

Teaching Business English for Chinese Students via “Field Work”

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A well-designed field work can motivate students and promote active learning. Under this context, the BETL (Business English for Teaching and Learning) presentation that is designed as an assessment to incorporating with a compulsory field trip is a Chinese characterized project which will be elucidated in this essay. It implies that the country must carry out appropriate policies to balance hard and soft skills development. Hurell (2009, p. 397) defines soft skills as involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts. The interview as part of the survey also suggests that the outcome of the field trip was generally positive. In fact, soft skills should be taught by parents preferably, or siblings and relatively at one's early age (Bhanot, 2009). Consequently, this leaves a huge space for the university professionals in China to accomplish soft skills development or training before they enter the workforce. It emphasizes on enhancing soft skills which require more initiatives to dedicate oneself to self-directedness and motivation on spontaneous learning at any point of life. The positive effects of the field trip are group members' collaboration and effective time management. 21st century or technology-driven society undeniably and undoubtedly needs hard skills which must be complemented by soft skills. As a result, hard skills pertinent to technological revolution change dramatically; it also affects soft skills involved in such a turbulent world. The former entails literacy, functional and digital competency while the latter consists of learning skills, soft skills, life skills, key skills, and transversal skills. The major strategy that is utilized in our program is the business group presentation with a three-week field trip before the final assessment.

Keyword: LWL, employability skills, soft skills, BETL (Business English Teaching and Learning)

Introduction

Technology-driven society undeniably and undoubtedly needs hard skills which must be complemented by soft skills. Bhanot (2009, p. 20) emphasizes that “the soft skills will finally make the difference between an effective and an ineffective employee/organization”, so professionals and university students both need to reflect on expanding learning (extramural opportunities) through various channels (Barnett, 2011). It emphasizes on enhancing soft skills which require more initiatives to dedicate oneself to self-directedness and motivation on spontaneous learning at any point of life. According to Hepple, Alford, Hendersen, Tengen, Hurwood, Alwi, Shaarib, and Alwi (2017), inter-cultural competency is regarded as crucial to skills in 21st century for higher education graduates. Since competency is much emphasized, learners' especially mature students will find themselves in great need when coming back to tertiary sector for refreshing themselves. As a result, duration will be dramatically reduced in learning and thus lead to a more efficient and effective

environment of learning. More profoundly, this will enormously reduce the cost of education which benefits the mature students and the institutions globally. In another word, since those mature students have better mechanism or critical thinking and leadership, it results in better productive outcome of learning which shortens the process of the whole session in the future.

It has been a while since I began to think and reflect on how soft skills help Chinese students in the way to enhance their uncertain career ahead of them due to the rapid change of the technology and inflated knowledge they have just acquired. Not until I was able to enlighten my students with latest idea to think of some of the soft skills they need to develop, was AI or MI approaching to all of us. As a result, hard skills pertinent to technological revolution change dramatically; it also affects soft skills involved in such a turbulent world. This has been proved by Besta's (2017, cited in Nae, 2019) proposition, indicating that contemporary times “call for a shift of traditional language teaching methods towards new and innovative approach”.

In China's university, most institutes just require their staff to teach business English for the sake of business only, not necessarily to arm students with extra skills regardless of soft skills. According to Moss and Tilly (1996), soft skills are those abilities or traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge. In other words, they are apart from hard skills which most of our students strive for year after year. Hurell (2009, p. 397) defines soft skills as involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts.

Literature Review on Field Trips Which Benefit Students in Higher Level of Education

China is well known for ancient education theories and ideas. Liu Xiang (BC 77-BC 6) pointed out “what you hear is not as effective as what you see, and what see is not as effective as what you do”. As a matter of fact, two thousand years ago, doing is prior to seeing or hearing was already emphasized in education. In ancient Greece, the emphasis was also put on the need of combining abstract learning with concrete experience, according a report by Shakil, Faizi, and Hafeez (2011), claiming students should not live in a closet: Instead, they should acquire knowledge in the real world. Teaching Business English is defined by many linguists as a branch of ESP (Pickett, 1989; Robinson, 1991; John & Dudley-Evans, 1991; St. John & Johnson, 1996; Wang, 1997; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Feng, 1999; Huang, 2000; Ellis & Johnson, 2002, cited in Zhang, 2007). Nelson (2000, cited in Zhang, 2007) further points out that the core value of ESP is identifying learners' needs, with which they can be met by specifically designing systematic activities in the specific field.

Therefore, what should be introduced in Business English teaching as a mode to implement a field trip, according to Squire and Klopfer (2007, cited in Kaewkitipong, Chen, & Ractham, 2016), provides a social active learning experience that can take place at any time and in any place (Kaewkitipong, Chen, & Ractham, 2016) through interaction with peers during the field trip. Dewey (1938), Frontczak (1998), Jakubowski (2003), and Chmielewski-Raimondo, McKeown, and Brooks (2016) share the idea that experiential learning, which can broaden and deepen the learning experience, is regarded as a more student-centered pedagogy. Field work, as regarded as a social practice, can be adopted as a medium to enhance “action-oriented” in the business as Zhang (2007) describes in his work. According to Donovan et al. (2010), Jackson (2014), and Webb, De Lange, and O'Connell (2009), companies around the world are increasingly demanding that universities are able to train graduates who possess both “work-ready” generic skills as well as “global cultural” awareness skills. As result, students' readiness for the future career seems far behind the needs; therefore, a field work moves instruction away from the confines of the classroom and out into the “real world” as Chmielewski-Raimondo,

McKeown, and Brooks (2016) claim in their research. Kolb’s four stages (Kolb, 1984) clearly explain the significance of participating, observing, contextualizing, and experimenting that equip students in a field work. All the above professionals provided the teachers with strategies to design an appropriate curriculum for Business English Teaching and Learning (known as BETL) course.

Field work is also a type of case study method, according to Golich (2000), a real life environment in which students are able to transfer knowledge into practical competencies such as listening, speaking, and writing or even critical thinking skills, other skills like problem identification, solution providing, and decision making to team work, leadership building, etc., as Golich (2000) claims in her work. Also in her paper (Golich, 2000) titled “ABCs of Case Teaching”, Golich emphasizes on the central role of students who should take over the responsibilities as she further alludes that teachers should act like an orchestral director who cannot create the learning alone. Instead, each individual should work together as a team to make a music piece. Metaphorically Golich (2000) says that teachers are facilitators rather than information providers.

Purpose and Object of BETL Incorporated With Soft Skills

This paper will investigate how soft skills assist our students in developing their non-technical competency in order to cater to future jobs. Many students from China are generally disapproved of not keeping eye contact, for example, in speaking, or inappropriate use of words in email or lack of basic etiquette in business letters. Additionally, it will also elaborate on how the BETL course is designed by integrating those non-technical skills from which students are able to learn and what major benefits they are able to obtain through our training. The major strategy that is utilized in our program is the business group presentation with a three-week field work before the final assessment. The presentation incorporating with a compulsory field trip is a Chinese characterized project which will be elucidated in later sections. This type of course design is quite effective for Chinese students in particular, and thus brings about the establishment of certain traits such as interpersonal communicating skills, time management, and understanding of business etiquettes and so on. The object of the research is the sophomore students of Shanghai Ocean University whose BETL course is compulsory credit course which covers business case study writing, CV writing, job interview simulation, and business presentation. They are required to complete BETL: within one-year study. This paper will also elaborate on the positive benefits gained from the field work and the relevant effects which may affect their future career development. An analysis based on the survey will be discussed and the implication of the analysis will also be interpreted in details.

Soft Skills and Their Relevance in BETL

Soft skills as they are defined were emphasized including basic skills and soft skills; the latter is inevitably regarded, according to Sbortoli (2015), as stepping stone to the future. The former entails literacy, functional and digital competency while the latter consists of learning skills, soft skills, life skills, key skills, and transversal skills. To our Chinese students, they really need to clearly identify those concepts in order to fit into the future society since the Belt and Road Initiative has been brought to a global context from which not only Chinese can benefit, but more importantly it benefits the whole world.

What really lacks regarding to Chinese university students is not technical skills, known as vocational skills, literacy, numeracy, technology (Williams, 2015), but those non-technical skills known as soft skills which are defined as interpersonal, behavioral skills according to Weber et al. (2010) (cited in Williams, 2015),

and those skills are generally related to human issues like: communication, team work, leadership, conflict management, and professionalism ethics (Azim et al., 2010, cited in Williams, 2015). The fundamental problems relating to the issue are when they start to find a job, and what most students in Chinese university face is that they are not able to understand the employers’ intention to recruit those who are equipped with better employability skills particularly the self-management (leading oneself) according to Sbortoli (2015), and business etiquettes, punctuality, attitude, and maturity claimed by Heimer (2010, p. 37, cited in Williams, 2015). One of the cases can be demonstrated is the group presentation based on a field trip which was assigned in 2016; one student was calling the Dutch Embassy. When the phone was connected, not even starting the conversation, the other students started to giggle. As a result, the phone was handed over the other side. If this took place in a work place, the candidate was definitely fired by the boss due to the impoliteness on the phone (Bhanot, 2009). So lacking the awareness of business etiquette in telephoning is the Achilles heels for that individual student; however, when it comes to the majority of the students, it does hamper the efficiency of the work. Bhanot (2009, cited in William, 2015) indicates that the employers usually feel reluctant to provide additional training for such employees. As a matter of fact, this case also reflected that this student or possibly referring to a larger group of students, does not comprehend how inter-cultural communication possibly affects the way of real world business contact or negotiation among different parties. As a result, soft skills should be taught by parents preferably, or siblings and relatively at one’s early age (Bhanot, 2009). Nevertheless, in reality of Chinese family education, this significant process has been missed out and therefore, resulting in ill manners of the university students in China on the whole. Consequently, this leaves a huge space for the university professionals in China to accomplish soft skills development or training before they enter the workforce.

The Design of the Field Trip for BETL Presentation Assessment

The presentation assessment for BETL is designed to assess students’ ability to communicate, negotiate, collaborate, and compromise in a business context. These abilities are associated with the competency in the real business environment and will assist our students to gain more hands-on business practices in order to cope with the future business career. Schwarz (2014), Piotrowski (1982), and Davis and Wilcock (2003), cited in (Nae, 2019), point out case method (field work) refines students’ communicative skills as well as bridging the gap between the theory and practice.

The field work will be divided into three stages as indicated in the following table:

Table 1

BETL Field Work for Business Group Presentation

Stages of task	Task components	Individual or group	Time allowed
Before	• Prepare to research on the targeted company	Individual Group	5 days
	• Prepare to make questions for the interview		
	• Make a plan for the trip and interview		
During	• Visit the company and interview the manager	Group	5 days
	• Ask the prepared questions		
	• Record and transcribe the interview		
	• Make presentation on the scheduled time		
After	• Write a report for the assessment	Individual Group Group Individual	3 days
	• Write a group report for the reflection		
	• Make an envelope for the field work		
	• Write a thank-you-letter to the manager		

The table above clearly informs the students to understand different stages and what they are supposed to do in individual manner or collaborative model. Each stage has different focus and they should understand the allocated time and sort out the deadline for each stage. Students also need to understand to collaborate harmoniously with each other and know how to compromise under certain context.

Implementation of the Field Work

Soft skills development can be ameliorated through a constant effort by both faculty and the learners of our university or other learners of higher education. To be more exact, it is about the way how students are trained to best suit to communicate with others in different social contexts. According to my own experience of designing the BETL course, at a time, our students were asked to implement a field trip to local consulate, from which a simple task was set up, requiring students to make a phone call to the consulate. 95% of the participants ended up with failure. The implication, therefore, is that our students extremely lack of basic communication skills with which they are strategically survival in the workforce. As a result, we made some changes as indicated in Table 1 to improve our program after the experiment with local consulate and the institute made it a compulsory assessment in 2016.

In the first stage of BETL presentation, students were divided into six groups in each class. Each group consists of four to five members who started with doing a research either reading or searching information online about a targeted company. A group leader was chosen for coordination purpose. If a member was interested in company's culture, he would focus on reading more materials on that issue and do more research. Until everyone in a team finished their reading and research, the group leader would surmount a meeting and discuss what had been found during the “before” stage. Upon collecting all information, team members started to brainstorm ideas for making questions for the interview in a later stage.

The second stage (“on-going” stage) started after questions were made and students were able to fully understand what their task was. Team leader, at this stage, scheduled to make an appointment with the manager in the chosen company. Team members were then surmounted to pay a day field trip to the company in accordance with the schedule. When team members arrived at the site, the manager amicably provided a warm welcome for all the members before starting the interview. A recording was required as part of the assessment, but consensus must be reached before the interview as university would release a paper of confidentiality agreement for all the teams. During the interview, some members would take down notes for the presentation and documentation purposes. Students would also take some photos during their visit for the documentation. Upon completing the interview, students would return school and have a discussion before the assessment. They were also required to make a clear outline, explicitly explaining what they are going to present in the assessment. On the assessment day, each group would have approximately 12 minutes for presentation and 10 minutes for a QA session. Other students were allowed to ask any question pertaining to the presentation they listened to.

The last stage was generally designed for documentation purpose. It includes several reports to work on; photos, brochures, and CD-ROMs to collect; a thank-you letter to write (as part of learning process of appreciating other's assistance). The assessment also requires students to write an individual report to reflect on the trip and how they feel about their learning through practices. Up to now, the task was closed and assessment would be graded in accordance to university rubric for BETL course.

The Effects and Outcomes of the BETL

After launching this program in 2015, both teaching staff and students were anxious to know what the results or effects were, in particular, the students who experience for the first time in their life with the field work incorporating with BETL course. In order to analyze the learning outcomes of the presentation based on the field trip, a survey was launched in May 2017 in a website: Sojump dotcom (later this site was changed to Wenjunxing dotcom) which provides online surveying and automatic diagramming of the survey result. The survey was designed in multiple choices and covers five areas of questions which aimed at finding out how students feel about this assessment based on a field trip and how it benefits their overall learning.

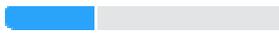
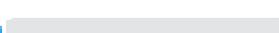
Option	Total	Percentage
Male	67	 32.37%
Female	138	 66.67%
Transgender	2	 0.97%
Valid number	207	

Figure 1. Proportion of male and female respondents (www.wjx.cn/report.13627390.aspx).

In regarding to the proportion of gender, the survey found that over 67% of the respondents are girls whereas 33% are boys (Sojump, 2017). Transgender respondents account for less than 1% which will be ignored in the survey. Total valid number of students who completed our survey reached 207 (more than half of our total students in two disciplines).

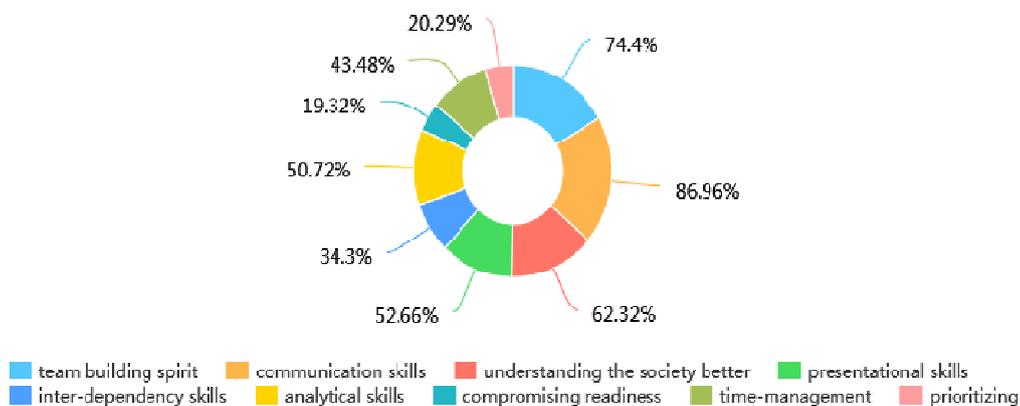


Figure 2. What did you learn from the field trip (www.wjx.cn/report.13627390.aspx)?

According to Figure 2, the first question is “what did you learn from the field trip?” The answer varies and nine skills are reported in the survey that they are able to learn through the trip. The followings are the ranks of those skills: communication skills account for 86.96%, ranking number one and closely followed by team building spirit which receives 74.4%. The third, fourth, and fifth will be given to understanding the society better (62.32%), presentational skills (52.66%), and analytical skills (50.72%). Time management skills also

received soaring percentage, exceeding 40%, and the least few skills 34.3%, 20.2%, and 19.32% go to inter-dependency skills, prioritizing, and compromising readiness.

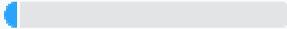
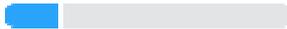
Option	Total	Percentage
Yes	158	 76.33%
No	9	 4.35%
Not sure	40	 19.32%
Valid number	207	

Figure 3. Will this field trip benefit your future job-hunting or your future job (www.wjx.cn/report.13627390.aspx)?

In answering the question in Figure 3, the majority of student (over 76%) have very positive confirmation on this question and only around 4% of students expressed their negativity towards it and around 19% of students showed their uncertainty on this issue (Sojump, 2017). This also suggests that students have gained confidence in such a trip and expressed their willingness toward the task-based assignment in the future.

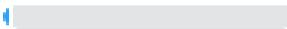
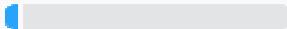
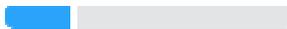
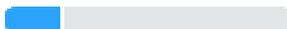
Option	Total	Percentage
Extremely unsatisfied	3	 1.45%
Unsatisfied	11	 5.31%
Average	49	 23.67%
Satisfied	103	 49.76%
Extremely satisfied	41	 19.81%
Valid number	207	

Figure 4. Willingness to participate in the field trip in the future (www.wjx.cn/report.13627390.aspx)?

In referring to Figure 4, if they are willing to participate in this type of activity in the future and their satisfaction rate of the activity, most of the students expressed their willingness of engaging in the field trip in their future studies. The ratio accounts for 62.8% and their relevant rate of satisfaction was recorded as approximately over 69% and only about less than 1.5% of the total showed their satisfaction towards the task (Sojump, 2017). However, surprisingly there were a relevantly high percentage of students who did not want to participate in the field trip in the future studies. My understanding of this is that many of the students neither understood the instruction of the task well, nor were they afraid of the challenges or difficulties of the task.

An interview was arranged after the survey was done on further clarifying the answers which were collected from Sojump website. In order to verify what was investigated in the survey can best match what was heard in a face-to-face interview, 50 students were chosen to further interpret what was not clear in picking up their answers in the survey. The following are the dialogues extracted from the interview; names of students are

unveiled due to the privacy:

Interviewer: Did you benefit from the field trip and what did you really learn through this field trip?

Student A: Yes, it helps me gain experience.

Student B: Yes, give us a chance to communicate with real business man.

Student C: Yes, it helps improve presentation skills.

Students D: Yes, cultivating personal living skills and communicating with others.

Students E: Yes, it improves my communication skills and we can learn more different things; this activity can make us practice in the real world, which benefits our career life.

Student F: Yes, I think it is positive one and very important to team cooperation, and only the team can work together to make it better. Second it improves the ability of understanding knowledge better in order to apply in real work.

Student G: It can improve students' experience and increase the fun of learning. The positive effects of the field trip are group members' collaboration and effective time management.

Student H: It is important to work as a team and cooperate with each other. Learn communication and inter-dependent skills, and better integrated to society.

Student I: It is a good practice for us and different task and it is interesting and helpful. We knew that every-thing is not as simple as we expected

Student J: Yes, I think the positive effects of the field trip include increase our speaking skills, time management and understand the corporate culture better.

The interview last about an hour and script above suggests that the outcome of the field work was generally positive. The key skills that students learnt from the field work are outlined as basic communicational, presentation, collaboration as well as inter-dependent capabilities which absolutely benefit their future careers. Students mainly expressed their satisfaction on gaining such an opportunity to expand their academic life with really useful hands-on practices in terms of directly contacting the real world off campus. Moreover, they found such a trip will assist them to understand the corporate culture better than merely learn from the text-book.

Discussion of the Effects of the Field Work

In contrast to the traditional method of teaching Business English, the new approach through the field work has brought some positive effects since the field work was introduced in 2016 in our institute. One of the most significant impacts is that students could maximally utilize the knowledge in the real career scenario, as Jackson (1998) and Piotrowski (1982), cited in Nae (2019) reiterate the importance of applying the acquired knowledge in the real life practice. In the assignments that were given in our past few years, students were able to use politeness when asking questions in the interview with the manager in a business context but before we carried out this project, students were quite ignorant about the business etiquettes in many settings.

Another important effect is that our students are able to express their gratitude when completing the project by writing to the managers a thank-you letter. More significantly, students are able to develop a healthier mentality, a Chinese philosophy of thanking someone who assists you in some ways. As a Chinese old saying puts, “a drop of water from a well, deserves an oceanic return”, it means repaying as much as you can even for a little favor you have received.

To conclude, soft skills or employability and LWL experience which have been long missed in our education system need to be brought back to our vision. Education, in 21st century, is a problem of attitude, so is innovation. University education may take place in different settings and more diversified environment where he or she is taking his or her formal university courses as Barnett (2011) claims. Those activities should not be regarded as optional and, thus, become shared responsibility (Sbortoli, 2015). To apply a metaphor here, the ship has sailed and every one with the ticket should not be left out behind the educational tide that involves all educational participants around the world including China. It implies that the country must carry out appropriate policies to balance hard and soft skills development. Otherwise it may impede teaching and learning in a sense which further hinders the economic growth that may, in turn, gradually form a bottleneck of the national prosperity.

The paper investigates the necessity of implementing a field trip to a business entity where students gain hands-on experience in making a better and functional presentation by integrating diversified skills such as communicative, inter-dependent as well as collaborative ones defined as “soft skills” by some experts in contrast to “hard skills”. In referring to the context in Chinese universities, soft skills development appears to be an Achilles’ heels, and they are scolded by educators not to be cultivated in accordance with hard skills. One of my friends said once that Chinese students are hard-working and academically performed well in Australia, but also cynically stated that they lack of the skills to apply to the real world. In addition, when putting our efforts both from students and staff, it is advisable for other institutes in this country to combine off campus activities with the required curriculum design to suit better future employment and enhance what some experts called employability or employable skills ahead of most students. There has been a crucial move toward incorporating experiential learning into the higher education teaching methodology that finally benefits increasing number of students who expect to gain more professional knowledge in their future career development.

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