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The Application of Data-Driven Learning in Business English Teaching for MBA Students in China: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at laying foundation for the application of Data-Driven Learning (DDL) in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) English teaching and furthers its development and improvement in different contexts. Therefore, the paper attempts to illustrate the pilot application of an innovative teaching method, DDL, in Business English (BE) teaching for the MBA program. The survey, by using questionnaire and analysis of the data, reveals the positive effects of the DDL application in the MBA program and some disadvantageous aspects which require improvement.

Keywords: Data-Driven Learning (DDL), Business English (BE), Master of Business Administration (MBA) program

1. Introduction

Business English (BE) is booming in China with China's economy growing dramatically and its becoming more integrated into the international community. In most MBA programs in China, the Comprehensive Business English Course (CBEC) is a prescribed general education course for MBA students to practice the all four skills of BE: listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the business context. In a non-English speaking country like China, MBA students do not have many opportunities practicing BE outside of class. They usually acquire vocabulary, study sentence structures and grammatical rules, and practice the four skills, only in the CBEC.

The new version of the syllabus for MBA programs in China, issued by China National MBA Education Supervisory Committee (2011), attaches great emphasis on the internationalization of the MBA program in China. Constructing effective BE course is a vital step for MBA program to go internationalized (China National MBA Education Supervisory Committee, 2011). However, it illustrates the new requirements for the courses in MBA programs, except for the BE course. The lack of detailed requirements for the BE course results in problematic construction and organization of the course. Textbooks are not tailor-made to satisfy the needs of MBA students. The lessons are predictable and quite monotonous—teachers illustrate language points, give students exercises to work on, and administer tests. Therefore, teachers do most of the talking while students listen, take notes, or give short and simple responses. Students are not motivated to perform well in the CBEC because they have already had extensive exposure to this type of teacher-centered and spoon-fed approach to language instruction.

Considering the syllabus of the postgraduate English course for Non-English Majors(2001), I believe an effective BE course for MBA students should be specially-designed to satisfy the needs of them and enables them to be qualified to use BE in the work field. Therefore, the course should be interactive and the teaching materials should be authentic. In this article, I describe some activities based on Data-Driven Learning(DDL), which can transform a dull and dry lesson plan into an interesting teaching and learning experience which emphasizes authenticity and interaction.

2. Theoretical Framework

BE teaching for MBA students in China has a long tradition of instructivist-based pedagogy which relies on didactic lectures, rote memorization, and high-stakes exams. The instructivist-based approaches fail to trigger MBA students' interest in BE learning. Therefore, changing the conventional teaching method is a must.

Constructivism has been viewed as a philosophy and a theory of communication and, in recent decades it has emerged as a dominant paradigm in education (Kaufman, 2004). Constructivism in education stems from notions of cognitive and social constructivism (Schcolnik et al, 2006; Kaufman, 2004). The former is grounded in the work of Piaget (1970; Piaget and Inhelder 1971) and sheds light on cognitive development and individual construction of knowledge; the latter focuses on social construction of knowledge and is underscored in the work of Vygotsky (1986). The debate over the relative influence of these two approaches of constructivism on learning continues. But I believe these two approaches are not exclusive of each other; rather, they are "inextricably entwined" (Schcolnik et al., 2006; Salsbury and Crummer, 2008). In fact, DDL is based on both cognitive and social constructivism.

DDL, based on Constructivism, is the application of corpus linguistics in English teaching and learning. The application of DDL in BE teaching for MBA students has three advantages: First, corpus can provide abundant sources of authentic language. Most BE teachers in MBA programs in China do not have enough work experience in the business field, and they have to depend on reliable source of BE in order to manage this course well. Second, BE is changing dramatically with a large number of nascent jargons. Corpus can help teachers keep abreast of changes in BE. Third, using corpus in BE teaching can bring the class more fun and students will be more involved in learning.

3. The Application of DDL

3.1 Activity 1: Vocabulary Teaching

The conventional method of vocabulary teaching and learning in CBEC class is usually the Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) mode: teachers present the pronunciations, spellings, forms, meanings, collocations, etc., of BE words and expect students to practice and produce them. Most of the MBA students find the PPP mode painstaking and ineffective. Because of the negative effects of the PPP mode, I introduce DDL, which is of the Observe-Hypothesize-Experiment (OHE) mode, into the BE teaching for MBA students. The advantage to this approach is that students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge; instead, they take responsibility for their language learning, with the teacher in the role of a facilitator (Lytovchenko, 2009).

In the DDL approach, students are exposed to large quantities of authentic language materials, and they have to make hypotheses about the language patterns, including the word's part of speech, meaning, and collocations; rather than simply being lectured on the correct rules for using the words. The DDL approach to vocabulary teaching is conducted as follows:

- For each unit, I select ten most frequent words in the business context are selected for students to learn in the DDL way.
- The concordance lines are well-chosen so that they suit students' language proficiency level.
- The target words are displayed in a format called "keyword-in-context (KWIC)"—the key word is put in the middle of the sentence and highlighted, which enables students to focus quickly on the main item of study.
- Students can discover the different usage, such as lexicalized "chunks" or collocations, of the target words by reading the KWIC lines.
- Students work in pairs to exchange their hypotheses about words' usage.
- Some students are selected to report their findings/hypotheses to the class. They also need to give evidence to support their findings. Students are encouraged to report as many findings as possible, be it right or wrong.
- Other students and I listen attentively to their findings/hypotheses and give our own opinions about the usage of the word and also the evidence to support our viewpoints. It is possible that we cannot reach consensus, hence a heated discussion. We take down our disagreement and move on to the next word. We refer to our notes again in the next step.
- The final step is for students to compare their hypotheses with the information in dictionaries. From my observation, compared with the instructivist-based PPP mode, in which students just take notes and practice

what they have learned rigidly; the constructivist-based OHE mode engages students in finding out the usage of the words on their own. The DDL approach, based on the OHE mode, is found effective and very popular with the MBA students.

3.2 Activity 2: Sentence Structure Teaching

The conventional method for teaching sentence structure in a BE class for MBA students is uninteresting and ineffective: teachers stand at the front of the classroom, analyzing sentence structure in detail, giving examples, and generalizing grammatical rules; while students take notes and receive the information passively. We often notice students dozing off in class when teachers are lecturing on grammatical points about sentence structure.

My goal is to transform this monotonous teaching method into an interesting teaching and learning interaction in a business context. I adapt an activity called "sentence auction" from Folse (2008) and use it in my class. The "sentence auction" activity was originally designed for teaching vocabulary, but I believe it can be useful in sentence-structure teaching. Since Folse (2008) did not give detailed explanation about how to undertake this activity, I have re-designed the "sentence auction" activity in accordance with the principles of the DDL approach, to satisfy my teaching objectives, and I have found that it does work out effectively. This part of teaching has long been considered the most boring for students and painstaking for teachers, but with the introduction of the "sentence auction" activity, students have shown great enthusiasm in learning sentence structure.

In brief, I auction sentences which are not directly selected from the BE text, but are closely related to the important sentence structures used in it. The goal for students is to buy as many correct sentences as possible. MBA students find this competitive and business-related activity very interesting. The sentence auction is arranged in the following steps:

- I find out all the important sentence structures in the text, and then consult the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) to check out the commonly-made mistakes of Chinese English learners. CLEC is a learner corpus which reliably records the inter-language development of a representative group of learners (Gui and Yang, 2003). The typical errors found in it have implications for the selection of sentences and the coining of grammatically-wrong sentences which are used in the auction. There are many other corpora of English language learners in countries where English is used as a foreign language.
- The sentences for auction to the students are listed on Powerpoint (PPT) slides. There are ten sentences in total, and on each of the slides are two sentences.
- Students are divided into study groups, with four students in each group. They have a discussion about whether they should auction a particular sentence or not. Students internalize knowledge by working in groups. Grouping is not just a convenient way to accumulate the individual knowledge. Students can be both novice and expert at some point, which helps them construct their knowledge through interaction.
- Specially-made paper money has to be prepared. The bid for each sentence starts at 10 dollars, and they need to add at least 10 dollars for every bid. As is the case with Folse's method (2008), there is no penalty for buying wrong sentences and there is no credit for leftover money.
- The sentences for auction are shown on the slides one by one. Students have 5 minutes to have a discussion and decide whether they should bid for that sentence or not. Students participate in the discussion enthusiastically as they all want to be the winning group, purchasing the highest number of correct sentences. I am only the auctioneer who makes sure the auction is conducted smoothly without providing any suggestions or hints for them.
- At the end of the auction, I announce which sentences are correct and which ones are incorrect and give detailed explanations of the language points involved. Students usually listen to the explanations attentively as they are eager to know whether they are part of the winning group— the group with the highest number of correct sentences. Very often a time, students challenge my explanation of language points and ask for more examples. In doing so, students acquire more language knowledge than learning it by rote memorization.

4. Findings—Feedback from MBA Students

Each of the questions in the questionnaire is a multiple-choice item which is designed on the basis of Lickert scale: from the most important (weighing 5) to the least important (weighing 1). The data collected have been processed and analyzed by SPSS 19.0 and the analyzed data lead to the following conclusions:

First, questions Q1 and Q2 attempt to find out MBA students' general opinions about DDL: whether they are for

or against this method. MBA students are of the following characteristics: first, they have been exposed to the conventional language teaching method for many years and it is quite challenging for them to accept another method; second, most of the students seldom have opportunities to use English in their work and daily life; third, they are mature adults who have been in the work field for many years and they are mature and have a clear idea about their needs. Their feedback is conductive to the development of DDL, providing useful suggestions for the application of DDL in new fields. The statistics of Q1 and Q2 reveal that MBA students hold conservative attitude towards the application of DDL in the BE teaching. Most of the students think the effect of DDL is ordinary, and it has room for improvement. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2). The students, to some extent, agree that DDL is more effective than the conventional method. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2).

Second, questions Q3, Q4, Q5 and Q6 are about DDL's application in students' vocabulary acquisition. Most of the students are not clear about DDL's function in the vocabulary spelling. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2). This finding reveals that more emphasis should be laid on vocabulary spelling when I use the DDL method. Students find DDL is effective in helping them acquire the meaning and usage of the words. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2). It is probably because the words are shown in the KWIC format and in different contexts which enable them to consider words' usage in the English context instead of mechanically memorizing their Chinese equivalents as they usually do in the conventional method. In addition, students find it a useful way for them to expand their vocabulary. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2).

Third, questions Q7 and Q8 are about the effects of DDL on students' improvement of their listening and speaking skills. Statistics reveal that students cannot see some significant improvement in their listening and speaking skills by adopting DDL. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2). The reason may be that students can only read the words shown on the printed handouts, and they are not informed of the words' pronunciation. How we can apply the DDL method in an audio-visual way remains to be seen.

Fourth, questions Q9 and Q10 are about the effects of DDL on students' improvement of their reading and writing skills. Students find the DDL method works effectively in helping them improve their reading and writing skills. The difference is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 2). Since the students are shown large quantities of authentic language materials, they can associate words with the different contexts in which they can be used accurately.

From the statistics we have found and analyzed, we can safely come to the conclusion that the application of DDL in the MBA program is innovative, and comparatively successful. But it still has room for improvement especially in vocabulary acquisition, and improvement of listening and speaking skills.

Table 1. Items and scopes of the questionnaire

Item	Scope
Q1	What do you think of the application of DDL in the MBA program?
Q2	Do you agree with the following statement: "DDL is more effective in English language teaching and learning, compared with the conventional method." ?
Q3	How useful do you think DDL is to your spelling of the words?
Q4	How useful do you think DDL is to your acquisition of the meanings of the words?
Q5	How useful do you think DDL is to your application of the words?
Q6	How useful do you think DDL is to your expanding of vocabulary?
Q7	How useful do you think DDL is to your improvement of listening skills?
Q8	How useful do you think DDL is to your improvement of speaking skills?
Q9	How useful do you think DDL is to your improvement of reading skills?
Q10	How useful do you think DDL is to your improvement of writing skills?

Table 2. Chi-Square test statistics

Item	Chi-Square	Degree of Freedom	Asympotic Significance(2-tailed)
Q1	24	4	p <0.05
Q2	16	4	p <0.05
Q3	16	4	p <0.05
Q4	37.6667	4	p <0.05
Q5	17.6667	4	p <0.05
Q6	33.3333	4	p <0.05
Q7	29.3333	4	p <0.05
Q8	21	4	p <0.05
Q9	48	4	p <0.05
Q10	11.3333	4	p <0.05

5. Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that MBA students in China frequently have a negative attitude towards the CBEC. Nevertheless, they attend this course because: first, it is usually a compulsory course and they need to obtain the credit to get the degree; second, they are obliged to pass a series of English proficiency exams.

On the other hand, China National MBA Education Supervisory Committee has already realized the importance of the BE course in the internationalization of MBA programs in China. But a designated and detailed syllabus has not been issued till now. How teachers can conduct BE course is still a tough problem to be solved.

From what I have observed, students have higher motivation in attending the CBEC than before, and they are no longer exam-oriented: they simply enjoy the process of BE acquisition. This pedagogic proposal of using DDL in BE teaching is not just suitable for the CBEC in China, but also useful for the course where the four skills of the English language are practiced while constructivist-based teaching methods are not in use. It is hoped that my proposal can contribute significantly to the undeniable need to educate students to be more informed, curious, and critical in BE teaching and learning.

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