The Application of Multimodal Discourse Theory in the Teaching of Business English Writing Course

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Abstract: *The deep integration of modern information technology and education has brought opportunities for the development of business English teaching in higher vocational college. Teachers can make use of multi-modality and media to create multimodal situational contexts and cultural contexts, with attention paid to the synergy between multimodal symbols. Taking the module of business English course in a vocational college in Guangzhou as an example, teachers are expected to use a multimodal teaching approach that can help students build an active, effective and interactive learning process. The method used in this research is classroom action research in which both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques were implemented in two classes, which aim at (1) tracking the improvement of students' skills in both writing competence and business practice; and (2) finding the synergy among different modalities when efficiency could be successfully achieved in a business writing class. Results showed that when such measures as multimodal teaching were taken, this approach could facilitate teachers to improve students' capability in business English writing, promote the interaction between teachers and students, improve students' multimodal reading ability and critical thinking, and enhance students' awareness of cross-cultural business communication. To achieve the best effect, the synergy among different modalities should be highly emphasized.*

Keywords: *Multimodal teaching approach; Business English writing; Multi-modality; Synergy*

1. Introduction

Business English writing is a special English style which is to meet such needs of business communication as international business, international finance, international trade, etc. involving language application and its relationship with industrial, social and cultural contexts.

Business English majors in vocational colleges are a strong preparing force for the small and medium-sized foreign-related enterprises in China with increasingly frequent exchanges of international business. However, situation at present shows that the cultivation and improvement of students' communication ability, especially business English writing ability, has become an urgent issue to be solved. Meanwhile, the rapid development of network technology has made business communication more multi-modal in its forms, and the real-time transmission of various symbolic resources such as text, images, charts, audio, and video has become a common practice. Therefore, how to adapt to this social trend in the teaching of business English writing and help it to meet the needs of the development of the times is the key point that should be taken into account by the teachers.

Business English writing is a way of expressing business activities in English, including business correspondence, e-mails, business reports, memos, proposals, etc. Although these discourses are generally based on visual media in modern business communication, they largely depend on the comprehensive use of various symbols, as well as the integrity and extension of its textual meaning which needs to be realized through expressions such as text symbols, image symbols and even sound symbols, constructing very important multimodal discourses. However, in the current teaching of business English writing in vocational colleges, the mainstream teaching approaches still focus on pragmatic aspects such as word selection, paragraph organization, discourse cohesion, etc. while there is a lack of teaching design and study adopted in the context of multimodal discourse. What multi-modal teaching of business English writing should focus is making full use of various modalities and media to create a writing context, train students' critical thinking from multiple perspectives, and enable them to conduct business English writing with rich language forms and content. Our study attempts to explore the multi-modal teaching approach of business English writing under the background of multimodal discourse analysis in order to provide a new perspective for reforming the

teaching methods and promoting the quality of business English writing in vocational colleges.

2. Literature Review

The theory of multimodal discourse analysis originated from systemic-functional grammar in the 1990s. Linguists represented by Halliday regarded language as a symbolic resource and meaning potential[1], which laid the ideological foundation for multimodal discourse analysis and mainly took social semiotics as the research perspective. On the basis of systematic-functional linguistics, multimodal discourses are defined as communication through such modality as language, sound, image, action and symbolic resources by visual, auditory, or tactile sense, etc. which believes that the interpretation of meaning in all communication is no longer a single-symbolic issue, but a multimodal form synthesized by various social symbolic systems[2]. Among the theories, the relationship between modality and media proposed by Kress & Van Leeuwen has become the dominant one in the study of multimodal discourse analysis[3].

In the field of language teaching, the New London Group was the first to implement the theory of multimodal discourse analysis. They consider that under the social and educational background of globalization, diversification in language and culture as well as in communication technology, it's the responsibility of teachers to convey information to students via a wide range of modes in language teaching, so as to cultivate students' comprehensive ability, during which the transmission and construction of meaning in a new multimodal expression form is completed[4]. Based on this, Jewitt emphasized again the great changes that multi-modality has brought in schools, he did some multimodal discourse analysis in UK secondary school English[5]. In recent years, linguists did more research on multimodalities in language education in a changing world, knowing more about new media and their important functions in learning[6].

In China, many experts and scholars have also studied the combination of multimodal discourse analysis theory and language teaching. Linguist Hu first introduced the concept of "multimodal semiotics" into China. He clarified the differences between multimodality and multi-media, combined multimodality of social practice with the requirements of humane education, and emphasized the important position of humanity quality in a pluralistic society[7]. Based on this, Gu differentiated the concepts of multimedia and multimodality, and analyzed multimodality from the perspective of cognitive psychology[8]. Later, Zhang proposed a framework of multimodal discourse analysis from five levels: cultural context, situational context, interactive discourse meaning, modality and media[9]. His study has greatly promoted the progress of multimodality in teaching, providing new perspectives for the multi-modal teaching approach under the rapid development of internet, and inspirations for the reform and optimization in the teaching of business English writing in vocational colleges. Some other linguists also made great contribution to the research. Zheng proposed a research perspective that integrates "cloud computing" service technology and "multimodal discourse analysis" theory, and attempts to construct a multimodal foreign language teaching model using "cloud services" in college English teaching[10].

3. Methodology

This study aims to assess the validity of multimodal teaching approach of business English writing in the 2nd-grade in Guangzhou City Polytechnic, a vocational college in Guangzhou, China. The study measured students' abilities in creating meaning and expressing ideas during the process of writing, using a variety of different modes of communication, such as text, audio and video. The experiment involved selecting two classes from five who have the same mean score in the pre-test of the research. The five classes were in two pilot studies of the research and Class 5 was used in a field trial validating the functioning of the experiment and assessing the quality of multi-modal teaching approach.

3.1 Research Questions

This study made an in-depth study of the modalities and multimodal contexts in business English writing course by adopting the framework of Zhang in the following five perspectives: cultural context, situational context, interactive discourse meaning, modality and media. This research aims to answer the following questions:

1) What is the multimodal selection in business English writing course?

2) What are the main factors contributing to a successful multimodal business English writing class?

3.2 Theoretical framework and data collection

This research used Classroom Action Research in Guangzhou City Polytechnic in four stages: planning, action, observation and reflection. During the study process, both qualitative and quantitative techniques were implemented from March to June 2022 to collect the data. The qualitative data came from class observation, audio and video recording, transcription, online and offline interviews and questionnaires from both teachers and students in the experimental group, investigating their feelings and views about the multimodal teaching approach. For the quantitative data, it mainly came from results in pre-tests and post-tests of the two classes. In the analysis of quantitative data, comparison was made on the scores to reveal whether there was any improvement of the students' business writing skills after multimodal teaching method was implemented. Another kind of quantitative data from the percentage of different modalities adopted in the class was also analyzed to show the synergy among multimodalities in business English writing course.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Results

In order to check the difference in the writing skill of students in five classes, a pre-test was conducted before the experiment. Among the five, two classes: Class 1 and Class 5 were chosen as the subject since they had nearly the same mean score in the pre-test. After a 4-month experiment was finished, a post-test was held to check the effects in two classes. To guarantee the reliability and validity of the test, we chose two test materials from Cambridge Business English test, writing task 2. Scores were based on four items: task completion, cohesion & coherence, lexical diversity and grammatical diversity. Results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of the pre-test and post-test

Test	Class	Mean Score	Task Completion	Cohesion & Coherence	Lexical Diversity	Grammatical Diversity
Pre-test	Class 1	10.11	10.21	9.77	10.09	10.37
	Class 5	10.18	10.31	9.98	10.06	10.34
Post-test	Class 1	14.60	14.89	14.43	14.77	14.32
	Class 5	18.90	18.90	18.76	18.82	19.12

The results indicated that the two classes shared nearly the same score in the pre-test in terms of task completion, cohesion & coherence, lexical diversity and grammatical diversity while after a term of experiment in which multimodal teaching approach was adopted in Class 5, it had a big improvement in the four aspects of writing skills compared with Class 1. This proved great positive effect after the multimodal teaching was scientifically designed and implemented. In this period, students showed an active, effective and interactive learning process while having writing competence and business communication ability enhanced.

4.2 Multimodal selection in business writing class

The multimodal discourse form of language teachers is closely related to students' enthusiasm for learning. Teachers' attitudes and teaching methods reflect their personalities and teaching styles, which are reflected in relevant multimodal discourse and stimulate students in a certain multimodal way. Undoubtedly, in the multimodal teaching process of business English writing, the main mode of business English writing teaching is actually chosen consciously by the teacher, including PowerPoint and pictures, real writing corpus from the enterprises, videos, audios, virtual reality technology, and teacher's oral expressions in the class etc. However, there is also an unconscious selection of modalities, such as gestures, expressions, eye contact, intonation, speaking rhythm, etc. In these modalities, each symbol system has its own unique meaning potential or "features for use", and needs to cooperate with and complement other systems in order to complete the communicative tasks in a more successful way[11]. When asked about the multi-modalities that can motivate students in class 5 (40 students) in the learning process of writing, most of them showed highly positive attitude, as can be shown in Table 2. Among the eight kinds of modalities mentioned, the traditional ones like textbook & reference books

and PowerPoint are less favored than audio and video which obviously can present more vivid information. Additionally, they showed much interest and admitted great help from writings and comments (either in a written or an oral form) from employees in the enterprises that cooperate with the college.

Table 2: Students' attitudes towards multi-modalities

No.	Multi-modalities that can motivate students in the learning process of writing	students in Favor	Percentage
1	Textbook & Reference books	29	72.5%
2	PowerPoint	31	77.5%
3	Audio & Video	35	87.5%
4	VR Technology	32	80%
5	Teacher's language	32	80%
6	Writing from enterprises	36	90%
7	Comments from employees in the enterprises	37	92.5%
8	Teacher's Body language	32	80%

There is a phenomenon needed to be noted that in some classrooms, teachers' use of media and modalities is superficial since the classroom media is only a kind of "outer package" of traditional cramming teaching, thus it is in essence still the old-fashioned teaching design and teaching method. The mechanical teaching content has not formed a benign multimodal collaborative interaction in the class[12]. In our research and teaching of business English writing, special attention was paid to the scientific allocation of various modal symbols since the synergy of different modalities plays an important role in the teaching process. Take one 80-minute class for example, the multimodalities mainly included PowerPoint, pictures, audio & video, virtual reality technology and teacher's body language, etc. (As can be seen in Table 3)

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Multimodal means

Form	PowerPoint and Pictures	Audio/Video	Teacher's Body language	VR Technology	Others
Frequency	150	20	18	7	5
Percentage	75%	10%	9%	3.5%	2.5%

Among the multimodalities, each was carefully designed according to its purposes, and most importantly, the synergy of all was paid special attention to in accordance with their functions in the class. The PowerPoint and pictures from companies accounted for 75% of the whole, which was less than the traditional classes. What should be noted is that teacher's body language was elaborately designed as well, accounting for 18%. In fact, this design was hardly made in other classes or in Class 5 before. The results proved that in this way, the classroom atmosphere became much more lively, and classroom interaction was increased as well. Thus, students' attention was concentrated and their interest in writing was greatly improved.

During the class, in order to achieve benign multi-modal collaboration in business English writing teaching, teachers in our research bore three basic principles in mind: First, use each modal symbol to guide teacher-students' behaviors. Teachers selected a modal symbol or symbols according to the specific communicative purpose of writing so as to maintain positive interaction with students in the classroom. Besides, they acted like the directors, organizing activities, encouraging critical thinking and analyzing writing resources so as to guide the students to realize knowledge acquisition and competence enhancement. And it was also possible to use the synergy of multimodal symbols to promote students' expression of multi-information, effectively transmit non-verbal information such as pictures, audios, and videos, and allow students to carry out multi-literacy and multi-modal discourse analysis. The ability of critical thinking instead of simply and passively processing and assimilating verbal and written materials was greatly emphasized in the class. Meanwhile, in the process of writing, students were asked to provide feedback through multi-modal collaboration to achieve mutual communication between teachers and students, through which the teachers adjusted and revised the teaching mode to achieve a virtuous cycle of in the writing class.

What's more, during the business English writing class, teachers focused on the complementary functions of multi-modal collaboration. In order to improve the teaching effect and learning efficiency of students, it was crucial to rationally arrange and organize the content of writing materials and skills through various information transmission means, including the suitable time, frequency and proportion

of each symbol resource. The multi-modalities synergize with each other, give full play to their respective advantages, and achieve expected teaching effects. For instance, in the preparation stage of writing, teachers selected and foregrounded the corresponding visual and auditory modalities, while in the writing stage, the auditory modalities were backgrounded, and the visual modalities were reduced accordingly to keep students focusing on writing and avoiding distractions.

Lastly, our teachers established an appropriate and scientific assessment system for students' writing competence. Instead of applying the traditional single writing assessment, that is the result-oriented one, Teachers adopted the formative assessment during the whole teaching process, considering and performance of the students at every stage into account and comprehensively assessing students' writing ability as well as comprehensive abilities. Assessment mainly focused on students' understanding of context & culture, and application of language.

4.3 Factors contributing to a successful multimodal business English writing course

4.3.1 Creating context of multimodal business English writing

Context is a very important concept in systematic-functional language, which refers to the general environment in which the language exists and is used by people. Halliday believes that the main purpose of language learning should be to learn how to use language and construct meaning in real situations, and how to use the target language in a social way[13]. Context can be divided into contextual context, situational context and cultural context. Business cultural context refers to the general environment in which international business activities are carried out, while situational context refers to a specific link in business activities. In the study of business English writing, students are prone to emphasize too much the related vocabulary and grammar, while often ignoring the contextual elements, especially the experience and research of cultural context and situational context. In fact, as a special and specific type of writing, business English writing is constrained by the macro-environment of the social, economic and cultural environment in which business activities are carried out. Thus, the cultural context can help the students generate a similar sense of psychological identity, achieve smooth communication, and realize expected business communication goals.

The acquisition of knowledge is a complex and systematic process and business English writing is not just as simple as imagined. It involves the input and output process of the writer's in-depth and comprehensible thinking process. However, for the students who lack experience in workplaces, it is difficult for them to own real situational business writing experience. Thus, enriching business context is an essential way to cultivate such kind of thinking. Some linguists believe that creating a multi-modal business context with diversified content and form is the guarantee for the good effect in teaching of business writing. For the teachers, they can create situations in the classroom and enrich the cultural and situational contexts of business, in which students can simulate different business scenarios and do some practice like imitating roles and experiencing workplace situations. Now, let's take writing a business proposal as an example to explain how to create a business situation for students through multi-modal methods in business writing in Class 5.

We chose the test material from Cambridge Business English test, writing task 2: *Your company requires a taxi firm that it could use on a regular basis for staff and clients. Your secretary has selected two advertisements from the local newspaper. Look at the advertisements, on which you have already made some handwritten notes. Then, using all your notes, write a proposal for your line manager, saying which firm you think your company should use. Write 120~140 words on a separate sheet.* This writing task was presented as a monomodal text discourse that asked the writer to state the reasons for choosing the suitable taxi firm. After showing the writing requirements, teacher in class 1 began to present the new words and sentence patterns needed in the writing with the help of PowerPoint and then asked the students to practice writing immediately. About 30 percent of the students would like to draw an outline to get a clearer structure of the proposal. However, results proved that this teaching method was difficult to establish a three-dimensional writing context and cultural background for students since they were unfamiliar with the real situations and could hardly finish the proposal well just by words and sentence patterns. Nevertheless, when the teacher adopted a multi-modal teaching approach in Class 5, the results was significantly improved.

Before asking the students to write this proposal, the teacher assigned the students the task of collecting data, and asked them to check in the internet the information of two taxi firms in Guangzhou, including the operating hours, assessment from passengers, safety records, etc. Pictures, charts and video clips about the two companies were shown in groups so that the whole class could get a full

understanding of the advantages of different firms.

Compared with the single-modal writing approach in class 1, this multi-modal and three-dimensional approach which applied materials such as text, sound, image, and animation had its obvious advantages. It could mobilize students' various senses on a richer level, and multimodal business scenes could help them naturally simulating their interest and associations about topics. Besides, it helped the students to shift from the perspective of students to that of employees, and meanwhile shift from classroom activities to business activities, all of which built a rich and real business context for business proposal writing.

Afterwards, the students were asked to carry out role-playing and group discussions, and then draw mind maps to clarify the structure, content and language points of the proposal. These multi-modal resources and activities further constructed the context of proposal writing, greatly breaking through the limitation of single text modal, and expanding students' critical thinking. In this way, the content of writing, and the use of vocabulary as well as the sentence patterns are more in line with the context in the writing process, the norms of business expression and cultural background.

After building the situational and cultural context, students began to write the proposal with regards to cohesion & coherence, lexical diversity and grammatical diversity. Then each writing was presented in the Superstar class platform and assessed by groups, providing discourse analysis and encouraging bilateral leaning process. Later, the teacher also presented a sample writing from a manager in a real company and asked the students to do multimodal discourse analysis and comparison so as to cultivate their multiple reading ability and cultural perspective. This could not only help the students understand the text from different angles, but also stimulate their innovative thinking and critical thinking, so they could gradually self-construct various types of specific contexts for business English writing, and can cultivate cross-cultural communication awareness through the comparison of local culture and English-speaking countries.

4.3.2 Adopting multi-modality and medium in business English writing

In the practice of business English writing, students should have sufficient and appropriate input of business English language before they have active output with high-quality. In our research, teachers in Class 5 were not limited to the use of school-based teaching materials like textbooks, but supported by a variety of information technology including virtual reality technology. They actively made use of network and multimodal teaching resources and media off campus, and also used various real business resources related to the curriculum from companies to cultivate students' input and output abilities.

In addition, multimodal business writing emphasizes experience and feelings, which is the most important way to construct the meaning of writing discourse and practical ability. Therefore, teacher followed the concept of "student-centered", acted like a guide, just giving guidance and encouraging inspiration of the students. Students were led to experience the context in the writing process, and improve the ability of using different media to acquire knowledge. During this process, they learned how to actively cooperate and communicate with others, thus achieving the purpose of active learning.

After class, teachers used different Apps like Superstar class platform, Weibo, WeChat, and others to provide students with platforms of multi-modal business writing, sharing relevant pictures, audio, video and other writing materials from companies. As for the students, they could also share resources on these platforms. By integrating the most appropriate resources according to the levels of the students, these platforms provided them with a simulated language learning environment and a variety of learning materials with rich content. Students underwent active learning process by exchanging ideas and sharing resources from the discussion area of the class platform. They could complete the writing either in a collaborative or independent way, thus breaking through the limitations of time and space of the class.

Now, let's take another writing class in Class 5 for example to show how the class adopted multi-modality and medium in business writing and how the teacher guided students to effectively use various resources for in the writing process. In this class, students were supposed to finish a business letter of negotiation. Before the class, students received a list of tasks by Superstar class platform and were asked to finish the preview tasks through various information resources such as the Business English Resource Library, Alibaba, MOOCs, mini-courses, etc. They completed the pre-test and initiative writing of the negotiation letter, and tried to think about the problems encountered in the previewing stage according to the feedback from the platforms. As for the teacher, he could also get the feedback of the students at the same time. By analyzing the result, the teacher understood the problems each student encountered, thus to make targeted adjustments in the coming class based on the standard

level of the whole class. In class, the teacher encouraged students to communicate and share their ideas about the letter. Students used PPT to show their ideas, asked questions in groups, discussed, brainstormed and role played the business situation in groups. Through communication and cooperation, students internalized knowledge of both business and cultural background, and mastered the key words and functional sentence patterns in letter writing. In this process, teachers interacted with students in a timely manner, made comments and answered questions from individuals or groups. Afterwards, a video introduced to show real business negotiation cases and each group began to simulate the manager of the trade company and negotiate the terms of the transaction negotiation, thus further internalizing their business communication skills. After class, through Alibaba and Superstar class platform, students finished their homework and some extra exercises on the writing of business letters. In this process, they could communicate timely with teachers through the platforms and teachers would send more letter samples to the students in need and provide personalized instructions to them in a video or audio way.

In a word, in the teaching process of business letter writing, teachers attach great importance to the leading role of students by acting as organizers and leaders in the class activities, and stimulating students' senses through the integration of multi-modal teaching materials and resources. In this way, students' interest in writing was greatly aroused and critical thinking ability was improved as well. Teachers and students are both designers and creators of meaning, and multimodal teaching and learning embodies the process of meaning construction and provides suitable conditions for the cultivation of students' multiliteracies. Students learnt to think actively, analyze and solve writing problems, cultivate awareness of active learning, internalize and absorb the skills they have acquired and put them into practice. This process proved that students were not only "learners", "writers", but also "critics" of various letters, "researchers" of practical problems, and "collaborators" of learning inside and outside the classroom[14]. The advantages of modern technology and media complemented that of traditional methods, contributing to students' strong motivation in learning and effective learning results.

5. Conclusion

This study provides an experiment in which multimodal teaching approach was implemented in business English class. Instead of emphasizing the vocabulary and sentence patterns, we try to analyze the requirements and utilize the resources from its cultural context and situational context so as to organize class activities to achieve interactive discourse meaning by using different modality and media. Results have shown that it has changed the traditional teaching mode, misuse or abuse of multimedia while neglecting the real needs of the students and requirements of the course. The multimodal teaching approach in business writing class enjoys a variety of benefits and brings great improvement in interaction between teachers and students, students' critical thinking, cross-cultural business communication, etc. What should be noted by teacher is that they ought to pay attention to the synergy among multimodal means, that is, their percentage and at the right time. The teaching design and activities should fully follow the "students-centered" principle not only in class but also before and after class. Therefore, to understand the requirements of the course and needs of the students is what teachers should always bear in mind.

We hope this study can provide a new perspective for promoting the development of business writing teaching in vocational colleges and improving the quality of teaching.

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