Business English: An individualised learning programme

─An effective but defective ESP program

CHI Gui-min

(School of Foreign Languages, Guangdong University of Technology, Guangzhou Guangdong 5105200, China)

Abstract: Business English is the core course for ESP (English for Specific Purposes) programs which empathizes the effectiveness and pragmatism. Feasibility is the crucial element for business English programs especially for in-services business people. *Business English-An individualised learning programme* is an effective and radical business English program, while its content is mainly learners-providing. There are some weaknesses that need to be considered.

Key words: business English; individualized; organizer

1. Introduction

Business English is an individualised learning programme which "represents a radical new approach to the provision of in-service business English courses" (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990, p. 8). It is a flexible learner-centered ESP program basing on two sharply different principles. Firstly, the students provide the content. Secondly, the book is designed from the perspective of a businessperson rather than the language teacher. With the help of sophisticated formats provided in this book, students can re-access, revise and use the information to fulfil their needs. *Business English* is suitable for the students from post-beginners to advance for the sake of the three characteristics─social language, formula phrases and word partnership (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990). This program depends on the lexical approach emphasizing the collocation and word grammar.

However, it is easy for students to produce grammatical mistakes without the systematic language learning procedures while they only rely on the language fragments to construct their language. There is still lake of examination in practice to consider the standard of this program. Although it is an effective way to increase students' lexical power, there are still some defective weaknesses remain in this program.

2. A new attempt in business English courses

Traditionally there are two kinds of business English textbooks. One is a conventional course book for general business purposes; the other is an extensive combination of photocopying material or the course book for specific business purposes (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990).

For the conventional ones, "a striking feature is the large number of general books, which seem to differ very little from course books for EGP (English for General Purposes)─working through a standard set of structures, teaching much common core as well as some work-related vocabulary, and dealing equally with all the skills" (Robinson, 1991, p. 98). So it is common that the students majoring in English have the opportunity to choose an

---

CHI Gui-min, lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Guangdong University of Technology; research fields: English teaching and learning, teaching methodology.

optional course in business English, who are provided with a general textbook applicable to a range of business situations. These conventional textbooks are recommended to the pre-service courses and appropriate for the students without or with little on-the-job experience. In these books, "most units contain work on the traditional four skills plus specific grammar and vocabulary development" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 55). Moreover this course consumes a long period of time, usually over several months or years.

However, for in-service business courses, organizers have to compromise on the requirement from clients, employers or companies to provide "tailor-made" courses, even though it is necessary to include as much as possible in the courses. Then "the photo-copy approach" comes to be the other alternative. "It is possible to choose material which are relevant to the student's declared objectives, and to tailor course content to a greater or lesser extent to job-specific needs" (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990, p. 8). There is an obvious disadvantage that no overall course plan is available to both students and teachers. From the development of ESP, Robinson (1991) suggested that more targeted business English textbook might be designed for specific students with different needs. Those books are more skill specific or genre-based. Like "*Speaking Effectively*", it aims to develop the fluency and language competence of learners of business English by focusing on the most common business communication situations and by giving learners the opportunity to practice the typical language of those situations (Comfort, et al., 1994).

By compared with these two texts types, *Business English* (an individualised learning programme) tries to make good use of these course books of business for both general purposes and specific purposes. From the content of this book, it includes nine sections ranging from personal language to professional language through business settings. Students are encouraged to talk about themselves and their jobs. They need to be aware of the language learning in business, identify the language they need, then find out their own personal language. They are invited to think about what he or she needs to learn so that they can provide the content by themselves by using the formats in the book. In order to improve the language competence including appropriateness and fluency, it is essential for them to learn the social language, resource text, and word partnership and business grammar. After having the fundamental language structure, they will be much easier to acquire the knowledge on their professional field, such as giving a presentation, making a telephone call, attending business meetings and communicating with people from different culture backgrounds effectively. These settings seem to very common in business for general purposes. However, *Business English* is an individualised program that focuses on individual self-study. Students can choose the sections that they need to learn according to their different language levels. This course is used for job-experience or in-service learners who bring business knowledge and skills to the language-learning situation. "Settings and carrier content are mainly taken from the learner's own business contexts" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 56). Students can learn from themselves. It is apparent that this program is more specific aiming at meeting the needs of individual learners. Robinson (1991) pointed out that many books that were basically designed for classroom and interactive use claimed to be fit for self-study. While in contrast with *Business English* those books are impractical. So this individualized program is a breakthrough in business English and an attempt to let learners get benefit from themselves by the encouragement from their teacher and the book. In order to highlight the characteristics of *Business English*, there are four sections which can represent the features of this individualized programme, which are language learning organizer, personal language organizer, word partnership organizer and business grammar organizer. The word "organizer" needs to be mentioned and explained. It is used to remind students of organizing information instead of recording what they learn (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990).

3. Examinations of several typical sections in the book

3.1 Examinations of section one and section two

These two sections emphasize the needs of the learners. "Success in learning can only come about if the learner is motivated. Making the course relevant to job or study needs is usually a good way to motivate the learner" (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p. 71). These two sections help to "find out what language skills a learner needs in order to perform a particular role" (Richards, 2001, p. 52).

The first section—language learning organiser is crucial for students to discover what they need to learn and design how to learn effectively. It is an investment for students to study most in shorter time with less money. Students are required to fill the frameworks with the topics, functions and situations where they need to use English with some key words given in the book. They can talk about their daily routine and annual routine. Especially they can describe them in their own language if they find it difficult to express in English. The purpose is to find out the English they need, like making a map to help them know where to go. They will be motivated and will realize their language needs immediately in this way. They can be aware of the gap between their language learning information and professional information. By compared with other business courses, need analysis becomes a fully integrated part of *Business English* rather than preceding the course. The learner's need is more subjective which is derived from insiders and correspond to cognitive and affective factors (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). This plays an important role for their future learning process.

From the point of credibility, "material designed for *Business English* and aims at learners who have some knowledge of the subject must be seen to represent the world that those learners are familiar with" (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p. 127). So this individualized programme starts with learners themselves. In section two, students are encouraged to talk about their personal issues including their backgrounds, jobs, companies, products, their values and philosophy, their families and friends. By using the personal language they can choose to talk about themselves when they meet and communicate with people from different countries professionally. It is important and essential to build up the good relationship with their business partners for future cooperation. This section makes this course quite different from other conventional business courses. Most business courses will divide the content into specific business settings like meeting people, telephoning and reporting which are directly related to professional practice. For example, *Business Objectives* focuses on language and skills in business, and less attention is paid for learner's personal language needs. However when some learners are not certain about their needs that they will feel resistant on some more serious language work, and this will become the psychological obstacle for learners to study further. In contrast, Wilberg & Lewis (1990) pointed out that *Business English* could provide certain face validity for the student and material to facilitate the personal relationship between the teacher and student.

3.2 Examination of section three

Word partnership organiser represents the lexical approach—the radical new approach to language analysis, syllabus design and material writing for both general and business English teaching. This section presents a group of important keywords including contract, sales, prices and so on for *Business English*, and it helps learners find and record important word partnerships. Those keywords are the core business vocabulary with higher frequency. In the book, space is given for students to choose their own keywords and find out the lexical collocations. There are also background words provided to let students divide basically verb-noun, adjective-noun, and verb-adjective-noun word partnerships into groups and make sentences with them. "Collocation describes the company that a word keeps" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 85). The learning of word partnerships can give

students a quick way to master the proficiency required. Usually business students have a large vocabulary, but they don't know how to combine the words together. When they need to express in English, they can come up with many nouns in mind, while they are difficult to make meaningful sentences that are well organized. So it is important to build up the word partnerships. It is obvious that vocabulary of *Business English* is needed for production purposes. Thus storage and retrieval are significant. The technique of learning vocabulary involves cognitive processing rather than mechanical learning of lists. Collocation is one of the effective ways to gather vocabulary and facilitate cognitive processing (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Students are also required to use their own keywords and collect background words by using a dictionary or talking to their teachers. In this way, they can provide the carrier content to meet their personal needs.

3.3 Examination of section four

"It is often said that ESP teaching is not concerned with grammar. While much of the skills-oriented work in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) or ESP does not concentrate on grammar in itself, it is incorrect to consider grammar teaching as outside the remit of ESP" (Dudley-Evan & St John, 1998). As Wilberg & Lewis (1990) quoted in the individualized programme, "without grammar you can't say much, without vocabulary you can't say anything". Grammar in *Business English* is important too. Business people need to communicate with each other in English and make oral presentation. To avoid serious weaknesses in grammar interfere with the productive skills, students will require more specific help in grammar. There are some business course books which cover the grammar of English systematically with particular attention given to verbs-tenses, conditionals and modals. In *Macmillan Business English programme* (Badger & Menzies, 1993), there is an irregular verb list and grammar index focusing the grammar points throughout contents. Similarly, grammar notes and glossary which is closer to academic language courses are provided in *Business Objectives* (Hollett, 1991). A practice book called *Build Your Business Grammar* (Bowen, 1997) covers most key structures in business based on a typical situation found in business world. In contrast, *Business English* considers many compromises in in-service professional courses and realizes that "grammatical accuracy must be sacrificed to communicative efficacy" (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990, P. 31). It is wise to make good use of students' considerable language learning experience. In this section there is no formal grammar of the kind found in basic course books, but a wide variety of material including general business grammar, grammar of change, word families, "reporting" verbs, expressions and mistakes. In general business grammar section, there are some general remarks which can make about the language used to discuss and negotiate effectively and help to avoid sounding dogmatic or inflexible like using "would" or qualifiers to say things diplomatically. For instance, instead of saying, "That is unacceptable", students can say, "That would be unacceptable" to sound more tentative. The grammar of change section focuses on different elements in language ranging from verbs to prepositions. The changes also result from different expressions of time. In word families the words chosen in the book are the professional words which are related grammatically. Students need to generate the collocation of the core word, basically in verb-adjective-noun structure. This section has much in common with word partnership. There are twenty-four "business verbs" selected in this section. Students are doing word study by using dictionaries to find out the accurate collocation of those special verbs. They are also provided with a long list of important verbs for reference. For many special expressions *Business English* covers the important verb "have", two-word verbs like "back up", prepositions and prefixes. "Students can devote a lesson to collecting expression using the empty verb 'have' or they can deliberately audit professional materials for use for prepositional expressions with by etc" (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990, p. 33). For important mistakes, there are two kinds of mistakes emphasized in this book, one is grammatical mistakes like the collocation of the verbs, the other is the

misconceived sentences which need to be re-thought in natural English expressions. Students are required to find out the most important mistakes and correct them by themselves with the help of the teacher. Word contrasts section is intended to highlight the frequent confusions to students at lower levels of ability. In this whole section, students can choose the context in which to practice the desired language by using the framework materials. "Frameworks are designed to prompt the production of language" (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p. 132). Students can discover more about their language weaknesses by completing the frameworks with their authentic language inputs.

4. Weaknesses remain in *Business English*

Business English is a radical individualized programme. Apart from the effectiveness of this book, there are some factors needed to consider. Is the business grammar that is not systematic suitable for the students at low levels of ability? For combining grammar, mistakes are inevitable. This program is designed for self-study, however, what is the solution for students who depend on the traditional teaching method? In this book, most of the sections focus on the speaking and writing skills training, while listening and reading skills are also important for communication with business people. In *Communicating in Business* (Sweeney, 2000), there are over 80 different recordings in the book with tasks accompanied ranging from general comprehension points to understanding important details. In contrast, there is no audio material provided in *Business English.* How well can the word partnerships help students to master their professional language only depending on their own lexical learning experience? There are not sufficient authentic materials examples for students to follow, although students are encouraged to provide the content from their jobs. Those questions are still waiting for answers.

5. Conclusion

Business English: An individualized learning programme, is a radical attempt in business English for specific purposes based on a lexical approach and individual learner's needs. It is an effective way to increase learners' vocabulary, which is the fundamental and crucial element for language learning. Teacher is the consultant and the language audit to help students find their needs and to stimulate and motivate them to use the language as much as possible. Students are the center of the course and the important decision-maker. "The basic idea of *Business English* is that the student provides the content and the teacher provides the language. The book itself provides the sophisticated formats which make possible this change of emphasis" (Wilberg & Lewis, 1990, p. 9).

References:
Badger, I. & Menzies, P. (1993). *Macmillan business English programme.* London and Basingstoke: Macmillan publishers.
Bowen, T. (1997). *Build your business grammar.* London: Language Teaching Publications.
Comfort, J., Rogerson, P., Stott, T. & Utley, D. (1994). *Speaking effectively.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Dudley-Evans, T. & St John, M. J. (1998). *Development in English for specific purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Ellis, M. & Johnson, C. (1994). *Teaching business English.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hollett, V. (1991). *Business objectives.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Robinson, P. C. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide.* New York: Prentice Hall.
Sweeney, S. (2000). *Communicating in business: A short course for business English students.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wilberg, P. & Lewis, M. (1990). *Business English: An individualised learning programme.* London: Language Teaching Publications.

(Edited by Lily and Lee)