

Motivation Management of Project-Based Learning for Business English Adult Learners

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Abstract

The paper finds out poor engagement in business English training program prevents adult learners at College of Continuing Education of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies from improving their communication skills. PBL (Project –Based Learning) is proposed to motivate adult learners to get involved with learning a lot. Based on the perspective of psychology, learners' needs may produce motivation which drives learners to actively participate in learning. Integrating McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to the implementation of PBL, the paper highlights teachers should stick to Theory Y, Participative Management Style which is suggested to more inspire learners. And then, through satisfying three classes of adapted needs: belonging needs, esteem needs and self- actualization, PBL can be employed to increase learners' participation, and thus improving their communication skills. The proposal sheds light on how PBL is effectively employed in business English teaching and learning from the perspectives of motivation management.

Keywords: PBL, Motivation theory, Application, Business English adult learner

1. Introduction

Business English has been booming since 1990s in China. Because business English more fits for social multi-disciplinary talents needs than literature and linguistics-oriented English teaching, Chinese Ministry of Education accredits that business English is one of the major means of cultivating multi-disciplinary talents who are able to communicate effectively in business contexts and get the work tasks done in English. (He, Yin, Huang, & Liu, 1999). With the support of government and social great demands of business English talents, the College of Continuing Education of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies specializes in offering training courses consisting of general English and business English programs to adult learners. Due to the career development needs, more and more Chinese adult learners with or without work experience take business English training program at the college.

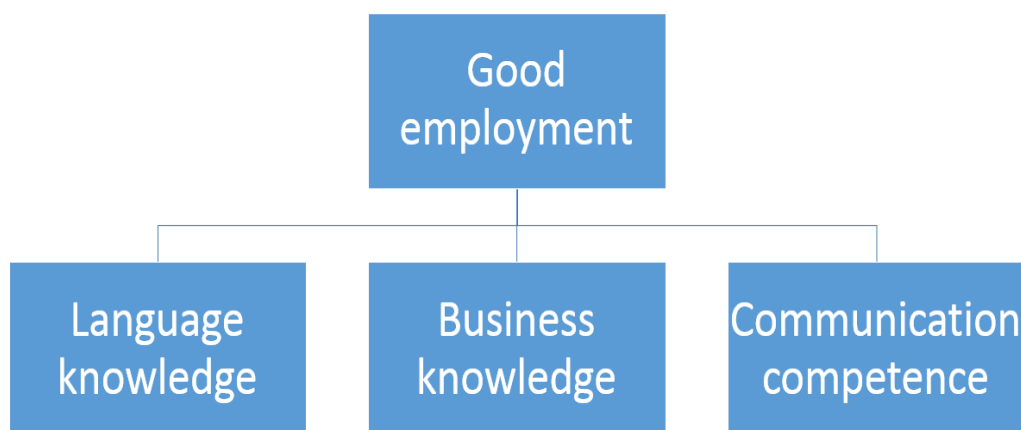


Figure 1. Learning needs of business English adult learners

According to survey (CCE1, 2014), most business English learners seem to have clear needs when they take part in the business English training program. As showed in the figure 1, adult learners' needs are roughly classified into 2 levels of 4 types. The overall need is to find a good job with high salary affording a better life. With the general need, the adult learners have the following three specific needs: language knowledge, business knowledge, and finally communication competence in business context. Among them, the first need language knowledge is composed of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar etc. which is subject to the foundation knowledge in English. And then, the second one is business knowledge which belongs to disciplinary knowledge such as economics, management, and international trading etc. Another one of the second level is communication competence in business context. The adult learners need communicate efficiently in English and get work done in a variety of business environment. These needs are accumulated into the ultimate one of good employment.

By the end of training program lasting 4 months or so each semester, CCE does a survey which aims to evaluate the adult learners' learning outcomes, helping identify the strengths and especially weaknesses of the programs. The survey (CCE, 2014) shows that about 91% adult learners are satisfied with learning language and business knowledge. However, they confess that communication skills (e.g. engaging in the job in English) do not improve as much as they expect. In terms of poor improvement in communication skills, CCE did some interviews with business English teachers who were teaching these adult learners business English. The interview discovers that the adult learners cannot be constantly motivated to get involved in the learning process. The adult learners surveyed further explain that the courses are decontextualized or lack of authenticity in business context, which makes them lose interest and become less-motivated very soon, although they have clear needs at the first beginning of learning. As Short, Harste & Burke (1996) argue that English as a language has been taught and learnt in a structured, linear fashion, accustomed with the teaching of loads of grammar which is based on unrealistic examples. If the language is learned through decontextualized practices, learners end up knowing about the language but not mastering how to use it.

The pedagogical approaches to business English teaching and learning have drawn lots of attention of researchers. There is a consensus on the effective approaches such as ESP (English for Specific Purposes), CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), and CA (Communicative Approach) etc., which are widely applied to the practices of business English education. Besides these approaches, the paper attempts to introduce another approach PBL (Project-Based Learning) which centers on the learners' interest, and thus enhancing the learning. PBL built upon the engagement, interest and motivation of the learner (Fauzia, 2013) is suggested to be an effective approach to inspiring the adult learners in business English training programs. Based on two managerial theories of Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y and Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, the paper proposes business teachers should maintain the positive class management attitude of theory Y which is the prerequisite of PBL application. Three classes of adult learners' needs are satisfied in PBL, thereby motivating their participation in business English learning. In doing so, the essential objective is to help improve their communication skills and finally satisfy their utmost needs of good employment.

2. Related Researches on PBL

PBL is put forward based upon Vygotsky's constructivist theory as well as Dewey's experiential learning (Smith, 2005). Against a mechanism of habit formation through imitation and repetition by behaviorism, constructivists propose knowledge and skills are constructed not transferred. Constructivism adheres to the basic principle that learning takes place when there is construction of knowledge; it is not only concerned with the end product, but the process of constructing that knowledge is considered rather more important (Fauzia, 2013:2). Therefore, PBL is devised to learn knowledge or gain skills in the process of constructing the designated projects. In higher education settings, PBL can be also used to enhance student motivation, communication, and higher order thinking skills (Neo & Neo, 2005; Papastergiou, 2005; Goh & Kale, 2015).

There are three major traditions from which PBL research and practice seem to come into being: (1) Outward Bound wilderness expeditions, (2) postsecondary models of "problem-based" learning, and (3) university-based research in cognition and cognitive science applications (Thomas, 2000:5). The paper only reviews the third tradition, university-based research in cognition and cognitive science applications in detail which is more related to the assumption of the paper.

A number of strands of cognitive research have been cited in support of classroom research and development activities in PBL. These strands can be divided into research on motivation, expertise, contextual factors, and technology etc. (Thomas, 2000:6). Research on motivation comprises research on learners' goal or need orientation and on the effect of variety of classroom reward systems. The research shows that learners with a motivational orientation focusing on learning or mastery of the subject matter are more apt to exhibit sustainable involvement with

learning than learners whose orientation is to merely perform satisfactorily or complete assigned work (Ames, 1992). Accordingly, PBL, because of its emphasis on student autonomy, collaborative learning, and assessments based on authentic performances, is seen to maximize learners' orientation toward learning. Furthermore, PBL designers have built in additional features such as variety, challenge, learner choice, and non-school-like problems in order to promote students' interest and perceived value (Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Thomas(2000:8) further summarizes that research on PBL can take on several forms. Research can be undertaken in order to (a) make judgments about the effectiveness of PBL (summative evaluation), (b) assess or describe the degree of success associated with implementation or enactment of PBL (formative evaluation), (c) assess the role of learner characteristic factors in PBL effectiveness or appropriateness (aptitude-treatment interactions), or (d) test some proposed feature or modification of PBL (intervention research). The research sounds very fruitful. Especially, it is well-founded that the PBL effectiveness on scores on standardized tests of academic achievement, developing general problem solving strategies, specific skills taught in the context of projects, fostering learners' initiatives and motivating learners' engagement etc.(Thomas, 2000; Fauzia, 2013; Macias-Guarasa, et al., 2006; Zheng, 2013).

On the basis of the preview study on PBL, there is no doubt that PBL plays a positive role in motivating learners. Furthermore, the paper attempts to elaborate how PBL is designed to satisfy learners' three classes of specific needs so as to encourage their involvement in business English learning.

3. PBL and Motivation

3.1 Important Characteristics of PBL

Researchers Thomas (2000) and Tan (2003) both conclude the crucial characteristics of PBL. These characteristics can be used to account for why PBL can arouse the learners' enthusiasm and improve their engagement in business English learning. Some critical characteristics are accordingly adapted into the following:

1) Being learner-centered and collaborative work. PBL is fundamentally learner-centered with the teacher playing the role of a facilitator or coach. Learners, organized in groups must finish the project tasks such as designing, planning, implementing or evaluating etc., which needs good cooperation among themselves. Project cannot be accomplished by one team member. Therefore, collaborative work is vital in PBL implementation.

2) Being multi-disciplinary and integrative. PBL inherently possesses multi-disciplinary characteristics with which the learners have to integrate multi-disciplinary knowledge in order to achieve the task. It is noticeable that each project may have many optional solutions which bring benefits to sharpen learners' creative thinking and train comprehensive abilities needed in business context.

3) Authentic performance based assessment. PBL takes the authentic problems and focuses learners on real-world and open-ended projects. In business English learning, it is very beneficial to build up the authentic context which is close or similar to the adult learners' working situations. Thus, the learners are largely motivated.

4) Development of variety of skills. PBL does not test language skills, rather, assists in the development of the skills themselves. Besides language skills, another skills such as coping with incomplete or imprecise information, self-regulation and commitment, cooperation or group work, and effective communication etc. are also developed. These skills acquisition is fundamental for communication skills in business English learning.

In sum, PBL requires learners to engage in authentic and challenging projects and collaboratively work to develop some comprehensive skills by integrating multi-disciplinary knowledge towards their resolution. And Stoller (2002: 109) summarizes that PBL is viewed as an approach to integrating language and content learning which makes it a viable option for language education practitioners to work in a variety of instructional setting, including general English, English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for occupational/vocational/professional purposes. Furthermore, many scholars reinforce that PBL is considered to be associated with quite effective learning opportunities for teaching languages in various contexts (Ke, 2010; Smith, 2005; Stoller, 2002). It sounds reasonable to assume that PBL may be an effective pedagogy of motivating learners to engage in business problems solving projects and then enhance their learning, thus improving their communication skills.

3.2 Motivation

Motivation has been studied and defined by a number of learning scholars from different perspectives (Keller, 1983; Gardener, 1985; Brown, 2001, Deci and Ryan, 1985, 1991 etc.). In some cases, the term motivation can be conceptualized as processes. For example, motivation is defined as the processes that account for an individual's intensity, direction, and persistence of effort towards attaining a goal (Cole, 2004). And some perceive it as a tool to

create a new effective behavior of a person that is, motivator. Meanwhile, motivation can be considered as internal state that instigates, directs and maintains behavior.

Kayode (2013) summarizes three elements of motivation: (1) some need, motive, or goal that triggers action, (2) a selection process that directs the choice of action; and (3) the intensity of effort that is applied to the chosen action. In essence, motivation governs behavior selection, direction, and level of effort. In the discussion, adult learners' needs are the essential motives and PBL is a selected approach to designing the activities in which learners' needs are satisfied and the learners stick to the persistence of learning effort.

4. PBL and Two Motivation Theories

However, the application of PBL is not straightforward or smooth and there must be difficulties which might arise in implementation. The paper takes these difficulties into consideration and elaborates the following aspects (research questions):

- 1) In order to employ PBL effectively, what attitude does the teacher should have?
- 2) In the process of PBL, which kinds of needs are satisfied in order to motivate adult learners' active participation?
- 3) How is PBL designed to improve communication skills in business English learning?

The paper answers the research questions from the perspective of motivation in management. In HR management, it is very important for businesses to motivate employees. It is argued that the lack of motivation may led to reduced efforts and lack of commitment in work in the short time and result in high levels of absenteeism, falling productivity, and declining profit for a business in the long run(Zhu, 2010). Similar to employees at workforce, the business English adult learners are supposed to need motivating to adhere to active involvement with learning.

4.1 Theory X and Theory Y and the Teachers' Attitude

As mentioned above, it is seemingly certain that the PBL's effectiveness on motivating the learners to engage in learning. However, in practice, the attitude of business English teachers will largely determine how successful the application of PBL is. As HR management theory states that managers' attitude motivates the employees, adult learners will also be influenced by the teachers' attitude in business English Learning. In 1960, An American social psychologist, Douglas McGregor, proposes his famous theory X and Y in his book "The Human Side of Enterprise". Theory X and Theory Y(table 1) are commonly referred to the field of management and motivation, which illustrates why people work.

Table 1. Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor, 1960)

Theory X	Theory Y
◇ Workers are motivated by money	◇ Workers have many different needs which motivate them.
◇ Workers are lazy and dislike work	◇ Workers can enjoy work
◇ Workers are selfish, ignore the needs of organizations and avoid responsibility	◇ If motivated, workers can organize themselves and take responsibility.
◇ Workers need to be controlled and directed by management.	◇ Management should create a situation where workers can show creativity and apply their job knowledge.

From table 1, Theory X is Authoritarian Management Style which assumes that workers are in nature lazy and irresponsible or self-centered or selfish. It is suggested that the only way to get employees to work well is by strict controlling or directing. However, Theory Y is Participative Management Style which argues that employees are generally responsible and committed for their work, and most employees can be motivated by different needs (Zhu, 2010). Otokiti (2006) compares the differences between two theories and introduces that Theory X represents tight control and no development, producing a limited and depressed culture, while Theory Y signifies liberating and developmental culture. And in detail, control, achievement and continuous improvement are achieved by enabling, empowering and giving responsibility.

PBL is an approach anchoring learning and teaching in being student-centered, self-directed learning, and collaborative work on solving authentic problems. PBL encourages more autonomic and collaborative work which requires learners' responsibility and commitment. In PBL, teachers are suggested to empower learners and encourage learners to take or share responsibilities. Therefore, it sounds clear that Theory Y is more suitable for guiding the

teachers to implement PBL. Teachers should trust the adult learners who have clear learning needs and can be self-directed when they are committed to achieving their learning needs. And Teachers are suggested to have confidence in adult learners who are responsible and willing to cooperate well with the team members, and thus improving communication skills. To sum up, teachers' persistence in Theory Y is the crucial prerequisite of the implementation of PBL.

4.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Needs Satisfaction

Until now, PBL is justified to be effective on learners' motivation and Theory Y helps orient teachers to PBL implementation. However, which kinds of needs should be satisfied in order to motivate adult learners to actively take part in business English learning? In order to answer the question, American psychologist A· H· Maslow's hierarchy of human needs will be employed as a theoretical framework.

From the perspective of psychology, human being's needs produce motivation, and motivation drives and facilitates human being's behavior (Wu, 2011). The motivation in learning produced by needs plays a very important role in learners' learning. As illustrated above, although the adult learners have some clearly identified objectives when they choose to study Business English at CCE, these needs are assumed to be so general or abstract that they cannot be achieved in short term. Therefore, the teachers are suggested to help adult learners to refine these needs into some short- term, easily achievable, and specific needs which may hold on the adult learners' interest and encourage them to get involved with the business English learning through PBL.

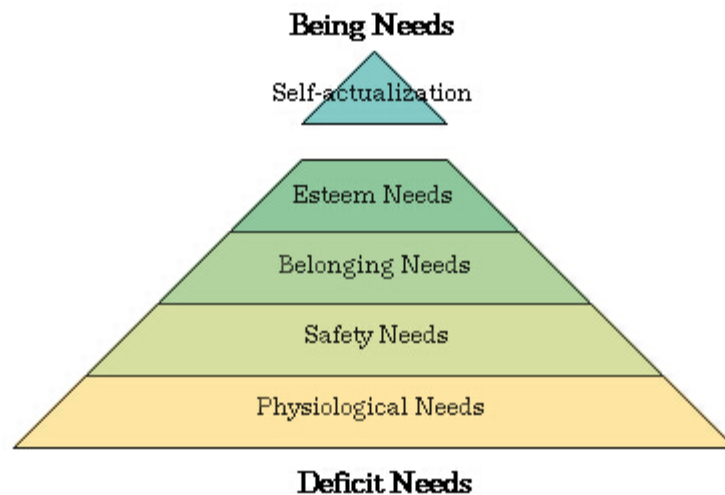


Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954)

In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954), human needs contain five levels as a pyramid: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belong, esteem and self-actualization needs, with the largest and most fundamental levels of needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization at the top. This theory suggests that the most basic level of needs must be met before the individual will strongly desire (or focus motivation upon) the secondary or higher level needs.

In management, most people may roughly think that they work in order to earn money to support themselves thus satisfying their physiological needs. However, People may have different needs which motivate them to work hard. In this discussion, the same to the adult learners. Besides learning business English well and then get a good employment, they may have other concrete needs which can enhance learning in daily learning. In terms of Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of needs, he also illustrates each need and offers some explanations or examples. Based on it, the paper adapts each class of needs in business English learning as follows:

Table 2. Classes of business English adult learners' needs (adapted from classes of needs proposed by Maslow in 1954)

Classes of needs	Maslow's brief explanations or examples	Adapted explanations or examples for adult learners in business English learning
Love& belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Receiving and giving love, affection, and trust and acceptance ● Being part of a group in teamwork ● Working with colleagues that support you at work ● Communicating well with each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being a member of a class or a project team ● Receiving love, affection, trust or care from the teachers or peer learners ● Getting well along with team members ● Cooperating with team members without conflicts ● Gaining support or help at working on the project
Esteem needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gaining the respect of others ● Gaining self-esteem and self-respect ● Feeling competent ● Being given recognition for doing a job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gaining the respect of team members or teachers ● Gaining self-esteem and self-respect ● Being competent for achieving some tasks under the project ● Gaining recognition for your contribution to the team working
Self-actualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Realizing your full potential ● Being promoted and given more responsibility to develop and introduce new ideas ● Taking on challenging new job assignments, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finishing the project on time ● Doing presentation in English ● Exhibiting the development of variety of skills and knowledge ● Sharing both positive or negative experience with fellow classmates and teachers

Although Maslow originally presents five classes of needs, Table 2 just demonstrates three of them. As adult learners choose to study business English, they have to do some preparation consisting of tuition, living expenses during learning and so on. Therefore, it can be concluded that physiological needs can be temporarily ignored during the learning period. And safety needs can also be put aside in the discussion because simple learning life on campus is relatively safer than social work context. Due to the long term teaching experience, it is reasonable to suggest that the adult learners' needs are mainly belonging needs, esteem needs and self-actualization in business English learning context. The following discussion will concentrate on whether the three classes of needs in business English learning can be satisfied in the process of PBL.

4.2.1 PBL and Belonging Needs

The business English training program has been conducted through classroom learning. Each class at CCE is at minimum composed of 30 learners who did not know each other before. With the same needs of improving business English competence, they have become classmates. As Table 2 illustrated, learners are eager to be a member of a class or project team and receive love, affection, trust or care from the teachers or peer learners. The teaching experience tells us that the teachers' time in class or with learners is limited, it is impossible for teachers to pay close attention to every learner for a long time in the classroom. If the learners cannot gain attention or care expected, they may soon lose interest in learning. At the moment, PBL can be utilized to make up for the large-sized class weaknesses and satisfy the learners' belonging needs. When the learners are grouped into small teams in which the team members can get to know each other sooner and better. In groups, it is easier for them to become friends so as to care more about each other. Each team member has to work collaboratively to achieve the common goal. With cooperation, they support and help each other, which enhances their sense of belonging.

4.2.2 PBL and Esteem Needs

PBL is a kind of approach mainly based on the team work. Team members are the main players. The project team conducts research altogether in order to solve the problems. PBL emphasizes the integration of learners' autonomous learning and team members' cooperation. Therefore, each learner must be required to finish some individual tasks independently, and then contribute to the overall project achievement. Every team member has his own advantages or talents and is competent for some tasks, which gain respect of others. When learners realize that they have something to contribute to the project, they must gain self-esteem and self-respect. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the contribution will gain recognition both from the team members and teachers, because individual contribution make the project accomplished.

4.2.3 PBL and Self-Actualization

In PBL model, learners engage in complex and challenging problems which are finally resolved through learners' collaborative hardworking. Especially in business context, teachers adopt the project which much connects multidisciplinary knowledge to real- business world problems. For example, some teachers may take an authentic business case as a project which requires learners to integrate variety of language skills to multi-disciplinary knowledge, and then to solve the problem, which helps learners develop comprehensive skills. After the project is accomplished, learners are required to do the project presentation which offers learners the chance to illustrate the project and justify their resolutions etc. The learners play their optimal potential at achieving the project. There must be some barriers in the progression of the project, so that learners are encouraged to get rid of all difficulties in the process, which may finally make learners accomplish the project and fulfill themselves.

4.3 PBL and Communication Skills

In the PBL approach, by satisfying the learners' three needs above, learners are motivated a lot in business English learning. There is still the utmost need, improving communication skills which cannot be satisfied in one step but gradually acquired in the progression of satisfying these needs. In order to improve the learners' communicative skills, there are some requirements on the design or assignment of the project:

- 1) Authentic business cases are designed to be projects. PBL situates language learning in the real world by using authentic problems as the starting point and focus of learning (Barrows, 1985; Dunlap, 2005). In business English context, when the project is from the real business world which is more likely to enhance the adult learners' enthusiasm. Authentic business project is subject to the principle of learning in the arena of social interaction (Mardziah, 1998) where the social participants decide the content and amount of learning (Cole and Engestrom, 1993; Salomon, 1993). Learners may gain more initiatives and act as real workers to communicate with each other to get project done.
- 2) The project can be achievable if adult learners do commitments. The project is supposed to be fit for the adult learners' competence both in language and other disciplinary knowledge. If the project is too difficult, it is easy to damage the learners' confidence and make them lose interest. However, if the project is less challenging, adult learners cannot inspire their potential and realize self-actualization.
- 3) The teacher is suggested to offer close supervision to the project team. Although teachers play a role of facilitators or coordinators, it is vital for teachers to supervise the progression of the project closely, for instance: clear explanation of the project, offering answers to any inquiry, harmonizing the team conflicts when there are, offering help when are needed, and finding out any problems which may impede the development of the project etc. In doing so, teachers keep smooth communication with learners and really facilitate them to achieve the task.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper finds out the unsatisfactory learning outcomes of adult learners at CCE and identifies poor involvement with learning leading to failure of improving their communication skills. PBL is argued as an effective approach to getting the learners motivated and enhancing their learning. Briefly summarizing the characteristics of PBL, the paper proposes that it can be employed to motivate adult learners to learn business English well. And then, the paper integrate McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y and Maslow's Hierarchy of needs from the management perspective to provide the answers to three research questions: 1) If PBL will be put into practice well, the teachers are suggested to hold on the positive motivator Theory Y, which in detail means every adult learner is responsible and willing to be committed to their learning; 2) With the prerequisite, PBL has satisfied the following three needs of adult learners: belonging needs, esteem needs and self-actualization which can motivate the learners to devote themselves to their learning; 3) The design and implementation of project should stick to three principles of

authenticity, being achievable and teachers' close supervision which are more helpful for improving communication skills.

The discussion of the paper brings at least two implications to the business English teachers and learners: 1) Based on effectiveness on motivation, PBL can be employed to enhance learning; 2) In order to motivate the adult learning, their concrete needs at different levels should firstly be satisfied, thereby gradually achieving the long term general objective of improving communication skills.

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Note

Note 1. CCE is the short form for College of Continuing Education which is one College of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in China. The College of Continuing Education conducts a learner questionnaire survey every semester. The survey mainly aims to elicit learning outcomes, satisfaction and some suggestions for the current teaching.