The Application of Stuart Hall’s Encoding-Decoding Model of Communication in Bilingual/Foreign Language Professional Course Teaching

Chan-ting CHEN
East China University of Political Science and Law,
No. 555 Longyuan Road, Songjiang University Town, Shanghai, China 201620

Keywords: Encoding-decoding, Bilingual, Foreign language, Professional course teaching.

Abstract. The significance of bilingual/foreign language professional course teaching in the educational modernization process has been reiterated by the central government of China. In practice however, bilingual/foreign language courses are found to be more difficult to teach and to receive satisfactory results than their Chinese parallel courses. The paper adopts Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model of communication to explain that additional linguistic encoding-decoding step makes bilingual/foreign language professional courses more difficult. The paper accordingly suggests that classroom communication helps to eliminate misunderstanding between teachers and students, so as to improve the teaching effectiveness of the bilingual/foreign language professional course.

Introduction

The Report of the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes the importance of education for a sustained development of the country. According to the Report, the Ministry of Education issued Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of High-level Undergraduate Education and Improving the Ability of Talents Cultivation in an All-round Way (New Era Higher Education 40 Articles), highlighting the importance of undergraduate education. The Opinion requires to “accelerate the construction of high-level undergraduate education and train a large number of high-quality professionals”, and to achieve the overall goal of “forming a world-class high-level undergraduate education with Chinese characteristics” by 2035.[1] High quality bilingual/foreign language professional courses are a necessary complement to the world-class undergraduate education.

Definition of Bilingual/Foreign Language Professional Course Teaching

Bilingual professional course teaching refers to a teaching model in which the second language, most of time English, and the native language are used alternatively in the process of professional course teaching. Foreign language professional course teaching is the advanced stage of bilingual teaching model, which requires teachers to give lectures in foreign language almost entirely. Though there is no specific document to require the percentage of foreign language used in bilingual professional course, it is a prevalent view that 50% would be a benchmark for bilingual one.[2] In foreign language professional course, instructors are allowed to use Chinese when it is necessary, yet there is still no document indicating how often Chinese can be used. A common sense is that the minimum percentage of English is 75%.

Bilingual/foreign language professional course is different from foreign language course. The former is to teach professional knowledges in foreign language form. The class content is the professional knowledge, while foreign language is the communication medium adopted to transmit the knowledge from the instructor to the learner. Differently, the purpose of the foreign language course is to improve learner’s foreign language ability through specific content medium. The benefit of bilingual/foreign language professional course is to enable learners to acquire major course knowledge and simultaneously improve professional foreign language.
Bilingual/foreign language professional teaching mode is ideal for cultivating compound talents who are proficient in both professional knowledge and foreign language competence if we can find an effective way to enhance the teaching result,[3] a bottleneck in the course teaching. The problem is brought by the difficulty of the professional knowledge and the usage of foreign language as communication medium. This means that learners in bilingual/foreign language professional class have to take on one more task than those in parallel Chinese professional class.

Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model of Communication

The encoding-decoding model of communication was first developed by Stuart Hall, a cultural studies scholar, in 1973. He explained the model in his essay Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse, offering a theoretical approach of the way media messages are produced, circulated, interpreted and reproduced. These four stages are relatively autonomous from each other, so that the coding of information controls its receptions but not transparent.[4]

With the encoding-decoding model of communication, Hall says that audiences will receive and interpret the same televisual informational in different ways depending on their ideologies, which are closely related to cultures, knowledges and histories. Though receivers may “distort” information variously, Hall argues that “encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate”[5] in normal situation. This guarantees effective communicative exchange, making communication possible.

Hall originally created the encoding-decoding model of communication to explain televisual message transmission. The model has been borrowed in many other research fields, i.e., translatology, intercultural communication. It is feasible to use the model in classroom teaching context, for the comparability between the encoding-decoding subjects in television communication and classroom teaching. Like television audiences, students will receive and interpret the same course information differently depending on their knowledge backgrounds and acquisition abilities. Also the encoding process to a certain extend limits the decoding operation, so that students are aware that they are learning a certain subject, though their reception of the knowledge varies.

The Application of the Encoding-Decoding Model of Communication in Bilingual/English Professional Course Teaching

The teaching process consists of two parts, the conduct of imparting knowledge by teachers and students’ acquisition of the knowledge. When teachers impart course knowledge, they in their mind transform the curriculum knowledge into specific teaching contents and methods, and convey the processed information to the audience in aural-visual forms. This is an encoding process of transforming abstract professional knowledge into content suitable for the audience to accept, and a process of choosing appropriate teaching methods to convey the content. On the learning part, students by listening and watching capture the course contents and absorb them as subjective cognitive parts. Students’ learning process is a decoding process. (Figure I)

![Diagram of Encoding-Decoding Procedure in Course Teaching](image)

Figure 1. Encoding-decoding procedure in course teaching.

Only when students successfully decode the information given by teachers, students’ actual performance and expected performance reach an ideal consistent state. However, due to the difference between the encoding and decoding subjects, it is not guaranteed that the information conveyed by teachers can be decoded and accepted successfully by students. Therefore, the ideal consistent state can only be distributed intermittently, not in a continuous pattern. Most of time, students’ expected performance and actual performance are inconsistent with each other, alternatively in a dominate position. (Figure II)
It is not beneficial for students when the expected performance is different from actual performance. When students’ expected performance is lower than their actual performance, the course does not satisfy their knowledge-seeking desire and ability. On the contrary, students may get disinterested in the course or be self-distrust about their ability if their actual performance keeps on being lower than the expected performance. It is teachers’ responsibility to stop either of the imbalance situation and to make the expected performance and actual performance converge again.

Once teachers find that students perform better than they expect, they will actively increase the amount of information taught to re-reach the ideal consistent state point. On the contrary, when teachers find that students' actual performance is not as good as the expected one, they need firstly to determine the cause of low actual performance. If the reason is that the presupposed aim is too high to be reached by average students, teachers may need to reduce workload and slow work pace for students. If the low performance is caused by insufficient subjective initiative of students, teachers need to create an incentive mechanism, i.e. a new curriculum assessment system with more consideration on students’ daily performance.

It is more difficult for bilingual/foreign language professional course instructors to reduce the gap between students’ expected performance and actual performance. Using the encoding-decoding model of communication for reference to explain class teaching process, there are two times of encoding and decoding in bilingual/foreign language professional class, while in parallel Chinese professional class there is only one time. In bilingual/foreign language professional course, teachers have to encode language in addition to encoding professional knowledge. Language encoding includes two aspects, to use grammatically appropriate professional foreign language as communicative media, and to use student friendly foreign language. Student friendly foreign language means that the language is simple enough for student to catch. For students, they have to decode language except decoding professional knowledge in bilingual/foreign language professional course. (Figure III)

**Solutions to Improve Teaching Effect of Bilingual/Foreign Language Professional Course**

The ideal consistent state between Students’ expected performance and actual performance maximizes teaching effectiveness. As previous discussed, due to the different subjects of teaching and learning process, the consistent state theoretically distributes intermittently. Still, teachers are able to reduce the curve’s fluctuation range to infinitely close to zero, as indicated by the ideal
model of students’ expected performance and actual performance consistent state. (Figure IV) The key to reach this ideal condition is to encourage teachers and students to communicate with each other effectively. With effective interaction between two subjects, teachers are able to receive feedbacks from students timely and adjust teaching contents accordingly. (Figure V)

Figure 4. Consistent state of students’ expected performance and actual performance.

Figure 5. Effective interaction in bilingual/foreign language professional course teaching.

The application of encoding-decoding model of communication reveals two pairs of positive correlation in bilingual/foreign language professional course, the correlation between teachers’ foreign language ability and the course teaching effect and the correlation between students’ foreign language ability and the course teaching effect. When both two subjects’ foreign language abilities reached a considerable high level, the extra linguistic encoding-decoding process then will not be a hurdle to the improvement of course effect anymore. Besides, influent English ability is a prerequisite of efficient classroom communication, a necessary step for teachers to obtain feedback from students and to fill the gap between students’ expected performance and their actual performance.

Conclusion

The world has witnessed a developing and opening-up China, whose further growth and integration into the world requires modernization in education. Bilingual/foreign language professional course teaching is a necessary step in the educational modernization process. Though playing an important role, the teaching model requires further research on its effectiveness improvement. By adopting Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model of communication, we find that the additional linguistic encoding and decoding process is the major reason to make the bilingual/foreign language professional course teaching more complicated than parallel courses taught in Chinese. The encoding-decoding model also helps to prove that high level foreign language proficiency of teachers and students, and effective communication between them are crucial for good teaching results.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by Shanghai Municipal Foundation for University English Teaching Model Course Construction and East China University of Political Science and Law Course Construction Foundation.
References


