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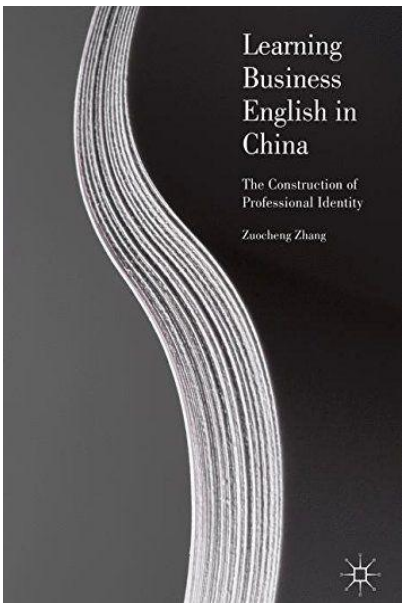
BOOK REVIEW



DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AMONG CHINESE BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS

Zuocheng Zhang. LEARNING BUSINESS ENGLISH IN CHINA: THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY (2017), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 277 pp., ISBN-978-3-319-59290-9 (HBK).

This book, written by Zuocheng Zhang, a professor and academic researcher with broad experience in Business English, Second Language Acquisition and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Education, is a multi-perspective study based on the cases and experiences of five third-year students of Business English from a university in China. The students' learning process is individually examined in order to analyse if the materials learnt in the classroom can be transferred into a professional environment. In this sense, the author points out several issues related to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) teaching that have been widely discussed by researchers (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 2005), such as "the portability of ESP classroom learning to the workplace" (p. 3). However, he particularly focuses on the construction of professional identity of Business English students since learning is a process and it "transforms who we are and what we can do" (Wenger, 1998: 215).

Learning Business English in China consists of eight chapters that allow the author to present his work, review the literature about professional identity, explain the methodology used for the investigation, discuss the research results, and finally propose a model of learning Business English and professional identity

construction that may be applicable to university students of Business English in China, but also to other ESP contexts. Zhang opens the book with three chapters presenting the conceptual framework and theoretical background to the study, continues examining several issues in Business English education, and introduces the methodology used by addressing the four main research questions of the study.

Chapter two mainly reviews the literature written about the exploration of professional identity construction and concludes by providing a working definition of the term, constituted by the sum of the subject's professional expectations, technical competence, and discursive abilities in international business contexts. The approach of the study is based on Lave and Wenger (1991), emphasising that "learning is a socialisation process in which learning persons acquire and accumulate social resources such as the knowledge, skill, and discourse that characterise expert practices of the community and develop new identity" (p. 16). The conceptual framework developed by the author guides the study of professional identity construction by drawing on research into communities of practice, professional socialisation, identity, indexicality, as well as business discourse and genre knowledge. This approach aims to explain how Business English students develop their personal and professional identity through the practice, experiences, and the implementation of different basic resources that are necessary to develop their particular professional role at an international level. The concurrence between the processes of *identification* and *negotiability* may basically determine the "identity formation" (Wenger, 1998: 18) of the individuals, which is an essential part of Zhang's investigation as it supports the professional identity construction of the Business English learners.

Chapter three is devoted to the methodology. The author describes his research design for the study as "a collection of a diverse range of data including narratives, student writing in various business genres, classroom observations, text-based interviews, documents, student journals, and feedback from international business practitioners" (p. 45). Regarding this collection of data, life-story interviews were conducted with five students focusing on different sets of questions regarding their motivations for learning Business English, experiences, influences, understanding of the international business scenario, plans for the future, and reflections on the changes perceived on themselves and their surroundings. Additionally, students were also provided with a variety of business writing genres, including four letters and four assignments that were assessed by a group of international business professionals from different fields such as financial analysis, insurance, logistics, manufacturing, and trade, as well as by a business writing instructor.

The four research questions of the study are respectively addressed in chapters four, five, six, and seven. Chapter four presents the findings related to the emerging professional identity of the students, which are profiled by the following four constituting factors: "professional goal, values and perspective of international business professionals, technical competence, and discursive

competence" (p. 69). The narratives of the five focal Business English students are individually introduced during the first part of the chapter. They are presented together with the answers directly given by the students, which provide, from the reader's viewpoint, a sense of authenticity about their own perspectives and experiences. After individually discussing the narratives of the five focal students, the general results indicate that "professional identity had psychological reality for the Business English students and came as the sum effect of the four constituting factors" (p. 99). Furthermore, the author emphasises the complexities of identities depending on the learning situation, especially if culture, gender, and professional identity are taken into consideration.

Chapter five focuses on the students' participation in three communities of practice such as the university, the student associations, and organisations where the students work as interns. These communities of practice have been identified as important to their personal experiences and represent an essential influence on their emerging professional identity. The analysis developed by the author suggests that these communities of practice are not independent entities, but are "interlocked in complicated ways" (p. 137). Besides, through the participation in these distinct learning spaces, the students are more exposed to certain features of the international business world, namely discursive competences or practical knowledge and skills that contribute to constructing their professional identity. In relation to the contribution of each community of practice, the primary learning space for the students is the university. It provides them with useful resources and experience to perform in the other two communities. Both students' associations and business organisations provide students with opportunities to practice, to prove, and to broaden their comprehension of the complexities of the business world, including the role they play. According to Zhang's observations, the experiences lived by the five focal Business English students vary considerably between them depending on their expectations and involvement in the communities of practice. These differences had a tremendous impact upon the students' emerging professional identity.

Chapter six analyses how the focal students construct their emerging professional identity by assessing their business genre knowledge in writing, which is reported through the use of indexicals on the formal, process, rhetorical, and subject-matter dimensions. As indicated by the author, this examination shows how the students used their rationale for selecting specific business features, but also how they established associations between the business genre knowledge, practice, and expertise, and, thereby, their emerging professional identity. However, the analysis also reveals that despite the significant progress in their business genre knowledge, the students demonstrated that "the indexicals were rudimentarily linked to their associated meanings" (p. 166). As the author points out, apparently, the students' indexicals on the four dimensions developed asynchronously, and their indexicals were not fully patterned or configurated (Blommaert, 2005; Gee, 2011). The chapter concludes by remarking that despite

all the difficulties, the five target students were able to understand and implement the written business genres, and progressed adequately in the development of their professional identity.

Chapter seven explores the construction of professional identity by introducing the reactions provided by eight international business practitioners, who analysed the Business English students' discursively constructed professional identity. The business writings were initially categorised, similarly to the analysis given in the sixth chapter, into the process, formal, rhetorical, and subject-matter dimensions of business genre knowledge. Then, the eight professionals commented on different business writings produced by the focal students. In general terms, the feedback given was positive. Zhang points out that one of the relevant findings of his study is that "the business professionals drew on the business genre knowledge the Business English students deployed in their writing in evaluating the students as employable, capable, or amateur" (p. 215). This finding reinforces business genre knowledge as a source of indexicals for professional identity and validates the use of the indexicality approach to explore the Business English students' discursive construction of professional identity. In addition to other findings that are related to diversity of international business or the importance of BELF, "the most significant finding from a Business English education point of view relates to the various gaps that were identified between the students' business genre knowledge and professional practices" (p. 218), a division between the classroom and the profession previously identified and discussed by academic researchers (Bhatia, 2004).

Chapter eight provides a review of the results previously discussed in the book. They are presented in relation to professional identity construction, communities of practice building, and business genre knowledge and indexing competence development in Business English education. The book concludes with the introduction of a complex "model of learning Business English and professional identity construction" (p. 244) that illustrates how the five focal students, considered as subjects of the study, were involved in each of the three communities of practice by undertaking the objects of learning Business English and fulfilling both extracurricular and professional experience requirements. Besides the aforementioned model, Zhang gives several suggestions for further research. Among these proposals, he points out that the Business English students' professional identity may also be analysed in other courses, like spoken business communication, and not only in their business writing classes. In addition, the author suggests that further studies may also help to investigate how the students' professional identity is constructed and business genre knowledge developed at different stages of the learning process (e.g. since the admission to the Business English programme) and during the transition from university to the workplace.

In conclusion, it is remarkable to point out that no significant weaknesses have been found in Zhang's investigation. *Learning Business English in China* may be considered as an outstanding book to instructors and researchers of both ESP

and Business English, but it can also be suitable for other kinds of readers, especially when having in mind the increasing popularity of Business English programmes around the world. Additionally, from a methodological viewpoint, this book provides excellent materials on how to study the professional identity of ESP and Business English students from multiple perspectives.

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