

## Original Paper

# Cultivation of Business Ethic Consciousness in Business English Teaching of Chinese Higher Education

Yuting Lu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, PhD, School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Economics, Hubei, China

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### **Abstract**

*Business English teaching of higher education in China has made great strides in recent years so that students' Business English skills have been significantly improved. However, the need for ethic consciousness in Business English teaching has become increasingly apparent. This article aims to analyze and respond to the deficiency of ethic consciousness in Business English teaching, and seeks to feasible solutions for teaching reform to meet the needs of development of higher education in China.*

### **Keywords**

*business ethic consciousness cultivation, Business English teaching, higher education, China*

## **1. Introduction**

Along with economic globalization, Business English teaching in Chinese universities and colleges has been shouldering the important task of cultivating talents with good cross-cultural skills and teamwork spirit. In recent years, under the background of ideological education in the curriculum, Chinese higher education has been advocating to establish a philosophical and social science discipline system with its own characteristics. Due to the international, comprehensive, and practical features of Business English courses, Business English teaching needs to reflect the real demands of students from the skill level and the value orientation. If, in the process of teaching, the theoretical and practical links cannot be connected but even separated, then students may grow into the one-dimensional men. Amongst teaching objectives, ethic consciousness cultivation and imperatives are present in almost every aspect of educational action research because it enters action research as a set of principles governing the way in which action research itself is conducted (Bridges, 2017). In other words, cultivating business ethic consciousness in higher education aims to bridge the gaps among knowledge, skills, and values, which requires Chinese educators to cultivate Business English majors with knowledge, competence and virtues. Only in this way can Business English education in China form a tripartite structure of

inter-discipline, practical innovation, and ethic cultivation. Ultimately, it will broaden the field of higher education in China.

## **2. Background: Current Situation and Problems of Business English Teaching of Higher Education in China**

Generally speaking, the course of Business English has originated in western country and has attracted increasing interest and awareness. In fact, Business English is a domain of ESP, which shares the similar elements, such as syllabus arrangement, curriculum design, teaching procedure and evaluation system, with other fields of teaching in ESP. However, “Business English differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations).” (Ellis & Johnson, 1994) Therefore, Business English, as an independent and interdisciplinary subject, has its own unique development path in China.

In 2007, approved by the Ministry of Education, the University of International Business and Economics took the lead in enrolling the undergraduate Business English major. In 2012, the Ministry of Education approved Business English to be officially listed in the *Catalog of Undergraduate Majors of Ordinary Universities and Colleges*. At the same year, 62 universities and colleges nationwide have set up Business English courses for undergraduate students (Bian, 2018). In particular, the *New National Standards for the Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Business English Majors in Universities and Colleges* (short for *New National Standards*), drafted in 2013, has made innovations and put forward the clear standards and requirements for the professional orientation, cultivation objectives, talent specifications, curriculum system, and teaching evaluation to Business English teaching, which are of great significance for guiding the undergraduate Business English majors to formulate the discipline system uniformly (Wang, Ye, Yan et al., 2015). By January 2024, 389 universities and colleges in China have officially established Business English undergraduate majors and enrolled students. With the development of Business English teaching, whether from the traditional textbook-driven mode, the teacher-oriented interactive mode, or the OBE teaching mode, Business English of higher education in China do adopt various suitable measures to ensure that students have the appropriate ability after the professional study and enable them to achieve the expected goals.

However, on the same basis of the *New National Standards*, Business English education obviously puts more emphasis on the practical or skill aspect with vocational training and internship accounting for 10 to 25 percent of the total credits for students since the occupations of the graduates of Business English majors mainly include foreign trade salesman, documentary handler, customs clearance clerks, forwarders, translators, and so on (Sun, 2016). Compared with the evident skill orientation in the teaching process, the value orientation is obviously weaker. The root causes for the deficiency are manifold, among which the incomplete curriculum provision system and the imbalanced composition of academic qualifications are the two most prominent aspects.

### 2.1 Incomplete Curriculum Provision System for Business English Majors

In China, the curriculum objectives of Business English majors primarily focus on knowledge imparting and skill training, that is, market-oriented. Although moral education is involved into the course, most of which are relatively foundational and superficial. Thus, the business ethic cultivation has yet to be officially included in the curriculum objectives. According to the *New National Standards* (2013), the curriculum provision system of Business English is as follows:

**Table 1. Curriculum Provision System of Business English**

Curriculum Module	Core Courses	Numbers of Courses	Proportion of Core Courses Hours
English Knowledge and Competence	Practical English Phonetics,	2	50%-60%
	English Grammar		
	Comprehensive Business English,	5	
	Business English Listening and Speaking, Business English Reading, Business English Writing, Business Translation		
Business Knowledge and Competence	Introduction to Economics,	4	25%-35%
	Introduction to Management,		
	Introduction to International Business Law,		
	Introduction to International Marketing		
	International Trade Practice,	3	
Cross-cultural Communication	International Business Negotiation, E-Commerce Practice		5%-10%
	Introduction to Cross-Cultural Business	2	
	Communication, English Public Speaking		
Humanistic Literacy	Overview of British and American Culture	3	5%-10%
	Selected Reading of British and American Literature		
	Introduction to European and American Culture		
Internship			NA
Undergraduate Thesis			NA

It can be seen from the above Table that, compared with the infusion of knowledge and competence (75%-95%), the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness and humanistic literacy (10%-20%) takes up a smaller proportion. Moreover, the relevant cultural and humanistic courses are generally confined to the scope of introductory contents about European and American culture, resulting in students lack of a solid sense of business ethics and academic integrity. For this reason, when faced with business ethic issues, students will be easily feel at a loss. If influenced by the inferior business environment in some cases, they probably make improper ethical choice, which undoubtedly jeopardizes their career development. Furthermore, as the future participants, operators, or managers of enterprises in China, students' deficiency of business ethic awareness is not only the loss for enterprises but also the potential risk for social and national security. That is the reason why the corresponding countermeasures need to be implemented urgently.

## *2.2 Imbalanced Composition of Academic Qualifications of Teaching Faculty*

As an independent discipline, Business English speciality starts late but develops rapidly. In March 2007, the Ministry of Education officially approved the establishment of Business English undergraduate program, and UIBE has become the first university that approves to offer Business English undergraduate program. From May 9 to 11, 2008, at the Fourth National Experience Business English Forum organized by Higher Education Press, more than 200 representatives from 150 Chinese universities and colleges expressed concerns about the construction of undergraduate Business English majors (Zhang, 2008). In consequence, this conference contributes to the dynamic growth of the Business English program over the next decade or so and, as a result, the demand for a professional faculty is expanding.

According to the requirements of the *New National Standard*, the approximate ratio of language, business, and practical teachers of Business English speciality should be 6:3:1. In addition to English language proficiency, Business English teachers are required to have at least one bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree in economics, management or law. The fact is, however, that many Chinese researchers have drawn conclusions from the data that a large proportion of Business English teaching staff have a single knowledge structure without interdisciplinary backgrounds. To be more specific, most teaching staff are either from English language and literature majors or from economics and business majors, and those who have English language and literature degree certificates are in the majority. In turn, very few teachers have practical experience and business qualifications (Li, 2018). Because of the lack of systematic business learning, teachers with single English language or literature diploma often apply the traditional methods to the business English course, making them more accustomed to teaching students vocabulary, grammar, translation skills, and writing techniques. Especially when these teachers encounter professional business problems, such as letters of credit, they usually seek the help of professionals to explain clearly, otherwise it is difficult for them to achieve efficient teaching results. That's the reason why these teachers need to supplement more business knowledge, in order to be better at guiding students to apply skills in the business environment.

On the other side, for those teachers who have a pure business background, although they are specialized in business knowledge, the ability to think philosophically could be more needed. Limited by the practical business skills, they prefer to discuss business issues from a single perspective without consciously breaking or expanding disciplinary barriers. This kind of teacher rarely leads students to think about subjects such as ontology, epistemology, or philosophy of science from the perspective of management theory, let alone the political, social, and ethical legitimacy of corporations in the contemporary democratic environment as well as the context of management philosophy and business ethics.

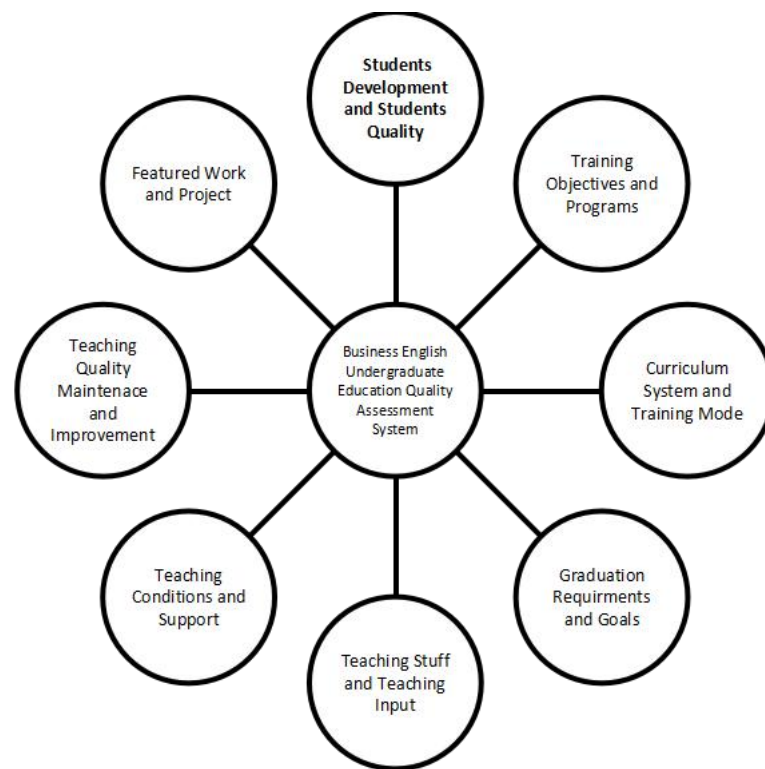
### 3. The Necessity of Cultivating Business Ethic Consciousness in Business English Teaching

Business ethics is a conception strongly associated with human morality because it involves the distinction between right and wrong when making business decisions. According to Crane and Matten, the subject of business ethics is defined as “the study of business situations, activities and the decisions where issues of right and wrong are addressed. It is worth stressing that by ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, it means morally right and wrong, as opposed to, for example, commercially, strategically, or financially right or wrong.” (Crane & Matten, 2016) In the same way, some other western researchers interpret business ethics as “the application of general ethical ideas to business behavior, and it is not a special set of ethical ideas different from ethics in general and applicable only to business.” (Lawrence & Weber, 2020) In reality, analytical business ethics and its concurrent management theory has produced much that is useful to theorists and managers, from employee rights to stakeholder theory, social contract theory, corporate responsibility and sustainability models, and much more (Morland & Bos, 2011). In short, as long as business activity is engaged by human, there will always be ethical issues. Thus, business people should always put morality and humanity first and actively adopt behaviors that benefit to society rather than contradict social norms. A right business decision should consider its own interests in the profit-making process and take on social responsibilities and obligations. As participates, the level of business ethics of young people determines the level of business ethics of enterprises in the future. Therefore, Business English majors should develop correct and positive ethical views through the higher education. By doing this, China’s Business English education may be rewarded with the all-round development of student’s personality development, educational level, and state economy.

#### 3.1 Meeting the Needs of Business English majors’ Personality Development

Empirical investigation shows that business ethic awareness can be cultivated because the individual value system has been constantly changing and developing under the influence of the outside world, in which education plays a pivotal role. In 2020, the Ministry of Education promulgated the *Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era* (short for Overall Plan), which emphasizes the main points on improving evaluation for universities and colleges, establishing evaluation standards, and cultivating students’ corresponding competence and ability. This program aims to point out the direction for the educational quality assessment system and standards for Business

English undergraduate programs. Basing on the *Overall Plan*, Chinese Business English scholars have correspondingly established the *Dimensions of Business English Undergraduate Education Quality Assessment Model* as follows (Shao & Wang, 2022):



**Figure 1. Dimensions of Business English Undergraduate Education Quality Assessment Model**

As seen from Figure 1 above, students' personal development is placed at the top of the measurement in Business English education. In the first place, ethic education is unquestionably beneficial for Business English majors understanding and accepting correct moral concepts, such as respect, honesty, and trustworthiness and others. Secondly, ethical awareness helps them to improve the self-management ability. By standardizing their own norms, Business English majors can enhance the awareness of abiding by laws and regulations, self-restraint, and management ability. Thirdly, ethic awareness cultivation in Business English teaching further promote students' sense of social responsibility. By carrying out volunteer activities and social practice, they are more likely to pay attention to vulnerable groups and public welfare in society. Finally, Business English majors' emotional intelligence can be also effectively raised since ethics itself is the subject of rational thinking and a concern for emotions. Through the cultivation of ethic awareness, Business English majors will grow to be more compassionate, tolerant, and courageous, which are the essential qualifications for their personality development. Most significantly, when facing the troublesome interpersonal relationship or business difficulties, they could deal with the problem in a more reasonable and decent

way.

### 3.2 Promoting the Level of Chinese Higher Education in Line with the World Trend

The 20th report of the Communist Party of China emphasizes the strategic deployment of making China strong in education, science, and technology. Especially at the fifth meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee in May 2023, the report points out that in building a strong educational country, the leading role is higher education. Accelerating the construction of world-class universities and colleges with Chinese characteristics and superior disciplines is higher education's top priority. Chinese education system should vigorously strengthen the construction of emerging and cross-disciplines, promote scientific research and innovation in line with the world's frontiers and national strategic needs, in order to constantly improve the innovative capability and the quality of personnel training." (Zhao, 2023) These important expositions have clarified the direction of reform to the educational development path of higher education in China.

With the progress of technology, the fields of ethics are expanding in recent years. Universities and colleges in developed countries such as the U.S., U.K., Canada, Germany, and Japan, especially engineering colleges, have indicated a strong request for specialized ethics education in educational system. In November 2017, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), the world's largest not-for-profit and technical society, announced three new artificial intelligence ethics standards to prioritize human well-being. In the 2018 semester, many U.S. colleges and universities, such as Harvard and Cornell, have opened interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary courses on AI ethics (Chen, 2018).

In contrast, ethic education in China has yet to be fully realized, especially business ethics education attached insufficient emphasis. According to the *New National Standard*, courses on business ethics are not explicitly included in the curriculum system. Taking the textbook *Market Leader: Intermediate Business English Course Book 3* (Cotton, Falvey, & Simon, 2016), a basic course for sophomore Business English majors in most universities and colleges, as an example, the book covers a total of 12 units, but the topic of ethics is the only optional one. Under this circumstances, it is necessary for the policy maker of Business English education to reconsider on the curriculum design that how to embed ethic consciousness in Business English teaching by adding the courses, such as *Ethics*, *Business Ethics Case Study*, *Business Ethics and Social Responsibility*, and so on. For Chinese higher education, it needs to shift the traditional curriculum system to meet the diversified learning needs of students in the new era, which is beneficial to expand students' theoretical vision and improves their professional ability. By doing this, Chinese higher education will align with the world trend.

### 3.3 Keeping pace with Chinese Economic Development

Since China's reform and opening up more than 40 years, the prosperity of the market economy has also led to the breeding of many social problems. It is shown that some Chinese people's moral sense have been gradually deconstructed, outmoded, and even ended to some extent. Coupled with the influx of western culture and the prevalence of consumerism, these people are bewildered by dealing with

various ethical phenomena, such as bribery in corporate, food safety, fake vaccines, unqualified hospitals, and so on. All of the social phenomena remind Chinese educators that in addition to improving the market economic system, deepening the reform and strengthening the construction of legal system, it is imperative to improve the ethical awareness from the educational source. In particular, in the transitional period in Chinese society at present, there is an urgent need for business corporations to enhance the ethical level since corporations do indeed have some level of moral responsibility that is more than the responsibility of the individuals constituting the corporation, which therefore consist of what is generally expected by society over and above economic and legal expectations (Crane & Matten, 2016). Business activities manifest international communication and city prosperity, building up the foremost way to improve residents' income and sense of happiness. As the first battlefield of education, Chinese universities and colleges have the responsibility to cultivate students' critical thinking skills and ethical awareness when dealing with complex socio-economic issues after they become employees or employers of corporations, thus improving the overall moral sense of the whole country. By doing this, China's business activities can achieve sustainable development, and the market economy can realize its full potential.

#### **4. Feasibility of Cultivating Business Ethics Consciousness**

According to Ellis and Johnson, there are two approaches to determine the content of Business English course. "The first is to take each of the performance areas and break it down into its constituent parts: skills components, language functions, and the grammatical and lexical contents. The second approach is to analyse the language used in samples from real life situations, or from simulations of real life situations, as management training videos or output from the learners themselves." (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). Therefore, the cultivation of ethic awareness in Business English course can follow the combination of skill practice and situational application as Ellis and Johnson mentioned, which is carried out in the following five aspects, namely, curriculum arrangement, teaching philosophy, teaching method, teaching activities and assessment measures.

##### *4.1 Adjustment of Curriculum Arrangement*

Taking into account that the purpose of the business ethic course in China is to develop students' moral awareness and to enable them to comply with ethical norms in business activities in future, Business English courses should clarify this goal and implement it in the curriculum arrangement. For this reason, the proportion of ethic courses should be expanded, that is, the relevant courses, such as *Business Ethics*, *International Trade Ethics*, *History of Business Ethical Thought*, *Business Ethics Case Study*, *Ethics and Law*, etc., should be the supplementary part of the curriculum system. By taking this series of courses, Business English majors will be able to comprehend the concepts and essence of business ethics and learn to comply with the code of business ethics in the authentic business environment. Furthermore, the courses should be also combined with actual cases and practical operations, in order to help students better understand and apply business ethic knowledge in future.



#### *4.2 Improvement of Faculty' Teaching Philosophy*

As an indispensable participant in teaching activities, Business English teachers need to constantly update their teaching skills and knowledge structure, aiming to improve the theoretical literacy, teaching level and practical ability. When encountering the subject of business ethic issue, teaching faculty should have higher ethical standards to guide students better, which required them be more familiar with and abide by relevant laws and regulations on account of that there is considerable overlap between ethics and the law and that the law is essentially an institutionalization or codification of ethics into specific social rules, regulations, and proscriptions (Crane & Matten, 2016). In addition, teaching faculty should also have a robust interdisciplinary awareness to integrate ethic issues into the business topics, in order to enhance students' sense of moral responsibility. Furthermore, teaching faculty's capacity of guiding and enlightening the students to establish correct values and ethics from multiple perspectives, such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, are also required.

#### *4.3 Innovation of Teaching Methods*

Diversification of teaching methods in business ethic course, including classroom lecture, case study, group discussion, role play, is conducive to stimulate students' interest in participation and improve their practical ability. For example, through the case study, teacher can guide students to analyze ethical issues in business activities, such as the topics covering fraud, unfair competition, environmental pollution, and so on. By discussing and analyzing the cases, students will learn more about the practical application of business ethics and the consequences of violation of laws or social morals. In the same way, according to role-playing teaching, students are arranged to play different roles to simulate various scenarios in business activities, such as telephoning, business negotiation, contract signing, after-sales service. In the process of role-playing, they have got the easy access to experience the actions and decision-making of different situations, thus mastering the application of business ethics in practice.

#### *4.4 Enrichment of Extra Teaching Activities*

Ethics in business English teaching can also be cultivated by enriching extra teaching activities. For instance, business field experts and entrepreneurs should be regularly invited to give lecture for Business English majors. By sharing the ethical problems these professionals encounter and the way they figure out, students would spontaneously think about how they would react if faced with the same dilemma and learn to perceive the actual ethical needs in business activities. In addition, universities and colleges can also arrange internship or practical project for Business English majors to apply business ethics in a natural business environment. Participation in negotiations, contract signing, supplier management, and other work during the internship in enterprises is useful for students to better comply with business ethics.

#### *4.5 Diversification of Assessment Measures*

According to the *New National Standard*, the assessment system of undergraduate Business English programme should emphasize the combination of formative process and summative results, focusing

on the evaluation of students' character, knowledge and ability (Wang, Ye, Yan et al, 2015). However, in reality, the effectiveness of Business English course is only assessed by the single mode of course examination. Therefore, the assessment system of Business English course should be more diversified, which includes not only the test of theoretical business ethic knowledge, but also the assessment of practical ethic judgement. Ellis and Johnson remarks, "test scores are sometimes meaningless unless they can be related to norms for the population at large. Thus, setting up a performance scale which can be used to evaluate all Business English learners worldwide according to common criteria is the efficient way for solving the problem on validity". (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). By this way of assessment design, Chinese educators of higher education should considering on elucidation the role of ethical theoretical framework, by viewing an ethical problem through the "prism" of ethical theories to focus ethical decisionmaking on a specific consideration, such as rights, duties, discourse, or whatever. (Crane & Matten, 2016). As to the teaching procedure, after completing the series of classroom study of business ethics, Business English teachers should summarize the ethic issues involved in the different cases, evaluating and giving feedback on student's performance timely. Only in this way can the students truly perfect the molding of their personalities as well as the formation of their professionalism within the framework of an ethical vision.

## 5. Conclusion

The importance of ethic awareness cultivation in Business English teaching in this day cannot be overstated. From the angle of Business English majors, Business ethic awareness conduces to their understanding of the ethical norms and regulations. Through the study of business ethics, they easily tell apart what is acceptable and unacceptable in business activities, so as to adhere to the right ethical choice throughout their career in future. At the same time, from the perspective of education system in China, ethic awareness cultivation in Business English teaching is essential to higher education and helps to improve the educational level because Business English majors with all-around character and high sense of responsibility will grow into the mainstay of Chinese society. Ultimately, at the national level, Business English ethic awareness cultivation attach great significance to the healthy development of state economy because ethical compliance in business activities is helpful to reducing fraud, protecting consumer rights, maintaining a level playing field, contributing to long-term stable economic growth, and enhancing the country's image. Given that globalization is a context and sustainability is the goal for business ethics (Crane & Matten, 2016), Chinese business English majors should better adapt to the international business environment, thus promoting the cooperation and development between multinational enterprises.

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