Applied Undergraduate Graduation Project Reform of Business English Majors in Private Universities in China—Take Xijing University as a Case in Point

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Abstract. This paper mainly reports the reform of applied undergraduate graduation project reform of Business English majors in Xijing University, an applied private undergraduate university in Shaanxi Province. By changing the requirements of the graduation project from top-level design, the new graduation project model has led to positive changes in graduation project requirements, workload, content and methodology. The new graduation project requirements, however, should also continue to explore in-depth cooperation between schools and enterprises, and improve the practical business abilities and qualities of graduation project instructors, in order to seek new breakthroughs.

1 Introduction

At present, China’s economic development has entered a new norm, with the social and economic structure having been profoundly adjusted, the pace of industrial upgrading having been accelerated, and the innovation-driven development strategy having been implemented in depth. The structural contradictions in higher education are more prominent, and the relationship between talent supply and demand has undergone profound changes. However, the applied, compound and innovative personnel training mechanism, which is in short supply in the production service front line, has not yet been fully established, and the structure and quality of personnel training have not yet met the requirements of economic restructuring and industrial upgrading. In addition, with the proposal of China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”, business English talents, as a strategic resource, are given an important mission in the implementation of the initiative. It is already difficult for our college English teaching to meet the demand by relying solely on the existing talent training mode. Therefore, it is necessary to speed up the pace of English teaching reform and optimize the current talent training mode. According to the 2018 National Standards for Teaching Quality of Foreign Languages and Literature, foreign language majors, apart from being able to use the foreign language, should be equipped with certain research ability, innovation ability, information technology application ability, autonomous learning ability and practical ability. Graduation project is not only an important part of practical teaching in colleges and universities, but also an important way to comprehensively cultivate and improve students’ multiple abilities. Therefore, optimizing the graduation project model for business English majors is of great significance to improve the quality of business English talents training.

Based on literature research, it is found that the current research on business English undergraduate graduation project is relatively limited. Based on the advanced retrieval function of CNKI database, with “business English” and/or “graduation project” as keywords, there were totally 52 articles, among which 31 results were about exploration of the reform of graduation project mode for business English major in higher vocational colleges (e.g. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]). This shows that the current research focuses on the reform of business English graduation project in higher vocational colleges. Zhang [6] proposed that the business English major in higher vocational colleges should reform the traditional practice of the undergraduate complex of the graduation thesis in higher vocational colleges. Based on the vocational post skills and combined with the
practical work of students’ on-the-job practice, the graduation thesis model of business English major with distinctive vocational and practical characteristics should be established. Considering the current talent cultivation mission of application-oriented undergraduate universities and the strategic needs of many undergraduate universities facing the transformation to application-oriented, this paper believes that it is of great practical significance and practical value to explore innovative reforms of graduation project mode for application-oriented undergraduate business English majors. This paper mainly reports the concept and experiences of innovation in the graduation project mode of application-oriented undergraduate business English majors undergoing in Xijing University, a private application-oriented undergraduate university in Shaanxi Province since 2016.

2 Reform Background

Before the reform in 2016, there were mainly the following problems in the undergraduate graduation requirements for business English majors in Xijing University.

There was little opportunity for business English majors to demonstrate their practical business abilities. Before the reform in 2016, academic paper was the dominating form of the graduation project, thus excluding non-academic projects in the form of business design, business survey report, etc., despite that the latter were able to better highlight the practical ability of the business English majors. Second, the theoretical basis of the academic paper mostly focused on pragmatics, psychology and translation theories, but involved very little topics in the fields of business negotiation, marketing, (cross-border) e-commerce, international trade theory and practice, business operation and management, etc.. Third, literature research and text analysis were the prevailing methodology in the academic paper, which made it difficult to comprehensively develop students’ practical ability and creative ability to solve practical business problems.

There was a serious lack of in-depth school-enterprise cooperation in conducting the graduation project. First of all, 100% of the graduation thesis supervisors were teachers of the university, with no participation of enterprises, institutions or government departments. Secondly, less than 20% of graduation thesis supervisors had more than three months of work experience in related business fields. Thirdly, about 90% of the thesis topics were the results of students’ or teachers’ literature research, with less than 5% of the topics coming from students’ internship, and no topics coming from practical problems in the business fields. Finally, there were no business professionals as defense judges in the graduation thesis defense.

On the whole, the problems in the graduation thesis before the reform were highlighted as follows: emphasis on academic research and neglect of practical application; lack of in-depth cooperation between schools and enterprises. Consequently, students would not pay enough attention to applied business courses, and worse still there formed a vicious circle to some extent; graduation project couldn’t well respond to the orientation of applied talents cultivation in the university, since it involved very limited development and cultivation of students’ practical ability.

3 Innovation of Undergraduate Graduation Project of Applied Business English Majors

In response to the above problems, since 2016, taking the opportunity of the revision of the talent cultivation program, a graduation project reform of the business English majors has been undergoing to live up to the applied talent cultivation objectives of the university. The major reforms can be demonstrated as below.

(1) Reform in top-level design of the graduation project. The requirement of the graduation project has shifted from accomplishing a traditional academic paper to a graduation project. This change in top-level design means that students need to select a business topic, adopt a theoretical perspective, conduct a business plan, simulate the business plan, and analyze the application of the theory in the business plan based on the theory. In this way, there has formed a closed cycle integrating business theories that students have learned previously with practice.
(2) Changes in the workload. The new workload requirements changed from completing an academic paper with no less than 5,000 words to accomplishing a comprehensive graduation project which mainly involves work from four aspects, namely, thorough understanding of the theory, a business plan based on the theory, a role-play simulation video of the business plan, and an analysis of the business plan based on the theory.

(3) Changes in the content. The new graduation project requirements are more consistent with the applied talent cultivation objective of the university by targeting at fostering high-quality applied business English service talents for international business. The new graduation project focuses on the comprehensive improvement in students’ business English competence, professional business knowledge and skills required in international business, including international marketing, international business negotiation and international trade practice. Besides, the survey on a theory, the literature review and the application analysis also provide students with the opportunity to foster academic skills.

(4) Changes in the methodology. The new graduation project requirements have involved diverse methods, which includes not only the traditionally most commonly used literature study method in academic paper writing, but also the comprehensive application of the business situation simulation, case study, as well as the deduction and induction methods. To be specific, first, the literature study is adopted to get acquainted with the theoretical framework and the research status at home and abroad, which serves to lay a theoretical foundation for the business planning. Second, the case study method is used by taking a virtual company or a real company as the subject for whom a business plan will be made in response to a specific business operation problem of the company. Third, the simulation method is employed by conducting teamwork to simulate the implementation of the business plan. Fourth, the case analysis method is utilized to demonstrate how the theory and practice have been integrated in the business plan. Last, the induction and deduction methods can contribute to the findings of the graduation project.

4 Achievements

Since the reform of the graduation project in 2016, the new applied graduation project has been seeing constant improvements each year over the past four consecutive years of graduation projects according to the problems highlighted in the previous one. On the whole, the reformed graduation project has continuously improved its measures and regulations on the issue of highlighting its applied nature, and positive results are beginning to show up in the following aspects: (1) It trains students’ business English competence and practical business ability and skills in international business more directly. At the same time, it considers the comprehensive training of students’ academic ability, information retrieval, processing and analysis ability, theory-based practice ability, and team cooperation and communication ability; (2) More than 50% of the graduation project topics come from problems found in the practice of enterprises, which indicates that the indirect participation of enterprises in graduation project is increasing. (3) Students start to give more serious attention to the professional business courses, which can be confirmed by the quality and quantity of the regular project-based assignments, the participation degree of the business internship and so on. (4) Students have an increasingly earlier and clearer understanding of their career plan. According to survey results, this not only encourages students to plan their professional career in advance, but also has a clearer understanding of their professional target and their core competitiveness in employment.

5 Conclusion

Graduation project is not only an important part of practical teaching in colleges and universities, but also an important way to comprehensively cultivate and improve students’ multiple abilities. By setting new graduation project requirements and highlighting the integration of theory and business activities, the new graduation project mode has produced top-bottom qualitative changes in
graduation project requirements, workload, content and methodology, as well as continuous breakthroughs over the past years since the reform. However, the quality of personnel training ultimately depends on social and market tests. Xi’an, Shaanxi Province, with its unique historical and geographical advantages, plays an important role in China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”. As an important strategic national resource and as applied university, business English talents have a great responsibility in training high-quality application-oriented composite talents with excellent knowledge structure and practical ability. They should constantly innovate, constantly break through and bravely undertake their mission with their ability to serve the regional and national economic and social development.

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