

TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH VIA COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *When it comes to taking the top management posts in leading multinational corporations, particularly in the USA, there are hardly any CEOs of Chinese origin. Obviously, China lags far behind its neighbor and competitor, India, whose CEOs in US organizations have rapidly increased. So, to catch up, China must focus more on nurturing homegrown talent. In this article I discuss the design of a Business English course for the first year MBA students at Shenzhen University in southern China, which included a series of mobile learning missions through Blackboard (a learning management system). With more computer-mediated communication into the curriculum for English for Specific Purposes, it is expected to help learners to develop the skills they will need in the workplace.*

KEYWORDS: Business English, computer-mediated communication, learning management system

INTRODUCTION

Recent years, a phenomenon draws people's attention in China. Indian CEOs in US organizations have rapidly increased, while there are hardly any CEOs of Chinese origin. Clearly, India outnumbers China when it comes to taking the top management posts in leading multinational corporations, mainly in the USA. It is high time for China to catch up with improved MBA education if it is aspiring to compete internationally.

For this end, I will discuss in this article the design of a Business English course for the first year MBA students at Shenzhen University in southern China, that included a series of mobile learning tasks through Blackboard (a learning management system), that were structured around interaction, production and reflection (Nickerson et al., 2016), aiming to enhance the communication skills of students in a curriculum for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) combined with computer-mediated communication (CMC).

LITERATURE

Researchers such as Camiciottoli, Bonsignori (2015) and Darics (2015) have begun to consider how computer-mediated communication can be integrated in professional settings. In addition, Gimenez (2014) and Lockwood (2017) think that, in the skill set business people need most, being effective in CMC is pivotal.

Moreover, the language practice can also become mobile, outside of the classroom boundaries at a different time and in a different place, in line with the idea that "mobile

learning refers to the use of mobile or wireless devices for the purpose of learning while on the move”, but it “is not just about the use of portable devices but also about learning across contexts” (Park, 2011: 79). That is, students may decide where, when and what they would like to access out of multiple choices in information for a certain mission.

According to Rapanta (2014), generally students in some countries embraced mobile learning with little hesitation, and got particularly motivated by visual mobile learning. Moreover, Nickerson and other researchers (2016) claimed that business students’ performance has improved through mobile learning. These studies of mobile learning provides pedagogical context for my teaching methodology at Shenzhen University, and the learning management system of Blackboard makes it possible that mobile learning could be more fully integrated in a curriculum of business English in a meaningful way for MBA candidates.

Most students prefer mobile learning to conventional learning, due to the high level of autonomy with online information (Laborda & Litzler 2017; Nicholas et al., 2010; Rapanta et al., 2014). And positive learning outcomes may take place after the introduction of mobile learning (Nickerson et al., 2016). However, researchers (Dicks & Ives, 2008) suggested that, in order for mobile learning to be effective, the online missions should be designed in a systematical fashion. Therefore, instructors are supposed to be committed to devising appropriate mobile learning missions followed by feedback and evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

Profile of the course

The transformation from a traditional approach towards a mode of mobile learning through Blackboard is a major challenge to my students and me as well. The answers in a survey at the end of the course reveal their attitude towards this experience. Hopefully, mobile learning, via a learning management system, could be integrated in a curriculum of Business English to optimize students’ learning curve.

The students involved in the course enrolled in Fall 2018. They were all MBA candidates at Shenzhen University (located in Shenzhen, a coastal city of the Great Bay Area in Southern China). They were all Chinese nationals, with Chinese as their first language and with work experience for three to five years. Most of them had taken College English Test (Band 4 or Band 6) and passed the entrance examination of English in order to get admitted to this MBA program. This is approximately a level B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), i.e. they can be assumed to have “the capacity to achieve most goals and express oneself on a range of topics” (Cambridge, 2017). In other words, most of the students were able to communicate in English despite some inaccuracies or hesitation. Besides, thanks to their work experience at enterprises or government units, most of them were already familiar with many common forms of communication for business such as email, meetings and business reports.

Such background information is indispensable for an instructor to devise the mobile learning activities, so that the missions are reasonable to all of the students regardless of their different levels of proficiency.

Course design

This course is a classroom experience in which how CMC integrated in the curriculum can effectively motivate learners of Business English in particular, in a similar way as some researchers put forward (Laborda & Litzler, 2017; Nickerson, Rapanta, & Goby, 2016; Rapanta et al., 2014), offering them a platform to access a set of crucial communication skills. Combining their language skills and their knowledge of the business world, Business English learners may gain a lot through this kind of language practice (Zhang, 2007 & 2016)

In this course, lectures, PowerPoint presentations or textbooks are combined with communicating online through the learning management system (Blackboard), complete with discussion boards, videos and other web-based materials.

According to Nickerson et al. (2016), mobile learning missions can be engaged in three modes: interaction, production and reflection. Each of the modes requires students to engage with the mission differently. For instance, the mission might be how to interact with online media, to produce a mission via CMC, or to reflect on how to use CMC effectively in an individual/collective manner.

For this reason, each of the online missions primarily focuses on one category of interaction, production and reflection.

For example, one mission is about how to make a good presentation. This is an interaction practice, asking students to brainstorm and search for relevant sources online, then log onto Blackboard, explaining at least three elements that a speaker needs to make a good presentation. They were expected to give reasons for their opinions and then interact with their peers to evaluate them.

Another mission is to produce a piece of video on how to give a good presentation. Students were asked to record a short video in which they demonstrate what a good presentation is like.

The mission of reflection came after the previous missions, in which students watched the presentation given by Steve Jobs at an Apple launch event, and were asked to think about how he interacted with his audience and to reflect on what makes him an effective presenter.

FINDINGS

The students were required to complete a survey online at the end of the course.

The first part of the survey consists of five questions concerning their experience specifically with the online missions on Blackboard.

For example, whether or not they found the missions appropriate, and why, which missions they enjoyed most, what they felt they had obtained, and which topics they thought they completed easily. 45 respondents in my class answered the survey questions.

The second part of the survey contains ten statements on Likert scale (ranging from Completely Disagree = 1 to Completely Agree = 5), which involve different topics in terms of critical thinking, or holistic thinking, or problem solving skills. All of the students who had taken the Business English course of MBA program in the same semester were asked whether or not they agreed with these statements. A total of 138 students in 3 different classes including the 45 responses from students in my class with mobile learning provided their answers.

All of the students involved with mobile learning answered positively in the survey about the online missions. “Yes, I enjoyed working on the missions.” “Yes, I would like to recommend this course to students in the future.” And “I learnt a lot from working through the learning management system.”

It looks like the experience in working with the missions online was generally positive. They also mentioned the platform on Blackboard is user-friendly without difficulty in accessing the missions, which indicates that CMC can be put into practice smoothly through such exercises. On the other hand, the access to the Internet ensures that work can be done both in class and after class; only a couple of students complained that they came upon problems in accessing one of the URLs embedded in a mission. The survey participants showed preference for those missions coupled with video clips. They were intimidated, however, by listening exercises. This confirms previous studies that have found that students might respond most positively to visual stimuli such as video (Rapanta et al., 2014).

At last, the students commented on whether they had learned anything new from such online practice, and their answers support the assumption that engaging them in the different methods of interaction, production and reflection could facilitate their studies.

For example, regarding interaction: “after I discussed an issue with my classmates, I understand it better,” and “I learned many new things and that each mission let me gain more information that is interesting”.

The comments on production: “when we had to actually do it by ourselves and not just imagine what it is like, I would never forget it”.

Finally, in terms of reflection, one student mentioned, “Listening to a second opinion offers a new perspective in understanding an issue. And you realize what is missing in your arguments.” This implies that they were interactive in the discussions and not just passive commentators.

These comments suggest that all the three processes were meaningful and provided a useful contribution to the students’ learning experience. In general, the students agreed that the approach was “novel and attractive”; they reported that they had “learned a lot”; they also acknowledged that they have learnt from others. In addition, they said that they finished the missions in their own time and not according to a fixed deadline. This is exactly related to the two important aspects of mobile learning in studies carried out by Kukulska-Hulme, Sharples, Milrad, Arnedillo-Sánchez, & Vavoula (2009). Overall, the students were positive in their comments, which explains a high level of motivation when they were engaged with the tasks.

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As for the responses that the students gave to the statements about mobile learning, the responses for the 45 students involved in mobile learning have been compared with the 93 other students who were following a traditional way in the same semester (where 1 = least positive response; 5 = most positive response).

In all cases, the mobile learning pattern was rated more positively than the traditional version. In several cases, there was a major difference between the mobile learning class and the traditional classes. These included interest in the topics (4.82 for the mobile learning class versus 3.28 for the traditional classes), critical thinking skills (4.5 VS 3.3), holistic thinking (4.7 VS 3.2), communication skills (4.9 VS 3.6), work with a team (4.58 VS 3.76).

CONCLUSION

With all things considered, my students and I myself had a positive experience in the whole process of transforming traditional classroom into an integrated one with computer-mediated communication on the platform in a learning management system. Due to the background of my students, who had obtained much of communication skills for business, I came up with advanced missions for them to practice online. At the same time, with the facilities of Blackboard, it is easier for me to interact with students one on one or in groups. In the next class, the mobile learning missions will be revised based on the feedback given by the students in the survey and refined in accordance to the professional background of the students so that they may relate to the missions with motivation.

As Zhang (2016) suggests, if we aim to integrate a curriculum of ESP with CMC, then we have to put more efforts into business content and language practice, where mobile learning missions might be effective pedagogical tools.

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