Bridging the Gap between Pedagogy and Workplace Needs

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For a university teacher of business English to both undergraduates and postgraduates, one of the biggest challenges is the lack of suitable books with authentic texts and updated information for demonstration/illustration of workplace texts and genres. First, students nowadays expect authenticity but not dated examples from existing business English textbooks. Second, the genres and communicative functions covered in most business English textbooks are limited, and emerging features and genres of workplace texts are rarely covered. Third, research findings are highly required to inform how workplace texts are composed in terms of content, structure and language features.

Many studies suggest the growing gap between classroom and globalised business environment (e.g. Bhatia & Bremner, 2012; Bremner, 2010). Chan (2014, 2023), based on a survey study of workplace professionals in Hong Kong, reported that business English courses are found barely relevant to workplace communicative needs and they focus too much on theoretical perspectives of the language. Existing business textbooks (e.g. Bremner, 2010; Evans, 2013; Lam et al., 2014) and task design fail to provide the types of activities that could help students understand and handle communicative tasks in the workplace. There might be divergences between curriculum design and content of business English courses in terms of what to teach and how to teach, highlighting a significant niche between research and practical applications that need to be addressed.

Take oral presentations as an example. A comparative analysis (Lam, 2023) of how presentations are taught and covered in 4 textbooks with the empirical study regarding workplace presentations conducted by Evans (2013) demonstrates the gap in the nature and frequency of oral presentations. For example, the teaching activities in textbooks are decontextualised, and they do not align with the tasks or decisions professional presenters encounter in reality. Some suggestions are proposed by Lam to address the gap, including the need to develop students' multimedia literacy with increasing use of digital technologies, coverage of topics related to getting used to unfamiliar accents, developing cultural awareness of both verbal and non-verbal communication, or even considering time difference in online presentations in different time zones. Key skills such as how to engage the

interest of the audience or handle questions in the Q & A session, which are rarely covered in textbooks (Cheng et al., 2019), should also be emphasised in order to bridge the gap between textbook design and workplace communication.

We need to fill the niche. We need not just empirical studies conducted to examine communicative needs in the workplace, especially after the pandemic when the pattern of communication has been reshaped by the use of technology. We also need to understand what exactly the discrepancy is about between textbook design/curriculum development and workplace communicative needs before we can address realistic communicative needs. Some of my attempts to fill the gap include a number of edited/authored books on the topic:

-   An authored book called English for Business Communication goes beyond the traditional coverage of business English to provide a broad and practical tool for students and professionals who are studying English for business or workplace communication, and it covers both spoken and written English. Dealing with the realities of communication in business today, this book is based on up-to-date research in business communication and incorporates an international range of real-world authentic texts.

-   An edited book called Perspectives in Teaching Workplace English in the 21st century aims to bridge the gap between research and practical applications by showcasing the latest research developments on business English as a lingua franca and the ways to better inform language teaching practice.

-   An authored book called Teaching Business English further bridges the gap between research and pedagogy by presenting relevant research findings to the reader before offering specific advice and guidance concerning how key spoken and written workplace texts can be taught toward facilitating more engaged, empirically-grounded business English as a lingua franca. It is hoped that both students and teachers can benefit from the scaffolding activities developed based on a research-informed approach.

More publications of this kind are needed to help bridge the gap between curriculum design and workplace reality. ESP teachers ought to adopt a more proactive approach to researching post-pandemic workplace communicative needs so students can be more effective in using business English as a lingua franca (BELF) (Louhiala-Salminen et al.,2005). Also, our teaching approaches and curricula need regular updates to reflect genuine workplace demands.

Some of the questions that warrant further examination include:

- Globalisation enables businesses to operate across different cultures, time zones and regions around the world; to what extent does it change the way people communicate?

- How has the pandemic shaped workplace communication? Is there a need to refine the notion of communicative competence? How? Why?

- What are the communication challenges encountered by professionals in the workplace in the post-pandemic era?

- As English is used as the lingua franca in Hong Kong/Asia for workplace communication, what are the accommodation strategies (see, for example, Lockwood & Song, 2016) adopted by professionals in the workplace? How can we use these strategies effectively to achieve different communicative purposes?

- How can we turn these findings into relevant resources/teaching materials that will help our students deliver in the workplace?

- How can relevant data about workplace communication be collected effectively to inform pedagogy? How can we collaborate with professionals in the workplace to identify key issues/data to work on that will make future studies more insightful and bring about improvements in our teaching practices?

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