



A New Perspective of the Concept and Development Trend of Business English in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers have made an ongoing research into the concept and definition of business English in higher education institutions. There have been quite a number of different ideas, but so far some disagreement still exists. The paper, through review and reflection into these researchers and their ideas, has concluded that the concept and implication of business English in China has been broadened, and business English, as a comprehensive inter-discipline developed from the EGBP in ESP, is now faced with some new development trends such as specialty regulation and degree-awarding flexibility.

Keywords: Business English, Concept, Development Trend, Reflection

1. Development Route and Current Situation of Business English

Based on the theory of Economics of Language proposed by American Marschak (1965), language also possesses the nature of economics, namely language, as an unavoidable tool for economic activities, does have the common feature of economics: such as reduction of costs to optimize value and effect. The macro economic value of language application chiefly lies in its position, frequency, linguistic change and people’s evaluation of language and linguistic policies used in the economic and social life of different era whereas the micro economic value of language study mainly relies on the relationship of percentage between the investment of language education and the economic return of it. The higher the economic return is expected to be, the bigger the investment cost is needed.

On the basis of this theory, the development route of business can be summarized as in Figure 1. It can be seen from the figure that business English is a necessary result brought by the demand of modern development, the increase of social needs and the expected high economic benefit. Business English, as a part of applied linguistics, has been more and more important in academic study and has been very popular in the mind of learners. It can be said that business English is a necessary selection of language study to minimize investment costs and to maximize economic benefits under the driving force of higher and higher social demand.

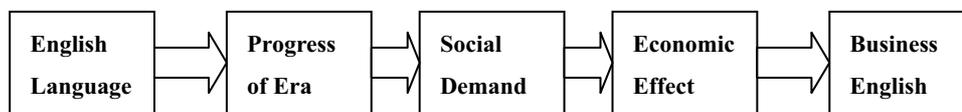


Figure 1. Route Selection of Business English development

Therefore, it is argued that the study of a second language can be deemed as a phenomenon of economics, and at least it can be said that learners studying a second language are partly impacted by the so-called social and economic factors, namely the consideration of the investment costs and expected returns of language study. Just because the study of business English is expected by the learner to have higher returns, such as the realization of double targets for learning multi-skills including English language and knowledge of particular discipline, there has been an emerging trend of business English study around the whole world.

In the West, in the middle 1990s, linguistics changed silently in the wave of economic and social changes, during which researchers stated to concentrate their research focus on the application of languages in various contexts rather than on

the regulation of language usages. At this period, ESP, namely English for Special Purpose, came into being. Contemporary business English originates from the Western countries in this era as a sub-branch of the so-called ESP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Ellis & Johnson, 1994). It is also a special branch of learning appearing in the background of economic globalization and trade internationalization. Currently, business English is becoming more and more important in academic position and has become the sub-branch of ESP with the fasted development. For example, in the UK, many series of business English books such as BEC and Market Leader, have been widely published and applied in countries like China today.

In China, business English can be traced back to the earliest era of 1950s, when high education institutions started to set the course of Foreign Trade English which mainly included such core courses as English electronic communication, selected readings of the Western paper, and oral English of foreign trade, etc. In 1990s, going along with the globalization of Chinese economy and the rapid increase of foreign trade volume, talents of business English had become increasingly welcome by the society. As a result, business English began to replace foreign trade English. For example, in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, a new school called the School of English for Business specializing in teaching business English undergraduate and postgraduate programs was established with the integration of teachers from Faculty of English Language and Culture, School of Law, and School of International Trade and Economics.

Just as what Mo Zhaishu (2006) argued in his paper that business English development in China could be investigated from the basic principle of language economics. On the one hand, China's quick integration into the world economy required the multi-skilled talents educated with business English programs, which had been declared in the 2000 Chinese Higher Education Guideline that the English major of universities should educate multi-skilled talents with good English language and proficient cultural, economic, and research skills. On the other, it had been the expected higher returns from education investment that had promoted the quick development of business English in China in that the study of business English could benefit learners in learning some specialized knowledge at the same time of making their language more applicable.

At present, business English is highly recognized in the society as one of the most popular disciplines. Statistics shows that the number of universities that have opened business English major courses exceeds 800, and the schooling levels, majors and degrees are more and more diversified. For example, in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, there are already five undergraduate programs and four postgraduate programs. Graduates of business English are very popular in MNCs and other international business enterprises.

2. Concept and Scope of business English

In recent years, there have a variety of ideas concerning the definition and conception of business English, among which three major types include: business English belongs to pure linguistics, business English belongs to ESP, and business English belongs to cross-discipline.

2.1 Business English belongs to pure linguistics:

The scholars holding such a point of view argues that business English and common English are not at all different theoretically because both of them belongs to the range of linguistics, and the former not a special form of language differing from others. For example:

2.1.1 Business English is neither a creation of basic English nor a special type of language, but no more than a unique attitude and view of English language (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

2.1.2 Business English is not an independent special language but a form of English language added with a number of business terms. Business English shares the same words and expressions with common English, but they do have some differences in the interpretation and usage of words and terms (Tan Hui-juan, 1999).

2.1.3 Business English is a language used by people working in business fields, who selects words and expressions and grammatical structures to communicate in oral and written forms in order to fulfill their purpose of business operation and comply with internal customs and practices (Zhang Zuocheng, 2000; Yang Ling-li, 2003).

2.1.4 Business English is a not a special form of language with no clear rules of grammar, but an application of common English in business context (Zhou Yi, 2006).

2.2 Business is a sub-branch of ESP:

This concept is fundamentally the same as the above one. ESP itself is regarded as a form of applied linguistics. There are quite a lot of supporters for this idea such as:

2.2.1 Business English should be included in the range of ESP as a sub-branch because it shares similar features with ESP, such as the analysis of demand and the selection of language materials. Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Ellis & Johnson, (1994).

2.2.2 Business English should be considered to be a forth-level of learning branch following English linguistics, applied English linguistics, and ESP (Lin Tainhu, 2004).

2.2.3 In 2005, Li Hong argued that in China business English chiefly belonged to EGBP (English for General Business Purpose) in that it aimed to add some common business knowledge in the skills of English language.

2.2.4 Similarly, in 2006, Jin Jinghua believed that business English should be classified into ESP, which could also be divided into two types such as: EGBP and ESBP (English for Specific Business Purpose), among which EGBP targeted to those learners who were lack of working experience while ESBP was designed to train those professional people who had business working experience. Currently in China, academic research focuses on the field of EGBP.

2.3 *Business English belongs to cross-discipline:*

There are more and more scholars in China who tend to believe that business English belongs to a cross-discipline combining linguistics and business management, for example:

2.3.1 Zhang Xinhong and Li Ming (2002), professors of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, argue in their article that business English is a functional transformation of English which possesses unique features with business knowledge and English language mixed.

2.3.2 Mo Zhaishu, et al (2006), professor of Hunan University, argues that business English, based on the foundation of linguistics and applied linguistics, has become a comprehensive cross-discipline absorbing other branches of learning in theory and practice.

2.3.3 Zhou Huahao (2006) has expressed a similar point of view concerning business English, who believes that business English formerly belonging to ESP has been enlarged in contents into a cross-discipline concept including international trade, finance, commercial law, e-commerce, and cross-culture communication, etc.

It is concluded from the above discussions that business English is a mixture of English language and business knowledge. In current China, it is more realistic to define business English as a comprehensive cross-discipline.

3. Development Trends of business English

In China, business English has its own characteristics in discipline. It has a double target of education, namely to provide students or learners with not only English language skills but also with business management know-how. Nowadays, as a result of its practical applicability and social recognition, it is developing very quickly, and there are some important developing trends which will generate in-depth influence over its future development:

3.1 Business English tends to be regulated or standardized in relevant majors. In 2006 and 2007, The National Education Department had approved the setting of the undergraduate program for business English by two universities as a second-level independent discipline. And it is expected to be months time to be able to see the setting of a business English postgraduate program in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. The deregulation in business English symbolizes a new page for its development in China.

3.2 Business English tends to be flexible in degree-awarding. Because business English in China can provide learners with both language and business skills, they should be entitled to be awarded with BA in Foreign language or BA in business management, or even BSc in economics if they have passed all the related courses required by a particular major. In Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, School of English for International Business now has both undergraduate programs and can award both degrees.

3.3 Business English tends to emphasize the importance of cultivating cross-cultural communication

skills. Facing economic globalization, the cultivation of cross-culture communication skills in the teaching of business English is becoming more and more important. Thus, more and more universities have set the course of cross-culture communication as core subject for learners to study.

3.4 Business English tends to be enlarged in concept and content. The narrow sense of business English in the past used to refer to English for business negotiation, import and export trade, etc. However, its current concept has been greatly enlarged in a very wide sense to cover the total of wording, grammatical structure, style and others used in all business contexts such as trade, finance, investment, transportation, economic law, event management, trade fair, international cooperation, cultural exchanges, etc.

4. Conclusion

Based on the principle of language economics, it is concluded that the repaid development of business English does have its in-depth underlying reasons for existence, which means the maximization of expected benefits for learners and the increasing objective demand of the society. Business English, as a sub-branch of ESP, should be classified as a field of languages. However, in today's China, it has been gradually enlarged in concept, content, and connotative meaning, and its style of schooling has been more and more diversified, so it is more realistic for China to classify it as an

independent cross-discipline evolved on the foundation of EGBP. In addition, it is less essential for people to continue focusing on the discussion of its definition, and more importantly, it is suggested to accept the fact of its rapid development, its important social position, to take some active measures to face the challenges and opportunities that the trends of its standardized discipline, flexible degree-awarding, and enlarged implication, etc. may bring to us.

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