

Incorporating 21st Century Skills into Business English Instruction

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Abstract

This study evaluates the efficacy of incorporating six 21st century skills (i.e. leadership, communication, teamwork, problem solving, analytical thinking, and time management) into Business English instruction via project-based assignments in an EFL context. The purpose is to investigate the effects of such an approach on students' acquisition of business English knowledge and their development of the six skills. The subjects were 68 students taking the elective Business English course in a private university in central Taiwan. While both groups received the same classroom instruction, the experimental group did the project-based assignments demanding heavy use of the six 21st century skills, whereas the control group did the traditional instruction-based assignments requiring little use of the skills. A pretest and a posttest were administered to gauge students' progress on the content area knowledge. Two surveys were also conducted and five reflective journal entries submitted to measure the effectiveness of the approach. The quantitative results showed that the project-based assignments did not significantly affect students' acquisition of the content area knowledge or the development of the six skills in either positive or negative way. However, the qualitative results demonstrated that such an approach could foster students' six 21st century skills and improve their employability in the future.

Keywords: Business English, 21st century skills, project approach, teamwork

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I. Introduction

The instruction of Business English, a bilingual ESP course, in Taiwan has long focused on the teaching of business English terminology, international trade procedures, and the correspondence and documents involved in the procedures. Critical thinking skills, such as problem solving and analytical thinking, and soft skills like leadership, communication, teamwork, and time management, on the other hand, have seldom received adequate attention. However, these skills are among the ones identified by many businesses and educators as the core skills that will help students succeed at colleges or universities and in the workplace in the 21st century (Bassett, 2005; Overtoom, 2000; 青輔會與靜宜大學攜手提升大專青年就業力, 2009; 張忠謀：卓越大學旨在培養社會領導人才, 2009; 「經理人獵才網」：向你的新目標邁進, 2009).¹ The “21st century skills,” as they are called, broadly speaking, refer to critical thinking skills (e.g. problem solving and analytical thinking), soft skills (e.g. leadership, communication, teamwork, and time management), and information and technology utilization skills (*Learning for the 21st Century: A Report and MILE Guide for 21st Century Skills*, 2002; Sawchuk, 2009).²

To better prepare students for this increasingly globalized, competitive world, employers and educational experts have called for an infusion of 21st century skills into the traditional curricula (Sacconaghi, 2006).³ A survey conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Hart Research Associates, 2008)⁴ also indicated that most business executives recommended that colleges should integrate problem solving, writing, and analytical thinking skills into their

¹ Bassett, P. F. “Reengineering Schools for the 21st Century,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (2005), pp. 76-83. Overtoom, C. *Employability Skills: An Update. ERIC Digest No. 220*, Columbus, OH: Eric Clearinghouse on Adult, Career Vocational Education, 2000. 〈青輔會與靜宜大學攜手提升大專青年就業力〉，《中央社》2009年10月，取自 <http://tw.news.yahoo.com/article/url/d/a/091020/5/1tb74.html>. 〈張忠謀：卓越大學旨在培養社會領導人才〉，《中央社》2009年10月，取自 <http://tw.news.yahoo.com/article/url/d/a/091024/5/1tm5e.html>. 〈「經理人獵才網」：向你的新目標邁進〉，《中央社》2009年10月，取自 <http://tw.news.yahoo.com/article/url/d/a/091016/5/1t39q.html>.

² *Learning for the 21st Century: A Report and MILE Guide for 21st Century Skills*, Washington, DC: Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2002. Sawchuk, S. “Backers of “21st-Century Skills’ Take Flak,” *Education Week*, Vol. 28, No. 27 (2009), pp. 1-14.

³ Sacconaghi, M. “Why the American Public Supports Twenty-First Century Learning,” *New Directions for Youth Development*, Vol. 110 (2006), pp. 39-45.

⁴ Hart Research Associates, I. *How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning? Employers’ Views on the Accountability Challenge*, Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008.

assessments so that college graduates could be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the workplace. To achieve the goal, students should therefore not be asked to work alone on assignments emphasizing short-term content memorization (Pearlman, 2006),⁵ nor should they do assignments which focus on translation (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996)⁶ or allow sloppily put-together pieces of model phrases and sentences from the textbook (許正義, 2006).⁷ Unfortunately, these don'ts happen to be what the traditional Business English assignments are about in Taiwan. To improve the situation, many educators have recommended group projects or project-based approaches (Hart Research Associates, 2008; Ngai, 2007; Pearlman, 2006; 許正義, 2006).⁸

Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach in which learning is structured around projects. Projects are complicated tasks, based on challenging questions or problems. In the projects, students have to analyze the problems, investigate possible solutions, make decisions, create designs, and solve problems. They work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time and come up with realistic products or presentations in the end. On the other hand, instructors are facilitators, who do not directly provide students with correct answers but guide them in the learning process and offer them feedback (Thomas, 2000).⁹

There have been many successful examples of PBL projects designed and implemented to foster students' skills that matter in the 21st century. One example is the innovative learning and outcomes-based assessment employed by New Technology High School in Napa, California, USA (Pearlman, 2006).¹⁰ Another is the employability skills group project developed and carried out by Metro Tech Technology Centers, USA (Metro Tech Technology Centers, 1999).¹¹ Still another is

⁵ Pearlman, B. "Twenty-First Century Learning in Schools: A Case Study of New Technology High School in Napa, California," *New Directions for Youth Development*, Vol. 110 (2006), pp. 101-112.

⁶ Louhiala-Salminen, L. "The Business Communication Classroom vs. Reality: What Should We Teach Today?" *English for Specific Purposes*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1996), pp. 37-51.

⁷ 許正義, 〈離開大學前的最後一門必修課：商用英文寫作〉, 《敦煌英語教學電子雜誌》2006年12月, 頁1。

⁸ Hart Research Associates, I. op cit. Ngai, E. W. T. "Learning in Introductory E-Commerce: A Project-Based Teamwork Approach," *Computers and Education*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2007), pp. 17-29. Pearlman, B. op cit. 許正義, 前揭書, 頁3。

⁹ Thomas, J. W. *A Review of Research on Project-Based Learning*, San Rafael, CA: The Autodesk Foundation, 2000.

¹⁰ Pearlman, B. op cit.

¹¹ *Creating Your Own Business. Employability Skills Group Project*, Oklahoma City, OK: Metro Tech Technology Centers, 1999.

the e-commerce teamwork-based project devised and executed by Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Ngai, 2007).¹²

Although many studies on project-based learning have been done and the trend towards introducing 21st century skills into curricula is gaining momentum abroad, research on incorporating 21st century skills into the teaching of Business English through project-based assignments is still limited in Taiwan. Therefore, this research was conducted to examine the effectiveness of the approach.

II. Current Research

Most students take Business English one or two years right before they graduate from college because they believe the course can better prepare them for the job market. Therefore, embedding the six 21st century skills into the course design is all the more important since most of the six skills are also among the top ten employability skills identified in the UK, Europe, and Japan (Brennan, Johnston, Little, Shah, & Woodley, 2001).¹³ However, as critical thinking skills cannot be effectively taught independent of the domain knowledge (Willingham, 2008),¹⁴ so are soft skills. Therefore, project-based assignments, which lend themselves perfectly to interdisciplinary nature of work, were designed to help students foster the six 21st century skills.

The purpose of this research is to examine the efficacy of incorporating the six 21st century skills (i.e. leadership, communication, teamwork, problem solving, analytical thinking, and time management) into Business English instruction via project-based assignments in an EFL context. The hypothesis states: Incorporating the six 21st century skills into Business English instruction will affect students' acquisition of Business English knowledge or their development of the six skills.

III. Methodology

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 68 sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students who took Business English as an elective course at a private university in

¹²Ngai, E. W. T. op cit.

¹³Brennan, J., et al. *The Employment of UK Graduates: Comparison with Europe and Japan*, London: The Open University, 2001.

¹⁴Willingham, D. T. "Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?" *Arts Education Policy Review*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (2008), pp. 21-29.

central Taiwan during the fall semester 2008. The 39 students enrolled in the morning class were named the control group, whereas the 29 students enrolled in the afternoon class on the same day the experimental group. The distribution of the participants categorized by sex, year, and college of majors is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants categorized by sex, year, and college of majors

| | | Control Group | Experimental Group |
|-------------------|--|---------------|--------------------|
| Sex | Male | 5 | 7 |
| | Female | 34 | 22 |
| | Total | 39 | 29 |
| Year | Sophomore | 1 | 4 |
| | Junior | 7 | 6 |
| | Senior | 31 | 13 |
| | Graduate | 0 | 6 |
| | Total | 39 | 29 |
| College of Majors | Business | 30 | 19 |
| | Humanities & Social Sciences | 2 | 3 |
| | Construction & Development | 0 | 4 |
| | Engineering | 4 | 1 |
| | Information & Electrical Engineering | 3 | 1 |
| | Sciences | 0 | 1 |
| | Total | 39 | 29 |

B. Design of the Study

While the 39 students in the control group were further divided into eight teams, each containing 4-5 students, the 29 students in the experimental group were divided into six teams, each containing 3-5 students. Both groups received the same classroom instruction, had access to the same supplementary materials on Blackboard, an e-education platform, and did the same individual homework—worksheets (Ashley,

2003b)¹⁵ designed to reinforce their business English knowledge taught in class. The only difference was their team assignments.

The control group was required to write five instruction-based team assignments: (1) memos containing team members' names and addresses in both Chinese and English, (2) sales letters, (3) enquiry letters, (4) replies and quotation forms, and (5) cover letters and order forms. The assignments were done based on the oral instructions given by the instructor in Chinese and the key information and expressions posted by the instructor in English on Blackboard. As a result, the students basically just needed to translate what the instructor dictated in Chinese into an English letter, using the key English expressions supplied by the instructor and making a rote application of the format of business correspondence and guidelines for writing various business English letters. In other words, the control group's team assignments required mainly business English knowledge and English language skills but little use of the six 21st century skills.

By contrast, in the project-based team assignments, the experimental group had to do everything from scratch on their own. In the first team assignment, they had to establish an imaginary company; decide on the products/services to sell, company's name, logo, postal address, contact numbers, and the person in charge; and post the company's basic information on Discussion Board on Blackboard. Next, they had to make a PowerPoint presentation in English, introducing their company and products/services. After that, each team had to analyze the nature of their products/services as well as that of other teams' to decide which team to do business with in the future.

In the second assignment, each team had to write a sales letter to their prospective customer after the business partnership was established. In the third assignment, each team had to write an enquiry letter to their prospective supplier, based on the sales letter they had received.

In the fourth assignment, each team had to reply to the enquiry letter they had received from their partner team and create a one-to-two-page catalogue, containing pictures of the products, catalogue numbers, product descriptions, unit prices, Incoterm used to quote the prices, methods of payment, discounts allowed, and delivery days guaranteed. In the last assignment, each team had to write a cover letter to accompany their order form.

¹⁵ Ashley, A. *Oxford Correspondence Workbook* (new ed.), Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003.

To accomplish each of the project-based assignments, each team had to choose a leader. The leader had to make plans, chair group discussions, listen to different opinions, coordinate, and allocate duties according to each team member's strengths and background (leadership). During group discussions, team members had to express their ideas clearly and listen to others' ideas carefully (oral communication). After the meeting, they had to organize their ideas and write a unified, supported, coherent, and error-free business letter (written communication). They also had to work together effectively, sharing findings with each other, offering help to each other, and being ready to compromise if ideas conflicted (teamwork). When they encountered problems, they had to brainstorm, refer to the textbook (Ashley, 2003a)¹⁶ or teachers, or search the Internet to find solutions to the problems (problem solving). Since each team's products/services, location of the company, Incoterms used in quotations, discounts allowed, methods of delivery and payment were different, each team had to analyze the situation and test the appropriateness of the information gathered so that sound decisions could be made and problems solved (analytical thinking). Finally, each team had to set the timetable for group discussions, submission of individual work, compilation and editing of individual work, and submission of team assignments before the deadline (time management). In other words, the experimental group's project-based assignments demanded not only mental process of business English knowledge and English language skills but also heavy use of the six 21st century skills.

In addition to the PowerPoint presentation and commercial letters and documents, a reflective journal entry and meeting minutes had to be posted on Discussion Board on Blackboard along with each team assignment. The function of the reflective journal was for the instructor to monitor and for each team to reflect on the skills they exercised while doing the team assignments, whereas the purpose of the meeting minutes was to ensure full participation of all team members in group discussions and fair allocation of duties. Each team assignment included two drafts. The instructor would point out errors in business concepts or English language skills on the first draft. Based on the instructor's feedback, each team revised their first draft and posted the second draft on Discussion Board on Blackboard. The grade for each team assignment was the average of the two drafts.

¹⁶ Ashley, A. *Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence* (new ed.), Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003.

C. Measurement

At the beginning of the semester, an instructor-made pretest (see Appendix A), consisting of 50 multiple-choice questions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.748), testing students' knowledge of the key business English course contents covered in this class (content validity) was administered (Wells, 2003; Writing Guides: Reliability and Validity, 1993-2009).¹⁷ Also, an instructor-designed survey (see Appendix B) was made to solicit students' basic personal information and their learning needs. During the semester, reflective journal entries (see Appendix C) were submitted along with team assignments to demonstrate the employment of the six 21st century skills in the process of doing the assignments. At the end of the 18-week course, the same test was given again as the posttest to measure students' progress on the content area knowledge. In addition, two surveys—one instructor-designed and the other school-designed—were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach and the students' satisfaction with the course.

IV. Results

A. Instructor-designed Survey

(A) Students' purpose of taking the course

For the instructor to analyze their learning needs, students were required to tick their purpose of taking the course. The results indicated that the majority of both groups took the course because they wanted to obtain hard skills like business English knowledge and English language skills. In addition, the top three reasons for both groups to take the course were the same: (1) to learn business English terminology, (2) to improve English translation and writing skills, and (3) to understand various business English correspondence and documents. In an educational system in which memorization and objective tests with exact answers are emphasized like Taiwan's, it is not surprising that the six 21st century skills (i.e. two critical thinking and four soft skills) were ignored by the majority of the students. This fact will help explain some of the survey results to be discussed later.

¹⁷Wells, C. S. & Wollack, J. A. *An Instructor's Guide to Understanding Test Reliability*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2003. *Writing Guides: Reliability and Validity* (1993-2009). Retrieved August 6, 2009, from <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/research/relval/index.cfm>.

(B) Students' self-assessment of skills used in team assignments

As shown in Table 2, among the 12 knowledge and skills listed, only four were ticked by more than half of the students in the control group as the skills used when they did their team assignments. They were (1) business English knowledge, (2) English writing skills, (3) English reading skills, and (4) English translation skills, all of which are hard skills. On the other hand, eight skills were identified by the majority of the experimental group as the skills applied when they did the team assignments. They were (1) business English knowledge, (2) teamwork skills, (3) English writing skills, (4) English reading skills, (5) English translation skills, (6) communication skills, (7) analytical thinking skills, and (8) time management skills. Among them, four are hard skills, whereas the other four are 21st century skills. A chi-square test was also used to determine if the difference between the two groups was significant.

Table 2: Skills Used by Both Groups in Team Assignments

| | Control Group | | Experimental Group | | χ^2 |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| | No. of People Who Checked the Item | Percentage of the Group (N=39) | No. of People Who Checked the Item | Percentage of the Group (N=29) | |
| Business English Knowledge | 37 | 94.9% | 25 | 86.2% | 0.66 |
| English Writing Skills | 31 | 79.5% | 21 | 72.4% | 0.15 |
| English Reading Skills | 26 | 66.7% | 20 | 69.0% | 0.00 |
| English Translation Skills | 26 | 66.7% | 20 | 69.0% | 0.00 |
| Analytical Thinking Skills | 19 | 48.7% | 17 | 58.6% | 0.32 |
| Teamwork Skills | 16 | 41.0% | 22 | 75.9% | 6.84* |
| Communication Skills | 15 | 38.5% | 19 | 65.5% | 3.85* |
| Problem-solving Skills | 13 | 33.3% | 14 | 48.3% | 0.99 |
| Time Management Skills | 12 | 30.8% | 15 | 51.7% | 2.24 |
| Leadership Skills | 2 | 5.1% | 4 | 13.8% | 0.66 |
| PowerPoint Making Skills | 0 | 0% | 11 | 37.9% | 14.96* |
| English Presentation Skills | 0 | 0% | 12 | 41.4% | 16.85* |

* $p < 0.05$

The results demonstrated that the team assignments well matched the design of the study—The experimental group did the project-based assignments which demanded not only business English knowledge and English language skills but also heavy use of the six 21st century skills, whereas the control group did the traditional instruction-based assignments which required hard skills but little use of the six skills. In addition, the chi-square test results indicated that there was a real difference between the experimental group and their control counterpart in the employment of teamwork skills, communication skills, PowerPoint making skills, and English presentation skills in doing their team assignments.

(C) Effect of team assignments on students' understanding of the course

To the statement “These hands-on team assignments have deepened my understanding of the course,” 94.87% of the control group and 100% of the experimental group showed agreement. The details are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Opinions of the Positive Effect of Team Assignments on Their Understanding of the Course

| | Control Group | | Experimental Group | |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | No. of People Who Checked the Item | Percentage of the Group (N=39) | No. of People Who Checked the Item | Percentage of the Group (N=29) |
| Strongly Agree | 9 | 23.08% | 12 | 41.38% |
| Agree | 28 | 71.79% | 17 | 58.62% |
| Neutral | 1 | 2.56% | 0 | 0.00% |
| Disagree | 1 | 2.56% | 0 | 0.00% |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0.00% | 0 | 0.00% |

The results showed that all of the experimental group students, compared with a vast majority of their control counterparts, believed that the team assignments deepened their comprehension of the course, though a chi-square test of homogeneity proportions ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 3.73, p > 0.05$) revealed that both groups did not significantly differ in their agreement to the positive effect on their understanding of the course.

(D) Students' self-assessment of gains from the course

Among the 11 items listed in Table 4, the majority of the control group picked (1) to learn business English terminology, (2) to master the formats of business English correspondence and documents, (3) to acquire the guidelines for writing various business English letters, and (4) to understand various business English correspondence and documents as the skills they had gained from the course. All of them are hard skills. On the other hand, more than half of the experimental group students identified the following 6 items as what they had gained from this course: (1) to learn business English terminology, (2) to acquire the guidelines for writing various business English letters, (3) to master the formats of business English correspondence and documents, (4) to understand various business English correspondence and documents, (5) to improve English translation and writing skills, and (6) to promote teamwork skills. Among them, five are hard skills, whereas one is a 21st century skill. A chi-square test was also used to determine if the difference between the two groups was significant.

Table 4: A Comparison of Two Group's Self-assessment of Gains from This Course

| | Control Group | | Experimental Group | | χ^2 |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| | No. of People Who Checked the Item | Percentage of the Group (N=39) | No. of People Who Checked the Item | Percentage of the Group (N=39) | |
| To Learn Business English Terminology | 39 | 100.0% | 28 | 96.6% | 0.02 |
| To Master the Formats of Business English Correspondence and Documents | 38 | 97.4% | 26 | 89.7% | 0.69 |
| To Acquire the Guidelines for Writing Various Business English Letters | 33 | 84.6% | 27 | 93.1% | 0.48 |
| To Understand Various Business English Correspondence and Documents | 32 | 82.1% | 22 | 75.9% | 0.10 |
| To Improve English Translation and Writing Skills | 18 | 46.2% | 19 | 65.5% | 1.79 |

| | | | | | |
|--|----|-------|----|-------|------|
| To Nurture Analytical Thinking Skills | 17 | 43.6% | 8 | 27.6% | 1.21 |
| To Improve English Presentation Skills | 13 | 33.3% | 13 | 44.8% | 0.51 |
| To Promote Teamwork Skills | 10 | 25.6% | 15 | 51.7% | 3.81 |
| To Develop Problem-solving Skills | 9 | 23.1% | 8 | 27.6% | 0.00 |
| To Foster Communication and/or Leadership Skills | 8 | 20.5% | 8 | 27.6% | 0.15 |
| To Cultivate Time Management Skills | 7 | 17.9% | 9 | 31.0% | 0.94 |

The results showed that there were more skills the majority of the experimental group students believed that they had gained from the course than the ones the majority of their control counterparts believed they had. Also, while all the four skills identified by the control group are hard skills, the six skills indicated by the experimental group include not only hard skills but also 21st century skills. However, the chi-square test results indicated that none of the differences between both groups' self-assessed gains were statistically significant, though "to promote teamwork skills" was almost significant ($\chi^2_{(1)}=3.81$, $p=0.051$). Surprisingly, the control group reported analytical thinking skills, English presentation skills, and problem-solving skills as the gains of taking the course while there was actually little chance for them to nurture these skills in the course design, especially the English presentation skills. On the other hand, teamwork skills, communication skills, and English presentation skills, which stood out as the real different skills used in team assignments between the experimental group and their control counterpart, turned out to be not significantly different.

B. Experimental group's reflective journal

For the instructor to monitor the development of the six 21st century skills, each team in the experimental group was required to write a reflective journal entry in Chinese for each team assignment. The reflective journal reveals that the experimental group fostered leadership, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, analytical thinking, and time management skills in the process of accomplishing the team assignments of the project.

(A) Development of leadership skills

The exercise of leadership skills is best reflected in the translated quote from one of the reflective journal entries below:

“Right after class, Lillian (the team leader) would usually arrange a time with every one of us for our group discussion. At the meeting, she would first distribute the information she printed out from Blackboard and some information she found on the Internet for the discussion. Then, she would lead the discussion, listening to everyone attentively and making sure everyone got a chance to talk. Sometimes there were disagreements among us. In that case, Lillian would talk us into reaching an agreement on the conflicting opinions. After that, she would allocate tasks based on our strengths and background and set a deadline for us to submit our individual work for compilation and editing. If we still had some doubt about the assignment, she would call or email the teacher on our behalf for clarification.”

According to NASSP Leadership Skills Assessment ("NASSP Leadership Skills Assessment," 2008)¹⁸ designed by National Association of Secondary School Principals and *Student Leadership Training Booklet* (Omatsu, n.d.)¹⁹ developed by California State University, Northridge, this student (Lillian) has demonstrated leadership by setting instructional direction for her team, exercising oral communication skills, resolving complex problems, fostering intra-group harmony and teamwork, managing tasks and overseeing group responsibilities, developing self and others, and serving as spokesperson through speaking.

(B) Development of communication skills

The display of communication skills is best summed up in the translated quote below:

“We usually sat in a circle when we had a group discussion. That way, we could see and hear each other better. During the discussion, each of us would take turns expressing our ideas. While one member was talking, the rest would listen attentively. If the idea was not clearly expressed, we would ask questions for clarification. When a good idea was brought up, we would show our approval immediately. For example, Julie (a team member) suggested that we added music to our PowerPoint presentation. We all thought it was a brilliant idea, so we did it

¹⁸NASSP Leadership Skills Assessment (2009). Retrieved Oct., 28, 2009, from http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec_inside.asp?CID=39&DID=39.

¹⁹Omatsu, G. (n.d.). *Student Leadership Training Booklet*, Northridge: California State University. Retrieved Oct., 26, 2009, from http://www.csun.edu/eop/htdocs/leadership_booklet.pdf.

accordingly. On the contrary, if ideas conflicted, we would negotiate or compromise, trying to reach a consensus.”

According to Irmsher (Irmsher & Eric Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1996),²⁰ the students have illustrated communication skills by facing people when interacting, keeping eye contact, listening to others carefully, expressing ideas clearly, asking questions, and giving constructive feedback.

(C) Development of teamwork skills

The exhibition of teamwork skills is best summarized in the translated quote below:

“Whenever we had a meeting, all of us would attend. In case any of us could not show up, he/she would submit a written report. At the meeting, we would all contribute ideas and share findings. We would also listen to others’ ideas, exchange our opinions, and support one another. Although our duties were usually chosen by lot, if any of us had difficulty finishing his/her part, we would all offer help immediately.”

Based on the teamwork skills assessment provided by Bellingham Schools (“7 Essential Skills for Teamwork,” 1999),²¹ these students have displayed teamwork skills by participating, sharing, listening, questioning, respecting, and helping.

(D) Development of problem-solving skills

The demonstration of problem-solving skills is best shown in the translated quote below:

“When we made the quotation, our biggest problem was to decide on the Incoterms. Our fictional company was located in Ontario, Canada, and our customer’s was in Texas, USA. If we used FOB, it had to be followed by the port of shipment, an international sea port in Canada. On the other hand, if we used CIF, it had to be followed by the port of destination, another international sea port in the US. However, we didn’t know which sea port was international and close to Ontario or Texas. As a result, we had to try several methods before we finally googled keywords like ‘international sea ports,’ ‘map of Canada,’ ‘map of the USA,’ and visited many websites to solve the problem. In the end, we decided to use CIF Houston because we felt it was a safer choice.”

²⁰ Irmsher, K. “Communication Skills,” *ERIC Digest*, No. 102 (1996), pp.1-6.

²¹ “7 Essential Skills for Teamwork” (1999). Retrieved Aug. 18, 2009, from <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/studentgal/onlineresearch/oldonline/mod8team.htm>.

The quote exhibits that the students have applied the problem-solving skills by identifying the problem, defining the problem, exploring possible solution strategies, acting on the strategies, and looking back and evaluating ("Teaching Problem-Solving Skills," 1999).²² Moreover, it reveals not only the students' mental process of the meanings of the Incoterms, in contrast to their control counterparts' rote application of the Incoterms, but also their utilization of modern technology in a meaningful way while they were trying to find the solution to their problem.

(E) Development of analytical thinking skills

The development of analytical thinking skills is best illustrated in the translated quote below:

“When we were asked to set up an imaginary company, we thought we should decide on what to sell first. Then we could decide the company’s name, logo, postal address, contact numbers, and the person in charge. Since all of us are girls, we decided to sell something we are familiar with. Then Cherry (a team member) remembered the ‘lipstick effect’ our International Financial Management teacher had mentioned in class. Because the current economic recession is similar to the Great Depression, something fashionable and affordable like lipstick might sell well, so we decided to sell lipstick.”

This statement shows that the students utilized analytical thinking skills by analyzing problems in a step-by-step way, identifying key issues, recognizing the causal relationship, making inferences, and drawing logical conclusions ("Analytical Thinking," n.d.).²³ Moreover, they linked the concepts from another course to their Business English assignment.

(F) Development of time management skills

The application of time management skills is best reflected in the translated quote below:

“After knowing our next team assignment, we would usually talk a little bit about it right after class, deciding what each of us should do first before our next meeting. By bringing ideas to the meeting, we could always work more efficiently and finish the meeting in an hour or two. After the plan was made, tasks allocated, and

²²“Teaching Problem-Solving Skills” (1999). Retrieved Oct. 25, 2009, from <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/faq/ct-unc.htm>.

²³“Analytical Thinking” (n.d.). Retrieved Oct. 30, 2009, from https://www.gov.ns.ca/psc/pdf/InnovationGrowth/resources/MCP/DevelopmentResourceGuide_2005-06/Development%20Resource%20Guide_Analytical.pdf

timeline set, all of us would finish our part before the deadline for individual work and send it to the leader for compilation and editing. Then we would all go online at the agreed time to fine-tune the assignment. After that, the assignment would be submitted immediately.”

The reflection above illustrates that the students executed time management skills by avoiding procrastination, setting priorities, planning efficiently, delegating effectively, and sticking with the deadline ("Top Ten Time Management Skills," 2009).²⁴

C. Pretest vs. Posttest

For the purpose of statistical control, an ANCOVA was run in SPSS ("SPSS 13.0," 2004)²⁵ to adjust both groups' posttest mean scores to examine the effect of the project-based assignments on students' knowledge of business English. A test of homogeneity of within-groups regression ($F_{(1, 64)}=2.87$, $p>0.05$) showed that the assumption was met. Therefore, the ANCOVA, using pretest mean scores as the covariate, was run to statistically adjust the posttest scores. When two groups' adjusted posttest scores were compared again, the results showed that there was no significant difference between both groups' posttest mean scores ($F_{(1, 65)}= 3.70$, $p> 0.05$). Full details are shown in Tables 5-7.

Table 5: The Means and Standard Deviations of Both Groups' Pretest and Posttest

| | N | Pretest | | Posttest | |
|--------------|----|---------|-------|----------|-------|
| | | M | SD | M | SD |
| Control | 39 | 27.08 | 9.08 | 83.64 | 9.23 |
| Experimental | 29 | 31.52 | 11.89 | 81.66 | 14.25 |
| Total | 68 | 28.97 | 10.52 | 82.79 | 11.59 |

Table 6: A Summary Table of the ANCOVA

| Source | SS' | df | MS' | F | η^2 |
|----------------|---------|----|---------|-------|----------|
| Covariate | 2404.16 | 1 | 2404.16 | 25.07 | .278 |
| Between Groups | 354.48 | 1 | 354.48 | 3.70 | .054 |
| Error | 6234.48 | 65 | 95.92 | | |

²⁴“Top Ten Time Management Skills” (2009). Retrieved Oct. 26, 2009, from <http://www.visitask.com/time-management-skills.asp>.

²⁵SPSS 13.0. Chicago, US: SPSS Inc., 2004.

| | | |
|--------------------|---------|----|
| Corrected Total | 8993.12 | 67 |
|--------------------|---------|----|

Table 7: A Comparison between Both Groups at Adjusted Posttest Means

| | Adjusted Mean | SD | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--------------|------------------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Control | 84.81 | 1.58 | 81.65 | 87.97 |
| Experimental | 80.09 | 1.84 | 76.41 | 83.77 |

On the other hand, as shown in Table 8, when pretest and posttest mean scores were compared by paired *t*-test, it was found that both the control group and the experimental group made tremendous progress.

Table 8: A Comparison between Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores of the Two Groups

| | Pretest | | Posttest | | t |
|------------------------|---------|-------|----------|-------|---------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | |
| Control (N=39) | 27.08 | 9.08 | 83.64 | 9.23 | -34.96* |
| Experimental (N=29) | 31.52 | 11.89 | 81.66 | 14.25 | -24.50* |

* $p < 0.05$

To sum up, the results showed that although both groups made considerable progress between the pretest and posttest, neither of the groups outperformed the other at the posttest. In other words, the project-based assignments did not affect the experimental group students' acquisition of the content area knowledge in either positive or negative way.

D. School-designed survey

At the end of the 18-week course, a school-designed survey using a 5-point Likert scale was administered to examine students' overall satisfaction with the course. The results showed that the approval rating of the experimental group (4.60) was higher than that of the control group (4.34). Moreover, the approval rating of the experimental group was ranked among the top 10% of all courses offered by the school in that semester.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

The quantitative results of this research showed, firstly, that both the experimental group and their control counterpart improved significantly between the pretest and the posttest and that neither of the groups outperformed the other in the posttest. Such a finding is aligned with the conclusion of an extensive research on the efficacy of the PBL approach adopted in training physicians, as Savery (2006, p. 10)²⁶ stated, “a problem-based approach to instruction was equal to traditional approaches in terms of conventional test of knowledge.” On the other hand, the control group, with the teaching method one would expect to work the least, also had a significant improvement effect. This result might be best explained by the conclusion Warden (2000, p.608)²⁷ made in his research, “Taiwan EFL students may respond best to what they understand most.” In an educational system stressing memorization and passive learning in Taiwan, the traditional instruction-based assignments were what the students were familiar with. They also allowed the students to have more time to concentrate on acquiring the content area knowledge by rote. Therefore, they could also make considerable progress from the pretest to the posttest.

Secondly, although the experimental group and their control counterpart differed significantly in the exercise of teamwork, communication, PowerPoint making, and English presentation skills in the process of doing team assignments, quantitative results indicated that there was no real difference between both groups in their self-assessed gains from the course. As research has indicated (e.g. Willingham, 2008; Georges, n.d.),²⁸ critical thinking and soft skills take time and constant practice to develop. Therefore, it is hard for the difference in the development of the six skills between the experimental group and their control counterpart to be significant in just one semester. Moreover, years of classroom instruction and testing emphasizing factual contents and memorization in Taiwan have made the students care only about the advancement of their hard skills, as reflected in their unanimous purpose of taking the course. Therefore, even though the chi-square test results on skills used by both groups in team assignments and students’ reflective journals all demonstrated the outcomes of the six 21st century skills, the students were still unaware of them. This

²⁶Savery, J. R. op cit, p. 10.

²⁷Warden, C. A. “EFL Business Writing Behaviors in Differing Feedback Environments,” *Language Learning*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (2000), p. 608.

²⁸Willingham, D. T. op cit. Georges, J. C. (n.d.). “The Myth of Soft-Skills Training.” Retrieved Aug. 30, 2009, from <http://www.jtemgt.com/PDF/TrainingMyths.pdf>.

unawareness, naturally, negatively affected survey results and, consequently, the outcomes of the quantitative research.

On the other hand, the qualitative research validated that the project-based assignments did help students foster the six 21st century skills, as illustrated in the reflective journal entries of the experimental group. In addition, all experimental group students, compared with a great majority of their control counterparts, indicated that the project-based assignments deepened their understanding of the course; and overall, as shown in the school-designed survey results, they were more satisfied with the course than their control counterparts.

This research, however, was limited in two respects. First, the number of the participants was not large enough to be representative. Second, no objective assessment tool, like standardized tests, was used to complement the subjective surveys and reflective journal entries to more solidly prove students' development of the 21st century skills via the project-based assignments. Follow-up research needs to be done to improve the situation.

To sum up, although the quantitative results showed that incorporating six 21st century skills (i.e. leadership, communication, teamwork, problem solving, analytical thinking, and time management) into Business English instruction via project-based assignments did not significantly affect students' acquisition of the content area knowledge or the development of the six skills in either positive or negative way, the qualitative results supported that such an approach could foster students' six 21st century skills and improve their employability in the future. Moreover, students showed a pretty high overall approval rating for such a course design. Therefore, it is a teaching approach worthy of trying.

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Appendix A

Business English Pre-/Post-test

Name _____

No. _____

A. Choose the most appropriate Chinese translation for the following business English abbreviations:

(2%×18=36%)

1. p.p.
 (A) 郵資與包裝 (B) 代表 (C) 運費待收 (D) 出口港船上交貨條件
2. SWIFT
 (A) 錯漏除外 (B) 增值稅 (C) 交單付現 (D) 世界銀行金融電信協會
3. B/E
 (A) 請款匯票 (B) 信用狀 (C) 海運提單 (D) 承兌交單
4. CEO
 (A) 交單付現 (B) 電匯 (C) 執行總裁 (D) 目的港運保費在內條件
5. VAT
 (A) 承兌交單 (B) 增值稅 (C) 貨到付款 (D) 工廠交貨條件
6. p&p
 (A) 運費待收 (B) 代表 (C) 郵資與包裝 (D) 出口港船上交貨條件
7. T/T
 (A) 請款匯票 (B) 電匯 (C) 海運提單 (D) 目的港運保費在內條件
8. E&OE
 (A) 錯漏除外 (B) 增值稅 (C) 交單付現 (D) 世界銀行金融電信協會
9. FOB
 (A) 貨到付款 (C) 目的港運保費在內條件
 (B) 工廠交貨條件 (D) 出口港船上交貨條件
10. CIF
 (A) 貨到付款 (C) 目的港運保費在內條件
 (B) 工廠交貨條件 (D) 出口港船上交貨條件
11. EXW
 (A) 貨到付款 (C) 目的港運保費在內條件
 (B) 工廠交貨條件 (D) 出口港船上交貨條件
12. C/F
 (A) 郵資與包裝 (B) 運費待收 (C) 貨到付款 (D) 承兌交單
13. L/C
 (A) 運費待收 (B) 海運提單 (C) 信用狀 (D) 請款匯票

14. B/L
 (A) 海運提單 (B) 請款匯票 (C) 信用狀 (D) 借據
15. CAD
 (A) 交單付現 (B) 承兌交單 (C) 運費待收 (D) 工廠交貨條件
16. D/A
 (A) 錯漏除外 (B) 交單付現 (C) 運費待收 (D) 承兌交單
17. COD
 (A) 貨到付款 (B) 運費待收 (C) 承兌交單 (D) 交單付現
18. IOU
 (A) 貨到付款 (B) 請款匯票 (C) 信用狀 (D) 借據

B. Choose the most appropriate Chinese translation for the following business English terms:
 (2%×18=36%)

19. quotation
 (A) 推薦書 (B) 預約發票 (C) 報價 (D) 退款
20. remittance
 (A) 印刷宣傳品 (B) 空運提單 (C) 匯款 (D) 敬贈便條
21. brochure
 (A) 委託人 (B) 小手冊 (C) 借項清單 (D) 財務收支表
22. on approval
 (A) 遠期匯票 (B) 敬贈便條 (C) 推薦書 (D) 不合即退
23. statement of account
 (A) 財務收支表 (B) 匯款 (C) 借項清單 (D) 印刷宣傳品
24. subsidiary
 (A) 委託人 (B) 小手冊 (C) 利潤 (D) 子公司
25. literature
 (A) 印刷宣傳品 (B) 推薦書 (C) 標單 (D) 敬贈便條
26. tender
 (A) 小手冊 (B) 標單 (C) 遠期匯票 (D) 委託人
27. principal
 (A) 利潤 (B) 委託人 (C) 子公司 (D) 託運品
28. refund
 (A) 匯款 (B) 遠期匯票 (C) 退款 (D) 空運提單
29. testimonial
 (A) 推薦書 (B) 子公司 (C) 借項清單 (D) 小手冊

30. consignment
 (A) 託運品 (B) 預約發票 (C) 委託人 (D) 空運提單
31. term draft
 (A) 標單 (B) 借項清單 (C) 預約發票 (D) 遠期匯票
32. debit note
 (A) 空運提單 (B) 敬贈便條 (C) 借項清單 (D) 標單
33. profit margin
 (A) 託運品 (B) 不合即退 (C) 財務收支表 (D) 利潤
34. compliments slip
 (A) 印刷宣傳品 (B) 敬贈便條 (C) 借項清單 (D) 財務收支表
35. pro forma invoice
 (A) 財務收支表 (B) 標單 (C) 小手冊 (D) 預約發票
36. air waybill
 (A) 敬贈便條 (B) 預約發票 (C) 空運提單 (D) 標單

- C. Read the following business correspondence and choose the best answer (A), (B), (C), or (D) to each question. (2% \times 14=28%)

Drake's Grill
 401 E Sixth Ave, Anchorage, AK 99501
 TEL: (907) 276-8700

November 3, 2007

Mr. Geoffrey Blake
 Anchorage Seafood
 Route 5
 Anchorage, AK 99502

Dear _____

It is with great disappointment that I am writing this letter. We have bought seafood from your company for the last five years. We have always been extremely pleased with the quality and service. That is until now.

Last Friday, we were scheduled to receive our order of 100 pounds of shrimp and 150 pounds of crab at 9:00 a.m. Finally, at 11:30 a.m., your delivery truck arrived, giving us only 30 minutes to prepare for our lunch time crowd. Unfortunately, that was not the only problem. The order contained half of what we ordered, and most of the shrimp was bad. We had to change our menu at the last minute, and, as you can imagine, we had many unhappy customers.

We will not pay for this order and are seriously considering another vendor. It is only because we have been buying from you for so long that we want to hear your explanation. You can contact me at the restaurant.

Sincerely

Joanne Brown
Manager

37. Why did Ms. Brown write the letter?
- (A) To return the food
(B) To express her displeasure with the company
(C) To praise their service
(D) To change the delivery time
38. What was not a problem?
- (A) The time of delivery (C) The attitude of the driver
(B) The amount of seafood (D) The quality of the product
39. How much shrimp did the restaurant receive?
- (A) 50 pounds (C) 100 pounds
(B) 75 pounds (D) 150 pounds
40. What does Ms. Brown want to happen next?
- (A) She wants Anchorage Seafood to return the money.
(B) She wants to search for a new vendor.
(C) She wants the seafood to be delivered earlier.
(D) She wants Mr. Blake to call her.
41. This letter is typed in ...

- (A) blocked style with standard punctuation
 - (B) blocked style with open punctuation
 - (C) semi-blocked style with standard punctuation
 - (D) semi-blocked style with open punctuation
42. The salutation of this letter should be ...
- (A) Dear Sir
 - (B) Dear Mr. Geoffrey
 - (C) Dear Mr. Blake
 - (D) Dear Geoffrey Blake
43. What part of a business letter is missing in this letter?
- (A) letterhead
 - (B) inside address
 - (C) complimentary close
 - (D) signature
44. It can be inferred from this letter that the method of payment is probably...
- (A) cash in advance
 - (B) cash against documents
 - (C) open account
 - (D) on consignment

Panton Manufacturing Ltd.

Panton Works, Hounslow, Middlesex TW6 2BQ

MEMO

To _____
From The Chief Executive
Date 2/8/'07

As you know, Friday afternoon is our annual company party. We are looking forward to this event and the opportunity to take some time out of our busy schedules to enjoy each other's company. Because we will continue to need to have someone to answer the phones and receive materials, we are asking that each of our six departments identify one or more employees who would be willing to work a two-hour shift: 1:30-3:30 or 3:30-5:30.

In order to compensate those people who will be working during the festivities, we have

vouchers for a weekend visit to Palm Resorts. Please send me the name of the person(s) in your department who will be taking on these duties.

45. To whom is the memo directed?
- (A) All employees
 - (B) The head of each department
 - (C) People at the resort
 - (D) The catering company
46. What is the main idea of the memo?
- (A) Some lucky employees will win a trip to Palm Resorts.
 - (B) The party will be for all employees.
 - (C) Some employees will not be able to attend the party on Friday.
 - (D) The party will finish between 5:30 and 6:00.
47. How many people will work during the party?
- (A) Fewer than five
 - (B) At least twelve
 - (C) Six or more
 - (D) All employees
48. What is the purpose of the event on Friday?
- (A) To take as many calls as possible
 - (B) To motivate employees for a difficult year
 - (C) To get a trip to Palm Resorts
 - (D) To spend time with each other
49. What is an important part of a memo that is missing in this one?
- (A) Subject
 - (B) Salutation
 - (C) Complimentary close
 - (D) Signature
50. The date in this memo is confusing. Panton Manufacturing Ltd. is a British company; the correct way to write the date in British English is ...
- (A) 2 August 2007
 - (B) February 8, 2007
 - (C) August 2 2007
 - (D) 8 February, 2007

Appendix B

「商用英文」教學評鑑問卷

一、 個人資料

請填入或勾選適當的答案。

1. 性別： 男 女
2. 年級： 二 三 四
3. 學院： 商學 理學 工學 管理 資電 建設 人文社會
4. 科系： 企管 經濟 合經 統計 會計 國貿 財稅 風保
財金 其他：_____
5. 除了本科目外，你是否同時還有修其他英語課程？ 否
是 (科名 _____)
6. 你修本科的目的是：

| | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 學習商業英文專業術語 <input type="checkbox"/> 熟悉商業英文書信類格式 <input type="checkbox"/> 提升英文翻譯及寫作能力 <input type="checkbox"/> 培養團隊合作的能力 <input type="checkbox"/> 培養解決問題的能力 <input type="checkbox"/> 培養時間管理的能力 | <input type="checkbox"/> 學會各類商業英文書信寫作原則 <input type="checkbox"/> 看懂各類商業英文書信 <input type="checkbox"/> 增進英語簡報能力 <input type="checkbox"/> 培養溝通/領導的能力 <input type="checkbox"/> 培養分析思考的能力 <input type="checkbox"/> 其他 _____ |
|---|---|

二、 修課後評鑑

1. 在五個團體作業中，你覺得最有趣或最有挑戰性的依次是哪些？請以 1（最有趣或最有挑戰性）至 5（最無趣或最沒挑戰性）的順序標出：
 以英語簡報方式介紹自家產品
 寫推銷信
 寫詢問信
 回覆詢問並報價
 寫訂貨信並製作訂單

2. 在做團體作業時，你運用到哪些技能？可複選。
 商用英文的專業知識 領導的能力
 溝通的能力 解決問題的能力
 分析思考的能力 團隊合作的能力
 時間管理的能力 製作 PowerPoint 的能力
 做英語簡報的能力 英文閱讀的能力
 英文寫作的的能力 英文翻譯的能力

3. 這些實務操作的團體作業提高了你對本科的興趣？
 非常同意 同意 沒意見 不同意 非常不同意

4. 這些實務操作的團體作業加深了你對「商用英文」的了解？
 非常同意 同意 沒意見 不同意 非常不同意

5. 六張「學習單」有助於你對本科的學習？
 非常同意 同意 沒意見 不同意 非常不同意

6. 八張「商業英文用語單字表」有助於你對本科的了解？
 非常同意 同意 沒意見 不同意 非常不同意

7. 你覺得自己修本科的收穫是什麼？可複選。
 學習商業英文專業術語 學會各類商業英文書信寫作原則
 熟悉商業英文書信類格式 看懂各類商業英文書信
 提升英文翻譯及寫作能力 增進英語簡報能力
 培養團隊合作的能力 培養溝通/領導的能力
 培養解決問題的能力 培養分析思考的能力
 培養時間管理的能力 其他 _____

8. 其它建議： _____

Appendix C

Reflective Journal

Instructions: Did you apply the following six 21st century skills in the process of doing your team assignment? Check and explain.

A. Critical Thinking Skills

Analytical thinking

Proof:

Problem solving

Proof:

B. Soft Skills

Leadership

Proof:

Teamwork

Proof:

Communication

Proof:

Time management

Proof:

二十一世紀技能融入商用英文教學

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摘 要

本論文旨在探討在英文為外國語文的環境下，透過專題型的作業，以領導、溝通、團隊合作、解決問題、分析思考及時間管理等六項二十一世紀的技能（以下簡稱二十一世紀技能）融入商用英文教學的效果。研究目的為探討此教學法對學生商用英文知識的習得及二十一世紀技能的培養是否有影響。本文以台灣中部地區某私立大學選修商用英文的 68 位學生為研究對象。在實驗組與控制組皆接受相同的課堂授課之下，實驗組的團體作業為需要大量使用二十一世紀技能的專題型作業，然控制組則為以傳統教師指示為主的作業，而鮮少使用該二十一世紀技能。前測與後測皆被用來評量學生學習商用英文知識進步的情形。兩個問卷調查及五個反思式的學習日誌也被用來評估此教學的效果。由量化研究結果顯示專題型團體作業對學生商用英文知識的習得及二十一世紀技能的發展沒有明顯的正面或負面影響，但質化研究結果卻顯示透過專題型團體作業訓練，可培養學生展現出二十一世紀技能，提昇學生未來就業的競爭力。

關鍵詞：商用英文、二十一世紀的技能、方案教學法、團隊合作

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