A Research on Experiential Education in Business English
Based on Task-based Instruction

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Abstract. Experiential education is a student-centered teaching method, wherein the teacher introduces or designs a scene related to the teaching content to enhance their learning experience and hence reach the teaching objectives. Task-based instruction (TBI) has become increasingly popular in business English teaching. TBI offers students abundant opportunities to experience business knowledge and English language in class. It can stimulate students’ interest in learning the target language and contribute to students’ overall development. This article analyzes the features of TBI and based on TBI, it sheds some lights on the application of experiential education to business English course. Introduction of business knowledge being the prerequisite and language knowledge being the basis, experiential education creates experiencing situations for the students when the teacher controls the process and evaluates the task completed.

Introduction

It has been long since the concept of business English was put forward. In the era of globalization, business English is becoming increasingly important as it not only simply improves students’ language ability, but rather serves as a way to impart to the students a concept of western enterprise management, work ethics, living habits as well as how to deal with foreigners. It covers almost all the aspects of business activities, including business communication, business negotiation, business contract, customs declaration practice, E-commerce, etc. The objective of business English course is to develop students’ ability in using theoretical knowledge and professional skills by setting proper practical tasks for students so that they can communicate smoothly in English in business context. Featured by practicality, marketability and sociality, business English requires a classroom teaching centered on business instead of language points, introducing to the students the latest development of international business activities, business theory, and enterprise operation and management. Therefore, it is significant to adopt an appropriate teaching method to integrate business and language learning so as to help students to use English to handle actual business problems efficiently.

As higher education continues to adapt to new expectations from students, experiential learning in business has become more important. For example, Clark & White (2010) point out that ‘a quality university business education program must include an experiential learning component’. The experiential education is built on the idea that classroom teaching should be ‘centered on students on the basis of tasks’. It aims at helping student to ‘learn through the reflection of doing’, in which students acquire language skills through participating in various tasks in person. Under the guidance of task-based instruction (TBI), this article tends to explore the effectiveness of experiential education in business English teaching, and to propose a practical model of experiential education as well.

Task-based Instruction

In task-based instruction, teachers organize the teaching by offering various tasks to students. During the process of finishing the tasks, students participate in different activities, experience the use of authentic language, interact and cooperate with other participants, thus giving full play to their cognitive ability and what they have already learnt to analyze and solve the problems autonomously.
In a word, students acquire language skills as well as business strategies by practicing the target language while fulfilling meaningful tasks.

Theoretical basis of TBI

Task-based instruction, popularized by N. Prabhu, is a kind of teaching mode based on constructivism, proposed by J. Piaget whose cognitive theory argues that learning is not only the result of the response to a particular stimulus, but the reconstruction of the cognitive schema of the mind. Language learning process is the hypothesis that learners construct in terms of the target language, and through the exposure to the target language, they constantly validate and modify the hypothesis, reaching a balance of new cognitive structure, and eventually improving their language ability. Its key idea involves engaging student voice in active roles for the purpose of learning.

From the perspective of learning theory, J. Bruner’s developmental psychology lay great emphasis on intrinsic motivation, which is essential for the students to acquire knowledge and solve problems. Generally speaking, such kind of drive is mostly derived from curiosity but without any particular field of interest. Students can only figure out their field of interest through constant individual success in completing challenging tasks offered by the teacher, thus intrinsic motivation is formed. Bruner also believes learning should be spurred by interest in the material rather than tests or punishment, since one learns best when they find the knowledge they are obtaining appealing. ‘Research indicates that intrinsic motivation stems from one’s interests and capacities to surmount challenges when presented or pursued,’ says Fenice B. Boyd. Successful experience in a student’s field of interest can provide valuable experiential learning which contributes significantly to the student’s overall understanding of the real-time environment.[2]

Advantages of TBI

Armstrong (2012) claims that students should be responsible of learning not the teachers.[3] In the class of TBI, students play the leading role in learning whereas the teacher serves only as a guide to design, organize and evaluate the class activities. Students participate in a real activity with real consequences for the purpose of meeting learning objectives. The process of problem solving and group discussion can promote the communication between students and increase their awareness in cooperation.

Task-based learning is advantageous to the student because it is more student-centered, allows for more meaningful communication, and often provides for practical extra-linguistic skill building. Therefore, task-based instruction has such advantages as following: 1) It helps to arouse students’ interest in learning when they are required to do a variety of challenging activities. 2) Students are bound to link language points to language skills in order to finish the task, hence their comprehensive ability in using language is increased. 3) It helps to broaden students’ knowledge since the content of tasks covers a wide range of fields and contains abundant information. 4) By learning through the reflection of doing, students are involved in active thinking, quick reaction and interpersonal communication, which benifits the students’ overall development. 5) Under the guidance of the teacher, each student has equal opportunity to participate in the activities and think independently. Therefore, it is easy for them to maintain learning enthusiasm and develop good study habits.

Experiential Education in Business English based on TBI

John Dewey was the most famous proponent of experiential education, writing *Experience and Education* (1938). He advocated that education should be based upon the quality of experience, the most important of which is that the experience has continuity and interaction. Continuity is the idea that the experience comes from and leads to other experiences, in essence propelling the person to learn more. Interaction is when the experience meets the internal needs or goals of a person.[4]

Beginning in the 1970s, David Kolb helped to develop the modern theory of experiential learning, drawing heavily on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget.[5] His Experiential
Learning Model (ELM) consists of four elements: concrete experience, observation of and reflection on that experience, formation of abstract concepts based on the reflection, and testing the new concepts. These elements are the essence of a spiral of learning that can begin with any of the four elements, but typically begins with a concrete experience.

![Figure 1. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (ELM)](image)

**Selection of teaching material**

Featured by experiential education model, the teaching material of business English should be comprised of various subjects under authentic business environment. The writing principle of the teaching material should be consistent with those of task-based instruction, with the content graded systemetically, progressing from simple topics to more sophisticated ones. Interesting and advanced teaching material with vivid and precise language as well as authentic and diverse cases helps the students obtain knowledge of target language needed in communication with others to complete the tasks. Meanwhile, the teacher can also recommend relevant professional teaching material in business so that students not only have a good command of language, but also possess solid profession knowledge, which satisfies their needs of future career development.

**Task-based teaching activities**

According to Rod Ellis (2003), a task has four main characteristics: A task involves a primary focus on (pragmatic) meaning; a task has some kind of ‘gap’; the participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete the task; a task has a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome. In terms of business English classroom teaching, since experiential education takes students as the center of learning, it is crucial for the teacher to assign corresponding tasks to the students based on specific business setting and students’ language ability as well.

**Pre-task preparation**

The purpose of pre-task preparation is to make it clear to the students the learning objectives and learning content, and to set up a classroom atmosphere based on TBI which highlights learning through ‘doing’ tasks and ‘using’ the target language.

After the teacher introduces the requirements and objectives of the task, students are to be divided into several business groups, each playing a particular role in business interaction. Then the students, through discussion and cooperation, should consult the reference materials to fully understand the relevant business knowledge and skills, for instance, construction period, cost, quality, bidding documents, etc. needed to play the role they have been assigned. Judging by the difficulty of the task and the time it may concern, the teacher may assign the preparation task to students in advance. Both the teacher and the students should be fully prepared, ensuring the effectiveness and smoothness of using the target language.

**Task performance**

This period is the core of TBI, during which students manage to complete the task by performing their role in lifelike situation. Cooperative learning is strongly suggested at this stage since it is a diverse learning atmosphere with each student having unique learning styles pertinent to their success. The teacher has to make sure that everyone actively participates in the task.
Students are required either to give reports on what they discussed, or complete the role-play activity with other groups, depending on the tasks given by the teacher. The teacher can also organize contests on business English knowledge to figure out the weakness and strengths of the students.

**Post-task reflections and evaluation**

The post-task stage focuses on students’ reflections and the teacher’s evaluation. Experience gained from the task helps stimulate students’ interest in further learning. However, the experience is not always a positive one. Dewey also categorizes experiences as possibly being mis-educative and non-educative. A mis-educative experience is one that stops or distorts growth for future experiences. A non-educative experience is one in which a person has not done any reflection and so has obtained nothing for mental growth that is lasting.[8] So it is also significant for the teacher to have the student discuss what they have just done, especially those improper usages of business knowledge or language during their task performance.

The teacher also participates in the discussion since professional evaluation is needed. The teacher must be very skillful in handling various situation in that students’ performance and response can be very unpredictable. Final evaluation is made by the teacher as well as students. It helps the students make clearer the objectives of the task, review the knowledge they have just learnt, and have better preparation for future tasks.

**Change in roles of students and teachers**

Experiential education offers various tasks like games, simulations, role plays to the students in classrooms. It changes the way the teachers and students view knowledge. Knowledge becomes active for students, something that is transacted with in lifelike situations. And when students are active learners, their endeavors often take them outside the classroom walls, because action precedes attempts to synthesize knowledge.

Besides changing student roles, experiential education requires a change in the role of teachers. Teachers serve as providers, and not just imparters of knowledge. They become active learners, too, experimenting together with their students, reflecting upon the learning activities they have designed, and responding to their students’ reactions to the activities.

**Conclusion**

In traditional classes, teachers take up almost all the time giving lectures and imparting knowledge to the students. Students are passive learners, only required to listen and take notes, thus lacking sufficient intrinsic motivation to learn. However, experiential education takes the student as the center of learning. Specific situations and learning atmosphere designed by the teacher enhance the students’ emotional experience and therefore help the students to learn the target language by ‘using’ the language while ‘doing’ tasks. Since business English course is one that requires sufficient technique training, task-based instruction provides the students with more opportunities to practice what they have learnt and what they are going to learn in class, both language and business knowledge. Such experience can not only stimulate students’ interest in learning, but also cultivate their creative thinking. Therefore, it will be a great benefit for the students if experiential education based on TBI is applied in business English teaching.

**References**


[6] Information on http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/resources/teaching/theories/kolb