Course Design of EPC from the Perspective of Discursive Competences: A Case in Chongqing University

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Abstract The course *English for Professional Communication* (EPC) is designed for postgraduates in Chongqing University, aiming to cultivate students' multi-communication ability for their future professional practice from the perspective of discursive competences in genre analysis. This chapter demonstrates how the EPC course is designed from course design rationale, material development, teaching methodology, teacher, and learner role and course assessment. It is hoped that this chapter can be of some help to the design of similar ESP courses for postgraduates in mainland China.

Keywords Course design, discursive competences · *English for Professional Communication* · Multi-communication ability · Chongqing University

1 Introduction

With the development of the national economy and the enhancement of its overall national strength, China needs a huge number of international and top-notch creative talents who are equipped not only with knowledge of international rules and the ability to participate in international affairs and international competition but also with critical thinking ability and high humanistic quality with humanistic knowledge and culture. The demands for international professional talents are

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increasing steadily in all walks of life. In view of this reality, on July 10, 2013, the Ministry of Education, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Finance held a conference on postgraduate education, introducing the idea of "*increasing the ratio of funding for postgraduate to study and visit … and to participate in international academic conferences, and improving the proportion of postgraduates who possess international academic exchange experience*," which proposes explicit requirements for the internationalization of postgraduates education.

Chongqing University is double first-class research university (a Chinese government plan conceived in 2015 to comprehensively develop a group of elite Chinese universities and individual university departments into world class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050). One of its goals is to cultivate top level international talents. In order to meet the educational target and postgraduates' needs and help them to function effectively for future work, *English for Professional Communication* has been piloted for postgraduates based on the notion of discursive competence in professional settings. This chapter, based on Bhatia's (2004) theory of discursive competences, and Hutchinson and Waters (1987) "learning centered approach", aims to discuss the course curriculum for the postgraduate English course named "English for professional communication" (EPC) in Chongqing University. How we designed this EPC course is discussed and interpreted in terms of its rationale, material development, teaching methodology, teacher and learner role, and course assessment.

2   Course Design Rationale for EPC

The rationale for the design of EPC is based on three considerations: (1) demand for international professional talents, (2) discursive competence, and (3) needs analysis.

2.1   Demands for International Professional Talents

What are international professional talents? The 2003 Asian University Presidents Forum (AUPF) defined international professional talents as those who "are capable of mastering more than one foreign language, utilizing some tools or channels for the transnational exchanges and services, possessing some expertise or abilities and basically having knowledge of international trade rules in a particular specialty, level, and field" (http://www.aupf.net/). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also noted that the development of higher education shall be in close contact with social issues and labor community and be able to serve the long-term goals and needs of the community, not only to provide a wide range of education with common characteristics, but also to implement vocational education, and cultivate people's viability under various conditions of the

educational reform. Recently, some domestic experts have advanced different ideas on training high-level talents (Luo, 2012; Xie & Fu, 2005; Xu, 2001). According to Luo's (2005) investigation of 14 universities of mainland China, postgraduates rarely participate in international academic conferences, even though they are mainly engaged in research as high-level academic talents and are supposed to play an important role in promoting international academic exchanges in order to improve Chinese academic standards. This is unfavorable for the development of high-level international talents with higher order thinking skills.

2.2   Discursive Competence

Bhatia (2004) summarizes language skills in three levels by using the concept "discursive competence" rather than language competence. He claims that "*discursive competence is the ability to identify, construct, interpret, and use a specific repertoire of professional genres to participate in the activities of a specific professional culture*" (Bhatia, 2004, p. 143).

As shown in Fig. 1, Bhatia (2004) argues that in academic or professional areas, no matter how complex and dynamic the discourse in the real world is, there are three important elements in professional expertise, which should be exploited in day-to-day professional work. These are knowledge of the system of genres they own, knowledge of the specific discipline they use, and the nature of professional practice. Therefore, what kinds of competences students should acquire before they graduate and step into the workplaces are taken into account and how teachers should help to cultivate and develop those required and desired competences are explored in various ways.

2.3   Needs Analysis for EPC

There are a number of studies on language needs analysis, as well as communication patterns analysis. Chia et al. conducted a needs analysis to describe the perception that medical college students and faculty have the English language

Fig. 1 Specification of professional expertise (Bhatia, 2004, p. 146)

needs to improve grammar–translation-based college English courses. Also concerning needs in ESP courses, Kim's (2006) needs analysis of East Asian students in US higher education shows that they considered formal oral presentations and listening comprehension the most important skills for academic success in postgraduate English courses, and pronunciation and note-taking skills the least important. Some language needs analysis has been done in workplace, which is the target situation. Kassim and Ali (2010) got some feedback from industry through a needs analysis of English communicative events and skills in the workplace. So-mui and Mead (2000) examined the English communication needs of textile and clothing merchandisers in the workplace. They also conducted questionnaire surveys, telephone interviews, analysis of authentic correspondence, and visits to workplaces and got some details of communication demands. Some types of communication have been identified and discussed. Therefore, it is possible for us to identify every item of discursive competence in the three types of competences through needs analysis. Brown (2016) recently claims the importance of ESP class. Therefore, needs analysis is the typical characteristics of ESP courses.

There are a lot of studies concerning needs analysis before designing courses (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002; Chew, 2005; Kassim & Ali, 2010). Some researchers (such as Cai Jigng, 2010) have conducted surveys to illustrate that ESP, EAP, and EOP are strongly required by college students rather than EGP. All these studies develop a framework for ESP courses or demonstrate that ESP approach is an inevitable trend in the college English reform process. Based on these studies, we conducted a needs analysis before designing EPC.

A survey was conducted to investigate what discursive competences the postgraduates needed for their study and professions for their later workplaces before the reform of postgraduates English in Chongqing University in 2012. The results showed that students had basic language skills in reading and listening with enough vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but they needed more productive skills in writing and speaking with their professional knowledge for their workplaces, also they needed appropriate language practice in social activities. These competences suggest that they need discursive competences.

2.4   Course Aims and Content

Considering the precondition that the needs of the state and society are never compromised, the course *English for Professional Communication* gives full consideration to students' scores of English in the Postgraduate Entrance Examination, and students' ability in interpersonal relationships in light of the discursive competences in genre analysis, aiming to cultivate students' professional competences in the workplace and the required text competence, genre competence and social competence in the general socio-cultural context. In the generic competence, students are guided to know how to write different genre with move structure (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 2004). The social competence will guide students to speak and write in

appropriate way in the general socio-cultural context. Module 1: Landing a professional position, Module 2: starting with the new position, Module 3: Creating a professional proposal, and Module 4: Creating a professional report (see Appendix for more details).

3   Developing Materials for EPC

Based on Bhatia's discursive competence (Bhatia, 2004) and the "learning centered approach" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), this course mainly guides and instructs students to use English in applying for professional positions, dealing with international office routines, attending professional meetings, and handling projects and international cooperation in workplaces and professional fields. Accordingly, the main contents of this course include: (1) job applications; (2) general communication in the workplace; (3) professional meetings and project presentations; and (4) project proposals/reports and cooperation, among which part 3 and 4 feature the students' majors and potential professions. Through the teachers' designing and organizing project-based activities and providing text samples as well as language input, the students are guided and instructed to fulfill authentic tasks by using the knowledge, skills, or strategies concerning English language, professional domain, and intercultural communication. Therefore, developing appropriate teaching materials play a very important role in enhancing ESP effective teaching and learning. It is suggested that ways of developing materials in a flexible and dynamic way may differentiate ESP program from EFL program.

3.1   Principles of Developing Materials for EPC

When considering what kind of materials should be developed for EPC, we keep the following principles in mind:

- Developing materials to meet teaching objectives and learners' needs and interests
- Developing materials to match the target situation–learners' professional context
- Developing materials to organize classroom activities and develop learners' discursive competence

Figure 2 shows differences between traditional materials development and EPC materials development. In traditional materials development, input materials are often given at first, which means language and content are provided as input to help the students to fulfill the designed tasks which require the use of related knowledge and language, while in EPC materials development, authentic projects or tasks in
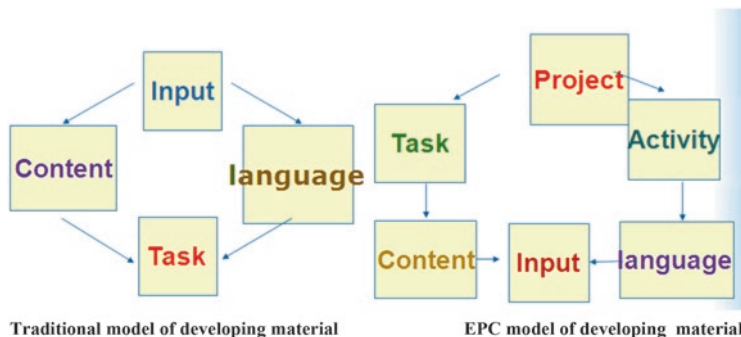
Fig. 2 Models of developing material for traditional EFL and EPC

real-life situation are first set for the students to accomplish. In order to fulfill the designed projects or tasks, the activities about the language communication are provided by the teacher to support the students while the contents concerning the disciplinary knowledge are implanted by the students, who know their subject and are required to give presentation afterwards in English, both of which are integrated as the input to the students in terms of language and content.

3.2 Selecting and Adapting Materials for EPC

In view of the principles of developing EPC materials, sources for EPC materials come from three major channels, namely available commercial materials, online resources, and student sampled materials (such as their writings and videos). Therefore, EPC materials embody the following features:

- Tailor-made, with overall structure and specific content
- Contributed by both teachers and students
- Open, dynamic, and flexible to use

After collecting the above resources, teachers may adapt these materials for their own class use according to the students' major or discipline, the students' needs and interests and the exact teaching hour for each time.

However, while developing EPC materials, we also found some limitations and challenges. First, our teachers' background is one of them. Since teachers major in applied linguistics and have no other subject knowledge, they feel incompetent and unconfident to adapt the authentic materials in different disciplinary areas. Another challenge is that they lack communication and cooperation with subject teachers in our school. Without the help and support from them, teachers could probably not implement the most effective ESP program. However we should be greatly encouraged to cooperate with subject teachers by consulting with them, getting their authentic texts or articles, or inviting them to the classroom to co-teach the students, if it is possible.

4 Implementing Project-Based Learning in EPC

To facilitate learners' discursive competence, project-based learning (PBL) is implemented in EPC, mainly guiding learners to use English in landing a professional position, dealing with international office routines, attending professional meetings, and handling projects or international cooperation.

4.1 Definition of PBL

Project-based learning is not new in the field of education, as attested by Dewey's (1916) advocacy of "learning by doing." The EPC focuses on the learner-centered approach of PBL, which is based on contextualized cooperative learning (Beckett & Chamness Miller, 2006). The implementation of PBL aims to foster the development of language learners' cognitive, social, and communicative skills through active exploration of real-world problems and challenges. It usually involves deciding on a project, making plans, collaborating with team members, and presenting and appraising the project. In the whole process, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator, helping students to design meaningful tasks, coaching both language development and social skills, and assessing students' performance.

The activity sequence is carefully designed by the teacher, and it is essential for the learners to deploy integrated competencies and thereby reach the intended output of the project. "Teachers … find that project work helps them to focus intentionally not only on language skills but also on non-language skills within the affective and cognitive domains" (AEEP/REEP, 1997, p. 3).

4.2 Implementation of PBL in EPC

EPC devises various projects of using English in workplaces, which are subdivided into different tasks. These tasks involve the basic language communicative skills expected in professional settings and include the introduction to the concerned project or subject, basic business reception and communication, meeting minutes, project report, various letters (inquiry, invitations, applications, etc.), the basic flow of convening a meeting, such as the genre of speech (opening, data or content description, ending, questions, etc.), PPT presentation, rehearsal, etc. These contents are all based on the discursive competences with which students experience and simulate through tasks provided (see Appendix).

4.3   An Example: Having a Business Negotiation

In this part, one project of the course syllabus, having a business negotiation, is given as an example to demonstrate how PBL is implemented in the classroom and what discursive competence can be taught by doing this project.

> **Situation**
> Imagine you are working in a car company in China. Your company will buy engines from a company in Germany. However, you have not agreed on the price, delivery, and after-sale service. Now the representatives from the German company have come to China for a business negotiation. Your job is to simulate the real situation by finishing the following five main tasks.

Task 1: Pick up the guests at the airport (omitted)
Task 2: Settle down in the hotel (omitted)
Task 3: Have a business dinner (omitted)
Task 4: Have a business negotiation
Task 5: Write business negotiation minutes

   Task 4 Have a business negotiation

1. **Watch a video about business negotiation and summarize the moves and language of having a business negotiation.**

2. **Four students make up a Chinese negotiation team and four students make up a German negotiation team. Each member of each team must play a role in the business negotiation and prepare for their role as follows:**

> *Role 1: You are the monitor of this negotiation. Think of your role and prepare for it.*
> *Role 2: You are the main negotiator of this negotiation. Think of your role and prepare for it.*
> *Role 3: You are the second negotiator of this negotiation. Think of your role and prepare for it.*
> *Role 4: You are the secretary during this negotiation. Your job is to take minutes.*

   In order for there to be an information gap, the above roles are separated, and each role can only be seen by the student who will play this role.

3. **The Chinese and German negotiation teams have a business negotiation following the moves summarized below.**

Moves
• Greetings and introductions
• Having small talks
• Getting started
• Stating the expected outcome
• Making an opening statement/proposal/offer
• Rejecting an offer
• Making a conditional offer
• Accepting an offer
• Concluding a deal

Task 5: Write business meeting minutes

1. Make a recording of your business negotiation.
2. Listen to the recording and write minutes of the negotiation.
3. Compare your minutes with your team members, and then submit your minutes.
4. Summarize the moves of the minutes.

The above teaching activities are designed from the perspective of Bhatia's discursive competence. According to Bhatia, "discursive competence is the ability to identify, construct, interpret, and use a specific repertoire of professional genres to participate in the activities of a specific professional culture" (Bhatia, 2004, p. 143). In identification and construction stage, students are expected to analyze and summarize the moves and language of having a business negotiation and taking minutes. In the interpretation and use stage, students will simulate a business negotiation and take minutes of the negotiation. In the whole process, the learning centered approach (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) is carried out, and both the teacher's and students' roles vary as Part 5 shows.

5   Teacher and Learner Roles in EPC

Teacher and learner roles are part of language teaching method design reflecting the language and learning theories and having a direct bearing on classroom procedures (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 33). This section is focused on teacher and learner roles in EPC.

5.1   Contextual Considerations for Teacher and Learner Roles in EPC

Chongqing University is a comprehensive university. There are six faculties and over 20 schools covering over 10 disciplines and more than 90 majors. Learners in a different class and even in the same class are different in their majors. Similarly,

Table 1 EPC teacher and learner background

Teachers' backgrounds	Learners' backgrounds
• Based in the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures	• Mature adults
• Majored in English language and literature	• Doing master's in engineering, sciences, social sciences, built environment, information technology, and arts and humanities
• Did master's in applied linguistics	• Having little experience in English communication especially professional communication through English
• Have little knowledge of the learners' disciplines including engineering, sciences, built environment, information technology, etc.	• Previous teacher-fronted classroom learning experience

the EPC teachers' background and learners' background differ from each other (see Table 1). Most notably, EPC teachers and learners differ in their subject area. To accommodate such a diversity of disciplines, majors and subject areas among learners and between learners and teachers, a learner-centered approach is preferred to the teacher-fronted teaching. In other words, learners must play an active role in EPC. It is believed that as mature adults, learners in EPC are able to play an active role and take on responsibilities.

5.2   Theoretical and Empirical Foundation for Teacher and Learner Role in EPC

The theoretical and empirical foundation for teacher and learner roles in EPC is summarized as follows:

1. EPC is an ESP course taking a learning-centered approach with a focus on learner's needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).
2. English for specific purposes is an approach rather than a product and generally conceptualized as a multi-stage process. In this regard, teacher and learner roles may vary at different stages of the teaching design and practice. Teachers may have many roles such as teacher, course designer and material provider, collaborator, researcher/theorizer, evaluator, counselor, facilitator, and motivator (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 13 Ghafournia & Sabet, 2014; Javid, 2015). Likewise, ESP learners may also have many roles. Javid (2015, p. 22) posits that "ESP learners should be actively involved in the process of the choice of the content materials, curriculum development and teaching methodology…."
3. The specific defining features of learner and teacher roles are included in Table 2.
4. The aim of EPC is to develop learners' discursive competence, i.e., the ability to identify, construct, interpret, and use a specific repertoire of professional genres to participate in the activities of a specific professional culture (Bhatia, 2004).

Table 2 Defining features of learner and teacher roles (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 33)

| Teacher role	Learner role
• Types of functions teachers fulfill	• Types of learning tasks set for learners
• Degree of teacher influence over learning	• Degree of control learners have over the content of learning
• Degree to which the teacher determines the content of learning	• Patterns of learner grouping that are recommended or implied
• Types of interaction between teachers and learners	• Degree to which learners influence the learning of others
	• The view of the learner as a processor, performer, initiator, problem solver, etc.
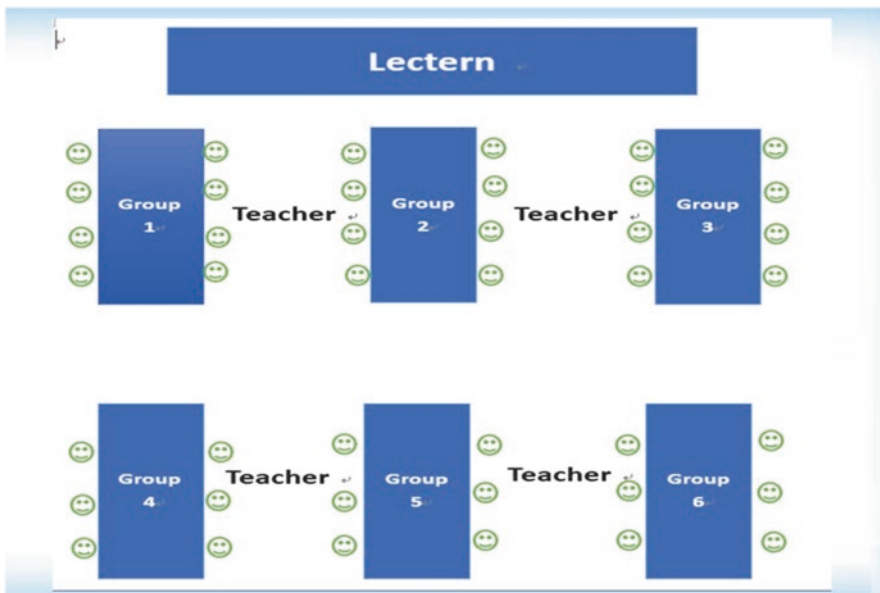
Fig. 3 Class grouping in EPC

Besides, EPC is based on projects supported by tasks and activities. The tasks and activities are designed to help learners develop their discursive competence while projects are intended to help learners integrate discursive competence, disciplinary knowledge, and professional practice (Bhatia, 2004).

5.3 An Example of Teacher and Learner Roles in EPC

To facilitate project-based learning, cooperative learning, and communication, each EPC class is organized in groups (see Fig. 3). Each group is a professional institute or organization in which every member is a professional in a particular field.
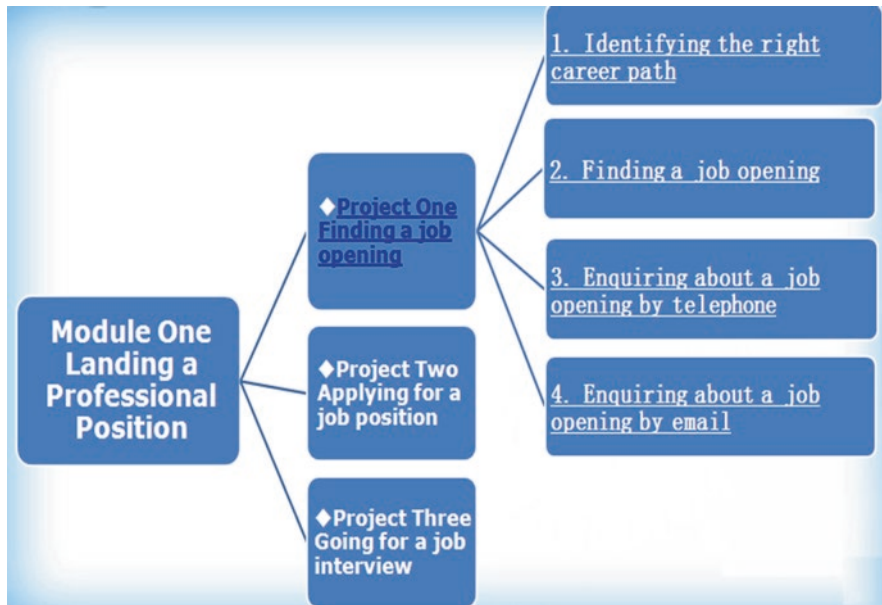
Fig. 4 Outline of Module 1 "Landing Professional Position"

Figure 4 shows an outline of Module 1 "Landing Professional Position" in EPC. This module, Project 1 "Finding a job opening" consists of four mini projects. The mini project "Enquiring about a job opening by email" is taken as an example to illustrate how discursive competence is developed and what roles the teacher and learners fulfill to develop learners' discursive competence in EPC.

Before doing the project "Enquiring about a job opening by email," learners first do some activities in order to identify and analyze the textual and generic features of a sample email enquiry provided by the teacher. Then, based on a role play task designed by the teacher, learners practice writing an email enquiry by using the textual and generic features they have learnt. While doing the project "Enquiring about a job opening by email," based on their real needs, learners write an email enquiry and send it to the employer by using the textual and generic features they have learnt and practiced. In order for the project to be implemented, the teacher has multiple roles as task designer, guide, facilitator, material provider, and so on. Likewise, learners are also actively involved in the learning process as learner, candidate, researcher, analyzer, informant, decision maker, language user, and so on.

To sum up, EPC takes a learning-centered approach with a focus on learners. To build discursive competence into EPC, both EPC teachers and learners have multiple roles which are dynamic and vary with learning activities and communicative tasks. The teachers' prominent role is to facilitate the learning process while learners are actively involved in the learning process especially as a language user as well as a language learner.

6   Doing Assessment in EPC

EPC course conducts assessments to check whether students master discursive competences (Bhatia, 2004), which constitute professional expertise to be acquired from their professional and workplaces. Based on Bhatia's theory, EPC course is focused on assessing learner's ability to identify, construct, interpret, and use various professional genres to participate in different professional cultures. Combined with basic skills required for a language learner, the course targets the test of generic, textual, and social competence from the following aspects:

1. Generic and textual competence in reading or writing, such as writing minutes, reading and writing project report, identifying job information from reading advertisements, writing CV and cover letters for interview, etc.
2. Social competence in listening and speaking like job interviewing, organizing and holding a meeting, business negotiating, making an oral present in a meeting, etc.

With the combination of formative assessment and summative assessment, this course breaks down traditional patterns with assessing students' ability of using language appropriately and correctly in practice and "being able to communicate like an expert" in the real situation (Bhatia, 2004). It is more authentic to put these situations into an ongoing process.

Formative assessment can provide a dynamic process of gathering information of learning, on strengths and weaknesses, which helps the teacher feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give to learners.

Formative assessment consists of two parts: class performance and project work after class. The main content of the class performance is designed in light of each task and aims at students' active participation. Students' performance will be marked as long as they speak in the class, pinpointing the students' communicative skills in class. The project work after class is mainly written assignments and the team work designed based on inter-discursive competences, such as various letters, minutes, project reports (written genre of each part), etc. needed in workplaces.

From the EPC material, learners can find a checklist at the end of each of the projects, which aims to enhance their ability in self-assessment. Also, in discussing samples of work, learners can learn to use meta-language to monitor their work for strengths and weaknesses and then formulate a self-directed learning plan.

Summative assessment adopts the form of the final oral and written examination. In the final oral examination, students are required to simulate organizing a business meeting (or other tasks happening in their future workplace). Each group member should play a corresponding role according to the meeting content, such as the moderator, the project reporter, the person who is responsible for raising and answering questions, etc. During the group work, other group members need to elect one representative to provide a grade for each member (the teacher explains the evaluation standards before the exam), and the questioner will get scores for class participation.

The main content of the written examination can be a formal proposal, report (or a project report referring to the content or a meeting report after watching a video),

a meeting minutes or other topics for business letters (e.g., application letters, inquiries, complaints, cover letters, invitation letters, notices, memorandums).

Assessment pattern in EPC is shown as follows:

Formative Assessment: 40%

1. Observe and feed back on learners' classroom activities (20%)
2. Feed back on learners' homework (20%)

Summative Assessment: 60%

3. Oral test on professional presentation (30%)
4. Written test on reading and writing (30%)

Following is a sample to show how we assess the EPC course in detail:

Sample: **Learners obtaining generic competence in writing a cover letter**

Borrowed from Formative Assessment System in "The Formative Assessment Action Plan: Practical Steps to More successful Teaching and Learning" (Frey & Fisher, 2011)

Figure 5 shows that the assessments in this course should be considered as one part of teaching. Feedback from assessment will not only affect teachers' course
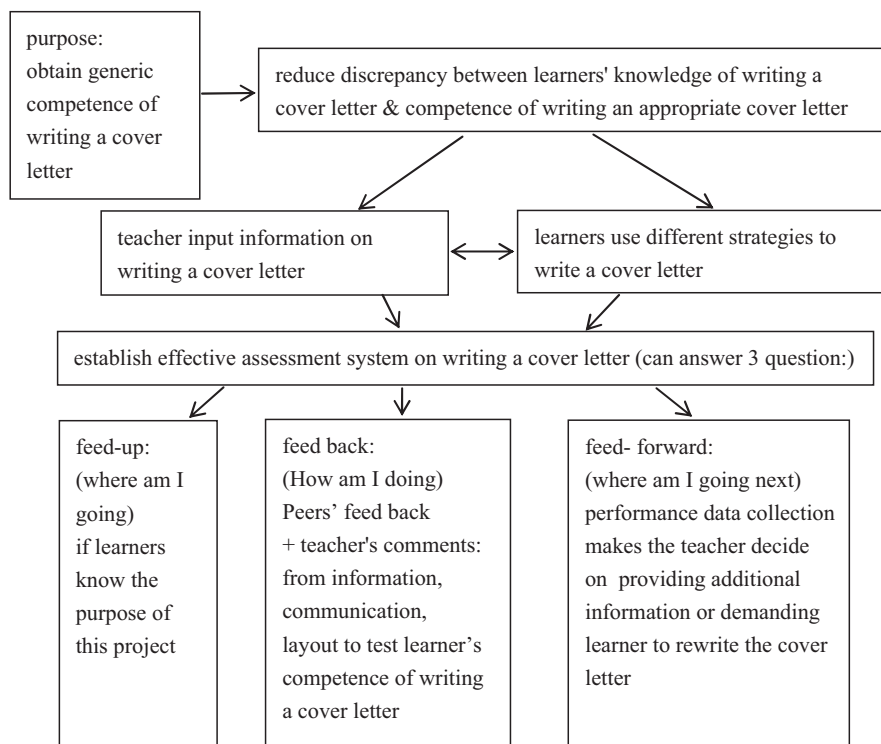

Fig. 5 Practical Steps to More successful Teaching and Learning (Frey & Fisher, 2011)

planning but also help learners establish their self-evaluation system on a certain topic, which embodies the learner-centered teaching method.

7   Conclusion

Based on the discursive competence of genre analysis along with the needs of national economic development for international high-level talents, EPC course is designed and implemented. This course tries to target the needs of students and society, design the curriculum with the combination of scenarios and projects, and adopt learning-centered approach rather than teacher-centered teaching mode. We strongly hold that students should acquire discursive competences for their professional communication. It is suggested that students should be provided with ESP-oriented courses in which discursive competences are taught for their future workplaces.

Appendix

Module 1: Landing a professional position
Project 1: Looking for a job opening
Project 2: Applying for a job position (I): writing a resume
Project 3: Applying for a job position (II): writing a cover letter
Project 4: Going for a job interview
Module 2: Starting with the new position
Project 1: Meeting new people
Project 2: Dealing with organization cultures
Project 3: Doing office routine (1)
Project 4: Doing office routine (2)
Module 3: Creating a professional proposal
Project 1: Writing a professional proposal
Project 2: Organizing and chairing a professional meeting
Project 3: Presenting a professional proposal
Project 4: Negotiating a professional proposal
Module 4: Creating a professional report
Project 1: Writing a professional project report
Project 2: Reporting on a professional project
Project 3: Writing an evaluation report
Project 4: Presenting an evaluation report

A project is a planned set of interrelated tasks to be executed over a fixed period

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