized by listening and speaking according to the exercises in the textbook, the revised one will be divided into several sections, featured by multimodality, each with its specific purpose of learning business English.

a. Student report

The students are divided into groups since the first class and every group is assigned with a report with regard to the relevant unit that is to be covered in the course. A short teaching video will be provided to the whole class before the unit begins, and the assigned group will do a report on the main points they deem as important. In this report section, students are allowed to use words, microphones, pictures to help them present their idea, through which they can make their performance more understandable to the class. It is found that when it comes to the presentation of the students, more than one modality are preferable. Because students differ in their abilities to convey their thoughts and ideas, thus making their speech unavailable for some of the audience. With the help of pictures and words, they can perform a better presentation.

b. Business English learning

In this section, the students will be given the useful words and expressions for this class, and it is to lay ground for later speaking and listening practices. The teacher will show all the related and important glossary to the students and which they are asked to remember before the class. Words and expressions will be divided by classification, for example, applying for a job, employee orientation, job description, telephoning, hotel room reservation, etc.. All these categories are of great help when they step into work after graduation.

c. Listening and speaking practice

This section will give the student a “real situation”, the teacher will guide the students to practice speaking and listening. The teaching materials will not come from the textbook only, and teachers and the students all will bring to the class relevant information to talk about or discuss. The classroom can be turned into a negotiation room for a business meeting where people conclude a deal, or into a press room for product promotion, a company where interviews are carried out and sometimes, into an airport where greetings are exchanged between guests and colleagues.

d. Self and peer review

The review part is actually a new section for the course. *Peer review is the evaluation of work by one or more people of similar competence to the producers of the work (peers). It constitutes a form of self-regulation by qualified members of a profession within the relevant field. Peer review methods are employed to maintain standards of quality, improve performance, and provide credibility.* (accessed 04/03/2018 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer_review) Before the class is over, the teachers will comment on the students’ performance and summarize the key points learned this class and ask the students to comment on themselves and each other about what they have learned, what progress they have made and what kind of mistakes they have done that can be avoided in the future. Liu Xiuli, Zhang Delu and Zhang yibo mention that “*the charisma and principles of the teacher will unconsciously influence the students and will impact on the effective teaching. the charisma and principles of the teacher should be expressed through multimodal discourse, which include the passionate teaching, interesting and funny talk and smile, considerate and warm care.....teacher should capture the students’ strengths with love.....teachers’ multimodal discourse can make them feel happy and confident.....so the students can learn new knowledge in a relaxing and harmonious atmosphere which can*

improve the teaching effectiveness". (Liu Xiuli, Zhang delu and Zhang yibo, 2013, p.3-7 My translation) Therefore, during the review, the students can find love, care and encouragement from the teacher, getting advice from their classmates, thus willing to take advice and improve their work.

2. Other multimodal changes

More than one modality are needed for some classroom activities according to different requirements of the exercises. In this part, two major multimodal changes in the speaking and listening section will be explained.

a. Culture immersion

Language immersion, or simply immersion, is a technique used in bilingual language education in which two languages are used for instruction in a variety of topics, including math, science, or social studies.(accessed 11/12/2017 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_immersion) Culture learning can also happen in the same way. As the words suggest, the students will become part of a different culture. As has been said before, successful business people need to know different cultures of the people they are dealing with. In this new course, the teachers will not simply ask the students to speak according to the requirements of the exercises on the textbook, instead, cultural assimilation is a hard nut to crack first. For example, the students need to learn what kind of gift to bring to an American home, and how people in the Arabian country and those in Germany deal with body distance and eye contact. Those are the things that can easily cause cultural conflict. Therefore, the teachers will have a lot of work to do before the class, gathering useful information. For a specific cultural situation, culture immersion is better achieved when the teacher provide a video tape to the whole class to watch instead of handling out some printed materials for the students to read. *"In a real conversational situation, the facial expression, gestures, eye contact, physical distance and so on can provide informative load of background. For the learners, these visible clues are more likely to trigger relevant knowledge in your brain, thus making senses to the students through the interaction of the listening materials and the background information. To add visual factor to the teaching of listening and speaking can help us get rid of the conventional teaching method which emphasizes words and lacks real-time communication and gradually transform into a context where teaching is interactive and listening skills and listening comprehensibility are equally valued."*(Ma Hailong, 2010, p.I-II My translation) In this way, the students get to see the subtle differences of people coming from diverse cultural backgrounds in terms of their facial expressions, body language, etiquette, native ways of expressing the same ideas. Not only do the students get a more direct contact with the people abroad in a two-dimensional way, but also their senses are all aroused to work out the charm of learning actively. In contrast to the one modality of reading only, it is observed that the students can do a better job at retelling what they have learned from the materials. Multimodalities here with the sound, images, moving gestures can give the student a more comprehensive way of peeping into another culture and live in it for the section.

b. Role-playing

This is based on the functional approach. *In second language acquisition (SLA) functional approaches are of similarities with Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG). Focus is on the use of language in real situations (performance), as well as underlying knowledge (competence).* (accessed 12/05/2018 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Functional_approach) Once the students have mastered the needed knowledge including the glossary and the culture, they are supposed to begin the listening and speaking part. The teacher should make good preparations and create a communication situation as close to reality as possible. It has been noticed that students can find it easier to understand the speaker and the whole context of the listening material in a "real situation". The combination of words and sound is the second step to help students take in the things they have learned. To further push the knowledge assimilation process, they are asked to play out the conversation. Therefore, the third step, after the model conversation is played to the students, they are assigned with different roles from the conversation and are allowed ten minutes to prepare. It is required that they should use the key expressions from the conversation and show full understanding of the emotions of different characters embodied in the conversation. Both for the students who are acting out the conversation and for those who are the audience, they have again relived the situation. They are part of it, and are impressed.

IV. CONCLUSION

After the semester, the students' academic performance, their final scores and their opinions about the course are taken into consideration and evaluated. Compared with those of the previous year, it is found that in the Business English Listening and Speaking course, the effective learning can be better achieved by designing multimodal elements in the classroom arrangements, making the students interested in the things they learn. Graphics, sounds, images, body languages, numbers, printed papers and other modes, when combined in a genuine way can actually make our classes brand new.

However, it is not to say that we have to adopt all the different modalities in every one of our class sections, a major modality should be set. This paper does not talk about the situations where single modality is adopted, but focuses on the cases where a combination of modalities is needed. For things like specific terms, for instance, it is advised that students can familiarize themselves with the words when they are written out on the blackboard, shown on the PPT slides or simply printed in the book. Here the major modality is visual. The teachers have to design and find the best combination of those modalities to facilitate the learning. And this detailed work is for further study. Hopefully, this

paper can be of some help to teachers who are teaching similar courses.

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