

Integrating critical thinking into task-based teaching of an integrated course of advanced business English

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Abstract. Critical thinking (CT) is conducive to foreign language learning. This paper conducts research of how teachers could enhance CT skills of junior-level university students in an integrated course of advanced business English. It has found that a task-based teaching method helps motivate students to reflect critically, to make use of what they have learned and to acquire new specialized knowledge and skills in practice. Teachers may assign five categories of tasks, including listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, and they could update teaching materials based on English levels and preference of students in order to engage them in the CT process of analysis, evaluation, inference, observation, reflection and reasoning.

1. Introduction

CT is of vital importance for academic success [1], and it is also considered as a crucial element in language learning [2]. Integrating CT into language classrooms is more than improving linguistic skills and memorisation of students [3], and it also aims to enhance their “communicative competence, creativity, argumentation, problem-solving, decision-making, autonomous learning, metacognition and emotions” [4].

Despite great significance of CT in second language teaching, there are scant studies regarding teaching CT in these classrooms [5]. Existent ones mostly focus on its positive influence on writing courses [6] and reading courses [7]. And even fewer studies are conducted on teaching CT in integrated English courses, though such courses are prioritized in countries like China. According to Chinese *National Standard for Assessing the Quality of Teaching in Undergraduate Programs Offered by Regular Higher Education Institutions* [8], this course is a necessity for undergraduates who major in English, translation, and business English. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to enrich study of this field, to explore how teachers could assign tasks to enhance CT in an integrated course of business English during higher education, and to shed light on the teaching of other relevant integrate courses. Following are the questions which drive this study:

What are teaching objectives of an integrated course of advanced business English?

How could teachers integrate the CT training into tasks of this course?

2. Understanding CT

Though the significance of CT is undeniable, scholars have not reached a consensus on its definition yet. For instance,

Halpern [9] defines it as the usage of cognitive skills or strategies for raising probability of getting desirable results. However, most scholars share common understandings that CT depends on skills and disposition [10], and it “involves analysis, evaluation, inference, observation, reflection, and reasoning” [5]. This paper intends to explore how teachers could engage students in the above-mentioned process and enhance their CT skills, in the teaching of an integrated course of advanced business English.

3. Teaching CT in an integrated course of advanced business English

This author has around-6-year-long experience in teaching this course, which is found to be challenging for junior-year students in the university where the author has taught. To help students learn this course better and enhance their CT skills in the process of teaching, the author has designated five categories of tasks according to English levels of students in regular universities. This sector intends to discuss teaching difficulties and objectives of this course and how teachers could integrate CT into learning tasks of students.

3.1. Teaching difficulties and objectives

This author has mainly found the following three challenges while integrating CT into the teaching of this course. First, though CT has been emphasised repeatedly in classrooms of different courses, most students and a few teachers fail to attach due importance to CT in their learning or teaching. Getting high scores or simply passing exams is the priority of these students who grow up in exam-oriented education. And most students tend to believe that memorizing new words and mastering

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grammatical rules are more effective for them to achieve good performance in final exams than bettering CT skills.

And the second one is that relevant coursebooks which are available in the markets are designed for students in both top-ranked universities and regular ones alike, and they turn out to be challenging for students in universities whose levels are closed to that of the author. Students find materials of the textbook so difficult that some just quit the learning. Therefore, it is of great significance for teachers to adjust task assignments based on levels of their students.

The third one is study habits of students. Although students find it hard to learn materials of this textbook, a number of them are not accustomed to doing preview or review work. Even when they are forced to do it to leave better impression on teachers and get higher scores than those who do not, a few choose to copy answers of others and fail to learn knowledge from such practices. So, it is important for teachers to set limited-time tasks to push students to finish relevant preview or review on their own in class. And giving appropriate encouragement and setting tasks in accordance with English levels of students are also necessary for teachers to intrigue students to learn.

Considering difficulties above, this author has come up with three objectives in the teaching of this course. This integrated course is usually taught during the junior year of college after students have learned some basic courses like grammar. So, one main teaching objective is to further improve overall linguistic competence of students regarding listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, while other linguistic courses tend to focus on the training of one to two specific skills. And teachers can replace some teaching materials, which are beyond understanding of students or make them feel bored, with the ones which are more acceptable and interesting to students. For instance, this author tends to start with popular topics or events in the speaking and listening tasks to make them feel interested.

Apart from this, the course also aims to equip students with specialized knowledge, so that they could perform better in communication and negotiations of future jobs than those of other English majors. It is of great significance for students to understand new information which they have got from learning tasks and put them into use whenever it is possible. Since such knowledge is new to them, one useful measure to help students better master the knowledge is to design a series of related tasks and encourage students to use the knowledge repeatedly while completing the tasks.

During recent years, CT has also become increasingly important, due to a common belief that it exerts great influence on academic study and future careers of students. CT skills could assist students to understand teaching materials more thoroughly and perform better in relevant tasks. Therefore, the third vital objective is to raise students' awareness of importance of CT, motivate them to think and improve their CT skills through various learning tasks of students. This paper intends to explore how teachers could achieve these objectives through task-based teaching, which could encourage students to apply known knowledge, practice learned skills and gain new ones in action.

3.2. Students' learning tasks

One noticeable feature of an integrated course of business English is high proportion of relevant specialized knowledge in teaching content. Students are mostly unfamiliar with the knowledge; and it is important for teachers to input information in the early-stage tasks to motivate them to think critically in the following tasks. And teaching the new knowledge directly could hardly interest students or even may make some feel bored; therefore, a better choice may be starting a series of tasks about common topics of which students are able to come up with individual insights when they are asked to do so.

Then teachers could relate new knowledge to what students have known to help them understand such message and learn how to apply the knowledge in their daily life. Considering the relations of different tasks and difficulties which students face in them, teachers could start with listening and speaking tasks, through which students gain some understanding of relevant business practices. Then they come to reading tasks from which students get more in-depth insights, and finally assign corresponding writing and translating tasks.

3.2.1 Speaking and listening tasks

Due to the situation that teachers tend to choose time-tested textbooks, which have been written and published a few years ago, for reliability in integrated courses, lead-in sectors of textbooks hardly contain trendy information to arouse the interest of students. Therefore, teachers could replace materials of this part with the updated ones in speaking and listening tasks to encourage students to think and talk about relevant topics rather than listen to what teachers said passively.

Though university students are not well equipped with specialized knowledge, they are one significant group of consumers and know about relevant business practices consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, teachers could begin the speaking tasks with common topics to encourage students to reflect critically on their daily life, analyze commercial phenomena, and justify opinions with real-life experiences in English. And the think-pair-share strategy is applicable in the category of tasks. For instance, in one unit regarding film industry, this author has set the following three questions for students to consider first, then discuss with partners in English and share their opinions in class: (1) what is your favorite film? (2) what are the first two or three numerical data that occur to you regarding this film? (3) what are these data about?

After speaking tasks, teachers may deliver new and relevant information to students through mixed tasks of listening and speaking. Considering language levels of students, this author has designed two kinds of listening tasks: the response type and the note-taking type.

In the response tasks, teachers impart new specialized knowledge to students based on the results from the previous speaking tasks in English. They ask students questions to make sure they understand the information and improve their listening skills. For example, in the film-industry unit, this author has explored film production, marketing and distribution based on the numerical data

from the task before. There are follow-up questions like that about optimal screening time of films in China to check how much information students have got from the marketing section, to encourage them to think back on their experiences, and to judge if business practices are common worldwide.

In the note-taking tasks, students are required to listen to videos whose speech rates outrun teachers. Students analyze and evaluate different information and distinguish important ones from supporting ones during the note taking. Speakers of these speeches are normally from different cultures, or their speech content poses a challenge to assumptions of students. Then students could be divided into two groups including supporters and opponents of the speakers, and they explain why they agree or disagree after several minutes of thinking, checking information online or discussing with partners. These speaking and listening tasks help enhance skills in analysis, evaluation, observation, reflection, and reasoning.

3.2.2 Reading tasks

The objectives of reading tasks are to improve students' linguistic proficiency, and better their CT skills in analysis, evaluation, inference, and reasoning. To be specific, reading tasks could be categorized into fast reading and intensive reading. During the fast one, students grasp main ideas of reading materials based on hints on worksheets provided by teachers without checking dictionaries. To accomplish the tasks, they analyze text structures, evaluate information, distinguish main ideas from evidence, and infer meanings of new words. After that, they could refer to dictionaries or other online resources for more detailed reading and decide whether answers on the worksheets should be changed or not. Discussion among partners is optional, depending on if there is still sufficient time. Several students are chosen at random to share their finished worksheets and justify their answers before the teachers show and explain his or her worksheets.

Since this course is an advanced one, the focus in class is on grammatical structures and terminologies during the intensive reading tasks. Teachers could ask a few students regarding understanding of difficult and complex sentences before they share their own opinions.

3.2.3 Translation tasks

There are two types of translation tasks, one of which is translation from mother tongue to English and vice versa. Based on 8-year teaching experiences, this author has found that one noticeable challenge for students in translation tasks is that most of them translate texts on a lexical basis or sentential one. It means that a few students attach great importance to finding lexical equivalents for each word and ignore relations between different components of one sentence. The other group of students perform better than the first group, but they focus on relations within one sentence and fail to clarify relations between different sentences of one text.

Therefore, it is of importance to help students cultivate the habit of analyzing original texts and evaluating their

information as the first step of translation tasks. Teachers could select texts concerning business topics about which student have learned during the previous listening, speaking, and reading tasks. They may require students to halt translation temporarily, summarize main ideas of original texts and share the summaries in class. After that, students start the translation, and the first versions of translations are suggested to be finished without the aid of dictionaries. This helps students strengthen skills of analysis and inference when they encounter new English words. And when they deal with complex expressions of native languages, students are pushed to analyze what information authors intend to deliver through the expressions, and to reflect on foreign expressions which they have learned, before they could find appropriate equivalents. Later, when they are checking dictionaries to improve the draft versions, students have a better chance of distinguishing various synonyms and selecting the suitable one than those who refer to dictionaries or online sources directly. It helps students improve language proficiency and enhance CT skills.

3.2.4 Writing tasks

Through writing of students, teachers could learn about the progress of their CT training, and update other tasks according to their performance. It could also better student CT skills through their participation in analysis, evaluation, observation, reflection, and reasoning. Because there are other courses which are designated to teach students about the writing of business letters and contracts, this course prioritizes writing tasks of analyzing business phenomena.

Though one objectives of this course is to teach specialized knowledge, the knowledge is mostly entry-level ones due to limited time and curriculum design. Therefore, usually students are required to analyze and evaluate relevant business practices, which they have seen or heard about in the daily life, at least from the perspective of individual consumers and enterprises. These assignments enable students to relate to relevant topics, observe or reflect on what is happening around them, come up with their opinions and explain reasoning behind such ideas. It is important to select business topics which are familiar to students as individual consumers, since they used to mostly write about topics like environment, education, hard work and so forth, and it is uncommon for them to consider issues from the angle of consumers.

In addition to content, there are requirements regarding article structures. Students are asked to explain insights of specific business practices in a more logical way than what they do with the writing of other articles like stories. They could either start with general ideas, then come to specific details and vice versa. One priority is that they clarify opinions and support those with clear reasoning. Other components like background introduction are optional for students.

4. Conclusion

An integrated courses of advanced business English is designated to improve comprehensive language skills of

students and impart to them specialized knowledge. And nowadays scholars and educators are increasingly aware of great influence of CT, therefore, enhancing CT skills is another significant teaching objective for the course. Task-based teaching is applicable in the teaching, and it motivates students to make use of what they have learned and to acquire new knowledge and skills in practice.

This paper intends to explore how teachers could assign different tasks and achieve the above-mentioned objectives. And it has arrived at the following findings: first, teachers could design tasks in a traditional way and divide them into tasks of listening, speaking, reading, translating, and writing; however, one important thing which they should keep in mind is to adjust teaching materials and procedures according to the objective of engaging students in analysis, evaluation, inference, observation, reflection, and reasoning.

Second, teachers may make use of think-pair-share technique, worksheets and so forth to guide students to think critically about what they have heard or read in the tasks which are mainly characterized by information input. Third, during the main information-output tasks of speaking, translating and writing, it is helpful to start with familiar business topics which encourage students to reflect critically on experiences, arrive at their own opinions and explain reasoning behind ideas. And after lead-in parts, teachers may instil specialized information and propose some follow-up questions to ensure that students get the information and to motivate them to think about issues from new perspectives.

Moreover, in the reading and translation tasks, it is important for students to analyse relevant texts or paragraphs, evaluate information and differentiate main ideas from supporting evidence or from the background information. In this way, they could further enhance relevant CT skills, and their performance are better in reading and translating than those who read or translate on a lexical or sentential basis.

Writing on business phenomena which have direct influence on students could facilitate them to observe and reflect critically on what has or is happening, come up with their own ideas and supporting evidence based on personal experiences, and probably justify opinions with convincing reasoning. Writing tasks not only helps improve CT skills of students but also serve as indicators of their CT level. Therefore, teachers could make changes to their task content and requirements based on student performance in writing.

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