



Systematic Teaching Design of Communicative Context in Business English Writing in Chinese Context

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Supported by the Research Project of Hunan Office for Education Sciences Planning of China: Research on the Mode of Cultivation of Entrepreneurial Talent in Higher Vocational Colleges (No. XJK012BZJ014).

Received 9 November 2013; accepted 30 January 2014

Abstract

It is a heated discussion among researchers of foreign-language teaching on how to enhance the interest of study and teaching effect through the design, organization and implementation of classroom teaching of EFL writing, which is responsible for the enhancement of the student's writing competence. This study is devoted to the systematic teaching design of communicative context in EFL writing within the paradigm of communicative language teaching, concentrating on the exploring of the cultivation of communicative environment in the aspect of macro-view, middle-view and micro-view on the practice of Business English Writing. Contrastive analysis and survey revealed that this overall design of the curriculum was much more effective in the teaching practice compared to the traditional one in arousing the learner's interest and awareness of readers on the chosen topic.

Key words: Systematic teaching design; Communicative context; Business English writing

LI Xiping (2014). Systematic Teaching Design of Communicative Context in Business English Writing in Chinese Context. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 8(1), 24-31. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320140801.4150>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320140801.4150>

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction of Business English Writing

Table 1
Original Content of Business English Writing

Content
Part One Fundamentals of Modern Business Writing
Chapter one General Principles of Business Writing
Chapter two How to Write Effectively
Part Two General Business Paperwork
Chapter four Notice
Chapter five Report
Chapter six Notes
Chapter seven Memorandum
Chapter eight Contract
Chapter nine Instruction
Chapter ten Certificate
Chapter eleven Invitation for Bids and Pre-qualification
Chapter twelve Form of bids
Chapter thirteen Proposals
Chapter fourteen Agenda
Chapter sixteen The Minutes of a Meeting
Part Three General Business Letter Writing
Chapter seventeen Formats of Business Letters
Chapter eighteen Useful Expressions of Business Letters
Chapter nineteen Resume
Chapter twenty Letter of Introduction
Chapter twenty-one Letter of Job-getting
Chapter twenty-two Invitations and Replies

Business English Writing (BEW) is the course that aims to teach non-native college students in economy-related fields how to convey clear, concise messages and avoid verbosity or flowery on common forms of business writing from traditional business letters, reports, and memos to e-mail and other electronic communications. It has a diversity range of knowledge including general Business English Writing, specific paperwork (summary, employment letters, interoffice memos, news release, report etc.) and Business correspondence (business letters) (see Table 1). According to survey and feedback in Hunan International Business Vocational College, nearly 90% of students regard it as the most difficult course and

half of them try to communicate with their real business opponent afterwards in professional practice just by reciting a number of model samples of BEW. Therefore, it is a consensus among practitioners that the interest of study and teaching effect must be enhanced.

1.2 Introduction of Present Problem

Both of the cognitive psychology and communicative language acquisition hold the belief that language acquisition only happen in language practice. Therefore, the best teaching design of second language writing must focus on writing practice in the paradigm of the communicative context, which can accelerate the students process of accomplishing internalization of the tacit knowledge to explicit one and self-construction of writing knowledge and skills by experiencing the series process of composition such as planning, organization, imitation, drafting, editing, revision, etc.. However, it is a consensus that the correlation between various themes, genres or styles in writing teaching contents is loose, or even has nothing to do with each other, such as Contract, Notice and Minutes in the practical writing. The lack of internal logical or meaningful relationship among teaching themes is an obstacle in cultivating overall communicative environment, which partly results in low proficiency. Nevertheless, skilled instructional designers cultivate systematic teaching design of communicative context as a countermeasure to this problem in the teaching practice. That is to cultivate the communicative environment in the aspect of macro-view, middle-view and micro-view.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cognitive Psychological Perspective

Constructivism, which serves as the outstanding representative of current leading cognitive psychological achievement and becomes as a paradigm or worldview, posits that learning is an active, constructive process in which the learner constructs knowledge and meaning based upon their experiences and current/past knowledge (Bruner, 1986). This theory emphasizes on the creation of a conducive learning environment where encourage the learners to construct their own perception of reality based on their experience and beliefs as well as dialogues with others (Razak & Asmawi, 2004). It advocates that the learning activities should encompass the real world, worthwhile results and authentic experiences (Mynard, 2003). The role of teachers within the constructivism learning theory is a facilitator, whose duty is to aid the student to draw the conclusions on their own instead of attempting to receive it passively when it comes to language acquisition (Bruner, 1990).

Constructivism assumes that the learners' writing proficiency can be enhanced through a series of cognitive and interactive activities in the process of writing,

and values the importance of the exertion of author's subjective initiative and iterative revision. Consequently it advocates "learning to write through writing", "student-centered" teaching activity and promotes the learner's self-exploration and practice of EFL writing as well as the utilization of learning elements such as situation, cooperation and meaning negotiation. It stressed the creativity of individual writer and claims the task of the instructor is to translate information into a format appropriate to the learner's current state of understanding and organize the teaching content in a spiral manner (Bruner, 1990).

2.2 Communicative Language Acquisition

Communicative Language acquisition is widely recognized and accepted among applied linguistics researchers and teachers in current second language acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy. It holds the belief that the aim of writing teaching of EFL is to cultivate the learner's communicative competence to acquire the ability to differentiate between the various functions that a form may have and to choose the appropriate form that is suitable to the given context. According to Stephen Krashen (1982), "Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language—natural communication—in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding." It emphasizes that writing skills must depend on the communicative practice, rather than language skills training and the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of the target language for meaningful purposes (Brown, 1994). Furthermore, it advocates learner-centered and experience-based teaching activity and promotes the fulfillment of communicative tasks in real or simulated real-life situations. It emphasizes collaboration among peers in a more formal pragmatics environment in typical communicative activities such as group discussion, simulation, and role-play to achieve the purpose of cultivation of real communicative competence.

The soul of Communication theory in EFL writing lies as the following: the learning material should be meaningful and authentic; the teaching task should be equal or similar to real communicative one; the learning process is also the process of fulfillment of communicative task. In other words, it advocates that the learner should compose a certain discourse to accomplish specific communicative tasks in real or simulated real-life situation with full feedback with peers other than writing without authentic communicative context and material in this field.

3. FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

3.1 Challenge for Teaching Design

Although systematic teaching design of communicative context in EFL writing within the paradigm of

communicative language teaching is popular among researchers, it is a challenge in practice due to the fact of lack of relevant correlation between writing teaching contents. It is not so difficult to design communicative environment in individual theme (in the aspect of micro-view), so there are many successful cases in classroom teaching design. However, it is not the case on a cluster of themes (in the aspect of middle-view) or even a whole curriculum (in the aspect of macro-view). The cultivation of communicative context has also long perplexed teachers of BEW since it covers a wide variety of themes and genres. Therefore, this study tries to provide a sample case in this field for reference.

3.2 Thought of Teaching Design

The two above-mentioned theories explain the best teaching design of EFL writing practice must base on the communicative context. Only after experiencing the series of writing process such as conception, writing, modifying, publishing etc. can the learner internalize the tacit knowledge to explicit one, and finish the self-construction of writing knowledge and skills as well. Therefore, the thought of the overall construction of ideal communicative context is to design scientific and reasonable form of teaching organization based on the combination of many factors simultaneously integrating the theoretical knowledge with professional situation and working process as well as the process of construction of knowledge with actual business practice. The utmost consideration is how to realize that all the design derives from the cultivation of writing skills of target language with typical working process of the task (business process)/project (case) serving as the clue and typical product (project) working

as the carrier, and simultaneously in the paradigm of in line with the students' psychological cognition rule. Therefore, the overall design of the curriculum must elaborate in consideration of the following three aspects: the macro-view design founds the total social context; the middle-view fixes the communicative situation while the micro-view deals with specific communicative scenarios (task) environment.

Consequently, this study presents the thought of design of BEW in the aspect of macro-view, middle-view and micro-view as following: the first step is to design the whole teaching content as a general teaching project (situation)/task in communicative context ; then further decompose these communicative project (situation) / task into many components just as “project (situation) → subproject (sub-situation)/task→ subtask”; Moreover, the third is to design specific communicative scenarios (task environment) for each teaching period to realize the aims of the cultivation of correlation of teaching content in various levels. Simultaneously the objective of cultivation of every knowledge and skill point may implement in specific teaching period through the implement of fulfillment of real communicative tasks and cross feedback with the aid of means of cooperative learning such as role-play (reader/writer) in classroom teaching. Only through such layers of decomposition can link the teaching scenarios of every teaching period with the whole teaching context. In this way, the overall teaching design of the course becomes an interlocking, rigorous system, and the teaching process evolves into an actual practice of project (trading) operation, which strengthens the acquisition of strategy and skills in writing, discourse and communicative practice (see Figure 1).

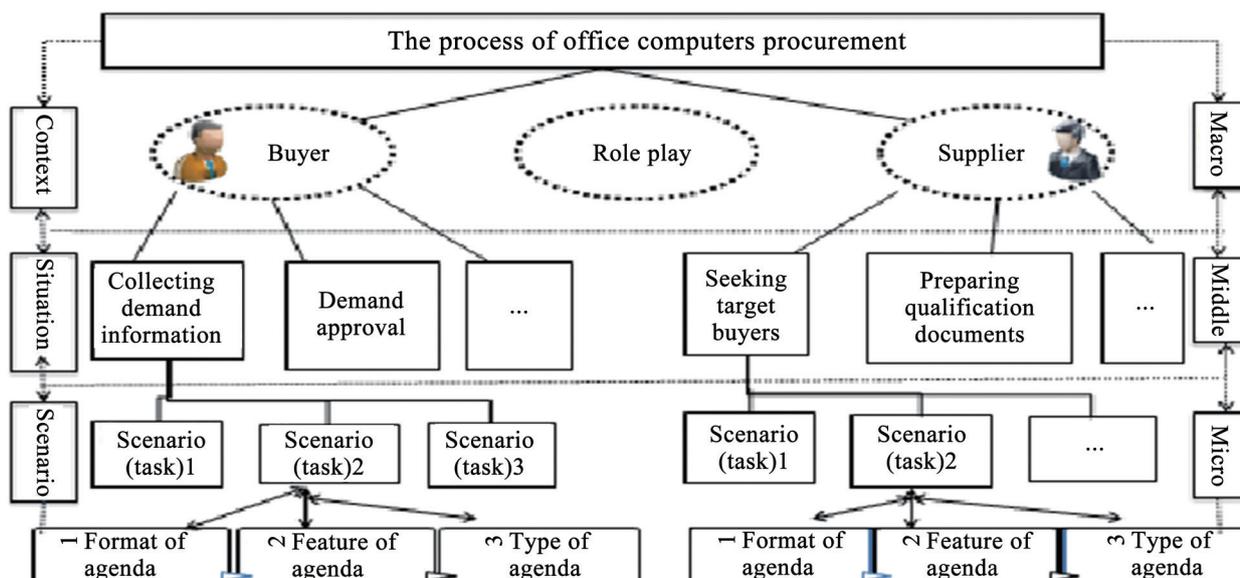


Figure 1 Sketch of Structure of Context of BEW

4. SYSTEMATIC TEACHING DESIGN OF BEW

4.1 Teaching Content

The original serial order of teaching content of BEW is parallel basing on the internal relations of knowledge, which lacks logical or meaningful correlation between various themes (see Table 1). However, after systematic teaching design of communicative context (see Table 2), all the teaching content strings into an interconnected and function union. Nevertheless, it seems somewhat limited in scientific viewpoint because some necessary

relevant knowledge and task that the learner will encounter in future business target situation is out of the framework owing to the limitation of context and in real business practice, the context setting is more changeable. So it is quite necessary to broaden the learner's vision and cultivate the all-round competence. As a countermeasure, the researcher classifies the teaching content into three kinds (priority of classroom teaching, expanding learning content and self-study content) and adds some relevant contents for an additional teaching stage- expanding stage apart from the priority of classroom teaching (see Table 3).

Table 2
Systematic Teaching Design of Communicative Context in BEW

Item Aspect	Communicative context	Communicative subject and task	Communicative object
Macro-view	Whole communicative context: the trading process of office computer between Hunan ABC Import & Export Company and XYZ Computer Company in United States of America	Supplier: sales process of office computer Buyer: approval and procurement process of office computer	Office computer
Middle-view	Situation: process of business negotiation or transaction	Supplier: seeking target buyers → preparing qualification documents → participating in the bidding → negotiation → signing contract and other sub-project Buyer: collecting demand information of office computer → demand approval → information release → negotiation → signing contract and other sub- projects	Office computer

Table 3
Teaching Content in BEW After Systematic Teaching Design

Theme	Priority of classroom teaching	Expanding learning content	Self-study content
Report	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of short English business report; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of English long business report and common office approval document	Writing skill and useful expression of English notes
Memo	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English business memos; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of international English memos of important events	Practice and comments of common notes such as "note of asking for a leave" and "note of leaving message"
Agenda	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English agenda and useful expression; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of classical agendas of international conference	Writing skill and useful expression of English bills
Minutes	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English minutes; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of classical minutes of international conference	Practice and comments of common bills such as "receipt", "bill of borrow" and "IOU"
Notice	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English notices ; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of classical poster and notice	Writing skill and useful expression of English notice such as "lost", "found" and "help wanted"; corresponding practice and comment
Invitation for bids and prequalification	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English invitation for bids and prequalification; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of classical invitation for bids and prequalification in international service and engineer aspect	Writing skill and useful expression of English posters
Form of bids	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English form of bids; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of classical form of bids in international service and engineer aspect	Practice and comments of common posters such as "promotion posters" and "activities and sports posters"

To be continued

Continued

Theme	Priority of classroom teaching	Expanding learning content	Self-study content
Email	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common business English email; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of update abbreviation in email and classical case in business field	Writing skill and useful expression of English address
Product's Instruction	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common English instructions; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of product's instruction in the form of pictures, PDF format or flash	Practice and comments of common address such as "welcoming, seeing-off, congratulation, thank-you, commemorative farewell, opening and closing speech; toasts
Certificate	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common business English certificates; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of common business certificate of qualification and ability	Writing skill and useful expression of English advertisement
Proposals	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common business English proposals; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of international classical proposal	Comments of common advertisement such as "product introduction" and "activities introduction"
Contract	The type, format, feature, writing skill and useful expression of common business English contract; corresponding practice and comment	Appreciation of international classical contract in compensation trade, labor service, leasing affairs, Sino-foreign joint venture and engineering projects	Writing skill and useful expression of English cards
Base of business English writing	The feature, requirement, principle, skill and caution of BEW	Appreciation of classical speech and advertisement	Practice and comments of common cards such as "invitation cards", "business cards" and "greeting cards"

4.2 Training Project

According to the above-mentioned design thought, the researcher designs "the composition of paperwork" as the general teaching project, which bases the overall context of the process of transaction of office computers between Hunan ABC Import & Export Company and XYZ Computer Company (see Table 4, 5 and Figure 2). Furthermore, this project is divided into two different roles - "purchaser" and "supplier" in accordance with the actual transaction practice, with "the process of approval

and procurement of 200 sets of office computers" as the general project of the "purchaser" while "the process of sales office computers" as the general project of the role of "supplier". Both of the two parts have to experience a series of procedures before the deal done, which serve as the situation or subproject and can be decomposed as scenarios and tasks. Every component has its corresponding teaching task and relevant knowledge, thus the teaching of BEW has turned into a communicative writing practice.

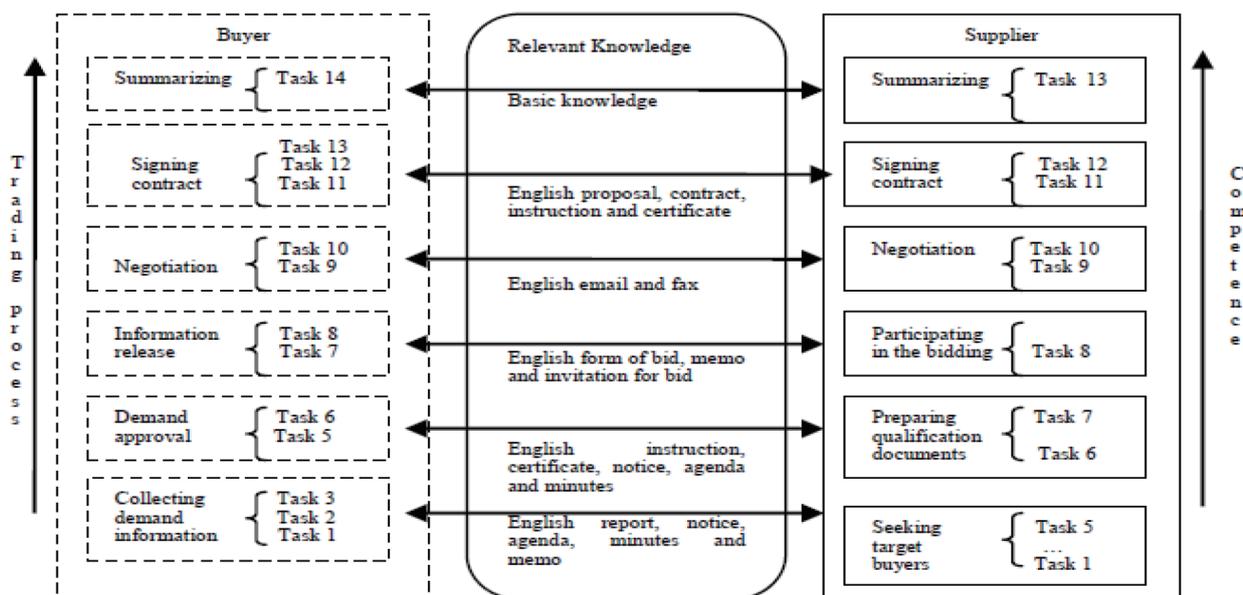


Figure 2 Sketch of the Design of Teaching Project

Table 4
Design of Teaching Project of BEW in the Role of Buyer
 (Buyer: Hunan ABC Import & Export Company)

Phase	Project	Task
1	Collecting demand information (relevant knowledge: English Report)	Task 1: to accomplish the composition of Report of current state of office facilities in your company Task 2: to accomplish the composition of Report of current state of notebook computers based on market investigation Task 3: to accomplish the composition of Report of demand approval of purchasing 200 sets of office computers
2	Demand approval (relevant knowledge: English notice, agenda, minutes, and memo)	Task 4: to accomplish the composition of Notice of meeting on the issue of purchasing office facilities in your company Task 5: to accomplish the composition of Agenda of meeting on the issue of purchasing office facilities in your company Task 6: to accomplish the composition of Minutes of meeting on the issue of purchasing office facilities in your company
3	Information release (relevant knowledge: English memo, and invitation for bid)	Task 7: to accomplish the composition of Memo of meeting on the issue of purchasing office facilities in your company Task 8: to accomplish the composition of Invitation to Bid of purchasing office facilities in your company
4	Negotiation (relevant knowledge: English email and fax)	Task 9: to accomplish the composition of circular E-mails between XYZ Computer Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities Task 10: to accomplish the composition of circular Fax between XYZ Computer Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities
5	Signing contract (relevant knowledge: English proposal, contract, instruction and certificate)	Task 11: to accomplish the composition of Proposal between XYZ Computer Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities Task 12: to accomplish the composition of Contract between XYZ Computer Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities Task 13: to review the relevant qualification documents of XYZ Computer Company
6	Summarizing writing skills and tips	Task 14: to summarize the characteristic on Business English Paperwork as well as skills and tips on the composition of them

Table 5
Design of Teaching Project of BEW in the Role of Supplier
 (Supplier: XYZ Computer Company in USA)

Phase	Project	Task
1	Seeking target buyers(relevant knowledge: English report, notice, agenda, minutes and memo)	Task 1: to accomplish the composition of Report of current state of demand of office facilities in your company Task 2: to accomplish the composition of Agenda of meeting on the issue of sales promotion on notebook computers in your company Task 3: to accomplish the composition of Notice of meeting on the issue of sales promotion on notebook computers in your company Task 4: to accomplish the composition of Minutes of meeting on the issue of sales promotion on notebook computers in your company Task 5: to accomplish the composition of Memo of meeting on the issue of sales promotion on notebook computers in your company
2	Preparing qualification documents (relevant knowledge: English instruction and certificate)	Task 6: to accomplish the composition of relevant providing qualification documents in your company such as Certificate Task 7: to accomplish the composition of Instruction of notebook computers in your company
3	Participating in the bidding (relevant knowledge: English form of bid)	Task 8: to accomplish the composition of Form of Bid of providing office facilities for Hunan ABC Import & Export Company in your company
4	Negotiation (relevant knowledge: English email and fax)	Task 9: to accomplish the composition of circular E-mails between Hunan ABC Import & Export Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities Task 10: to accomplish the composition of circular Fax between Hunan ABC Import & Export Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities
5	Signing contract (relevant knowledge: English proposal and contract)	Task 11: to accomplish the composition of Proposal between Hunan ABC Import & Export Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities Task 12: to accomplish the composition of Contract between Hunan ABC Import & Export Company and your company on the issue of trading of office facilities
6	Summarizing writing skills and tips	Task 13: to summarize the characteristic on Business English Paperwork as well as skills and tips on the composition of them

4.3 Teaching Activity

The design of teaching activity must match the previous framework and teaching process. Although there are lots of procedures and stages devised so far in different aspects, the typical task-based teaching process consists of three principle phases: pre-task, during task, and post-task (Ellis, 2003).

In the pre-task phase, there are two main teaching activities—predetermining the environment as well as analyzing and discussing. First the teacher pre-determines the communicative task and its environment (including communicative purpose, target readers and interpersonal relationship). Consequently, they mutually discuss and analysis the task and its environment (including role of author, form of text, topic of the task) as well as characteristics (such as field, model and tenor) of the model genre (Badger & White, 2000).

In the during task phase, students are required to implement mainly procedural activities, which usually involves the following steps: planning or generating the outline of the target discourse→ collecting and organizing relevant information→imitating writing after provided model→com Retrieved from posing the first draft (Badger & White, 2000). Meanwhile the teacher should supervise and provide necessary assist (Li, 2013a).

The main task of post-task phase is to further revise and resubmit their target discourse and includes two

writing process: revision, edition and sharing. Under the teacher’s supervision, guidance and assistance, the students are required to experience a series activities self-revision →self or peers feedback →further revision and editing→ trial communication→ overall assessments(in terms of organization, coherent, phrasing, tone, etc. of the discourse) on the writing performance (Li, 2013b). In addition, many outreach activities such as project writing, social investigation and practice as well as a variety of language competence competition etc. can be added to this phase in teaching practice.

4.4 Assessment

The assessment of teaching effect usually involves discourse and learner evaluation. This research adopts similar assessment conventional tools such as classroom performance, communicative effect and a scoring scale to evaluate the teaching performance, of which the index of “task achievement” is utmost important in order to check whether the learner stands in target reader’s shoes in provided context. For example, the index of evaluation of the learner’s discourse covers “task achievement, language, tone and organization” (see Table 6). Since this research focuses on the cultivation of context, so the details of evaluation system of the teaching effect of BEW does not present here.

Table 6
Analytic Scoring Scale of Discourse

Task achievement (content)	
20~25	All contents points elaborated without irrelevant or missing information; meet text type requirement.
14~19	Most contents points elaborated; some important information was missing or irrelevant to the content; some inconsistencies in text type requirement.
8~13	Some contents points elaborated; a lot of information was missing or irrelevant, which resulted in insufficient word length (less than half of the word length); many inconsistencies in text type requirement.
2~7	Major information was irrelevant to the task, or insufficient word length (less than one third of the word length).
0~1	The text was neither informative nor relevant.
Coherence and cohesion	
20~25	Transitions were used appropriately; ideas were well-connected; communication was effective.
14~19	A few transitions were used inappropriately, but the ideas were understandable.
8~13	Limited transitions; ideas were not well-connected and subject to misunderstanding.
2~7	Incorrect transitions which led to misunderstanding.
0~1	No coherence at all; sentences were fragmented; or transition was absent.
Grammar and Spelling	
20~25	Wide range of structure; almost no grammatical mistake.
14~19	Good range of structure; minor grammatical inaccuracy that hindered the understanding at lexical level.
8~13	Limited range of structure; Major grammatical inaccuracy that hindered the understanding at syntactic and semantic levels.
2~7	No range of structure; Frequent grammatical mistakes including major and minor inaccuracies.
0~1	Almost all grammatical patterns were inaccurate or no assessable language.
Language	
20~25	Wide range of vocabulary appropriate to its meaning and purpose; no signs of plagiarism.
14~19	Minor inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; no signs of plagiarism.
8~13	Moderate inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; or minor plagiarism.
2~7	Major inadequacies of vocabulary appropriateness; or excessive plagiarism.
0~1	Almost scatter vocabulary; no assessable language.

CONCLUSION

This research states the belief that the cultivation of communicative context is very important in the teaching design of EFL writing and it is necessary and possible to develop a systematic communicative context. Taking an ESP course—BEW as an example, the researcher presents in detail how to organize and implement the systematic teaching design of task-oriented and business-focus communicative context.

Comparing the teaching content of BEW before and after systematic design, most of the participants agree that the latter is much more practical, logical, professional and meaningful for learners. Furthermore, the design of BEW has been implemented with nearly 200 participants for one semester in each academic year from 2009 for Grade Two students majoring in Business English in the College of Business Foreign Languages in Hunan International Business Vocational College. Feedback receives from both the teacher and learners reveals that this kind of design is very useful in both teaching and future business practice, because it provides the experience of a modified whole process of business deal, which enhanced their comprehension of paperwork and awareness of readers.

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