

A Brief Analysis of Business English Students' "Knowledge Deficit": Taking the Business English Reading Course as an Example

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Abstract: In addition to the English language knowledge and skills, students majoring in Business English should also master knowledge and skills in the various fields of business, intercultural communication, humanities, and social sciences. However, in the teaching practice of Business English students, the author finds that many of them face a "Knowledge Deficit" in learning, which refers to that students have very limited business knowledge, or their business knowledge cannot be interacted with their English Language knowledge when dealing with business texts, resulting in their obstacles when dealing with business texts and difficulty in forming a business thinking-pattern. Therefore, efforts should be made in many aspects so as to address this problem. In this paper, the author aims to analyze the "Knowledge Deficit" in teaching and learning of Business English by reviewing the role of knowledge in reading comprehension theoretically, exemplifying with some cases from his classroom teaching, analyzing the causes, and providing some tentative solutions.

Keywords: Business English Reading; Business English Teaching; Business Knowledge Deficit

1.Introduction

Business English belongs to the category of Applied Linguistics, which is a cross-discipline based on theories of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, a cross-discipline and involves a wide range of fields.[1]The nature of Business English major, as we as the needs of employment determines that the teaching of it should be focused both

on "business" and "English". In the teaching process, we should not only pay attention to the imparting of English language knowledge, but also to the conveying of business knowledge, that is, a comprehensive knowledge system of economics, management, marketing, and international trade, etc. It will enable students to form a business thinking and correctly understand the business texts. However, in teaching practice, students often fail to achieve this goal mainly due to their insufficient and ineffective business knowledge.

2. Knowledge in Reading Comprehension: A Theoretical Review

Reading comprehension is a complex, multidimensional, cognitive, and linguistic activity. The theoretical research of it in psychology to explore the reading comprehension of knowledge mainly surrounds the concept of "schema". In his book *Remembering*, Bartlett defines schema as "an active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences".[2] Bartlett's research lays the foundation for the role of knowledge in understanding, and some psychologists later applied the concept of "schema" to studies on reading comprehension, and proposes their own theoretical models. For example, Anderson and Pearson's research points out that the "schema" is defined as "knowledge already stored in memory", and "an abstract knowledge structure". In the process of reading comprehension, knowledge works to interpret new information and integrate it to the knowledge store.[3] According to Rumelhart, the "schema" is refers to data structure for representing the genetic concepts stored in memory.[4] He proposes an "Interactive Reading Model", which suggests

that reading comprehension is essentially the result of the interaction of various knowledge, including the reader's linguistic knowledge at the lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels, the reader's background knowledge and as well as the background knowledge of the text itself.[5] Kintsch and van Dijk's research shows that reading comprehension is in essence discourse processing, which is a process that takes place under the control of the reader's schema.[6] They together proposes and refines the "Construction-Integration Model" (CIM), which suggests that comprehension of texts consists of two processing phases of "construction" and "integration". In the "construction" phase the reader starts from the "surface structure" of the text, and constructs the "text base" by his knowledge base and linguistic input, in which the reader's knowledge base plays an important role. In the "integration" phase the "text base" is integrated into a coherent whole, and finally a mental representation of the meaning of discourse is generated. Knowledge is particularly important in reading comprehension, especially in the "construction" phase, in which the construction of the text base includes two sources of information: knowledge of language and knowledge of the world. [7]

It is not difficult to see that the psychological research of knowledge in reading comprehension regards knowledge as a certain structure in stored memory, that is, the "schema", and it reveals how knowledge acts on the processing of textual information, from which it can be easily seen that knowledge plays a vital role in understanding the text.

3. "Knowledge Deficit in Business English Reading": Two Case Studies

"Knowledge Deficit" is originally referred to as a concept in the field of Science Communication, which is also widely used in many fields. Generally, it refers to a lack of cognitive or psychomotor abilities necessary for professional activities. In the sense of Business English Reading, the knowledge here refers to the knowledge required for understanding business texts in English, i.e., not only the basic English vocabulary, sentence-breaking skills, and cohesive devices in English, but also the business knowledge related to the background.

3.1 Case One

In the institution the author works for, *Business English Reading* is an elementary course towards the third-year Business English Major students. In the teaching of this course, the author finds that after two years of learning, most of the third-year students have mastered the TEM-4 vocabulary and a rather complete grammar knowledge, but they may still feel difficult when dealing with business texts without sufficient business knowledge. An example can be taken from *Business English a Reading course* edited by Ye Xingguo [8]:

On Saturday, March 4, a few hours before FDR's swearing-in, the governors of New York, Illinois and Pennsylvania signed orders closing banks in those states. The New York Stock Exchange had suspended trading, and the Chicago Board of Trade bolted its doors for the first time since its founding in 1848. The terrifying "runs" that began the year before on more than 5,000 failing banks had stripped rural areas of capital and now threatened to overwhelm American cities.

The text, from which the above sentences are derived from narrates the story about the first "fireside chat" by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The author found in classroom teaching that most of the students did not understand the contextual meaning of the word "run", and even thought that it here refers to its literal meaning "to move quickly with one's feet and leg". The misunderstanding of the word finally led to the misinterpretation the main idea of the text, the background of Roosevelt's first "fireside chat". The students lacked business knowledge related to the background, and as a result were unable to figure out the meaning of "runs" in the text. The author thus tried to input the business knowledge about banking crisis, i.e. banks closing down due to the lack of reserves and asked students to find the clue, "an insolvent banks" (a bank lack of the funds to cover all its customers' deposits) in the text. The scaffoldings employed above facilitated the students' understanding of the contextual meaning of "runs", that is, a large group of depositors withdraw their money from banks at the same time. In this way, the students finally managed to grasped the general idea of the text: the United States went through a banking crisis in 1933. Roosevelt delivered his first "fireside chat" to keep people calm and

prevent a large “run” caused by bank failures.

3.2 Case Two

Business English students focused mainly on the cultivation of English language ability in their first two academic years, and thus it might be understandable for them to have inadequate business knowledge input and difficulties in dealing with long business texts. However, the author also finds that some of the third-year students experienced some difficulties in understanding business texts, after learning some business knowledge for one semester. We may exemplify it with a text titled *The Farm Flight* from the textbook edited by Ye Xingguo's *Business English: A Reading course* as well [8]:

That sinking price makes a huge difference in West Africa, where more than 10m people depend directly on cotton to pay for food, school fees and housing. The crop provides Burkina Faso and Mali with half of all their export earnings; in Benin it accounts for 75%. “If there is no cotton growing in Mali, Mali doesn't work the subsidies U.S. cotton farmers receive help destroy any advantage West Africa's farmers have. Since the mid-1990s, when U.S. exports of subsidized cotton began growing—according to Oxfam, U.S. sales went from a low of 17% of the world export market in 1998 to 41% in 2003—the world cotton price has dropped by more than half.

The text above is a more typical example of the matter. The text is mainly about trade protectionism. The U.S. government largely subsidized its cotton farmers to reduce their production costs, and thus significantly expand US cotton production, resulting in a sharp decline in global cotton prices. One of its competitors in Africa, Mali, could not endure the diving price of cotton due to its smaller economic scale, and thus was “forced out” in the trade war.[8] In the classroom, the author found that most of the students had no idea why the price dived and why the diving price would threaten the cotton industry. The author attempted to find the reason by interviewing some students, and found that most of them had very limited knowledge about “trade protectionism”. In other words, most of them had not taken any course on international trade before. They only knew what “trade protectionism” means from memorizing some business terms for BEC, but were mostly

ignorant of the mechanism of subsidies that works on the price and even trade markets. Thus, they were not able to understand the details of the text. Some students, despite having taken a semester-long course on international trade, could still not understand why the price of cotton fell under the subsidies. The authors talked with them after class and found out the cause. Although they might have had a good grasp of knowledge related to international trade, the knowledge was, however, instructed in Chinese. The students absorbed the knowledge in Chinese, and thus they may fail to utilize it in reading the business texts in English. In the words of Rumelhart, their business knowledge failed to “interact with” their lexical and grammatical knowledge of English language in reading comprehension. Also, the requirement of these knowledge courses towards Business English students was mostly not enough for them to apply the knowledge to solve the problems, and lacked effective assessments.

The two cases mentioned above account for why some Business English students fail to understand the business texts in English correctly: on one hand, their knowledge base for business subjects may be limited or superficial, that is, inadequate for text comprehension; on the other hand, their business knowledge fail to work with their language knowledge. Ans if we extend the reading ability of Business English text to the comprehensive ability of Business English, that is, the listening, speaking, reading and translation of business texts, business knowledge is always indispensable. For example, writing a business contract requires some basic knowledge of International Business Law and legal English, while writing a Letter of Credit and other types of business correspondence requires a knowledge about international settlement, international trade, etc. In a word, business knowledge is paramount in the study of Business English Major.

4. Cause Analysis and Tentative Solutions

4.1 The Cause of “Knowledge Deficit”

As mentioned in above, students majoring in Business English should not only master knowledge and skills of English language, but should also master knowledge and skills in the fields of business, intercultural

communications, humanities, and social sciences, etc. In addition, the compound talents with both business and language knowledge are more competitive in the job market.[9] Many higher education institutions with Business English programs offer courses both focusing on the input of English language knowledge, those on business knowledge and as well as ESP courses under the Business English category, such as English for Tourism, and English for Exhibitions, etc. However, it is hard to say whether they have successfully achieved the goal of cultivating the qualified personnel of Business English. The crux of this matter lies in whether these courses are effectively taught, that is, whether they realize the integration of business knowledge and language knowledge. The ineffective teaching can be attributed to teaching materials, teachers' professional quality and as well as many other factors.

From the viewpoint of teaching materials, there is a wide variety of teaching materials for Business English majors on the market today, with a wide coverage of courses. However, many textbooks do not achieve the integration of business knowledge and English language. Some textbooks on Business English listening, speaking, reading, or writing do not incorporate business knowledge related to the materials, but merely annotate some business terms or vocabulary. Some business knowledge textbooks for Business English majors are written in English, which can satisfy the students' needs to learn business knowledge in English. Compared with the textbooks for students majoring in Economics and Management, the textbooks for Business English majors are rather easier, or adopt the mode of language textbooks, which reduces the learning burden of students to a certain extent, and facilitates the classroom teaching and lesson planning for teachers. The unexpected result, however, lies in that the knowledge conveyed is not systematic. That is, these textbooks are in nature for language learning, other than textbooks for business knowledge. The imparting of business knowledge is confined to memorizing the business terms and their definitions, other than applying them to solve problems.

In terms of teaching mode, many teachers use traditional teaching methods, such as the translation method. This also makes the

learning of business knowledge finally "reduced" to the acquisition of business English vocabulary, as mentioned above. The specialized vocabulary, however, carries only "fragmented" knowledge. The acquisition of them does not achieve a holistic understanding of the business knowledge carried by them. At the same time, the specialized vocabulary also carries only partial language knowledge, and the acquisition of them does benefit the development of overall language competence.[10] If the teaching of business knowledge is barely limited to the teaching of business words and terms, students will only learn fragmented business knowledge, which is neither conducive for them to master and apply the business knowledge to analyze and solve problems in English, nor conducive for them to improve their overall English competence.

4.2 Some Tentative Solutions

In order to address this matter, teacher of Business English should play a leading role in integrating and using teaching materials, or try to develop integrated and systematic teaching materials focusing both on the input of language knowledge and the business knowledge. Also, they should adopt a variety of ways to organize the classroom. In addition, the teachers' business knowledge is also crucial to their ability of effectively using the teaching materials. Taking the reading course as an example, the teacher's business knowledge determines whether he or she can identify the business knowledge contained in the text during the lesson preparation. However, it should also be pointed out that it is also by no means easy for the teachers to have a full grasp of business knowledge, due to their education background and practical experience. In view of this, teachers should uphold the attitude of lifelong learning, and participate in relevant training in ESP teaching. Also, higher education institutions should also provide Business English teachers with opportunities of social practice and further studies, and cultivate a team of "double-functional" teacher.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, this paper takes the Business English reading course as an example to analyze the "Knowledge Deficit" in the

teaching and learning of Business English, which is pervasive among Business English students. The reasons for this may be derived from many aspects: the ineffective mode of instruction, defective teaching materials, and even the flawed course structure of Business English programs, etc. In a word, it is mainly dependent on the teachers to address this problem. In other words, the students we try to cultivate should be interdisciplinary personnels with both business knowledge and English language knowledge, which meet not only the goals of *The National Standard on Teaching Quality of Higher Education Institution for Business English Undergraduate*, but also the requirement of job markets. That is, our students should not only be able to understand business texts, but should also be equipped with business knowledge and business thinking-patterns. To fulfill the goal, it must be our constant endeavors to reform the course structure of the existing Business English programs, the compilation of teaching materials and as well as our modes of instruction, etc.

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