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*Research Article*

# Practice-Oriented Undergraduate Teaching Reform on International Trade

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## Abstract

In recent years, for the undergraduate education in international trade of China's colleges and universities the teaching contents have appeared to be lagged behind the actual needs of enterprises. In this context, the purpose of this study is to enhance students' practical ability and the coping ability with practical work. To this end, the reform scheme was designed in this paper to reform the existing teaching methods of international trade. Then, the effectiveness of teaching reform was also discussed. Studies have shown that in the undergraduate education of international trade, practice-oriented reform can significantly improve the enterprises' satisfaction with the student. Meanwhile, the students' theoretical knowledge can also be consolidated with the increase of practical opportunities. This shall provide a useful reference for the reform of undergraduate teaching on international trade.

## Keywords

International Trade • Teaching Reform • Practice-Oriented

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Since the reform and opening up 40 years ago, China's foreign trade has achieved remarkable achievements. The proportion of total trade in global trade has been rising, and the ability of trade to drive economic growth has also expanded. Along with the continuous development of China's foreign trade, the demand for international trade talents has also continuously increased (Ma & Xiao, 2011). In order to meet the growing demand for international trade talents, most universities in China have opened courses related to international trade, and the number of relevant professional graduates is also on the rise every year. These professional talents have made important contributions to the vigorous development of China's foreign trade.

However, with the in-depth development of international trade work, the situation of international trade talents cultivated by Chinese universities being disconnected with international trade practices has become increasingly serious. It is generally believed that in college education, undergraduate education emphasizes practice, and graduate education focuses on theory and research (Honig, 1986; Scott, 2010; Kemmerer & Wagner, 1985). As the examination system of colleges and universities is closer to the international level, the focus of undergraduate education has gradually shifted from practice to theory. This transformation of teaching focus has made the undergraduate graduates of international trade majors cultivated in China in recent years to emphasize the theory over practice, so that they cannot adapt well to the relevant work requirements. This has been denounced by the majority of international trade enterprises. In this context, taking the current status of undergraduate teaching in international trade in colleges and universities as the starting point, this paper studies the practice-oriented teaching method of international trade, which provides a reference for the teaching reform and innovation direction of this speciality.

## **Current status of undergraduate teaching in international trade**

Starting from the international trade enterprises and undergraduates of international trade majors, this study firstly investigates the problems existing in the undergraduate education of international trade, which provides directional guidance for the later curriculum improvement and innovation.

### **International trade enterprise research**

Shanghai has always been the frontier of China's international trade, with various international trade enterprises. Therefore, this paper selects 45 representative international trade enterprises in Shanghai and examines their views on international trade undergraduate graduates in recent years. In the questionnaire survey, we focused on the professional skills and satisfaction of the students majored in international trade.

Fig.1 and 2 show the survey results of the professional skills and student satisfaction, respectively. Fig.1 shows that among the 45 enterprises surveyed, 27 believe that graduates have a solid theoretical foundation (60%), while 35 enterprises indicate that the practical ability of graduates is weak (77.78%), and 32 enterprises think that graduates entering the enterprise need to be retrained (71.11%). From Fig.2, it can be seen that among the 45 enterprises surveyed, only 2 enterprises are very satisfied with the graduates recruited, 4 satisfied, 8

basically satisfied, and 25 not satisfied; the enterprises that express “lower than expected or unsatisfied” accounts for 68.89% of the enterprises surveyed. The above survey results show that China’s professional education of international trade undergraduate pays too much attention to theoretical education and neglects practical education, so that the enterprises need to spend extra cost in training graduates.

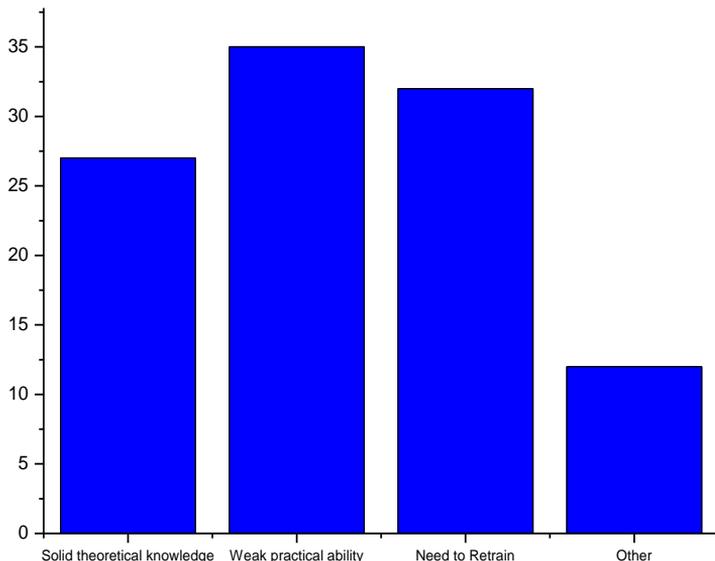


Figure 1. Professional skills survey

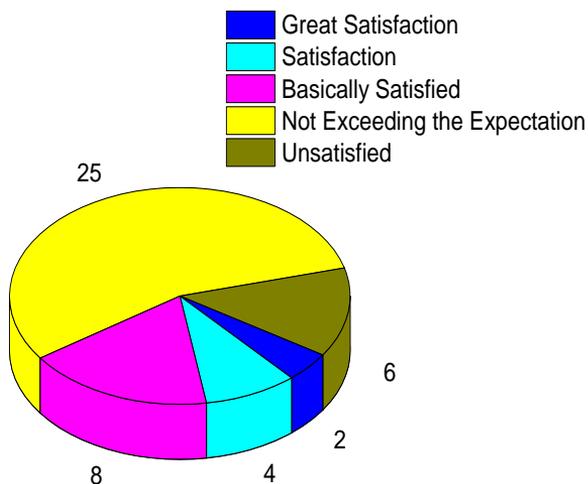


Figure 2. Satisfaction Survey

**Undergraduate survey of international trade majors**

In parallel with the enterprise survey, certain undergraduate students majored in international trade were selected from five colleges in Shanghai so as to conduct an investigation on the current status of international trade undergraduate teaching. A total of 872 questionnaires were distributed, and 790 valid ones were retrieved, with the effective rate of the questionnaire 90.60%, which met the research needs. From the survey results in the figure below, it can be seen that only 21% of all students surveyed have had practical experience, and the remaining 79% have only received classroom instruction. Among all the students with practical experience, only 69% participated in the internship once, 31% had more than one internship experience, 15% had more than 2 internships, and the rest accounted for 2%. Thus, China’s undergraduate major in international trade does lack the cultivation of practical ability.

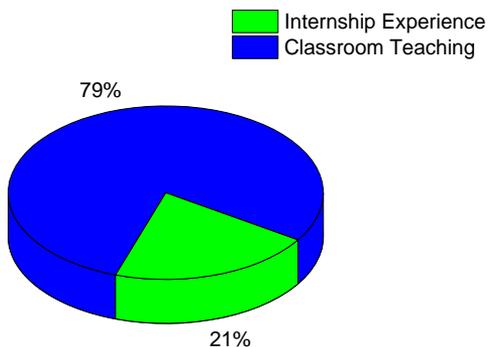


Figure 3. Teaching Methods

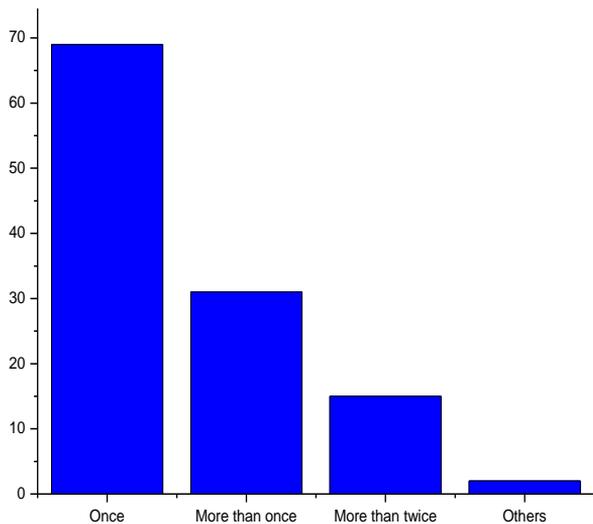


Figure 4. Internship Survey (%)

### Undergraduate teaching reform plan for international trade

From the results of the above questionnaires, it's urgently needed to cultivate students' practical level and ability in the current undergraduate teaching of international trade in China's college and universities. Therefore, when formulating teaching plans, focus should be put on the combination of theoretical teaching and practical teaching. The practical teaching should be added on the basis of the current theoretical teaching.

In teaching reform, the teaching goals should be determined firstly (Ladd & Washington, 1996; Soares, 2005). According to the survey results, this paper identifies the goal of undergraduate teaching in international trade as cultivating the comprehensive talents who can systematically master the basic theory of international trade, understand international trade policies of various countries, and skilfully use various related skills. On this basis, the knowledge structure that students should have includes the basic theory of international trade, international trade policy and its implementation process (Jahanshahi & Naghavi, 2017), business English (Carnoy, 2001), industry trends (Bravo, 2010), etc. The ability structure includes basic theory analytical ability and practical operational capabilities (Neave, 2003), with corresponding qualifications and certifications. In order to achieve the above reform goals, the courses of international trade should also include general education courses (mainly basic theories) and professional core courses (the courses designed according to different directions of international trade, such as international business negotiations, cargo clearance, and trade negotiations, etc.). For improving practical skills, each professional core course should have a special internship. Therefore, students are required to go deep into the international trade process of the enterprise and train their practical ability during the summer vacation and specific learning stages.

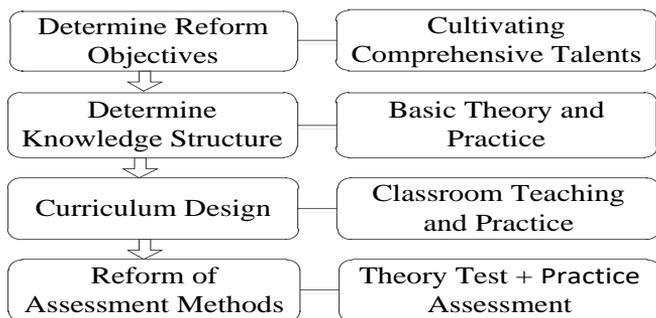


Figure 5. Teaching methods reform plan

In addition to the teaching process, the assessment methods for undergraduate students in international trade also needs to be reformed. To this end, the evaluation of students' practical skills was added in the assessment, forming one assessment system of 60% curriculum learning and 40% practical skills. All students must graduate after the course assessment and practice assessment are qualified.

### Evaluation of teaching reform effect

This chapter mainly evaluates the effectiveness of the teaching reform plan mentioned above. Due to time constraints, it is not possible to track students' learning and ability changes over the course of four years. Therefore, in this paper, the reform was carried out for the third-grade students according to the teaching plan. Within one year after the students' graduation, the enterprises' evaluation of these students and their self-evaluation were studied. The third-grade students majoring in international trade of five colleges in Shanghai were selected as the object of teaching reform.

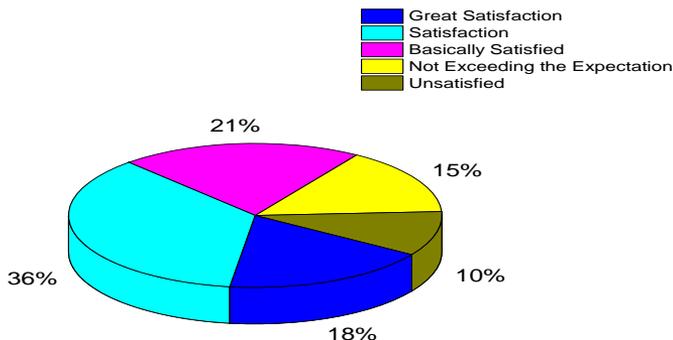


Figure 6. Enterprise satisfaction after reform

Fig.6 below shows the basic evaluation of the students by the enterprise after one year of graduation. The data indicates that among all the enterprises surveyed, 18% of all enterprises are very satisfied with the students, 36% enterprises are satisfied, and 21% are basically satisfied; 15% think that the students' performance hasn't met expectations, and 10% enterprises are not satisfied with students. Thus, after the teaching reform, the enterprises' satisfaction of undergraduates majoring in international trade has risen sharply, the dissatisfaction has fallen sharply, and the proportion of the enterprises that express "lower than expected or unsatisfied" has dropped from 68.89% to 25%.

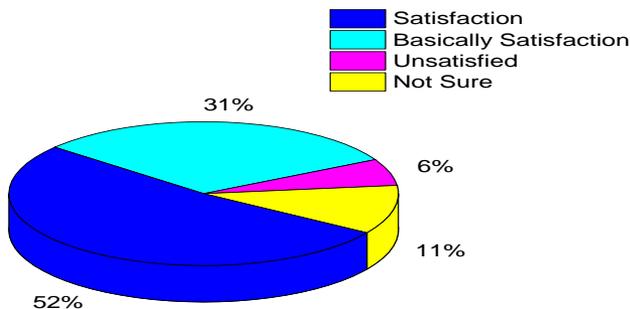


Figure 7. Student satisfaction after reform

Fig.7 below shows the views of surveyed students on this teaching reform. It can be found that among all the students receiving the survey, 52% of all students are satisfied with the teaching, 31% students are basically satisfied, 6% are dissatisfied, and 11% are undetermined. Of all the students who are satisfied with the teaching reform, more than 70% of the students think that they have a deeper understanding of international trade practices after the reform, and also the international trade theory.

## Conclusion

International trade professional education in colleges and universities has provided a large number of professionals for China's reform and opening up. However, in recent years, the professional education of international trade has paid more attention to the theory training, but neglected the cultivation of students' practical ability, resulting in more serious disconnection between students' knowledge system and the actual needs of enterprises. In this context, this paper focuses on introducing the international trade practice into the international trade teaching of colleges and universities, and studies the effects of teaching reform on enterprises and students. The main conclusions of this paper are as follows:

- (1) At present, only a small number of undergraduate students majoring in international trade in China have practical experience, which leads to a serious disconnection between the student's knowledge system and the needs of enterprises. Most enterprises believe that students cannot effectively cope with work challenges.
- (2) The reform of college undergraduate teaching in international trade major should be guided by the principle of "theory + practice", by clearly taking the comprehensive talents training as the training goal, and rationally setting up the curriculum system.
- (3) After the teaching reform, the satisfaction of enterprises with international trade students has risen sharply. Students also believe that teaching reform strengthens their understanding of the theory while improving their practical ability.

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