Teaching Business Chinese with Combined Methodologies

PingPing Zhu Lincoln

Abstract

Three outcomes are generally expected from a business Chinese course: business vocabulary, business conversation and business tasks. They are the three very major challenges to the course: business vocabulary that is hard to explain; business conversations that are difficult to mimic and memorize; business tasks of which students have no experiences and cultural background. It is not easy to find a suitable business Chinese textbook for freshmen that covers all three aspects of the course at the elementary Chinese level. An implementable solution to these challenges is not to use only one method but a few verified ones or combined methods. This research discusses the application of various methods in teaching business Chinese skills to students at the elementary Chinese level. While the target language only method runs through the whole course, the Grammar-Translation Approach is used for teaching business vocabulary with the translation in students' mother tongue next to the words on the list. Difficult reading materials are also provided with direct translation that students can easily catch the meaning. However, the texts are not analyzed grammatically, and only the grammar necessary for reading comprehension and fluency is taught in the Reading Approach. Learning business communication through the Directive Approach enables students to learn the usage of business Chinese vocabulary and practice business words and phrases within the context of a Chinese business world. Students can also experience Chinese culture associated with the target language and business tasks.

In the Chinese curriculum at a business school, Business Chinese is a key course starting from freshman year. Due to the lack of elementary business Chinese textbooks, other L2 Chinese textbooks for general purpose are used for freshmen and sophomores. Most conventional L2 Chinese textbooks at elementary level add on cultural elements rather than business components compatible with the vocabulary and grammar they convey. They prepare students of Business Chinese in grammar and basic dialogue forms but not in vocabulary and business tasks. However, without enough business words and phrases, students cannot conduct business conversations, not to mention business tasks. This brings challenges to both teachers and students of Business Chinese. It is difficult to find a suitable textbook for business Chinese beginners for the fact that an elementary business course in a second language has to combine the primary grammar points with the vocabulary of intermediate level and above, along with an understanding of business tasks within a foreign cultural context. Is there such a suitable business Chinese textbook in terms of its content, level, and target students? How can teachers utilize various teaching methods to reach the teaching goals with available textbooks? How can a course of Business Chinese meet the various needs of students who will use business Chinese in different situations?

Suitability of the Textbook

Business Chinese is for those who are engaged in business with China or those who may pursue a career related to China or Chinese people. As a subject Chinese course, Business Chinese is more challenging than most conventional Chinese courses at elementary or intermediate levels. It is even more challenging to the novice learners of Chinese business. Thus, a suitable textbook for business Chinese beginners has to combine basic grammar rules and commonly used business vocabulary with preliminary business tasks.

There were fewer textbooks for Business Chinese several years ago although various styles of business Chinese textbooks have been published in recent years. We considered seven and tried four of what we could find in last few years. Among these seven business Chinese textbooks, two were published in Japan and five in China (hereafter simplified as BCT1 to BCT7 in the following text). None of them were written for the purpose of teaching young college students at low Chinese level without any background of Chinese culture and business. Four of the seven BCTs in this research are more suitable for people from the business world whose Chinese efficiency is at least above the intermediate level. The other three BCTs were written for those who have studied Chinese for one or one and a half years in China or another learning environment. They could be suitable to the third year Chinese majors in a Japanese university. However, our third year Chinese majors have to earn many credits other than Chinese as students in a commerce university. And the suitability of a textbook, especially of a business Chinese textbook is multifaceted. Since there is no systematic engagement between conventional Chinese and business Chinese in terms of content, level, and student group, it takes more consideration to choose an appropriate business Chinese textbook for the level of a certain group of target students.

I. Content Suitability

The commonly accepted definition of Business Chinese is that as part of L2 Chinese language teaching, it is a subject Chinese course with business content and Chinese as its language capacity. However, business Chinese can be understood either as a practical business course in Chinese or a Chinese language course with business content. The former focuses more on business; the latter emphasizes Chinese. The content of a textbook depends on its target users and the goals of the course that uses it. Most textbooks we have tried could not fully meet the three goals of the course in business vocabulary, conversation, and tasks at the level of students in this research.

1.1 Not enough business vocabulary learning

Our students have learned very limited number of business Chinese words from the conventional L2 Chinese textbooks. And business vocabulary is very difficult to explain in target language only yet essential for further learning of business Chinese. Understanding the meaning of business vocabulary helps students conduct business conversations and complete business tasks. BCT1 and BCT2 provide the Japanese translations for texts, but do not have a vocabulary list in each lesson. BCT3 has the Japanese translation for all the vocabulary, but it is at the end of the textbook. In other words, vocabulary is not included as a teaching section in each lesson, not to mention having vocabulary exercises for further understanding. BCT4, 5, and 6 list the important business vocabulary in each lesson with no Japanese translation. So either students have to spend much time to look for the meaning of each word, or the teacher has to make students understand the new business vocabulary before teaching the other content. Only BCT7 has a word list in each lesson with a Japanese translation so that students can know the meanings of the vocabulary without taking up too much of the teaching period. They can also learn and review those words themselves within texts and with tasks. This makes the text learning and task conducting much easier and class progression more smooth. It is one

of the main reasons that we finally chose BCT7 as the textbook of Chinese Business Communication.

1.2 Business conversation too formative

The main texts of five BCTs are in the form of business conversations according to the chronological order in a typical business environment, usually between a Chinese company and a foreign company. Three among these five BCTs are at the level of intermediate and above with pure business content. They include business transactions such as commodity inspection, damage claim, arbitration, and calling for a bid. It is too "businesslike" even in the students' mother tongue. Although the contents of the two lower level BCTs are much simpler and easier for students to comprehend, they require students to be able to play business roles right from the first lesson. And most conversations are stylized between two people, which is not always the case in doing business. Students do not have the sense of doing business although they can mimic the business conversation from the texts under a teacher's guidance. The texts of BCT7 are formed of all business related conversations. However, it considers the transition between conventional Chinese and business Chinese. For example, the text of lesson one is to introduce yourself which students learned in general Chinese courses. Although the context of the introduction is the first day at a company, the format is familiar. Students can just replace certain words with business vocabulary, and it is easy to practice. It is also not difficult for students to understand the situation. Other texts in BCT7 are also easy for college students of low level Chinese without business experiences to handle, such as interviews, daily arrangements, a company's location, party arrangements, surveys, etc. The contents are business related; the level is from elementary to intermediate, and they are suitable for business Chinese beginners.

1.3 Business tasks with no variety

Most of the seven BCTs in this research only cover two tasks: one is routine business communication, and the other is practical business writing. Texts are composed of identical conversations between two parties. It does not cover various roles or positions in business through simple tasks. Some practical business texts are written in classical Chinese. So it is a very difficult task even for native Chinese as to be explained in the following part of this article. BCT6 is an advanced reading textbook with business content of famous businessmen, successful companies, and business analysis. It is for those who can already do business in Chinese, but need to improve their reading comprehension. BCT7 has seven parts and nine sections in each lesson. They are basic business vocabulary, important sentence structure with business content, listening materials of simple business tasks, business conversation on different topics, exercises for vocabulary reviewing, business tasks including role play and mini-business experiment, extended reading, and advanced business words. The contents of the nine sections vary greatly, yet at an appropriate level. Through different tasks focused on diverse themes with various functions of language skills, students learn business Chinese on one topic at a time with many activities.

II. Level Suitability

In terms of level suitability of a business Chinese textbook, it is not only a matter of teaching appropriate business content in Chinese, but also a matter of business content for the students' Chinese level. The HSK level of our third year students is between levels 2 and 3. But most business Chinese textbooks are at a higher level in their vocabulary and content, not to mention those words used in business tasks. Some of the words appearing in one of the BCTs we tried were "有幸", "承蒙", and "斟酌". Do Chinese use these words when they communicate directly with foreigners? Do Chinese among themselves use these words commonly? The answers are "No", at least not nowadays. So they were selected inappropriately. There are other words on the vocabulary list that teachers probably do not quite understand if they are not from a business

major, such as "实盘", "虚盘", "报盘", and "还盘". Similar examples can be found in practical business writings. Instead of "请理解" (please understand), it is expressed as "包涵为盼"; and using "敬请良鉴" to mean "请读一下" (please read). It is difficult to decide the levels of these words and expressions, but they are not suitable for students at a low Chinese level. It requires high skills of a teacher explaining those complicated technical expressions in a very simple and explicit way so that the students at the low Chinese level without business experience can understand. If this is possible, it will certainly take a big portion of the teaching time.

III. Student Suitability

As mentioned above, there are two types of business Chinese textbooks, of which one focuses more on business; the other emphasizes Chinese. We probably can also divide students of Business Chinese into two groups. One group of students with higher expectations who fall into three categories: those who are from the business world; those who are going to pursue further learning in Business Chinese or related areas; and those who are going to use their business Chinese skill in doing business with China. The other group of students has lower expectations and only wants to learn some basics in business Chinese for dealing with Chinese customers in the service sector, or just for tourism. Our students belong to the second group.

Some of our best graduates work for Japanese companies that have business with China. But they usually work as assistants using very basic Chinese, for example, making simple phone calls or meeting with Chinese customers for hospitality. None of them are involved in formal business procedures. Case Study Approach may be suitable for students who have studied Chinese for four years (Liang, 2006) or the first group of students, but what the second group of students needs the most is basic conversation with the most commonly used business vocabulary in simple business-related tasks.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to find a suitable business Chinese textbook for a special student group. Among seven BCTs only BCT7 is close to what we were looking for, yet some of its vocabulary and reading materials are beyond our students' Chinese level, and some of the business tasks such as business consultation and strategic management are beyond their knowledge and experience. Thus, applicable teaching methods can be a better solution.

Applicability of the Teaching Methodology

Three outcomes are generally expected from a business Chinese course: business vocabulary, business conversation and business tasks. They are the three major challenges to the course: business vocabulary is hard to explain in the target language; business conversation is difficult to mimic and memorize; and business tasks are unfamiliar to students having no experience or cultural background. An implementable solution to these challenges is not to use only one teaching method but a few verified ones or combined methods.

I. Grammar-Translation Approach for Vocabulary and Sentences

The Grammar-Translation Approach is a method that teaches a second language in the students' mother tongue with little help from the target language. Vocabulary is taught in the form of isolated word lists, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words. And only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue, and vice versa (Mora, 2008).

In *Experience Chinese: Business Communication in China* (BCT7) (Zhang, 2006), there are about 300 business words and 100 business sentences. Among the 300 words, three quarters are on the HSK vocabulary

list. However, vocabulary of level one, level two and their combination only amount to 35% of the 300 words. Most of the 100 business Chinese sentences of BCT7 are in common sentence types with difficult new words that students are not familiar with. It is extremely difficult to use the target-language-only method in this situation because the business words and sentences are difficult to explain in the target language due to the abstract meaning of the vocabulary and the context of the sentences. The best way to teach the business vocabulary is to provide the meaning in students' mother tongue when they first learn. It helps them to understand the text of business conversation and the context of business tasks. Meanwhile, the target-language-only method is not completely ignored. At the beginning of the following class, students are tested on whether they can remember the vocabulary in both pronunciation and writing in the target language. At the end of each lesson, the important words are reviewed again in sentences. Business sentences are taught exactly according to the Grammar-Translation Approach. First, they are given to students in the target language. Based on the sentence types they learned before and the words they just learned, students translate these sentences into their mother tongue. To most students, it is fairly easy because there are flexibilities in translation as long as the meanings are close to the original sentences. Second, these sentences are tested in a reversed way. Students need to translate these sentences from their mother tongue to the target language. This way saves the teacher's time on difficult explanations, yet students can understand the meanings of these sentences with bidirectional translation exercises. In addition, learning sentences enhances students' understanding of the meanings of the words within contexts. It also helps students to use these sentences in business conversation and tasks.

II. Directive Approach for Communication

As a reaction to the Grammar-Translation Approach, the Directive Approach never uses the mother tongue and translation method. Material is presented orally in the target language. Texts are not analyzed grammatically but associated with the cultural background of the target language (Mora, 2008). In BCT7, texts are all in the form of conversations, but the translation is at the end of the texts. In learning this part, students are not allowed to look at the translation but only the target language version. As the business conversations in BCT7 are very simple, and difficult words are learned in advance with the translation of the students' native language, it is not difficult for students to listen to the record and imitate the conversation in the target language. One drawback of BCT7 is that it does not provide a clip to visualize the situation so that students have a vivid picture of where, when, and how the communications occur. So when students are asked to play roles according to the texts, they more or less copy exact sentences from the textbook. But when being without a textbook, they cannot recall or reproduce the right sentences. Without the matching visual input, we borrowed one serial of situational dialogue with a movie screen at a similar Chinese level. Students have to follow four steps: 1) watch the video and answer the comprehensive questions; 2) practice the conversation from the video; 3) create a conversation on the same topic and then practice it; and 4) create a conversation on a certain business topic and then practice it. Students are gradually used to conducting business communication on their own through transitions from conventional Chinese to business Chinese, from visual to verbal, and from written to oral. All the steps take place within the target language environment.

III. Blended Approaches for Business Tasks

The approaches discussed above are normally applied to classes as a whole method. However, this research uses several of them in a single class to fulfill the various tasks of a low-level business Chinese course. Business tasks from BCT7 usually undergo three stages. In the first stage, the Grammar-Translation Approach is used to read and understand the goal of the task in the students' mother tongue. In the second stage, the

Direct Approach guides students to write the process of completing the task in the target language, imitating business practices including planning, organizing, and processing. Charts, maps, graphs, and advertisements are also introduced in the target language. For some difficult tasks, the instructor provides directions or outlines to guide students' completion. In the third stage, students play the roles in tasks based on their comprehensible auditory input and oral communicative competence. The communicative purpose of Business Chinese cannot be fulfilled through either the Grammar Translation Approach or the Reading Approach. Students are allowed to output the language on their own, and create situations with problem-solving skills. A transition from learning business Chinese to using it for "real life" communication is happening in the classroom (LanguageLink, 1997). In completing some of the tasks, students need to read difficult materials provided with direct translation so that students could easily catch the meaning. However, the texts are not analyzed grammatically, and only the grammar necessary for reading comprehension and fluency is taught as in the Reading Approach (Mora, 2008). Thus, one needs the Grammar-Translation Approach, the Direct Approach, the Communicative Approach, and the Reading Approach to complete a business task from BCT7. And only with multiple teaching methods, could one make up the insufficiency of the textbook, the imbalance of difficulty levels among sections, and the specialization of some business tasks.

Innovations in Business Chinese Teaching

In several years of Business Chinese teaching, we have recognized the problems of textbooks, teaching methods, and the diversity of students who took the course. These issues should be investigated and considered with a broad viewpoint from the field, not only through an individual teacher's experiment. The subject of Business Chinese may need the following innovations.

I. Two Systems

Due to the hazy concept of "Business", textbooks for Business Chinese do not have a system with differentiable contents and levels. Many of them fall into the same format of business between a Chinese company and a foreign company. The text is usually organized in conversations at the following stages: at airports or hotels, schedules, negotiations, issues such as wrapping and shipping, contracts, etc. Does a Business Chinese textbook have to focus only on a typical business dealt in China? Are most students of Business Chinese going to conduct business with China or in China? What are the main goals of the students who take Business Chinese?

According to Yuan (2004), the concept of "Business" should be very broad, including foreign trade, foreign economic relations, business practices, investment modes, registered trademarks, annexation and purchasing, business management, tax revenue declarations, acquisition of materials, etc. A business course only containing the content of foreign trade and its practices is too narrow. However, one can argue that a course in the system of Yuan's "broad Business" is not a language course with business content but a business course taught in Chinese, not to mention that more young college learners are pursuing a much lower level business career.

It is not only a matter of teaching business content in Chinese, but also a matter of business content for students' future use. Based on the reality and needs, Business Chinese can be graded into two systems: the system of lower level as pre or pan-Business Chinese and the system of higher level as subject Business Chinese. Within each system, there are different levels according to the target student groups and their goals. Each level includes a certain scope of business vocabulary and business sentences. Universities and teachers can easily locate the system according to the curriculum.

II. Two Types of Students

The rationale for two systems of Business Chinese is based on the needs of different types of students. Not all students of Business Chinese have the opportunity to do business in China. Some students of Business Chinese do not really want to get into serious business with China. There are others only targeting jobs in travel agencies, hotels, or sales departments. For example, most students at NUCB belong to the latter category. There is no need for them to learn all the formal business procedures and transactions beside basic business communication skills. Thus, the pre or pan-Business Chinese is for students who will work as tour guides, hotel clerks, or low-level sales people in a business environment. And the subject Business Chinese is for students who will either continue their Chinese learning at a higher level or pursue a higher business position in a management track including those who are doing business with China. They can take either the pre or pan-Business Chinese or other conventional Chinese courses up to intermediate level before taking the subject Business Chinese. So, a pre or pan-Business Chinese course serves the purpose of the first group of business Chinese learners, and prepares the second group of business Chinese learners for taking the subject Business Chinese. However, the majority of the business Chinese textbooks are aiming at the students with higher expectations.

III. Two Sets of Textbooks

Two systems of Business Chinese and two types of students need two sets of textbooks. And two sets of textbooks means that we need different BCTs for different students with different goals. For the first group of students, we need textbooks with low-level business vocabulary, simple business conversations, and practical business tasks. For the second group of students, we need textbooks with high level business vocabulary, business conversations of a formal style, and the most applicable business tasks. The alternative is to add some practical business words into the conventional textbooks at each level. If students can learn enough basic business vocabulary in their general Chinese courses, then they can move directly on to the high-level Business Chinese without taking any pre or pan-Business Chinese lessons.

Conventional Chinese textbooks are often labeled as elementary, intermediate, or advanced according to the amount of vocabulary and their levels, grammatical points, etc. Most business textbooks have no labels indicating their levels. Their names are mostly based on the content rather than the language level except few of them titled as "basic" or "practical". Either ranking business Chinese textbooks or systematizing conventional Chinese textbooks with business Chinese textbooks is a huge project. The involved decision-making and the process of the project need cooperation among many institutes in the field.

Conclusion

Business Chinese is a subject Chinese course serving two purposes: to learn Chinese language within a business context, and to cultivate an ability to do business in Chinese. There are many business roles and positions requiring business Chinese with a variety of contents at different levels. BCTs have to meet the needs of various students. Now we are facing the reality of having business Chinese textbooks that are not, of the appropriate content, or at the right level for a target group of students, and there is no single method that can deal with a combination of business words at various levels, business conversations that are not practical in daily life, and business tasks never experienced in an unfamiliar cultural background. The solution is to apply multiple teaching methods to get the three results of Business Chinese teaching: business vocabulary, business conversation and business tasks. Business Chinese with two systems may improve the

situation of BCT unsuitability, and meet the needs of students with different expectations.

References

Dong, J. (2000). Business Chinese: Writing and conversation. Tokyo: Hakuteisha.

Guan, D. (2000). Basic and practical business Chinese. Beijing: Beijing University Press.

Ha, J. (2003). Economic and business Chinese: Reading and writing. Beijing: Foreign Language and Research Publisher.

LanguageLink (1997). Comparative teaching methodologies, retrieved on Oct. 24, 2009 from http://jobs.languagelink. ru/TEFL/methodologies.php.

Li, L. (2002). Company Chinese. Beijing: Beijing University Press.

Liang, H., 2006. "Business Chinese beyond business: Incorporating the teaching methodologies of conventional Chinese courses into Business Chinese," retrieved on Dec. 25, 2008 from www.umich.edu/~cibe/pdfs/ Hsin_Hsin_Liang.ppt.

Lu, Y. (1997). Foundation of Chinese conversation: Business conversation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Audio and Video Publisher.

Mora, J. K., 2008. "Second-language teaching methods: Principles and procedures," retrieved On Jan. 13, 2009 from http://coe.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/almmethods.htm.

Yuan, J. (2004). *On Business Chinese course, teaching and textbooks,* Journal of Yunnan Normal University, Vol. 2, No. 2.

Zeng, Xue. (2006). *Engagement between L2 business Chinese and Basic L2 Chinese,* Bianjiang Economy and Culture, No. 6.

Zhang, H. (2006). Experiencing Chinese: Business communication in China. Beijing: Higher Education Press.

Zhang, N. (1987). Practice business Chinese: Negotiation. Tokyo: Hakusuisha.

Zhou, X. (2008). *Vocabulary in business Chinese textbooks and business vocabulary program,* World Chinese Teaching, No 1.