

THE SIGNIFICANCE, TEACHING APPROACH, AND INSTRUMENTAL DESIGN OF BUSINESS ENGLISH AS A GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE IN AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITIES---A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH CHINA AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Chinese university students have learned English since they entered primary schools, whereas most of them focus on learning the grammatical rules and fundamental usages of English, neglecting its application in the field of business. Business English as a General Education (BEGE) course is an integral component of college English teaching in the new era. It effectively enhances students' practical English application skills, helps them acquire business knowledge relevant to their majors, and strengthens their perception and adaptability to diverse business cultures. Taking the teaching practice at South China Agricultural University as an example, this paper elucidates the significance of the BEGE course in cultivating interdisciplinary talents with agricultural characteristics, clarifies the overall teaching approach, and optimizes the instructional design. Analysis of teaching outcomes further verifies the feasibility and necessity of offering the BEGE course within the college English curriculum of agricultural universities. Furthermore, BEGE course could enhance learners' competitiveness in talent market.

Keywords: Business English as a general education course; Interdisciplinary talents; Agricultural characteristics; Dynamic evaluation

1 INTRODUCTION

The rise of emerging engineering disciplines and the advent of artificial intelligence present unprecedented challenges to college English teaching, constraining its scope. Some even mistakenly argue that college English is obsolete. In reality, college English teaching is an indispensable part of China's higher education, bearing multiple responsibilities such as fostering virtue through education, improving students' English application skills, and enhancing their humanistic qualities. Facing societal skepticism, how can college English teaching avoid homogenization? How can talent cultivation align with market demands? These are pressing questions that college English educators must address. As former Director of the Department of Higher Education Wu Yan pointed out, the nation needs "to vigorously cultivate international talents with a global vision, understanding of international rules, proficiency in foreign languages, and expertise in Sino-foreign negotiation and communication. There is also a need for targeted cultivation of various professional, technical, and managerial personnel proficient in foreign languages, urgently required for initiatives like the Belt and Road construction" [1]. Years of teaching practice demonstrate that integrating BEGE content into college English teaching can significantly enhance students' practical English skills and cross-cultural business communication awareness, thereby strengthening their competitiveness in the job market. Using the teaching practice at South China Agricultural University as a case study, this paper explores the significance and instructional design of offering BEGE courses in agricultural universities, hoping to provide valuable insights for college English teaching in the new era.

South China Agricultural University has consistently oriented its college English teaching towards national and market demands for talent, striving to serve the economic and cultural development of the Greater Bay Area. The BEGE course is treated as a vital component of the college English program. Leveraging the university's existing strengths in Business English and agricultural English, the course encourages students to develop the habit of using English to understand their majors, industries, and domestic and international markets. It equips them with basic etiquette for international business activities and enhances their ability to engage in cross-cultural business communication in English.

2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BUSINESS ENGLISH GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

The BEGE course significantly improves students' comprehensive and practical English language abilities. According to the Content-Based Instruction (CBI) theory, optimal foreign or second language learning conditions are created when language teaching is integrated with subject matter instruction, using the language as a medium for learning disciplinary knowledge [2]. The BEGE course closely combines language knowledge teaching, language skill development, and business knowledge, highlighting the characteristics of language use in different business contexts. It is "the process of meaning-making, experience formation, and gaining understanding and knowledge through two languages"[3]. This enables students to understand linguistic variations across disciplines, perceive real-world scenarios of linguistic and cultural application, and learn about usage taboos. For instance, when teaching marketing English to students majoring in

Economics and Management, instructors can analyze the lexical preferences and syntactic features of business professionals from different countries. This helps students become familiar with English and its variants, enhances the precision of their English expression, and increases their success rate in cross-border marketing.

The BEGE course provides students with broad interdisciplinary perspectives. Its content covers a wide range of areas, including e-commerce, marketing, logistics, negotiation, and international trade, “facilitating knowledge construction”[4]

. Students not only improve their listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills in business contexts, thereby enhancing their overall English proficiency, but more importantly, they also gain relevant business knowledge related to their fields of study, forming an objective understanding of their industry and the market. For example, guided by instructors, students from the College of Food Science can read classic English literature related to the entire industrial chain of food sales, production, and demand. This exposes them to basics of consumer psychology, management, and international trade laws and regulations, helps them understand the impact of cultural differences on agricultural product consumption, and integrates knowledge from science and engineering fields like food science with humanities and social sciences like economics, management, and law. Thus, learning content transcends the boundaries of empirical food science, breaking down disciplinary barriers and optimizing knowledge structures.

The BEGE course equips students with preliminary capabilities for engaging in business activities. The course consistently adheres to the English plus Business teaching philosophy, aiming to cultivate interdisciplinary talents with a solid foundation in English language and culture, capable of conducting cross-cultural business communication within their professional fields. During instruction, teachers integrate content such as business etiquette, business cultures of major world economies, and laws and regulations to be followed in business activities, fostering students' sensitivity to cross-cultural business communication, awareness of rules, and adaptability. For example, when teaching business negotiation to students from the College of Informatics, the instructor can start with the general negotiation styles of China and the United States, using classic cases of chip negotiations between the two countries to help students understand cross-cultural business negotiation strategies and methods. Additionally, experiential teaching methods like simulated negotiations allow students to accumulate practical experience and enhance their ability to connect theory with practice.

3 THE OVERALL TEACHING APPROACH FOR THE BUSINESS ENGLISH GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

Although the BEGE course is significant for improving the quality of college English teaching in agricultural universities, some shortcomings persist in current course instruction. Ideological and political education elements need better integration with professional knowledge: past teaching had room for improvement in shaping students' correct worldview, outlook on life, and values; the educational concept of educating talent for the country should be organically integrated into all aspects of foreign language classroom teaching. Teaching content often overemphasizes theory over practice: previous teaching frequently remained at the stage of simply overlaying language skills and business knowledge, focusing heavily on theoretical business knowledge while lacking simulations of real cross-cultural business scenarios, resulting in insufficient practical cross-cultural communication experience for students. Teaching methods need to keep pace with the times: traditional lecture-based methods dominated past classrooms, with underutilized case teaching and digital teaching resources; virtual simulation platforms and digital-intelligent teaching tools were not fully applied. Industry-university cooperation lacks depth, providing students with limited practical opportunities. Student assessment methods are singular: previous course assessments relied heavily on final written exams, exhibiting rigid evaluation methods that paid insufficient attention to assessing the learning process, practical abilities, and innovation/entrepreneurship skills, which is detrimental to cultivating top-notch foreign language talents. To implement BEGE course teaching more effectively, the teaching team collaboratively researched and designed the following overall teaching approach.

First, teachers should adhere to the teaching philosophy of teaching students according to their aptitude and implement personalized instruction. BEGE teaching should follow the principle of combining general education with specialized education; teaching content should vary for students from different majors. The course's aim is not to inundate students with extensive and comprehensive business knowledge, but to inspire them to observe economic phenomena around them, stimulate their learning interest and initiative. Using this as a starting point, instruction should be appropriately expanded based on students' existing knowledge, comprehension ability, and professional characteristics. For example, when teaching international trade knowledge to students from the College of Agriculture, instructors can highlight the geographical advantage of the university's proximity to RCEP countries and introduce the characteristics of agricultural product imports and exports between China and ASEAN countries. This enhances students' sense of participation, helps them connect their major studies with market demands, gradually clarifies their career development direction, and helps them find their role in contributing to rural revitalization.

Second, teachers should empower teaching with digital-intelligent means to improve teaching quality. The emergence of artificial intelligence presents new opportunities for BEGE teaching. Digital-intelligent teaching tools can simulate and recreate authentic business scenarios, enabling immersive learning; blended online and offline teaching modes greatly expand learning content. Instructors can use digital-intelligent tools to promptly understand learners' progress and provide personalized guidance, collect common problems encountered by students during learning, and adjust teaching content accordingly. For instance, when explaining tourism English to tourism management students, teachers can use AI devices to allow students to virtually experience lychee picking in Maoming and the joyful atmosphere of ecotourism. Students can be asked to use their professional knowledge and learned vocabulary/communication skills in simulated scenarios to

promote local rural tourism products. Experiential teaching enhances students' sense of achievement and helps them identify shortcomings in their English and professional knowledge learning.

Third, supervisors should stimulate the enthusiasm of both teachers and students through a multi-dimensional ability evaluation mechanism. Teachers and students are the main agents of teaching activities, and good teaching outcomes depend on their collaboration and coordination. Fully mobilizing their sense of participation and enthusiasm is a decisive factor in improving teaching quality. As the BEGE course places high demands on college English teachers' knowledge base and teaching abilities, a long-term mechanism encouraging teachers' self-improvement should be established. Incorporating outcomes of course teaching and guiding students in Business English competitions and various innovation/entrepreneurship contests into the teacher evaluation system is recommended. For student assessment, the reliance on final written exams as the primary means should be changed. Dynamic assessment methods should be adopted, incorporating students' performance in cross-cultural communication activities, Business English competitions, internships like the Canton Fair, etc., into the evaluation system. This creates a virtuous cycle where competitions promote learning, teaching, and reform, facilitating the transformation of knowledge into ability.

4 INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN OF THE BUSINESS ENGLISH GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

Based on the overall teaching approach above, instructors optimize teaching mainly from the following aspects:

First, teachers should organically integrate ideological and political education into the course. Through careful instructional design, teachers blend ideological and political education with professional knowledge explanation and communication skills training, promoting students' holistic development and highlighting higher education institutions' responsibility of educating students. The course integrates language skills, business knowledge, and humanistic qualities, aiming to enhance students' professional ethics and social responsibility. For example, when teaching globalization to students from the College of Forestry, instructors can cite cases of Chinese furniture industry investment in the Caucasus region. This helps students understand the development opportunities brought by China's Belt and Road strategy to both cooperating parties and the positive contributions of Chinese enterprises to local ecological protection. Integrating socialist core values into the teaching of business ethics, contract spirit, etc., helps shape students' correct business values and compliance awareness.

Second, teachers should highlight the characteristics of modular teaching. Instructors divide the teaching content into several main modules, with the focus of each module varying according to students' majors and abilities. Students need to use English to discuss disciplinary issues and complete disciplinary tasks. This content-oriented language use greatly promotes the natural improvement of students' language abilities[5]. In the language module, core skills of Business English listening, speaking, reading, and writing are strengthened, such as adding language training for new business formats like cross-border live stream English. In the culture module, thematic cases on Belt and Road cultures can be embedded. In the practice module, simulating real business scenarios like cross-border mergers and acquisitions, cross-border e-commerce, and various forms of industry-university cooperation provide students with more practical opportunities. For instance, students from the College of Horticulture can visit the university's internship base lychee orchard. There, they can utilize their language and professional advantages to conduct cross-border marketing on-site, introduce lychee varieties, product characteristics, and China's advanced lychee preservation techniques in English, interact online with overseas consumers, and answer their questions. Furthermore, during the live stream, students can narrate the allusion of "a steed raising red dust evokes a concubine's smile" to showcase the rich cultural connotations carried by Lingnan (South China) lychees, thereby spreading captivating Chinese culture while potentially increasing product premium. Multi-module teaching content helps cultivate students' language application skills and comprehensive quality, "facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge"[6] and enabling them to accurately grasp English application scenarios and improve their practical level in cross-cultural business communication.

Third, teachers should adopt diverse teaching models. Instructors select appropriate teaching models based on the course content to stimulate student interest and improve teaching quality. Using real business cases, combined with role-playing and virtual negotiation scenarios, immersive and experiential teaching is conducted to enhance students' practical application of Business English. For example, teachers can fully utilize the opportunity of the Canton Fair, taking students to the venue beforehand for in-depth communication with exhibitors. In class, students simulate buyers and sellers at the Canton Fair for business negotiations, with instructors providing timely feedback. After class, students discuss and summarize their experiences from on-site observation and simulation to consolidate the learned negotiation strategies and communication skills. Instructors can also fully utilize blended learning methods, combining online self-directed learning with offline deep interaction. Throughout the teaching process, AI language assistants can aid instruction, helping students with oral practice; big data analysis can identify students' weak areas, enabling personalized learning guidance. For instance, when teaching about cross-border trade of agricultural products, instructors can use digital-intelligent tools to help students master core vocabulary in this field before class. AI learning companions can generate cross-border trade scenarios based on the student's vocabulary level to help them practice using the acquired words and expressions. Teachers dynamically adjust teaching content based on students' language levels, focusing on cultivating practical Business English application skills, achieving the integration of language instrumentality and professional specificity.

Fourth, teachers should implement a comprehensive assessment model. The course evaluation shifts from a single exam to various forms, including process evaluation and outcome demonstration. Dynamic, differentiated, and whole-process assessment methods are introduced, focusing not only on students' language ability and subject knowledge mastery but also on evaluating comprehensive qualities like cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, and innovative spirit[7]. Course grades are composed of several main parts: effectiveness of pre-class preparation, quality of classroom

discussion, post-class reflections and practice, competition awards, etc. Students can freely choose the weight of each part in the total grade. At the beginning of the semester, teachers inform students about the teaching content, plan, and assessment methods, encouraging students to form study groups based on their interests for learning and practice. For example, students can choose participating in competitions or interning at the Canton Fair as the main content for course assessment. This differentiated course assessment model helps stimulate students' learning motivation, allowing them to fully utilize their strengths during the learning process and achieve personalized talent cultivation. The optimizations in the above aspects enable the BEGE course teaching to continuously meet market demands for talent while accomplishing the enhancement of students from value guidance to language application ability. It also helps students understand domestic and international markets and cultivate their own workplace adaptability.

5 TEACHING OUTCOMES OF THE BUSINESS ENGLISH GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

Through continuous exploration and practice, the BEGE course teaching at South China Agricultural University has achieved satisfactory results. The agency of both students and teachers has been enhanced, and their collaboration has become more synergistic. On one hand, students' ideological and moral character, knowledge and skills, and practical abilities have improved. Classroom teaching, online spaces, and practical bases cooperate with each other, jointly constructing a comprehensive, multi-angle teaching environment that cultivates students' comprehensive abilities, innovative capabilities, and problem-solving skills. Through course structure optimization, practice model innovation, and cross-boundary resource integration, teachers have developed the BEGE course into a golden course that enhances students' comprehensive quality. Students' values, language skills, and practical abilities have been improved comprehensively, fully reflecting the educational feature of progressing from cognitive deepening to ability acquisition. On the other hand, teachers' professional qualities have continuously improved. During the teaching process, teachers focus on enhancing their professional qualities and digital-intelligent teaching abilities, broadening their knowledge horizons, and updating their existing knowledge structures to enhance students' language practice ability and sense of acquisition. The teaching team continuously identifies problems during teaching and uses them as breakthroughs for scientific research, transforming research results into practical teaching outcomes. In the virtuous cycle of teaching and learning complementing each other, teachers' teaching standards and research capabilities keep improving.

6 CONCLUSION

The Business English General Education course at South China Agricultural University embodies the teaching philosophy of teaching students according to their aptitude and personalized instruction. It emphasizes both the stylistic features of Business English and general business knowledge, enabling students to understand the lexical, syntactic, stylistic, and discourse structure characteristics of Business English during the input process[8]. During instruction, teachers organically combine the teaching of business knowledge with the cultivation of students' English language skills and cross-cultural communication abilities based on their professional characteristics. This ensures that students acquire basic knowledge related to business activities while mastering the ability to express themselves fluently in English within business scenarios. The course implements the Values-Language-Business tri-core driven teaching philosophy, helping students accurately position and plan their careers, ultimately becoming interdisciplinary talents with agricultural characteristics.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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