Experiencing Business English in Community-Based Projects

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With more emphasis on the communicative and pragmatic function of Business English learning, the author discusses a case study of a Business English course based on projects conducted by the students in their community. This curriculum aims at students experiencing and implementing their knowledge of Business and English in the real business environments, engaging community in the process, and avoiding isolation and separation of business English teaching and learning from communities. The research lays more importance on the students’ experiencing and participating process by providing them with a series of guidelines as reference and assessment, but meanwhile, the students have their freedom of choices and decision-making in many aspects. Integrative skills are practiced including linguistic skills, business-related skills, communicative skills, and technology-related skills. Specifically, the students are required to conduct a mini market research in their community. The topic of the research is negotiated, classified, and grouped in the entire class until each individual student belongs to a group. The project procedure and requirements are given to the students on weekly basis, including field of research, questionnaire, data collection and analysis, report, and the final group presentation. Based on their experience from the research, the students write down their reflections. Based on the observation of the instructor and students’ feedback, the research found that students’ expectations and teacher’s roles varied in a number of aspects. A variety of knowledge and skills have been practiced. Problems have also been found in each step of the project.

Keywords: Business English, experiential learning, community, project

Introduction

Throughout the past decades, the concept of education has been transformed from teacher-centered teaching to learner-centered education, and from more controlled instructions to more flexible and innovative projects. Kilpatrick (1918) proposed project method that supported the idea of learning by living and the concept that life is the curriculum. Dewey (1997) has also discussed the critical need of learning-by-doing concept of learning, which has brought about constant discussions over decades towards what is the most meaningful and effective way of learning. From a historical perspective, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and learning have witnessed the tremendous changes with respect to design, classroom practice, evaluation and assessment, ESP (English for Special Purposes) and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) emergence and other fresh transformations such as flipped classroom and MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses). The vastly updated daily information requires the curriculum designers and classroom practitioners to constantly adjust the syllabus according to the pace of the progress.

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In line with the requirements of syllabus in a great number of universities in China, Business English students are supposed to meet the requirements in language, business, and the related cultural and entrepreneur competence. With observations in a number of business English classes, people may trace the changes taking place generally in the optimistic direction. In some schools and classes, students are more involved in various tasks and projects assigned by their teachers. However, a gap is assumed to be filled between the projects that the students do in the classroom and the projects that they conduct in their community. In other words, it is essential for the students to connect their learning experience with their living environment.

In foreign language teaching and learning, as Larsen-Freeman (2000) noted, content-based, task-based, and participatory approaches of teaching can provide students with the language context that they can employ for learning other subjects or skills. This point of view presented similar concepts of Dewey, which emphasized the importance of experience in the learning process. Brown (2007) also defined models of skills integration as content-based, task-based, theme-based, and experiential process of teaching and learning. According to Brown (2007), experiential learning may not necessarily cover the previous three models. However, it requires that the students understand situations when they actually use the language in the authentic environment or solve real life problems.

Business English is under the umbrella of ESP that calls for learners using the language for “real-world purposes” (Brown, 2007, p. 291; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). That is to say, instead of solely learning English as a language, authentic context-based language learning experience can be a prosperous model, through which a more meaningful and practical model can be set up as shown in Figure 1.

According to Figure 1, experiential language learning of Business English through community-based projects is composed of four main elements—content, skills, tasks, and assessment. Based on the nature of Business English as an ESP subject, the content area is chiefly concentrated on the relevant business course content. Multiple skills will be practiced in the experiential language learning process, including not only the language skills, but also other mental and physical skills (Brown, 2007; Dewey, 1997; Larsen-Freeman, 2000;
Tyler, 1986). Tasks will be initiated and participated principally by the students themselves with teacher’s controlled scaffolding and facilitation. The tasks will mainly take place in the communities where the students can make connections to. The community may be the “site for learning and action” and it may also be the space where students can commence their future dialogue with the community to solve problems or to “produce sustainable change” (Ewert & Grace, 2000, p. 328). The last but not the least element, assessment, should be involved in the whole process to guarantee the efficiency and effectiveness of the ongoing project, especially the students’ reflective practice that allows students “to make judgments in complex and murky situations, judgments based on experience and prior knowledge” (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000, p. 60). The interconnected nature of all four elements makes Business English a more practical and meaningful course instead of sit-and-learn experience.

What is more important, though, is as what Dewey (1997) argued:

> It is also essential that the new objects and events be related intellectually to those of earlier experiences, and this means that there be some advance made in conscious articulation of facts and ideas. (…) Connectedness in growth must be his (educator’s) constant watchword. (p. 75)

That is to say, the value of learning can be optimized when the learner lives through the learning process based on their previous experience of knowledge and skills. In this research, students enter to Business English class to acquire necessary knowledge and skills specifically for the future use. Meanwhile, they might intend to rethink and restructure their prior concepts of what will be learnt (Mckinney & Norton, 2007). Therefore, a considerate and well-organized curriculum is crucial. Based on the student-centered nature of experiential language learning mode, Brown (2007) distinguished a number of examples of learner-centered experiential techniques in ESL/EFL teaching including “hands-on projects, computer activities, research projects, cross-cultural experiences, field trips and other ‘on-site’ visits, role plays and simulations” (p. 292). Multiple skills can be practiced by experiencing in the course of action, as shown in Figure 2, which is a detailed expansion of the skills section in Figure 1.

![Figure 2. Integrative skills practiced in community-based projects for Business English class.](image)
Accordingly, this paper will discuss a case study showing how the students perceive the Business English learning experience by doing a number of projects in their community. These projects aim to encourage students to experience and implement both their knowledge of business and English language knowledge and skills in the real-world environment, engage community in the process, and avoid isolation and separation of ESP learning from the pragmatic usage in the authentic context. This experimental case study lays more importance on the students’ experiencing and participating process, providing them a series of guidelines as reference and assessment, but meanwhile, the students have their freedom of choices and decision-making in loads of aspects (Gardner, 1985).

Method

At the beginning of the semester, the teacher provided copies of handouts with guiding procedures and requirements of the project that the students will do for the entire semester. In the following weeks, the students worked for five to ten minutes at the beginning of each Business English II class. The projects were designed to implement the knowledge from the textbook into the market research that the students were going to conduct.

**Figure 3.** Handout with directions of the Mini Market Research in Your Community project.

As shown in Figure 3, students were required to conduct a mini market research in their community. They listed five of their preferences and were put into the same group according to the same or similar preference (Step 1). Since working alone as a team or working with more than five people was not allowed in this task, students had to negotiate and debate in the class to clarify their specific ideas and feasibility of the topic. Therefore, the topics of the research were negotiated, classified, and grouped among the whole class until each individual student belonged to a group of three to five people. Eventually, teams were formed after discussion and persuasion among students themselves. This process lasted for three weeks because it took place for only five to
ten minutes at the beginning of the class each week. At the end of Step 2, eight groups were formed covering five themes, including cell phone, skin care, food, sport, and education. The more detailed project procedures and requirements were given to the students at the beginning of the class on the weekly basis from the fourth week.

Regarding Step 3—designing questionnaire, the teacher provided some sample questionnaires of market research and explained each section of it. Then the students spent two weeks on the designing process and after that brought their draft to the class. It took another week for the teacher to give students feedback and the students made changes until their questionnaires were set so that they were able to take the next step. Four weeks were given to the students to conduct the survey, collect the data (Step 4), and analyze the data (Step 5). Then the students had four more weeks to write the market research report draft (Step 6). When the teacher spent two weeks finishing reading the reports, the students made final drafts of their reports and went on working for the final presentation. After the suggested revision of the presentation slide shows (Step 7), the students did their presentations (Step 8) and the follow-up discussion in the final week and handed in the reports, including their reflection papers.

A feedback survey was conducted in the class at the end of the semester so as to evaluate the meaningfulness and usefulness of the community-based market research project. The students also shared their reflections. Combined with the teachers’ observation throughout the entire semester, the following findings are of significance and value.

**Findings**

With the scaffolding and facilitation of the teacher and the students’ cooperative work, the class was divided into eight groups respectively working on eight topics, including three topics related to cell phones, two about skin care, one on fast food at campus, one on yoga, and one about early childhood education as shown in Table 1. Negotiating, communicating, and co-working with each other, the students conducted their surveys mainly in their campus surroundings because almost all of them are living on campus and taking campus as their community. Seven groups did the survey among students and one group took only university faculties as sample participants. Some groups kept photo records of the process and two groups interviewed individual participants and shot videos as a record although it was not required.

| Number of groups | Number of topics | Topic  | Focuses                                                                 | Target population       |
|------------------|-----------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 8                | 8               | Cell phone | 1. China Telecom mobile phone usage  
2. Cell phone games  
3. Cell phone market  
4. Women’s skin care  
5. Men’s skin care | Students on campus |
|                  |                 | Skin care | 6. Dietary preference  
7. Yoga preference in the community  
8. Early childhood education market in the community | University faculties |
|                  |                 | Food     |                                                                         |                         |
|                  |                 | Sport    |                                                                         |                         |
|                  |                 | Education|                                                                         |                         |

**Students’ Expectations**

According to 33 students’ feedback and questionnaires, all the students admit that the projects are beyond
their expectations in almost each step of the procedure. Every one of them considers the project remarkably helpful for the Business English study in this semester. In terms of the duration, one-third of the students think that a semester is too long to do the survey. More than one-third of the students quit their original topics after the negotiation and discussion in the first three weeks. However, each student chooses his or her own group with satisfaction in the end although there are disagreements in the group during the progress. Regarding the minimum number of the participants set for the mini research, 16 students point out that 50 participants are not enough.

As shown in Table 2, 3% and 12% of the students meet their groups for discussion once a day or two or three times a week respectively. The rest majority meet each other once a week or once every half month with 46% and 39% respectively. Students consider their group members co-workers, negotiating with them. But in some groups, the allocation of tasks turns out to be a problem. With respect to the evaluation of the projects, 19 students consider data analysis the most important part, which should be given more credits. Fourteen of them think that the cooperation between group members and linguistic skills in both written and oral report should be taken into consideration of the grading. Students also suggest that originality and innovation of the topic count. Nearly half of the students prefer to do the oral presentation in Chinese.

Table 2

| How Often Do You Discuss the Procedures of the Market Research in Your Group? |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
|                                | Once a day | 2 or 3 times a week | Once a week | Once every half month | Once a month | Never |
| Number of students             | 1         | 4         | 15        | 14        | 0         | 0     |
| Percentage                     | 3%        | 12%       | 46%       | 39%       | 0%        | 0%    |

According to Table 3, the majority of students consider reflection paper necessary at the end of the project for the following reasons. First, it is a sound summary of the project in terms of what has been met, done, learnt, and questioned. Second, it is an effective way to find the problems in the process for the future’s sake. Third, it allows the students to relate the project with their other experiences. Most importantly, it can be a self evaluation process to appreciate the whole experience and keep a record of it.

Table 3

| Reflection (In Your View, Is It Necessary to Write a Reflection Paper After the Project?) |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|---------|-----------|
|                                               | Yes     | No      | No difference |
| Number of students                            | 31      | 1       | 1          |
| Percentage                                    | 94%     | 3%      | 3%         |

Concerning the research sample, most students recommend larger sample of research in and out of campus with more equality in gender because they find that gender differentiates some data results. Recommendations are also made for more communications and exchanges among different theme groups so that they can make some reasonable predictions after learning from other groups.

Knowledge and Skills

As shown above in Figure 2, integrate skills are intentionally engrained into the design of the community-based projects for Business English class in four aspects. According to the students’ feedback, the most important knowledge and skills that they have practiced are the communicative skills and business knowledge. Business-related skills include designing, negotiating, executing, researching, marketing, data
analyzing, presenting, and reporting, etc. Linguistic skills also have been practiced in terms of speaking and listening (in the discussion and presentation section); reading, writing, and even translating (in questionnaire designing and final report section).

The students point out more knowledge and skills that they have practiced including cooperative working, organizing and coordinating, innovative thinking, critical thinking, logical thinking and analyzing, leadership in the group, computer operating and PowerPoint making, conflict resolving and tolerance.

What is worth mentioning is that the students’ technology-related skills are much practiced and improved, too, in the process such as recording, photographing and video shooting, computer operating, especially the PowerPoint making, etc. The students autonomously shoot videos as an interview reference for the final presentation. They also keep some photo records of the research, which can be very valuable teaching resources for the teachers, too.

Speaking of the most beneficial steps in the process, as shown in Figure 4, the students are benefited more in data collection and analysis, as well as the field research when giving out the questionnaires. The other important aspects are negotiating in the group to make decisions on the fields and topics, writing the report, making the slide shows, and doing the oral presentation.

![Figure 4. From which step can you learn most in your learning experience?](image)

Problems

Concerning the problems that occurred in the process of the mini market research, eight questions are raised, including fields of research decision-making, working teams, questionnaire designing, data collection, data analysis, report writing, presentation slide show, and final presentation.

Decision-making on field of research. It takes three weeks for the students to decide which topic that they will develop in the market research. The majority of them show their bewilderment of the field that they want to work in until they discuss for quite a few times in different groups at the beginning of the class each week. After they decide what field they want to work in, again, they have to decide specifically what topic they will focus on. That is also unclear to them. Even after that, some groups are stuck in the purpose, direction, and target population of their research.

1 Notes: Step 1. Work out in which business or field that your group will do about the survey; Step 2. Specify what exactly your group will focus on; Step 3. Design questionnaires about the issues or fields that you want to focus; Step 4. Conduct the survey with at least 50 participants; Step 5. Analyze the data collected from the survey; Step 6. Write a report on your survey; Step 7. Make a slide show for your report with PowerPoint; Step 8. Do the final oral presentation of the report to the rest of the class.
Working teams. When comes to the group work, the students on the whole show their unclearness about what each group member can do. Though after discussions, the groups have assigned each member various tasks, some other groups are still undecided and even in the end, it does not work satisfactorily, which results in a very unpleasant experience to a few students. What is more unpleasant to some groups are the inactive group members who always follow each step passively or lack participation in the whole process.

Questionnaire designing. After teacher showing a few examples and formats of the different questionnaires of a market research, groups are rigid in respect to the formats, specific questions, and number of questions. For some groups, the number of questions is appropriate but a few questions are repetitive in one way or another, making some questions meaningless and useless, which reduce the credibility of the research result. It is a similar case to the not well-organized questions.

Data collection. Data collection and data analysis are two most fruitful learning experiences. In the field research, most groups are surprised that some participants show unwillingness to answer the questionnaire, which makes some students frustrated in continuing the research. Students have difficulties in communicating with the participants, who sometimes carry negative attitudes towards the research. Interviewees’ impoliteness, misunderstanding, refusal, and impatience come about occasionally, but this process allows the students to understand more of the task itself and practice different strategies to resolve the conflicts or solve those real-life problems in the community.

Data analysis. To most of the groups, data analysis is the most difficult part. Facing all the collected data, students are reluctant about where to start. The meanings of the individual data are tricky to read and understand. At the same time, among the vast range of collected data, students indicate that it is complicated to decide which is more important, more valuable, or more worth mentioning. What make the data analysis more complex are the contradictions of people’s misconception on a phenomenon and the actual result of the research. With the limitations of the research sample population, it may be time consuming for students to distinguish which option is more reliable.

Report writing. As shown in Figure 5, the most difficult part for the students to write in the market research report is the findings, which is due to the difficulties in analyzing the collected data. Students also think that executive summary, process, recommendation, and individual reflections and thoughts are difficult to write. Introduction part is the easiest section in the market research report. What is worth mentioning is that there are a few obstacles in translating some terms and new words in the research from Chinese into English.

![Figure 5. In the market research report, which is the most difficult part to write?]
Presentation slide show. With respect to the presentation slide shows, students reveal their dilemma in making the PowerPoint file. Some groups show their difficulties in using PowerPoint in a professional way, while other groups are undecided about what to put into the file. It also takes time to make the graphs consistent with the content and data analysis. A few students point out their awkwardness of transforming their ideas on the slides. To a few students, different versions of the PowerPoint program can be a problem, too. It happens to some groups that the file is not properly saved and then lost, so they have to redo all the work.

Final presentation. Concerning final oral presentation, most students state their nervousness because of the new experience to them. To almost all the students in this class, it is the first time for them to do their own market research and share the findings with each other. Because of the uncertainty from many directions, it is natural for them to undergo nervousness. Another problem that the students face is how much information they intend to report and how to deliver. Another common struggle to the student is to articulate in a well-organized and structured way. Otherwise it might cause misunderstanding among the audience. Linguistic problems in presentation are obvious, which can tell the need of improvement in this aspect, too.

Teacher

The teacher plays a minor role in the whole process except in planning the task, giving instructions each week, providing assistance, and scaffolding when necessary. According to the students’ feedback and reflection, the teacher’s planning of the tasks is well-organized and thoughtful. The sample questionnaires and sample survey reports are very helpful and save more time for the students to do other tasks. Length of time for the oral presentation is reasonable.

The students convey their thankfulness of having the opportunity to participate in their own designed community projects through experiential language learning. The senses of being closer to the teacher through the project are shared among the students. However, most of the students also emphasize the weight of the scaffolding and facilitating role of the Business English class teacher who can provide assistance in both linguistic area and the content area.

Further Discussion

The case of experiential language learning model of Business English through community-based projects has its pros and cons, but it can be an initiator of project-based experiential learning, where learners can always relate to their community. The benefits of the project are over-fetching in terms of the above-mentioned four aspects of skills via the experiences—linguistic skills, communicative skills, business consciousness, and technology-related skills.

As the students mention, they are growing up during the survey. The self-directed process will become internalized (Tennant, 2000; Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). For example, for the students in this project, because they have developed a company project plan in the previous semester, some groups decide to continue with their company project for the market research, which might be helpful in their future career. Meanwhile, through the experience in certain field, the students take advantage of the project to familiarize themselves to the field by doing research in it. They believe that after experiencing in the community, they are able to understand the situation and make further move in the future workplace.
Conclusion

Therefore, the learner-centered education with variable and original community-based projects makes learning out of living. The above-mentioned project sets an exemplar for ESP teachers to connect students’ previous knowledge to the existing problems in their community. In the EFL context where English is not easy to trace as in the ESL context, experiencing the learning process will have much impact on the contents, skills, tasks, and assessment. English for Business, as an English for Special Purpose (ESP), takes the responsibility of training students with pragmatic competence but not unrealistic capacity. At the same time, it requires the teachers of English to master and evaluate the learning environment. Based on their observation over the environment, the decisions can be made in terms of the tasks and the projects. In this way, the students may be aware of the context and take practical advantage of it to make progress in learning as well as solve the life problems.

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