

Application of Task-Based Language Teaching to Business English Negotiation Teaching in Higher Vocational College

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ABSTRACT

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) takes foreign language teaching as the process of fulfilling the communication tasks. It employs tasks to organize classroom teaching and makes the learners deploy their existing language resources to perceive and apply the target language during the process of doing the tasks. Business English Negotiation aims to foster the students' abilities and skills to use English freely in business negotiation activities. In training the senior business specialists, it plays an important role in enhancing their working adaptability and developing their innovation capacity. The purpose of the work is to propose the appropriate task design in teaching Business English Negotiation on the basis of the implementation of TBLT, and hopes this paper can provide references for the teaching reform of this course, and thus promotes the practical teaching of Business English Negotiation in Higher Vocational College (HVC).

Keywords: *Task-based Language Teaching, Business English Negotiation, Higher Vocational College, task design*

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) embodies the advanced teaching idea of "learning by doing", and is an effective teaching approach that is worth popularizing[1]. Business English Negotiation aims to foster the students' abilities and skills to use English freely in business negotiation activities. In training the senior business specialists, it plays an important role in enhancing their working adaptability and developing their innovation capacity, and it has a high demand on the students' practical skills. Thus the students' practical ability should be emphasized in the teaching of this course. Based on the above features, the author thinks it is necessary and reasonable to apply TBLT into the teaching of Business English Negotiation.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

With the emergence of economic globalization and the rapid development of China's economy, the demand for inter-disciplinary talents with proficiency in English has been increasing. Business English talents, especially those who are not only familiar with the international business but also good at the intercultural communication are in high demand in the talent market nowadays. In order to adapt to the new situation of the economic development, more than 2,000 colleges have set up the major of Business English to foster inter-disciplinary talents since the 1970s.

As a major to foster the applied talents, Business English emphasizes to train the students' linguistic competence and develop their practical ability. Its development direction is to make the students be the inter-disciplinary talents who can not only be proficient in English but also have a good knowledge about how to do international business. The introduction of Business English Negotiation is just to meet the needs of the current situation. Business English Negotiation is a professional course designed for Business English majors in HVC, and is the complement and extension of the specialization in English study. It aims to foster the students' abilities and skills to use English freely in business negotiation and the communication of different business activities. In training the business specialists, it plays an important role in enhancing their working adaptability and developing their innovation capacity, and it has a high demand on the students' practical skills. Therefore, the students' practical ability should be paid attention to and emphasized during the teaching of this course. But in the present situation of Business English Negotiation teaching in HVC, there are still some problems as listed below.

(1) The English levels of the students in HVC are various. The students are selected from those high school graduates who can't be admitted to undergraduate colleges, and most of them are poor in English. Business English Negotiation is a professional course, and it requires that the students should not only use English to communicate freely but also know some business knowledge after learning this course. Therefore most of the students are lack confidence in learning this course.

(2) Some deficiencies exist in the teaching model as well as the faculty development of HVC. A lot of colleges have offered the course of Business English Negotiation, but the classroom teaching in most colleges is teacher-centered and “cramming” is still taken as one of the most frequently used teaching methods[4]. This kind of teaching model is lack of practicability, and hence most of the students can’t use what they have learned in the college to solve the practical problems after their graduation, even for those ordinary business activities. What’s more, most of the teachers in HVC graduated from normal universities. They are familiar with English language and literature but don’t know much about business knowledge, not to mention the working experiences in the business environment. Because of the reasons mentioned above, most of the teachers prefer to adopt the traditional PPP teaching approach. They are good at teaching the language points as well as the communicative strategies, but when it involves the business knowledge, they may feel incompetent. Some teachers even ask the students to learn the business knowledge by themselves, which makes the students think that Business English Negotiation is a meaningless and tedious course. All these finally make both teaching and learning of this course fall into a passive position, and the high demand of inter-disciplinary talents can’t be met[5]. Hence it is necessary to reform the teaching model and improve the teaching quality of Business English Negotiation.

(3) The students’ thinking ability and creative ability are ignored. For the classroom teaching of Business English Negotiation in most colleges, the teachers’ explanation is still in a dominant position. Students are always asked to recite the new words and phrases as well as the main sentence patterns. In this way, students may have no problem in communicating with others, but if they are asked to analyze a case by themselves, most of them would be at a loss about how to do it. Actually, the language points are very important, but more attention should be paid to the teaching organization. Good teaching organization can be helpful to the students’ thinking ability and creative ability, such as the discussion of a certain question or the analysis of a certain case[6].

(4) The classroom teaching is lack reasonable design. In the classroom teaching of Business English Negotiation, most of the teachers only emphasize the importance of the special terms and sentence patterns, but neglect to arrange the teaching from the characteristics of this course and the social needs[7]. As a result, some students only have communicative ability but lack professional knowledge. So teachers should design the classroom teaching rationally according to the features of Business English Negotiation and handle well with the relationship among the teaching material, the teaching content and the teaching approach. Actually, the teaching aims of Business English Negotiation are not only to let the students learn some special terms and phrases by rote, but also demand them to master the related negotiation skills and strategies. All these require the teachers to train and foster students’ languages skills and communication ability in the context of business, and the author thinks the learner-centered

TBLT can be applied here to develop the students’ communication ability in doing international business activities. TBLT was put forward by Prabhu in 1980s from the point of teaching. It is a theory that emphasizes “learning by doing” and it aims to develop the learners’ language skills during the process of using language to fulfil the tasks[2]. TBLT is a further development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and it shares the same beliefs, as language should be learned as close as possible to how it is used in real life. Besides that, it stresses the importance to combine form-focused teaching with communication-focused teaching. In the language teaching activities, teachers can design specific and practical tasks for students in the forms of expression, communication, explanation, negotiation etc., and finally make the students master the language. How to apply TBLT to the classroom teaching of Business English Negotiation and propose the rational task design are the problems that would be discussed in this thesis.

3. OBJECTIVE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

3.1. Research Objective

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, China’s economy has developed tremendously. As the product of the economic development and the reform of higher education structure, Higher Vocational Education (HVE) has played a more and more important role in the development of social economy. Its characteristics have decided that for the education of the students in HVC, the emphasis should be put on the practicability and pertinence of the professional skills as well as the applicability of the theoretical knowledge[8]. That is to say, the HVC graduates should be more excellent in practical ability compared with undergraduates, and more familiar with the theoretical basis compared with technical school students. As China’s economy has a close connection with the world economy nowadays, it should be necessary for the students to master the related knowledge on language, culture and business. Business English Negotiation is a course that has a high demand for the skills of practicability which should be highlighted and developed in classroom teaching. The teaching material used in this research consists of many negotiation topics, and the students are required to master the relative business knowledge as well as the skills and strategies used in each step of the business negotiation. The classroom teaching model of TBLT integrates the teaching aims into one or more specific tasks, and makes the students master the target language in the process of doing the tasks. In the task-based classroom teaching, teaching is a process with plan, purpose and organization, and the teacher is the designer and organizer. The teacher teaches students to practice new words and sentence patterns by means of designing the relative communication tasks. When the students fulfill the tasks under the instruction of

the teacher, they make good use of the existing knowledge and master the new knowledge at the same time. And sometimes students can be encouraged to design the tasks by themselves so as to stimulate their creative ability. In the classroom teaching of Business English Negotiation, the teacher can assign the students several tasks according to the topics of negotiation, and then ask them to do these tasks by individuals or in the form of group work. All the group members are closely interconnected for the same goal and each member takes a certain responsibility and acts in close coordination. When the students finish the tasks, they can learn from each other and make progress.

In recent years, TBLT has been used widely in the classroom teaching of EGP, such as College English, English Listening, Oral English, but its use is less common in ESP, especially in the course of Business English Negotiation. In order to improve the teaching quality of Business English Negotiation, this thesis tries to explore the feasibility of applying TBLT into this course from the theoretical and practical perspectives, and how to design the appropriate tasks for this course will also be discussed.

3.2. Significance of the Research

The importance of communicative ability and communicative practice has been emphasized in the New National Criterion for English Course. In the English Curriculum Standard(2001) issued by China’s Ministry of Education, more attention is paid to training students’ comprehensive language skills and TBLT is advocated for the first time. After doing some researches on the theory of TBLT, the author makes a survey on the present situation in the classroom teaching of Business English Negotiation as well as how to employ TBLT to design the effective tasks in teaching the course. In narrowing the gap between the theory of TBLT and the teaching practice of Business English Negotiation in HVC, and increasing the utilization efficiency of this theory, this thesis should be of great significance.

4. FRAMEWORK OF TBLT

TBLT is a kind of teaching approach but not a specific teaching method, thus it does not have a fixed operating process or teaching procedure. Actually, its advocators have put forward several specific operating models, and some of them are widely used in the language teaching practice, such as the framework proposed by Willis.

Jane Willis (2002: 53) provides a typical framework to implement this teaching approach, as it is shown below[3]:

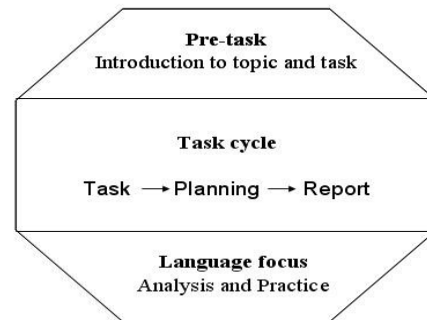


Figure 1. Framework Proposed by Willis

Challenge and Change in Language Teaching (Willis, J & Willis, D. 2002: 53)

Pre-task is the first phase and it introduces the topic and the task to the students. This preliminary stage provides the useful input for students to help them be familiar with the topic and the task as well as the topic-related words and phrases. The teacher highlights the topic and the task, and ensures that the students understand task instructions and what preparations they should make. For example, the teacher can ask the students to implement a pre-task, such as an activity related to the topic.

Task cycle consists of task, planning and report. In the phase of task, students should do the task in pairs or small groups first of all, and they can make comments on the materials that they read or hear. During this process, teacher should act as a monitor and encourage the students to communicate with the target language. The phase of planning is to make preparations for the coming report. Students should prepare to report to the whole class (orally or in writing) about how they did the task, what they decided or discovered, while the teacher can walk around to make some suggestions if necessary. The phase of report aims to motivate the students to use formal and precise language and know more about spoken language as well as written language. In this phase, the teacher can select some groups to present their reports in the class, or exchange their written reports, and compare the results.

The last phase in the framework is the language focus. Compared with the traditional PPP teaching approach, it is put at the end of the whole activity and is composed of two phases: analysis and practice. In the phase of analysis, students examine and discuss specific features of the materials that they have just read or heard, and the teacher makes an analysis and draws a conclusion. Finally, teacher conducts the students to practice words, phrases and sentence patterns from the analysis activities, and this phase is normally done at the end of each analysis activity. In Willis’ opinion, the main purpose of this framework is to create a real environment for language learners to gain fluency as well as accuracy of the language.

5. APPLICATION OF TBLT TO BUSINESS ENGLISH NEGOTIATION

According to the characteristics of Business English Negotiation, the author mainly adopted the following types of task in the teaching.

5.1. Comparing Tasks

According to Willis, these tasks require the students to make a comparison among similar objects and find out the similarities or differences. For example, preparation for the business negotiation was very important during the whole negotiation as it had a direct impact on the further cooperation between the two parties. Before the negotiation, both parties should do a lot of work, such as the introduction to their own products or the company. When the author explained the preparation before business negotiation, she asked the students to compare the introduction of products with the introduction of the company and find out their similarities and differences. In this way, the students could get a better understanding about how to introduce the products and the company, and finally improved their negotiation ability.

5.2. Question-solving Tasks

These tasks are usually questions which demand the students to put forward the solutions by using a set of information given by the teacher. During the teaching of Business English Negotiation, the students should learn to analyze and master the different negotiation strategies and skills used in each negotiation item. In order to foster their analysis ability, the author mainly assigned them to finish question-solving tasks. For example, in the explanation of how to promote the sales at the trade fair, she asked the students to tick the excellent sentences which were suitably used to promote the sales. First of all, the author gave the students one example chosen from the dialogue. "Our company specializes in producing suits and I'm sure you've come to the right place." In this sentence, the words "the right place" indicated that "we can supply what you require". Then she asked the students to give more examples. Finally these examples could help the students be familiar with the promotion at the trade fair.

5.3. Role-play Tasks

Role play is a kind of classroom teaching activity by simulating the authentic language situation. According to different situations, the students can act out different dialogues by performing different roles. Let's take an example of the introduction to the company. After analyzing the teaching content, the author designed the following role-play task.

Situation: "Mr. Smith from England comes to China to meet with Mr. Chen of China National Textile Corporation to explore the possibilities of establishing trade relations. Mr. Chen makes an introduction to his company, scope of business, financial standing, etc. He then provides Mr. Smith with the latest catalogues. After the meeting, Mr. Smith will fly back home to discuss the information with his boss."

After the students understood the above situation, the author asked them to choose their partners by themselves. One student could be Mr. Smith and the other could be Mr. Chen, then they were given several minutes to prepare for this negotiation. Then the author encouraged the students to act out the negotiation in front of the class. When one pair finished their performance, the author made the assessment to ensure that they had mastered the skills of how to introduce the company to the potential business partner. The students were fond of these tasks, as they could have the freedom to decide how to use the language to do the tasks without the rigid control of the teacher. Besides that, role-play could release their emotional tensions and make them be in a relaxed condition to join in the classroom tasks.

5.4. Case Study Tasks

Case study was one of the most frequently-used tasks in the author's Business English Negotiation teaching. It is very popular in the world and is considered to be a successful educational model. Its essence is not to let the students recite what they have learned but to make them master the way to deal with a certain problem through observation and analysis. Case study tasks put the emphasis on giving the students chances to consider how to solve the problems and express their own opinions but not verifying what is right and what is wrong. For example, for the negotiation of complaints and claims, the author asked the students to do the following case study task.

Case study: "The sellers and the buyers sign a contract on CIF basis. According to the contract, the sellers ship 2000 cartons of frozen shrimp on time. Yet the freeze facilities on the ship happened to be broken. Thinking it impossible to get another ship within the stipulated time of shipment, the sellers still load the goods without telling the buyers. Though a lot of big pieces of ice are put on the shrimps, the frozen shrimps have gone bad by the time they arrive at the port of destination. In this case, the buyers lodge a claim against the sellers. The sellers insist that it should not be their responsibility for the damage because:

①The shrimps were in good condition when they were loaded on board the ship and the Inspection Certificate issued by the CIQ can speak for that.

②Though the business is concluded on a CIF basis, the sellers take responsibility for the risk only till the goods pass over the ship's rail and then the buyer should take it over from then on.

③*The goods were damaged during the transportation, thus the buyers should lodge a claim against the insurance company for force majeure.*

In your opinion, who should take the responsibility? State your reasons.”

The above case could make the students have a deeper understanding of how to deal with complaints and claims in the international trade. Case study tasks have always been very popular among the students. As it can provide the good opportunities to the students to link theory with practice, and finally improve their ability to analyze the problems.

6. CONCLUSION

In TBLT classroom, tasks are not isolated from each other but should have systematicness and continuity. Systematicness means that tasks can have various levels, such as the task—the main task—the extended task. While continuity means that in the task chain, the success of the former task is the premise to do the next task, and the implementation of the tasks should be not only in the class but also before or after the class. When designing the tasks in Business English Negotiation classroom, the teacher can choose the appropriate task types according to the different steps of the negotiation and the essential purpose of each step.

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