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The Development of Authentic and Localised Instructional Materials for the Teaching of Business English to Year I BBA (Honours) Students at Hong Kong Baptist University

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Abstract

The project aimed to investigate the English language skills and needs of graduate employees in four banks in Hong Kong so as to match these skills with the existing curriculum of Lang 1160: English for Business, and to revise and improve the materials used on that course. On-site investigations were carried out to gather information. This was then matched with the existing instructional materials used to teach the Business English course, and revisions were made to improve them. It was also found that the existing curriculum covered many of the needed English skills but would benefit from a longer duration.

Key words

Business English, authentic and localized instructional material

Introduction

Before starting this project, I had been teaching Business English to Hong Kong Baptist University students for more than ten years. One of my major responsibilities as the Business English course coordinator and teacher was to design and run the Business English course for first year students studying for the degree of Bachelor of Business Studies

(BBA Honours). This was a compulsory 40-hour course taught to more than 300 BBA students every academic year, which aimed to improve their English language skills for business studies and business communication.

There is a widespread perception among Hong Kong employers and the general public that the English language standards of university graduates are not

good enough to meet the needs of the economy. Employers have in the past decade become increasingly dissatisfied with the English language standards of the university graduates that they employ (American Chamber of Commerce Survey, 2001; Chew, 1999; Hong Kong Census & Statistics Department Survey, 2000; Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, 2001; "Mainland Cities," 1999; Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, 2003). The business sector is alarmed that the poor English standards may cause the city to become less competitive not only with its traditional rival, Singapore, but even with some cities in mainland China where standards of English are improving fast ("*Business Community*," 1999; "*Job Applicants*," 2002).

As a teacher of Business English to university students, I was very interested to find out for myself how these graduates were faring in the workplace. I therefore decided to conduct my study in there. I specifically wanted to investigate the English standards of bank employees, since the financial sector is one of the pillars of the Hong Kong economy and Hong Kong has one of the world's most developed and modern banking systems, in which the use of English is very important. I would first gather the necessary information, and then match what I found with the existing curriculum for Business English and make revisions so as to improve it.

I also had the opportunity to participate in a large-scale collaborative project

conducted by and across five local universities. It was entitled *Teaching English to Meet the Needs of Business Education in Hong Kong* and it was headed by Professor Vijay K. Bhatia and Professor (Chair) Christopher N. Candlin from the City University of Hong Kong. This five-university project was funded by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research Language Fund (SCOLAR). It investigated the scenario within the academy regarding the adequacy and efficacy of the English courses offered to undergraduate students in the Business faculties. I was the Baptist University coordinator for this five-university project.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of this project were:

1. to investigate the English language needs of graduate employees in four banks in Hong Kong, so as to determine what kinds of English writing and speaking skills are needed to carry out their daily work;
2. to investigate what difficulties the employees encounter in carrying out their tasks in English and what solutions they adopt for overcoming these difficulties;
3. to match these skills with the existing teaching materials of *Lang 1160: English for Business*; and
4. to revise these materials and improve them to make them more authentic and localised so as to better prepare these BBA students for future work challenges in English in Hong Kong.

Methodology

The project consisted of four stages.

Stage 1

Letters were sent out to 20 banks in Hong Kong in June 1999 requesting their participation in the study. My aim was to get the target number of six banks to participate in the study. Most of the banks did not even bother to reply. A few did reply but declined to take part in the study citing resource limitations. Fortunately, through my repeated attempts and through the contact gained in one bank, I eventually managed to get the consent of four banks to participate in the study.

Stage 2

I interviewed a total of 16 employees in the four banks in order to investigate the first and second aims of this study. Each of these interviews lasted about one hour and they have been transcribed so that there are more than 16 hours of work description and details about the informants' language use. The informants were also asked to complete a questionnaire detailing various aspects of their work and language use. I used a modified version of the questionnaire used by Bhatia and Candlin in their study of the communicative needs of legal professionals in Hong Kong (Bhatia & Candlin, 1998). In one of the banks, I also interviewed the Head of Department for his views about the role of English in the bank, and was allowed to generally observe the work of his department. However, none of the banks granted me access to any of their

written documents. Consequently, I have had to scrutinise the information gathered from the interviews.

Stage 3

I then used the information and insights gained from the interviews to study the existing instructional materials adopted for use in *Lang 1160: English for Business* and then to modify the materials so that they would be more relevant to workplace English skills and would better equip our Business School students with these skills.

Stage 4

The modified and improved instructional materials were trialled in the classroom in the 2001-2002 academic year. They were then further revised and used in the 2002-2003 academic year, after which they were yet again revised and used in the 2003-2004 academic year. This meant that the instructional materials for the teaching of Business English to year-one BBA (Honours) students at Baptist University went through three rounds of revisions even as they were being adopted for use in the classroom over three academic years.

Results/Findings

The 16 informants perform numerous and varied tasks in their respective positions. Classifying them broadly, four informants are in marketing or selling retail banking products and services, three are in corporate communication, four are in the area of computer and information technology and Management Information

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Systems, two are in credit research and one each in secretarial support, investment analysis and human resources.

1. The findings for the first aim, which is to investigate the English language needs of graduate employees in four banks in Hong Kong so as to determine what kinds of English writing and speaking skills are needed to carry out their daily work, reveal that there is an interesting and diverse use of English at work. Seven of the 16 employees use English primarily for reading and writing while one uses English only for writing. However, eight use English in all the four linguistic areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Further analysis of the use of English for speaking and listening by the eight staff members reveals the following insights: one informant provides IT support and uses English for oral communication with vendors from Australia and the USA about twice a year. Another informant is an investment analyst and uses English for discussions with English-speaking counter parties from other investment houses and for business lunches where social English is used. All the four employees of one of the banks are required to speak English because the bank is a branch of a multinational bank and it has many international members of staff, particularly in the more senior positions. Two informants in another bank work in the Corporate Communications Department and they report to a British Head of Department. In addition, one of these two employees reports directly to the Bank's CEO who is a non-Chinese. Thus, it is found that in all the eight cases where English is used for oral communication, it is with English-speaking colleagues and associates.
2. Asked about the difficulties employees encounter in carrying out their tasks in English and what solutions they adopt for overcoming these difficulties, five informants report that they have no English language difficulty, while another informant reports having had initial difficulty in writing but states that this is no longer the case. Further analysis reveals that some informants do not encounter any difficulty because they can either pass their writing to their supervisors to be checked and corrected, or they have a standard format or template that they use. Of the remaining 10 informants who reported, or are identified as, having some difficulty with the English language, six had difficulty in writing memos, proposals or reports and taking notes, while the other four had difficulty in oral communication. Three from this latter group reported not being familiar with social English. The need to give quick and accurate verbal responses in English was also cited as a difficulty by two of them, who were actually the most competent users of English among the 16 informants in this study. The most common solution for their writing difficulties was to

- pass their writing to their supervisors for correction. One such supervisor in turn passed it on to an external copywriter for further correction and improvement of the language. Only two informants tried to solve their language difficulty by taking a course after office hours – a writing course for one and a speaking course for the other. But the informant who took the speaking course stopped taking the course because it was too basic to be helpful to her. The remaining eight informants facing some language difficulty were not doing anything about it.
3. The findings for the third aim, which was to match these skills with the existing curriculum of *Lang 1160: English for Business*, revealed that our curriculum does cover, to a considerable extent, the speaking and writing skills used by the bank employees in this study. The skills we teach include speaking skills such as how to participate in meetings and to articulate one's opinions, how to give short oral presentations, and writing skills such as how to describe graphs and tables and present information on trends, how to write short reports, how to write memos, and language exercises to help students with these writing tasks. However, the existing course does not cover social English skills because there is no time for it in a 40-hour course.
 4. The fourth aim was to revise the existing *Lang 1160: English for Business* materials and improve them to make them more authentic and localized, so as to better prepare BBA students for future work challenges in English in Hong Kong: I made revisions to the instructional materials for this course so that they became more relevant and also added more exercises based on local examples to provide more practice in using the right vocabulary, tone and style for writing in the workplace.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

The findings of this study affirmed what I had expected would be the useful workplace English skills to include in the course *Lang 1160: English for Business*. The existing curriculum was improved by revisions to the materials to give the students more language and grammar exercises based on local contexts so that the materials would be more authentic and more relevant to our students' needs. However, the fact remained that the duration of the one-semester course, which was only 40 hours for three credits, was not sufficient to produce significant improvement in students' English speaking and writing skills. The students needed English training during all three years of their university education, and not just in one semester in their first year. This would allow a broader range

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of English skills to be taught, including social English skills.

Limitations/Difficulties

My original target was to get six banks to participate in the study. This figure proved to be unattainable. However, after repeated attempts, I was able to get four banks to agree to participate. The collection of data started in the summer of 1999, but later there were personnel changes in one of the banks involved, and further access was denied. This was a setback to the project and considerable momentum was lost. I also found that I could not control the number of employees who could be interviewed. The number of visits I could make was also dictated by the banks. I was also not given access to the documents written by the bank employees because the banks regarded them as confidential.

The interviews with the 16 bank employees provided approximately 16 hours of work description and details about their language use. The transcription of these interviews proved to be very difficult and time-consuming because the interviewees were generally not articulate, the pronunciation was in many instances unclear, the speech contained many grammatical and syntactical errors, and there was a great deal of repetition of non-meaningful words such as "the", instances of stuttering, swallowing of certain words and other such problems. It took about 10 hours to transcribe each one-hour interview. This was just the first stage. In the second stage, I listened to each interview again and again, and

went over the transcribed data to correct mistakes. The correcting and typing up took many more hours.

Conclusion

The project has been very useful in allowing the researcher to look outside the academy and in the workplace to determine the kinds of English skills new graduate bank employees use for their daily work, and the difficulties they face in using these English skills. As a result of the insights gained, the course materials have been revised to make them more authentic and the language exercises based on local contexts have been increased. All these add up to significant improvements in the instructional materials for *Lang 1160: English for Business*. More, however, could have been achieved if the banks had given the investigator access to some of their employees' written documents. I conclude by quoting Sarangi and Roberts (1999):

... we, as analysts, need to immerse ourselves in specific workplace contexts. And shedding light on specific and local practice is equally important if we want to go beyond understanding and explaining to contributing to change. We believe that discourse analytic and sociolinguistic studies of workplace communication should be grounded in an ethics of practical relevance. (p. 2)

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