

Research on Strategies of Improving Business English Students' International Business Negotiation Abilities—Taking MNUST as an Example

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Abstract: With the deepening of the globalization of China's business activities, the external economic and trade environment has become extremely competitive. There is a serious shortage of qualified international business negotiation talents who are fluent in foreign languages and understand the profession. Therefore, how to measure and improve international business negotiation ability is an important issue that needs to be studied. Based on universities and starting with actual teaching practices, this study aims to discover the obstacles and solutions in the improvement of international business negotiation ability of business English majors. The study analyzed the definitions and related theories of international business negotiation ability by domestic and foreign scholars through literature analysis method, and summarized three dimensions and eight factors to measure international business negotiation ability as the theoretical basis for conducting the study. Then, the questionnaire and interview methods were used to investigate the teachers and students of business English majors in Minnan University of Science and Technology (MNUST) to understand the current situation of students' international business negotiation ability, and to summarize the main problems that may exist from three aspects: the teaching conditions are not perfect, the teachers' professional level is limited, and the student's comprehensive quality is poor. In response to the existing problems, this study tries to propose corresponding improvement strategies from the above three aspects. Finally, the effectiveness of the strategies proposed in this study is explored by contrast experiment method and analyzing the differences in student's international business negotiation ability levels before and after the experiment. The results of this study will serve as an essential guide for the practical improvement of international business negotiation ability of business English majors. This paper will have a practical value for the reform of international business negotiation teaching and the preparation of related teaching materials, and provide a reference for enterprises to assess and improve the negotiation ability of their employees.

1. Introduction

Against the background of “One Belt, One Road,” “opening up to the outside world,” and “going global” of enterprises, China is facing the most significant change. The importance of international business negotiation ability has become more prominent. It is necessary to cultivate the professional skills of high-level international business negotiation talents. There are limitations in the training of the talents and research of Business English negotiation ability in China, which then restrict the development of Business English negotiation towards professionalism. Therefore, strengthening the cultivation of international business negotiation talents in universities is crucial.

This paper begins with studying the actual teaching practice and research practices of Business English majors. The author studies the multidisciplinary theories of negotiation, linguistics, intercultural communication, and international business trade both at home and abroad through literature analysis. On this basis, the author establishes an ability model as the theoretical basis of the paper, including three dimensions: communication abilities, professional abilities, and cultural etiquette. The three dimensions contain eight factors: communication skill, effective listening, non-verbal communication, negotiating strategy, knowledge of international trade, law quotient, cultural debugging, and etiquette display. Accordingly, the author conducts questionnaires and interviews with teachers and students of Business English at Minnan University of Science and Technology (hereafter referred to as MNUST). The aim is to analyze the current situation and the problems in improving Business English students’ international business negotiation ability and propose corresponding improvement strategies. Then, the author uses three stages of pretest, eight weeks of training, and post-test for the groups to compare the differences of their ability before and after training. In the form of simulated negotiation activities be consistent, the pretest and the post-test have helped to determine the effectiveness of the strategies proposed in this study. They have achieved the expected objectives of this contrast experiment method.

From the perspective of Business English majors, this research has practical value for reforming Business English teaching in universities. It is of great reference value for improving the negotiation ability of Business English majors, the content and methods of business negotiation teaching, and writing business negotiation textbooks. It also provides reference for enterprises to measure their employees’ international business negotiation ability.

2. Research design and data analysis

In this section, the author will define the research subjects and concepts mentioned in the paper. This section also proposes and explains the sources and definitions of the eight factors in the three dimensions of the ability model. In addition, the three research designs and data will be shown.

2.1. Definition of key concepts

Business English is a major in China’s higher education institutions. Business English studies the basic theories and fundamental knowledge of the English language, foreign trade, commerce, business, and management. According to Yan Zhao [1], Business English is the combination of business and English, and is a language specifically used English language in business activities.

A university is a type of school that provides higher education. Undergraduates are students and graduates of general higher education at the bachelor level. In this thesis, the author implemented the questionnaires, experiments and interviews in MNUST in Shishi City, Fujian Province, where the author is studying. Moreover, the respondents involved in the survey are the students enrolled in the undergraduate level of Business English in this university.

2.2. Research methodologies

In order to construct the structure and find out the obstacles to improving international business negotiation ability among undergraduate students majoring in Business English at MNUST, the author used a combination of four research methods: literature analysis, questionnaires, interviews, and contrast experiments.

2.2.1. Literature analysis method

The literature analysis method refers to exploring the nature and status of the research object and drawing out one's viewpoint by studying the collected literature on a specific aspect. In order to provide a theoretical basis of this study, the author collected and summarized the components of international business negotiation competency in previous studies, and divided international business negotiation ability into three dimensions and eight elements as shown in Figure 1. This study was conducted based on this structure, which is a standard and guide for assessing international business negotiation competency and establishing improvement strategies.



Figure 1: Structure of international business negotiation ability.

Communication abilities include communication skill, effective listening, and non-verbal communication. Communication skill indicate the use of appropriate language for expression. Effective listening is listening to another party's viewpoints and interpreting and understanding the in meaning and intent. Non-verbal communication is the ability to understand the other's intentions or express one's opinion using hand gestures, micro-expressions, eye contact and physical behavior.

Professional abilities include using negotiating strategy, using knowledge of international trade, and having some legal quotient. It means that students can use suitable negotiating strategies, knowledge of international trade in business negotiations. Legal quotient means understanding the laws applicable in international business negotiations and acquiring legal knowledge such as the handling of contractual disputes and risk avoidance techniques.

Cultural etiquette includes cultural debugging and etiquette display. Cultural debugging is to understand the etiquette and taboos and to master the negotiation characteristics and styles of people in business negotiation in different countries. Etiquette display is the etiquette involved in dressing, behavior, reception, meeting, negotiation, and signing in the negotiation process.

2.2.2. Questionnaire method

The questionnaire is a written research method in which the respondents fill in suggestions and opinions about the problem. The author designed a questionnaire for students based on the ability structure in Chapter 2. There are 9 questions in communication abilities dimension, 8 questions in professional abilities dimension, and 4 questions in cultural etiquette dimension.

The scale is based on the Likert self-assessment 5-point scale, in which "fully conform" (5), "relatively conform" (4), "not sure" (3), "not quite conform" (2), and "not at all conform" (1) are

used, scoring from 5 to 1. The author uses the mean score to indicate the level of abilities for each dimension and use it as a criterion for analysis.

The questionnaire survey was conducted on undergraduate students majoring in Business English at MNUST. Two hundred and eight five questionnaires were distributed with the help of Wenjuanxing, a statistical data platform in China. The invalid questionnaires that took less than 100 seconds to fill in and those that chose the same option consecutively were excluded, and the final valid questionnaires were two hundred and forty three.

Through the data analysis, the mean values of the three dimensions scored between 3.15 to 4.13 on communication abilities, professional abilities, and cultural etiquette. Students' cultural etiquette dimension is the highest, followed by communication and professional abilities, indicating that students perform well in cultural etiquette and communication abilities and could be better within their professional abilities. They have a better negotiation attitude but need more vital language expression ability in the communication skill dimension. In the professional abilities dimension, they have basic professional knowledge but a weaker ability to use them in practice. In the cultural etiquette dimension, they can complete the etiquette display better, but they need to strengthen their ability to cultural debugging.

2.2.3. Interview method

The interview method is a psychological research method to understand the psychology and behavior of respondents through face-to-face conversation between the interviewer and the respondent. The author designed an interview outline. The first part was designed to understand the teaching environment and situation of the international business negotiation course, and the second part was designed to determine the factors affecting the development of international business negotiation abilities of Business English undergraduates.

Sixteen people were interviewed, ten students were Business English majors and had taken negotiation classes. Three teachers had negotiation courses. One was the Business English department director and two led teams to participate in international business negotiation competitions. These interviewees better understand the teaching environment and the current status of international business negotiation abilities.

Based on the interviews with business English majors and teachers in MNUST, the author sorted out and summarized the interviewees' influences on the development of international business negotiation ability of business English majors into three aspects: school environment, resources, policy support, the driving force of students' own development and teachers' own ability.

2.2.4. Contrast experiment method

A contrast experiment is an experiment that sets up two or more experimental groups to investigate the relationship between various factors and the experimental subjects through a contrast analysis of the results. The author selected sixteen students who had international business negotiation course as the research object in the experiment. Sixteen students are divided into four groups and two groups as the experimental groups and the others as the control groups. Four international business negotiation teachers were selected as observers during the process. The experiment lasted ten weeks, including the pretest, the 8-week training phase, and the post-test. In order to ensure the validity of the pretest and the post-test, the author made the International Business Negotiation Level Observation Rating Scale based on the ability structure.

Then is the results of the experiment. In the pretest, the difference between the total scores of the four groups of students was not significant, and the difference between the highest and lowest mean scores was only 0.9, indicating that the current level of international business negotiation ability of

the four groups of students was close.

In the training phase, students of two experimental groups were trained intensively for eight weeks in three aspects: communication abilities, professional abilities, and cultural etiquette. Case studies and negotiation simulations were carried out in a targeted manner.

After 8-week training on international business negotiation, the experimental and control groups were paired again to conduct another four simulated negotiations. Strictly following the procedures in the pretest stage. After the post-test, the international business negotiation abilities of the students in experimental groups had improved significantly compared to their pretest scores. The international business negotiation abilities of the control groups without training were the same as the pretest, without significant improvement. Furthermore, the experimental groups in this post-test were at least 50 points higher than the control groups.

3. Obstacles preventing Business English students from improving international business negotiation abilities

In this section, the author combined the above data analysis, summarized, and elaborated on the obstacles for improving international business negotiation ability.

3.1. Insufficient support from universities

Through the interviews with students and teachers, the author found that creating a negotiation atmosphere and related policy support in schools primarily affect students' international business negotiation ability. Some students indicated that the teaching types of equipment and resources in schools are insufficient, and two teachers indicated that relevant competitions greatly influence the improvement of their ability.

Dan Xu[2] proposes that negotiation is an emerging and broad discipline, which is the cross-product of management science, social science, economics, law, and technology science. Compared with developed countries in the West, negotiation education in China started late, and teaching resources and experience are scarce. The above problems directly lead to students' late exposure to international business negotiation, lack of systematic learning and exercise, lack of proficient teachers, and lack of professional laboratories and related equipment. All of these restrict the development of negotiation education.

The practical teaching of negotiation, a course with a solid practical application, should have a critical position in the curriculum of negotiation courses. Hui Wang's[3] view shows that the primary purpose of practical teaching is to let students combine their theoretical knowledge and practical skills to master negotiation abilities more efficiently and thus improve their practical application ability. At present, most universities have similar problems in the curriculum of negotiation, such as the small proportion of practical teaching hours in the total number of hours, the lack of foresight and innovation in the practical teaching content, and the lack of simulated negotiation due to the predominance of case studies, which makes students' learning of negotiation only stay at the theoretical level and lack of practical experience to face the challenges of society.

There must be more negotiation-related second-class activities in universities and opportunities for students to participate in international business negotiation competitions. Shougang Zhang[4] suggests that supporting college students to participate in national high-quality Business English negotiation competitions can improve their practical business negotiation abilities. The rich practical experience also helps to improve college students' interdisciplinary knowledge.

3.2. Limited expertise of teachers

In interviews with most of the teachers, 80% of the teachers indicated that the effectiveness of the teacher's teaching affects the students' ability, and three teachers jointly mentioned the problem of "single format of the course and poor interest of the students."

Qi Lu[5] suggested that most of the teaching models in China have long been teacher-centered, in which the teacher is the main body of teaching, and the students are the objects. Teaching in the classroom often focuses on explaining some boring theoretical knowledge while neglecting the cultivation of students' practical abilities. International business negotiation, as an essential part of Business English, requires teachers to increase the content of students' English practice. Furthermore, in the actual teaching process, teachers can establish a dialogue environment through specific business activities content to bring students into business practice activities in the shortest possible time, so that students can feel the charm of business English negotiation.

There needs to be more attention to international business negotiation courses and teacher training strategies in university education. If the course design is not reasonable enough, the cases are not new, or the lectures are not profound, students will skip classes, which leads to a significant decrease in classroom efficiency. The efficiency of the class is greatly reduced. Therefore, improving teachers' training is necessary.

3.3. Inadequate comprehensive abilities of students

Through the analysis of the questionnaire results, the summary of the interviewers' views, and the comparison of the problems observed in the contrast experiment method, the author summarized the main problems of the students into the following four areas:

Firstly, they have a good negotiation attitude but need more expression ability. Most students have a good negotiation attitude and can establish a harmonious relationship with their negotiation counterparts, but their expression ability and logical thinking ability still need to be improved. They are slow in giving and receiving feedback, prone to the repetitive expression of ideas, afraid to speak up, unable to capture the loopholes of the other party, and use contradictory expressions.

Secondly, they have basic professional knowledge but need more application ability. Analyzed from the perspective of negotiation expertise, students have poor mastery of negotiation strategies and need to learn how to master the skills of listening, asking, answering, narrating, observing, and arguing about assisting negotiations. Most of them have fundamental international business trade expertise, but the learning of knowledge needs to be more systematic and can be flexibly applied to actual negotiations. They are prone to use or express trade terms incorrectly or wrongly. In the negotiation, their setting of negotiation objectives and negotiation issues is not comprehensive and rigorous. Moreover, the contract terms they made were lack of integrity. Analysis from the rest of the business, legal and other perspectives, international business negotiation is a part of business activities, and students have insufficient knowledge of basic business knowledge, legal knowledge, contract law, which can easily lead to negotiations out of reality.

Thirdly, students need more teamwork skills. Negotiation is a team effort, in most teams, individuals are unable to work with the team. They don't use negotiation strategies rationally and lack experience in the choice of negotiation style and division of roles, which can easily lead to disagreements, snatching deadlocks, and unnatural cooperation in the negotiation process.

Fourthly, students' internal motivation for development is insufficient. Students are not aware of the importance of international business negotiation ability. The reflective consciousness, the desire for knowledge, and the internal drive to actively participate in courses, events, and practices all restrict the international business negotiation ability of undergraduate students in Business English.

4. Strategies for improving Business English students' international business negotiation abilities

Improving the international business negotiation ability of undergraduate Business English majors requires the concerted efforts of multiple subjects. Based on analyzing the existing problems and causes of international business negotiation ability of undergraduate Business English majors in sections 3 and 4, the author puts forward suggestions and proposes.

4.1. Establishing an integrated teaching system

Infrastructure investment provides the foundation for the development of education. Universities should focus more on and invest in international business negotiation courses. It is necessary to set up a leadership group to focus on the construction of the course, starting with infrastructure improvement, providing teachers and students with special negotiation classrooms, multimedia equipment, books. Universities should increase the financial support for developing courses. Setting up incentive funds to encourage teachers and students to participate in the course activities is also a way to improve their abilities. If sufficient conditions exist, the international business negotiation laboratory can be established to make the course development in a more professional direction.

Universities should rely on second class activities to create opportunities for students to practice. According to Jing Cheng[6], "Schools should be bold enough to develop macroscopic practical teaching plans that integrate practical teaching from numerous courses." After all, the knowledge taught in the classroom is still inadequate. Universities should widely mobilize students to learn from society and establish an online learning mode, so students can upload their negotiation experiences online through video or text forms for joint learning and reference. At the same time, making full use of university clubs, such as debate club, negotiation association, to create a learning atmosphere of negotiation knowledge are of great assistance. Negotiation competitions are one of the most effective teaching modes in practical teaching, which can integrate theoretical knowledge and practical ability and it can better reflect the course's practicality.

4.2. Creating opportunities for self-improvement

Universities should regularly assign teachers to attend national high-level international business negotiation courses and practical teaching workshops to strengthen the optimization of classroom teaching and diversify the teaching of negotiation courses. In order to help teachers and students learn the business negotiation experience, negotiation skills, and professional knowledge of negotiators to overcome the shortage of business negotiation practice and prevent the disconnection between theoretical learning and practice, universities should give full play to the advantages of alumni resources and regularly invite professional negotiation practitioners into the classroom to share real-life cases or offer special lectures. It is crucial to strengthen communication between professional business negotiators and universities, and it is increasingly urgent to explore flexible and effective mechanisms for university-enterprise cooperation in business negotiation.

From the teachers' perspective, they should develop the motivation for self-improvement and improve the teaching and learning process. For learning international business negotiation, William W[7] suggests a combination of four parts: theoretical parts, video teaching, case study, and simulated negotiation. Teachers should reduce the teaching of conceptual knowledge, increase students' exposure of business negotiation strategies, skills, etiquette, and culture, and focus on case studies to enhance students' interest in learning and promote the effectiveness of classroom teaching. Furthermore, they should cultivate professionalism in international business negotiation and give guidance and assistance to students.

4.3. Stimulating self-learning motivation

Though obstacles exist in students' development of business negotiation, those barriers can be overcome as long as students seize the initiative.

Firstly, students should strengthen the learning of professional knowledge. The knowledge of international trade is the basis of international business negotiation. Only by mastering the relevant knowledge can students reflect professionalism. Jie Hong[8] believes that a qualified negotiator should have a wealth of comprehensive knowledge, especially legal knowledge. Therefore, qualified international business negotiation personnel need to have a wealth of comprehensive knowledge, including business, law, social, that is to proficiency in the profession's knowledge, but also should have the ability to become sophisticated and knowledgeable professional talent.

Second, strengthening communication abilities and logical thinking is vital for students. According to Xinhui Yang[9], negotiation is conducted through language communication between people, so the ability to express language is essential. Although business negotiation is aimed at mutually beneficial agreements, both parties still have to compete fiercely for gaining the maximum benefit. Ming Luo[10] suggests that the effectiveness of language often determines the effectiveness of the negotiation. If the negotiator is fluent in the language and uses appropriate words in the negotiation, he or she can often grasp the initiative of the negotiation. The language ability of a negotiator is expressed in two aspects: one is the ability to use language effectively at the negotiation table to express the party's ideas, intentions, and trading conditions in a precise, clear, systematic, and vivid manner, and the other is the strong language artistry, and the words used in handling various situations that are appropriate to avoid misunderstandings or adverse effects on the negotiations caused by language mistakes. In addition, business negotiators should develop their thinking, analysis, synthesis, comparison, abstraction, generalization, empathy, self-control, observation ability, so that they can deal with negotiation matters independently.

Third, students must address the cultivation of cultural etiquette. Qin Jing[11] suggests that the purpose of negotiation is to cooperate, and since cooperation requires seeking common ground while reserving differences and mutual respect, respecting each other's culture is a necessary prerequisite. According to Guoqiang Liao[12], in international business negotiations, proper manners and etiquette will greatly add to the negotiation. Lizhi Yao[13] suggests that "polite language in international business negotiations can play an important role in maintaining a harmonious relationship between the negotiating parties." Therefore, International business negotiators should have a more standardized and rigorous cultivation of etiquette before entering formal negotiation occasions, and form a high standard and quality understanding of international business behavior, so as to effectively avoid unnecessary negotiation deadlocks caused by cultural differences, reduce negotiation costs, and improve negotiation efficiency.

Last but not the least, it is crucial for students to gain practical experience and improve teamwork ability. As a group activity, giving full play to the advantages of the teamwork is a key to successful negotiation. Students should actively develop their teamwork skills, clarify the team division of labor, and design the placement of negotiation strategies, such as the red and white face strategy, to achieve the purpose of negotiation.

5. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical and practical research of international business negotiation, the author conducted ten-week research among undergraduate Business English majors in MNUST, Shishi County, Fujian Province. By studying and organizing the previous research results, this paper analyzed the characteristics of international business negotiation ability, and the author established a ability structure which proposes three dimensions and eight factors, namely communication abilities, including three factors of communication skill, effective listening, and non-verbal communication; professional abilities, including negotiation strategy, knowledge of international

trade and legal quotient; and cultural etiquette including cultural debugging and etiquette display.

In order to understand the current situation of the international business negotiation ability of undergraduate Business English majors, the author conducted investigations and collected the relevant data. Through questionnaire surveys and interviews, the author found some obstacles preventing students from improving their international negotiation abilities, which can be summarized into three significant problems: insufficient support from universities, limited expertise of teachers, and inadequate comprehensive ability of students.

The effectiveness of the strategies proposed in this study was further verified through the action research of the contrast experiment method. Then the strategies were adjusted according to the experimental results. At the end of the research, the author developed three complementary strategies to improve international business negotiation ability. From different levels of society, universities should establish an integrated teaching system, teachers should create opportunities for self-improvement, and students should stimulate self-learning motivation.

There are still shortcomings in the study, the first being the small sample size due to the limitations of the practice period. The study lasted for ten weeks and was conducted only for Business English majors at MNUST. At the same time, developing learners' international business negotiation skills is a long and gradual development process with some variability. Therefore, the validity of the theory proposed in this study cannot be fully explained based on the existing research alone. There may also be insufficient questions and incomplete content selection when designing the questionnaire and interview outline. When defining the elements of international business negotiation ability of undergraduate Business English majors, there is a particular subjectivity, and the base for previous research may not be large enough.

Finally, cultivating international business negotiation abilities for undergraduate Business English majors should be more comprehensive and it should be carried out throughout their training process. The cultivation of all core competencies, including international business negotiation competence of undergraduate Business English majors, can be permeated into different courses.

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