



**Title**

Curriculum Development for Business English  
Students in China: The Case of UIBE

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**Abstract**

This paper is a case study of the curriculum development for Business English students in China at a Chinese university. By demonstrating the application and extension of principles of English for Specific Purposes and research in applied linguistics in the curriculum development, the paper shows that an ESP-informed curriculum is able to integrate disciplinary knowledge, professional practice, and language. The implications of the case for curriculum development are discussed.

**Key words.** Business English, curriculum development

**1. Introduction**

Business English (BE) teaching is increasingly important in China. It has outgrown the *yingyuyuyanwenxue* (English linguistics and literature) undergraduate programme and obtained accreditation by the Ministry of Education of China to run parallel with the English linguistics and literature programme (Chen & Wang, 2009). As more

institutions of higher learning in China are preparing to operate their BE programme, issues concerning curriculum development require urgent attention. This article brings under spot light the case of the BE programme at the University of International Business and Economics in China, discussing the various theoretical and practical issues that have been encountered and addressed in the development of the programme. The implications for BE curriculum development in general are also discussed.

## **2. BE under the magnifying glass of English for Specific Purposes**

Curriculum is often discussed along with syllabus and programme. It is necessary to explain these three terms at the beginning. A programme, according to Smith (1989, p. 47, quoted in Owen, 2006, p. 26), is “a set of planned activities directed toward bringing about specified change(s) in an identified and identifiable audience.” Richards (2001) has made a clear distinction between curriculum and syllabus.

Curriculum in a school context refers to the whole body of knowledge that children acquire in schools (p. 39).

A syllabus is a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested (p. 2).

Curriculum development is an essential component of an educational programme. Richards states that “Curriculum development focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, and values students learn in schools, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes, and how teaching and learning in schools or educational systems can be planned, measured, and evaluated”(2001, p. 2). This definition specifies the major

concerns of curriculum development: what to include in the programme, how to implement it, and how to assess its outcomes. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides a rich source of theoretical and practical concepts, which are relevant to the development of BE curriculum.

BE is widely recognised as a branch of ESP, which is characterised by the priority given to learner needs and the design of a focused course that satisfies the needs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, pp. 123-124), the procedure for identifying learner needs includes four essential activities, namely the target situation analysis (TSA), the learning situation analysis (LSA), the present situation analysis (PSA), and the means analysis (MA). The target situation analysis is concerned with the activities, events, tasks, etc. that the learner expects to participate in on the one hand and the underlying language, skills, discourse on the other hand. The learning situation analysis involves personal information about the learners such as their previous learning experiences, their reasons for attending the course and expectations of it, and their views on the effective ways of learning skills and language. The present situation analysis provides information on the learner's current level of language and skills and the strengths and weaknesses in their learning experiences. The means analysis is concerned with the environment in which the course will operate. This analysis takes into account the institutional constraints and affordances.

The four types of analysis are important to developing a BE curriculum, particularly in yielding the curriculum content and the criteria for ordering the content. The analyses and the outcomes with regard to a BE curriculum will be elaborated in the next section.

### **3. Planning the curriculum**

### **3.1 Factors to consider in planning the curriculum**

Planning is a process of identifying the goals, objectives, and approaches that will be captured in the curriculum. This process can be guided by the four analyses as mentioned above.

The Business English majors are expected to function in international business, which has been defined broadly as covering a wide range of “economic, public, and social activities such as trade, management, finance, marketing, tourism, journalism, and law” (Chen & Wang, 2009, p. 5). Following the TSA, the target performance situation requires that the students handle the events, activities, and tasks and the language and skills necessary for these events, activities, and tasks. Recent developments in professional discourse indicate that weight should be given to professional knowledge and practices on the list of outcomes of the analysis. Bhatia points out that “the process of becoming a competent professional requires the development of professional competence, which is measured in terms of a combination of discursive knowledge and disciplinary knowledge, in the context of professional practices” (2004/2008, p. 147). This understanding of the target performance situation expands the scope of BE teaching to include as essential components the knowledge of international business, practice in international business, and the language and skills necessary to the study of the knowledge and practices (Zhang, 2008b; Chen & Wang, 2009).

With regard to the LSA, the BE majors are fresh from high school. Their enrolment in the BE programme indicates their interest in the opportunity to learn both English and international business in order to end up as a composite-type talent employable in the job market.

The PSA, like the LSA, of the BE majors, can only be stated in general terms given the diversity of the origins of the learners. They are pre-experience learners in the sense that they need both knowledge of international business and the language for learning this

knowledge. They also need knowledge of professional practice. Concerning their English proficiency, they have learned English for at least 6 years (6 years of high school where English is compulsory), with a minimum vocabulary of 2,000 and mastery of basic English grammar.

The MA is a crucial procedure of the analysis of the needs of the BE students as it addresses the institutional concerns. There are three essential considerations. First of all, BE is supposed to be a tertiary educational programme rather than a training project. As it is, it should be guided by educational objectives. Biehler and Snowman(1990) group educational objectives into three major domains: cognitive domain, which highlights knowledge and intellectual skills, affective domain, which concerns values and attitudes, and psychomotor domain, which involves physical abilities and skills. In the Business English context, this means that a Business English programme should promote all-round development of students by advancing them intellectually, affectively, and behaviourally. Secondly, the programme should treat the *sibianquexizheng* (syndrome of absence of abstract thinking). This is often taken as a deficiency in English majors (Huang, 1999; Wen & Liu, 2006). Thirdly, there is the need to remove worries that the programme may “scratch the surface” of both business and language. The programme involves business and language, which are two distinct disciplines. Given that time is a constraining factor for any educational programme, there are concerns that the programme may fail to enable learners to learn either business or language adequately.

There is also the factor of the forces of tradition at work. One facet of this factor is the influence of the traditional English linguistics and literature programme. Hu and Sun (2006) argue for literature and linguistics and studies of English-speaking nations as the core of the discipline of English. Although BE has evolved into a separate

programme, the impact of the parent programme is still keenly felt. The other facet of the tradition is that of BE itself. The surge of interest in Business English is against the background of 50 years of BE teaching in China (Zhang, 2007). There have been three stages of BE curriculum since the early 1950s. They can be represented as: Translation for Foreign Trade, English for Foreign Trade, and English for international business (characterized by trade of goods, services, and investment). A review of these curricula identifies a few essential features. One is that BE has been geared to the needs of the state in its drive to expand its trade with the rest of the world. These needs derive from the institutional requirements. The needs of the state are assumed to be the needs of learners, who enrol in the government-run universities in the first place and whose needs are extrapolated from the state needs. The other is the recognition of business knowledge as an indispensable component of the curriculum apart from language. For example, courses in business knowledge were part of the very first curriculum and have been enhanced systematically, from a few courses serving the narrow foreign trade to a wide range of courses in response to the broader scene of international business.

### **3.2 Curriculum content**

The TAS, LSA, PSA, and MA contribute to specifying the goals, objectives, and content of the BE programme. According to the Division of Academic Affairs UIBE (2007), the programme aims to “cultivate composite-type English talents who have sound English knowledge and skills, master fundamental theories and knowledge of international business, have comparatively high humanistic quality, are adept at intercultural communication, can meet the needs of economic globalisation, and are competitive internationally” (my translation). The objectives are as follows (my translation from the Chinese original):

1. Have sound English knowledge and skills and pass Test for English Majors Band 8;
2. Master fundamental theories, knowledge, and skills in international economics, management, and law;
3. Are familiar with Chinese and Western politics, economies, and cultures;
4. Have fine intercultural communication abilities;
5. Take a second foreign language and achieve the university-set proficiency level;
6. Possess essential IT application skills;
7. Have strong ability of autonomous learning and basic ability of academic research.

When these aims and objectives are translated into the curriculum content, they can be grouped into business knowledge and practices, business discourse, English proficiency, knowledge and understanding of humanities. The first component includes business-related courses, such as economics, management, and business law. These courses do not involve the functional treatment of subject knowledge or use them as carrier content (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) as is usually the case in the content-based approach to language teaching (But see Brinton et al. (1989)). Instead, they treat disciplinary knowledge systematically and in depth. They also acquaint students with disciplinary cultures and prepare them for developing insights into the ways of perceiving, structuring, questioning, and hypothesizing in the business disciplines. By means of this in-depth and systematic study of business disciplines, the programme is intended to address the cognitive objectives of education, that is, to provide academic training, promote intellectual growth, and develop skills transferable to other fields of work.

To this first component can be added courses in business practice, including practice in international business, international business culture, and practices in international business communication. These courses introduce students to procedural and factual information as well as cultivate critical awareness of business practices. They allow students “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the business world by taking part in such activities as simulations and on-site observations, which will allow them to gain certain hands-on experience. In the process of participation, they sharpen their sensitivity to the culture of international business and acquire tacit knowledge of their target community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Business discourse involves the use of language in business settings to achieve goals and get business done (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007). Business discourse is a bridging component in two senses. First, it deals with genres that are typical of business disciplines, such as academic writing, discussion and presentations, and business practices, such as meeting, negotiating, socializing, telephoning and corresponding. Business discourse thus acts as a service to the study of other courses. Secondly, the carrier content (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) is graded according to its level of sophistication and complexity. Less complicated or sophisticated carrier content is incorporated into the language courses, i.e. *jinengzhishihua* (skills training materials are knowledge-based), as in Hu and Sun (2006) or the content-based language teaching discussed by Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989). This arrangement saves time for in-depth and systematic study of more theoretically sophisticated knowledge of business disciplines.

Business discourse is also the site where intercultural communication is enacted. The teaching of English takes the form of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and translating in English in international business contexts. This enhances students’ ability to

reflect on the use of language in business in terms of accuracy and appropriacy. Along with courses in humanities (English literature, linguistics, cultures of English-speaking countries, etc.), business discourse courses take care of the affective and psychomotor domains.

These components are interdependent and integrated. When the BE majors live out the curriculum, they will fulfil the requirements of the educational programme, acquire transferable academic skills and abilities of critical thinking, and learn both language and business in a thorough and systematic fashion.

### **3.3 Issues in implementing and evaluating the curriculum**

Implementing and evaluating the curriculum are on-going as the first cohort of BE majors are in their final year of study at the University of International Business and Economics. The methodology, materials, and teachers will be discussed as they are important to the success of the curriculum.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) argue that “ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves” (p. 4). As the teaching of BE involves subject knowledge, business discourse, and business practice, there can be no uniform methodology. In fact, to prepare the students to perform proficiently in the field of international business, the methodology for teaching is necessarily eclectic and learner-centred. Ellis and Johnson (1994) list a few methods for teaching BE, namely, simulations (acting out a task with personal preferences or stances), role plays (playing a role as set despite personal preferences or stances), and case studies (learn from business professionals’ experience). These methods help the learners both to take in knowledge and to gain hands-on experience of business operations and the language in use in these practices.

Learning business English is more about picking up a practice and taking on professional identities than acquiring English proficiency, so

it can be regarded as a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), i.e. students of BE are socialised into the community of international business practice under the guidance of their teachers who, ideally, are expert members and provide them with role models. At present, teachers of BE on the BE programme fall into two types: subject-trained and language and literature-qualified. Most of the latter have no or inadequate knowledge of business disciplines nor have they been exposed to international business practices apart from being ordinary consumers of internationally produced goods. Without such knowledge and exposure, it is difficult for them to select appropriate teaching materials, identify relevant information in talk and writing, or provide valid feedback to students' talk and writing. For the former cohort of BE teachers, teachers with specialised training in business disciplines, quite surprisingly, they are uncertain about their identities. Most of such teachers were language students who later switched to business studies in their higher degrees. They experience difficulties in gaining recognition from the discipline of business studies or the discipline of language studies. A possible solution is to organise business English teacher development programs where ELT and business subjects are organic components; to run seminars where ELT specialists and business practitioners sit together to discuss issues of language in use and business practices; to keep up with collaborated research by academics and business professionals, for example the research reported by Cheng and Mok (2008).

Materials are another issue. ESP has been materials-led (St John, 1996). Although we know more about language use in ESP than before, as Nickerson (2005) argues, we are far from knowing all about professional expertise. More cooperation is needed between linguists, professional communications researchers, professional practitioners so that we can gain insights into the business expertise that constitutes

the professional identities which are targets of our pre-experience learners. The research findings available also need to be translated into teaching materials (Nickerson, 2005; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

The evaluation is another major pending issue. As business expertise is more than language performance, the commercially available tests such as BEC, TOEIC, and BULATS fail to meet the needs of BE assessment (Zhang, 2008a). Douglas (2000, p. 19) defines ESP test as follows:

A specific purpose language test is one in which test content and methods are derived from an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation, so that test tasks and content are authentically representative of tasks in the target situation, allowing for an interaction between the test taker's language ability and specific purpose content knowledge, on the one hand, and the test tasks on the other. Such a test allows us to make inferences about a test-taker's capacity to use language in the specific purpose domain.

This is a step ahead because it recognises the importance of the interaction between language and content. Other important components of BE learning such as professional identities are practically neglected, however.

#### **4. Discussion**

There are a number of points we would like to discuss as implications for BE curriculum development and teaching in general. The first is concerned with the nature of BE in the Chinese educational setting. Two issues need to be addressed here. ESP as a branch of English language teaching is taken as a “service industry”

(Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 164). It would follow that ESP is training by nature. Yet the BE programme as outlined above is a proper university programme in its own right. The other issue is the division of labour between BE and the the English literature and linguistics programme, which had been in place long before the BE programme. When Business English has outgrown the English literature and linguistics programme and assumes the status of an independent programme, the division of academic and educational labour is clear. While the traditional English programme takes as its core English literature, linguistics, and studies of English-speaking nations, BE claims as its domain the use of English in various socio-economic fields. The one is complementary to the other and neither is inferior to or conspires to displace the other.

The second relates to the ultimate goals of teaching BE in China. The BE programme at the University of International Business and Economics is designed to train business professionals in the sense that it aims to help students learn how to do business with English, to enable them to pick up a practice, to perform professional roles, and take on professional identities. It also has the crucial goal of nurturing all-round persons. Wenger argues that

Education, in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state. Whereas training aims to create an inbound trajectory targeted at competence in a specific practice, education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self. It places students on an outbound trajectory toward a broad field of possible identities. Education is not merely formative – it is transformative. (1998, p. 263)

There have been allusions to BE as a sort of vocational or professional training, falling short of a proper English education (Hu & Sun, 2006). Although we will argue that the Business English programme as presented in the article is not necessarily limiting in terms of the range of trajectories offered to its learners, the warning of Wenger should be kept at the back of the mind all the time. There are challenges for curriculum developers, textbook writers, teachers, and administrators.

The third point to note is the role of language and content in BE teaching. The BE curriculum is meaning-focused. It is commonly believed that learning language in a meaningful context is motivating to learners. In content-based learning, learners deal with subject-relevant materials, access disciplinary cultures and practices. This learning context motivates learners and increases effectiveness of language learning. The BE curriculum adopts an integrated approach, i.e. English is taught along with knowledge of business disciplines and business practices. It recognises the interrelatedness of language features and business practices and incorporates the insight that BE cannot be usefully described without making reference to the business activities it accompanies or enables to take place. Business English is social action rather than merely a representation of business operations. When this view is taken, the practice of breaking down target events into language, skills, notions and functions, etc. is problematic as underlying the practice is the assumption that language and content are separable. This situation poses a problem for BE practitioners and theorists.

The next issue is that Business English teaching should pay serious attention to the “accommodationist” (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 231) approach, that is, being uncritical about and restricted to helping learners to cope with their target performance situations. There is research indicating that business discourse is ideology-laden, likely to enact inequality in power, gender, and race (Mullany, 2009; Parker &

Grimes, 2009). Teaching business English should not end in preparing learners to acquire business expertise for the business world. It is important also to encourage these students to be sensitive to the inequity and social injustice and be agents of change.

Last but not least, there is the issue of the competitive/comparative advantage of BE majors in comparison with other university majors. The coming years will witness the continuing boom of the BE programme as the demand is high. Since 2007, 15 universities and colleges in China have won the approval of the Ministry of Education to run a BE undergraduate programme (Chen & Wang, 2009). According to Wu (2009), director of the Training Section of the Bureau of Personnel of the Ministry of Commerce of China, talents of the following types are required to implement the *zouzhuchu* (go global) strategy: *kuaguojingyingguanli* (international operation and management), *guojishangwuyingxiao* (international business marketing), *guojitouziganli* (international investment management), *guojijingjifalu* (international business law), and *guojishangwutanpan* (international business negotiation). While the expertise of these talents varies according to the specific business operations involved, they all need to possess global vision, pioneering and innovative spirit, and intercultural communication skills (Wu, 2009). In other words, they need to know how professionals of different cultural backgrounds communicate in relevant business operations and activities. The social demand for BE majors will create the sustained driving force behind the programme. This means that the content of BE programme may increasingly converge with that of the curriculum for business majors. The question arises of what differs BE majors from business majors. It seems that BE practitioners need to be aware of this tendency and answer the question properly. One possible way of responding to this is, once again, to cast the eye at the target situation the students are to serve in the end. At the age of

globalisation, communication within multinationals and between multinationals and other entities is increasing. The need to handle communication-related issues is on the rise. The niche for BE majors is their expertise to handle such issues. If this is a valid observation, then the curriculum content should be adjusted to reflect this. The curriculum for business communication for the business students at the Aalto University School of Economics can be commended on their inclusion of the various international communications in the curriculum. Their students are exposed to the communication taking place in the corporate world to develop skills for handling it. This may give a renewed focus to the BE curriculum at the University of International Business and Economics and even Business English curricula elsewhere in China.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

The BE programme at UIBE demonstrates the relevance of ESP to BE. It is an exemplar of integrating disciplinary knowledge, professional practice, and language in a curriculum that is designed to educate composite-type talents. It has the potential of feeding back on applied linguistics research by raising questions for theoretical discussions and practical answers.

BE has gained momentum. While BE keeps expanding, it is necessary to reflect on the rationale for it and the various issues pending for consideration in its implementation. Work is needed in asking questions such as what students of business English themselves feel about their programme, what changes they undergo in learning business English, in particular the Business English program currently implemented in China, and what programme can be offered if they want to pursue a postgraduate level education.

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