

**Developing the BE Students' Intercultural Communication Competence through
Extracurricular English Activities Combined with Business Skill Practice
--- A Case Study of the BE Students from Higher Vocational College,
West China Normal University**

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Abstract

Intercultural communication competence is defined, in the new standards for English, as communicative competence among difference cultures. Therefore, the purpose of the Business English (BE) teaching is to help students develop communicative competence, which includes both linguistic competence and cultural awareness while training business skills. Well designed and full-conducted extracurricular English activities will be an efficient way to provide students with opportunity to experience authentic situations, and raise their awareness of the sensibility of communicative routines in the target culture, so as to make the students obtain the awareness of specific communicative rules and routines that exist in the target culture and the ability to apply them accordingly. In this paper, the author will make an effort to be different from others and attempts to offer a new way to this question by putting forward a proposition for cultivating cultural awareness of the students from the Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University in extracurricular English activities. Firstly, the paper goes back the basic development history of extracurricular English activities from literature review and then emphasizing the importance and advantages of extracurricular English activities for the students' intercultural awareness. Furthermore, the paper discusses their designing and conducting all kinds of extracurricular English activities from the theoretical point of view, combined with business practice such as English Bar, English Club, English Cultural Festival, English International Trade Negotiation Room and et el on the basis of the Business English students from Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University in order to explore and innovate a new way to cultivate the students' intercultural awareness beyond general Business English teaching.

Keywords: intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence, extracurricular English activities, business English teaching, business skill practice, higher vocational education

I. INTRODUCTION

Today in the world of globalization the importance of university education and opportunities of international experience provided to the students are getting vital. This is mostly because the companies are targeting the foreign markets rather than domestic markets as a result of saturation of home markets and effects of globalization. This trend of going global change the employee selection procedures as today majority of firms are looking for co-workers who can speak at least two languages, has a university diploma and freedom of traveling both in and out of the country. In short we can say that today the businesses are conducted across the borders of one nation which makes the world an economic and political marketplace as a whole (Hugenberg et al, 1996).

At the same time, with China's increasing integration into the world's economic system, we are witnessing more and more international business dealings taking place in multicultural contexts. Many Chinese firms conduct and expand their business globally by exporting their products and service, importing the raw materials or machinery they need. What's more, they also venture into cross-border M & A transactions, and some of them such as Lenovo, Haier and Huawei, are beginning to compete with leading multinationals. But many Chinese firms investigating in overseas markets arrive unprepared, overpay for acquisitions, fail to do their due diligence, and are not sure how their new foreign holding fit into their global strategies. The result is a recent series of nasty corporate disasters. The litany of Chinese mistakes clearly echoes Western companies' own in the China market (Dou, 2011).

In the intercultural context, intercultural communication education should be more concerned about the cultivation of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence is defined as the understandings, attitude, competencies and identities which enable effective participation in a cross-cultural setting (Cheng, 2010). As such it is presented as a crucial competence for the BE students from Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University. Needless to say, the Business English students should have intercultural communication competence for their future business career and then will be adapted to the intercultural context of business with foreign countries. In order to change the present situation where the teachers paid less attention to the authors only takes the BE students from Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University for example, and attempts to find a new way to improve the BE students' intercultural communication competence in our university.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND TEACHING'S PROBLEMS

Intercultural communication competence is defined by Chen and Staresta (1998) as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment". Of all the approaches developed in intercultural communication competence training, the culture assimilator method has been exposed to the most intense secreting and

analysis. According to Albert (1995: 157-158), the Culture Assimilator method exposes trainees to a wide variety of situations in the target culture(s), focuses on differences in perceptions and interpretations in behaviors, simulates important aspects of the experience of entering a new culture, e.g. ambiguity and uncertainty, centers on key cultural differences between trainees' own culture and the target culture, and fosters trainees' active involvement.

However, the training experiment program which includes extracurricular English activities combined with business skill practice should be one of the culture assimilator methods. This is what the training experiment discussed below aimed at in other words it tested the effectiveness of the culture assimilator method in cultivating the intercultural communication competence of the BE students from Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University.

In our Higher Vocational College English teaching, due to the impact of unified teaching methods, teachers often overlook the cultivation of the students' intercultural communication competence and only focus on teaching the students' English language points and some basic business theoretical courses. Therefore, the training program will benefit to develop extra-curricular activities to enhance the students' intercultural communication competence.

It's very helpful to develop extra-curricular activities to enhance BE students' intercultural communication competence. For example: BE teachers can require BE students to collect some of the foreign cultural information, such as picture books, magazines, photos, newspapers and their to study the costumes, decorations, hairstyles, etc. of the different peoples, so that they can better understand different cultures, customs, aesthetic standards, and more intuitively understand the foreign art, sculpture, architectural styles and customs. Furthermore, the use of films, televisions and videos can guide students to observe what happens in the English-speaking countries. Then BE students can know what people eat, what people wear, what house people live and how people make friends, what festival people have, how people celebrate festivals, as well as people's facial expressions, gestures, etc. Also, BE teachers can allow BE students to familiarize themselves with the text dialogue, and then students perform role play. In addition, BE students can read literatures, which is also a non-neglected element to improve BE students' intercultural communication competence..

2.1 Extracurricular English activities

The extra-curriculum made its first appearance in American colleges in the nineteenth century. It complemented the curriculum as much as subverted it. The students found in it a kind of laboratory for practical and vocational interests. The first extracurricular activities were student literary societies (which had roots in the previous century at Harvard and Yale), debate clubs, and by mid-century, Greek letter fraternities and sororities. Students also initiated and organized the early athletic programs on American college campuses. Literary societies were on the decline by the turn of the twentieth century, and some educators felt that less desirable extracurricular activities were now distracting students from their curricular responsibilities. Intercollegiate athletics soon became the dominant element in the extra-curriculum in most American colleges and high schools. Extracurricular activities are activities performed by students that fall

outside the realm of the normal curriculum of school or university education. Extracurricular activities exist at all levels of education from 4th-6th junior high/ high school, college and university education (Wikipedia, 2011). At the present time, extracurricular English activities have been going well on every campus in the Chinese colleges and universities including our college. The extracurricular English activities involve different kinds of events which cover English Corner, English Drama Show, English Song Contest, English Cultural Week and others.

2.2 Intercultural Business Skill Practice

The border lines are no longer discriminating business of different countries from each other rather the ease of transportation in short make the world a global village. Therefore, for business to be successful in this international competition race it is very important to hire people with high levels of ICC. Can an effective ICC be learned (Hugenberg, et al, 1996) or born so? The components of ICC highlighted both learned such as “language for communication and cultural knowledge for communication and cultural knowledge and inherited “such as personal traits” factors for better ICC. In this study Auncion-Lander (1977) listed various textbooks, journals, courses and simulation games which can be used to raise the acceptance among different cultures.

The vocational college carries out business skill-training teaching in international and domestic business, stimulates students’ interest and enthusiasm for learning business, and combines theory with practical application closely, which is more helpful to improve students practice abilities. In this way, the students will be familiar with all aspects of international business practice standards and professional qualifications for their required foundations, so as to develop their independent abilities and requirements to work in domestic and international business.

However, many main problems still exist in domestic and international business teaching of our higher vocational education. Especially, under the employment pressure, most universities have realized the importance of practical ability, but in practice, most of the teachers are from school to school without any practical experience, and teaching from theory to theory, leading to the phenomenon of word-to-word teaching and theory separating from practice. Moreover, applying with the lack of practice bases in universities, many enterprises, are not willing to accept interns, so even though colleges want to easily find a practicing bases but turn to the imitating practice in the laboratory which has an satisfactory effect. However, business is not only an effective applied subject, but also an important management one. And then problems still existing in the training pattern, that severely constrain the improvement of education level of and development of education of business, include the followings in our higher vocational college.

2.2.1 Lack of the Curriculum Characteristics

Our Higher Vocational College offers Public Relations, International Business, Practice of Foreign Affairs, E-commerce Course and so on. The courses of Business English teaching in our Higher Vocational College is compressed and cut simply from the undergraduate courses of Business English. The knowledge

of Business English courses is unrealistic for real business work, and then the contents of Business English teaching are too theoretical to be rained and obtain business professional skills.

2.2.2 Lack of the Dual-qualified Teachers

Most Business English teachers are trained language teachers, who lack real experiences and the confidence to teach business specific contents in Business English textbooks. Although the teacher might evince interest in business, she / he needs not be expert in business content area. As Ana A. Esteban and Man. L. P. Canado (2004) pointed out: the world of business they were presented with was unfamiliar to them, which limited their ability as teachers of English. Therefore, Business English teacher should be to some extent familiar with the specialized area of business, although she / he is not a subject specialist.

2.2.3 Lack of Different Teaching Platforms

The students in our Higher Vocational College are not good at English. Though they also have learned English for more than many years, majorities of the students are still not capable of taking the business course in English. It is no doubt that the teachers in our Higher Vocational College must choose “translating method” to teach Business English and the students also take down those translated version word by word by the teachers’ writing on the blackboard or showing on screen. Therefore the students have rather limited relevant vocabulary and business background information. The conventional in-class teacher-feeding methods or “translating methods” is not sufficient to develop interdisciplinary qualified students for the human resource market.

3. SOME SUGGESTIONS OF EXTRACURRICULAR ENGLISH ACTIVITIES COMBINED WITH BUSINESS SKILL-TRAINING TEACHING

The world is an open one, and with the accelerating process of globalization, the exchange between various countries is becoming more and more frequent. Thus, the cultivation of students’ intercultural communicative competence should be an important goal of our Business English teaching. Meanwhile, combining theoretical knowledge with practical hands-on experience, the German model of "dual education" in vocational training has proven to be a real success story and provides young people with the professional skills needed in the modern globalized world (Zhuan, 2012). Currently, our college has set up the relative intercultural communication courses such as “ An Introduction to Anglo-American Culture”, “Practice of Foreign Affairs,” to spread intercultural knowledge and skills, enhance students’ awareness of intercultural communication, and train students’ abilities of intercultural communication. Of course, lectures and reports in class are all helpful ways that might attach much attention in educating students’ knowledge of intercultural communication. All these above efforts have got positive feedback. However, in the creation of intercultural communication teaching mode adequate attention should be paid to extracurricular English activities combined with business skill-training teaching. At the same time, the traditional teacher-centered teaching methods should be changed to student-centered. Team-work, presentation, role-play and other activities should be introduced into the teaching to inspire the students’ initiatives of pursuing knowledge of

intercultural communication. This will not only help students to master the knowledge of intercultural communication, but also improve their business basic skills to achieve the comprehensive development of intercultural communicative competence and business skills. Therefore, the college should create teaching and training new modes which combine the all kinds of extracurricular English activities with business skill-training teaching together to reach our ideal teaching and training integrated platform for the students of our Higher Vocational College.

3.1 Establishing Meeting Hall for Business Negotiation

On Chinese campus, almost every college and university has one of the most commonly seen out-of-class activities, that is, English Corner or English Square. Students from different majors are interested in English Corners or English Square, because they have an occasion to practice their spoken English without pressure, and then they have one more opportunity of getting to know more people and making friends. However, English Corner or English Square, if left to itself, may turn out to be a failure for BE students. Therefore, we should reform the traditional English Corner, English Square and English Debating Competition into such as Meeting Hall for Business Negotiation. We'll arrange for a foreign teacher or Chinese teacher to work as a negotiator when necessary, and a prompter when negotiation or communication among certain students comes to a dead lane. At this time, foreign teachers or Chinese teacher (for teaching English) are also involved, which motivates the BE students. When they get positive response from foreign teachers, BE students will see the "fruit of their hard work. As a result, the BE students will become more confident and interested in this activity. Thus, students also develop skills specific to their business career path and imperative for future job success. Students have opportunities to improve their leadership, interpersonal and intercultural communication skills while also increasing their self-confidence. By working together with other individuals, students learn to negotiate, communicate, manage conflict, and lead others. Taking part in this out-of-the-classroom activity will help BE students to understand the importance of intercultural communicative skills, time management, and intellectual competence. Extracurricular involvement allows students to link business knowledge with practical experience, thereby leading to a better understanding of their own abilities, talents, and career goals. Future business employers seek individuals with these increased skill levels, making these involved BE students more viable in the job market. Specifically, participation in extracurricular activities and leadership roles in these activities are positive linked to attainment of one's first job and to business managerial potential.

3.2 Simulating the Customs

Every BE student should know that the Customs is very important place where all sorts of business activities will be happened there. Especially, the BE students have learned many courses such as International Trade, International Import and Export and so on. If they want to obtain really practical knowledge about international business, they should know to deal with various international application procedures at the Customs. Maybe, the knowledge of international import and export business is not theoretic, but very

practical. If the BE students have some practical experiences for international business, they will further prefer these international business courses. Furthermore, extracurricular activities provide a setting of international trade to become involved and to interact with other BE students, this leading to increased learning and enhanced development.

The simulating Customs may be shifted by the traditional English drama or English performances and so on. One group of BE students could play roles as the Customs officials, another group of BE students would play roles as businessmen or businesswoman. The BE students will change the performance on the stage into the business practice. The BE students will have many chances to deal with different procedures for the Customs application, and learn a lot of things through these contexts and working style.

Nevertheless, this kind of extracurricular activity provides a place for BE students to come together, learn how to work and accomplish their common goals. Within this community, where BE students will feel comfortable and refresh with one another, their professional learning and development are enhanced and BE students interesting in extracurricular is positively impacted.

Such professional extracurricular activity typically focuses on one career area of interest. Meanwhile, the BE students will enjoy learning job related skills in an effort to be fully prepared for future business success.

3.3 Set up different business services based workshops

Our Higher Vocational College has different student organizations and societies to host several workshops and cultural activities after class. Therefore, the BE students in our Higher Vocational College will be organized to go to work in business services based workshops, such as English Bar, English Hotel, Restaurant, Shops and so on.

The College should encourage BE students to participate in these business service based workshops, so that the BE students can be practical of business service. If so, they also will have much refresh experiences in business services. All kinds of business services will be decorated with western cultural style. The shopper or customers will try their best to speak English. Sometimes, the BE students may invite foreign teachers as customers to bargain with BE students. In this way, the BE students feel some special like the Western culture. And then they really like to work such business service and really enjoy talking about something with classmates in English. There is no doubt that they will not only improve their English, but also know how to serve different people. Of course, this will enhance their intercultural communication competence.

In this way, the BE students will overcome the fearing emotion in their minds. Especially, they are not afraid of “losing their faces” in front of the people including their teachers and classmates, because the Chinese students always look shy and dislike to service the other in the business services as waiters, shoppers and so on. The BE students will really realize that the important roles in the social life the business services play and are willing to devote themselves to business services. Furthermore, the BE students will know that social work is different in the world. No matter whoever does any valuable work, he or she should be respected by other people. Maybe, the BE students will change their minds through these specific

extracurricular activities, just like interns in the different business services. Meanwhile, different extracurricular activities combined business practices will offer the BE students an opportunity to work with others and to gain essential life skills in business service-related activities. In short, this is the good beginning and early preparation for future business practice activities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the problems on Chinese vocational college students' intercultural communication competence, which shows the importance and urgency to reform college Business English teaching. It is necessary that BE teaching quality in our higher vocational college should be improved and BE students' intercultural communication competence should be cultivated. The BE students' intercultural communication competence can be promoted if the colleges, teachers and students attach great importance to and actively involved in BE teaching reform.

Thus, the purpose of business English teaching is to help BE students develop their intercultural communication competence, which includes both linguistic competence and intercultural awareness. Well designed and full-conducted extracurricular English activities will be an efficient way to provide BE students with opportunity to experience authentic situations, and raise their awareness of the sensibility of intercultural communicative routines in the target culture, so as to make the BE students obtain the awareness of specific communicative rules and routines that exist in the target culture and the ability to apply them accordingly.

Therefore, the authors have made an effort to be different from others and attempts to explore some new ways to this question by putting forward a proposition for cultivating intercultural awareness of the students from the Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University in extracurricular English activities. Firstly, the authors went back the basic development history of extracurricular English activities from literature review and then emphasizing the importance and advantages of extracurricular English activities for the BE Students' intercultural awareness. Furthermore, the authors highlighted to design different extracurricular English activities from the theoretical point of view, closely combined with business practice, the authors pointed out that there are some problems which included the lack of the curriculum characteristics, lack of the dual-qualified teachers and lack of different teaching platforms on the basic of the Business English students from Higher Vocational College, China West Normal University in order to explore and innovate a new way to cultivate the students' intercultural awareness beyond general English teaching. And then, the authors discussed about the present problems and suggestion that involved changing traditional campus extracurricular activities, establishing meeting hall for business negotiation simulating the Customs and setting up different business services based workshops such as English Bar, English Club and so on.

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