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Investigating non-English major undergraduates' needs and perceptions of business English teaching in a Chinese university

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This article reports an investigative study of non-English major undergraduates' needs and perceptions of business English teaching in a Chinese university context, within the context of College English Teaching reform and internationalization. The main instruments used were surveys consisting of rating and open-ended questions, and classroom observations. There were 147 valid participants in the study who were enrolled in various academic programmes. The results show that participants most needed to improve writing and speaking skills, and most often read general interest articles. Less than one third of the participants had had job application experiences and they held various career expectations linked to their academic specialization. However as pre-experienced learners, they lacked adequate experience to understand the business world. For business English teaching, participants perceived the use of media resources and authentic materials, case-based methods and simulated practice as effective approach to achieve communicative competence development for the real business world. This study promotes college English teaching reform and guides further curriculum upgrading as well as informing business English curriculum design and implementation in China.

Key words: non-English major undergraduates; needs analysis; business English teaching; Chinese university; college English teaching reform

Introduction

In China's higher education institutions, College English Teaching is usually provided to non-English major undergraduates. This is different from the content of the English Language and Literature programme offered to English major students. According to the *College English Teaching Guide* of the Higher Education Institution College English Teaching Advisory Committee (2014), the university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum has been undergoing changes within a new round of college EFL reform. The updated curriculum includes *English for General Purposes* (*EGP*), *English for Specific Purposes* (*ESP*) and cross-cultural communication courses. For *ESP* courses, it is specified that through learning *English for Academic Purposes* (*EAP*) or *English for Occupational Purposes* (*EOP*), students can achieve the ability to communicate in academic or professional fields.

The current reform of China's college EFL teaching is facilitating an internationalization process in universities. Huang (2006) reported increased use of "original textbooks in English" (p. 527) and the trend of English medium instruction (EMI) or bilingual instruction, a trend which complies with the Ministry of Education requirements to increase the percentage of EMI curricula in China's leading universities in both science and social science disciplines.

However, in practice, Du and Guan (2016) found that there are still hindrances to effective teaching in China's EFL context. These include Chinese cultural factors; classroom factors, such as class size and class time; teachers' English proficiency; assessment; the reduction of productive vocabulary and failure to understand students' real learning needs. They suggest redefining the goals of China's EFL teaching to focus on students' needs for learning English, which is to be able to use English effectively in global communication or professional work contexts.

This study aims to investigate the needs and perceptions of non-English major undergraduates of business English as offered in the College English Teaching *ESP* course group in a Chinese university context. The study fulfils this aim by providing a picture of the target group's business English learning needs, difficulties, career prospect and perceptions of effective business English teaching. The study provides a unique theory-informed case of needs analysis, informing practice to enhance the curriculum for non-English major undergraduates and promote College English Teaching.

Theoretical framework

Theories of needs analysis in business English teaching
Broadly for *ESP* teaching, Basturkmen (2006) mentions five objectives, "to reveal language use in subject knowledge, to develop target performance competencies, to teach underlying knowledge, to develop strategic competence and to foster critical awareness" (p. 133). For the teaching of business English, as a key branch of *ESP*, it would make sense to supplement these broad objectives with the goal of revealing language use in a business context, developing communicative competence for workplaces, teaching business knowledge, developing strategies for learning and fostering cross-cultural awareness. Belcher (2009) suggests that business English teachers should know about language use in business settings and emphasizes that *ESP* should be based on needs. It is the responsibility of *ESP* teachers to gather student information prior to course commencement. This concept applies particularly to business English programmes.

In relation to business English teaching, Ellis and Johnson (2002) propose that analysing learner needs includes describing levels of performance and information gathering to determine the course content. Nevertheless, Basturkmen (2010) indicates that courses of *ESP* including business English can be wide-angled or very specific to different professional or business contexts, which influence content selection and material development. For pre-experience learners in the context of this study, the learning needs may be different from learners with job experience. There could be both workplace related learning needs and academic study needs. From the communicative perspective, Schutz and Derwing (1981) indicated the communicative needs to be gathered in the needs assessment stage. These should cover personal information such as language background, purpose of language learning, target language settings, and types of communicative means, dialects and communicative events. Moreover, needs analysis should incorporate the basic considerations in *ESP* classroom research, related to information about "social milieu, learning objectives, input materials and output activities, and methodologies" (Cheng, 2011, p. 63).

Basturkmen (2010) suggests that the more recent needs analysis process has been expanded and is more comprehensive than that in the 1980s because it involves "target situation analysis, discourse analysis, present situation analysis, learner factor analysis

and teaching context analysis" (p. 19). She also indicates that needs analysis is an ongoing process which should inform course design. The main instruments used are usually "questionnaires, interviews and observations" (p. 33), the use of which varies in different case contexts. Long (2011) also suggests that needs analysis procedures related to the academic context include "diaries/journals/logs, content analysis, triangulated methods and ethnographic methods" (p. 31). Recently, Serafini, Lake, and Long (2015) analysed needs analysis (NA) studies of the past 30 years and found that the sources of data and methods were still not consistent. They suggested more "reliable and valid NA practices" (p. 25) by checking insider and outsider views, using mixed methods and triangulation of information collected from different sources.

Review of needs analysis studies in the university context
In both international and Chinese university contexts, needs analysis studies have gathered information mostly from learners in educational institutions. The results of these studies inform effective course design and implementation. In the context of Australia, Crosling and Ward (2002) investigated the oral communication needs of business graduate employees of Monash University and indicated that informal oral communication skills were more often used in workplaces rather than formal presentation. This informs adaptation in the curriculum focus. In a Greek university context, Chostelidou (2010) described students' needs of learning English for accountancy and designed the course based on those needs. Students' immediate needs and long-term needs were collected in order that the curriculum should be adapted. The factors of students' previous learning experiences and English proficiency should be considered to bridge the gap between the current situation and future requirements for the profession. In the Turkish university context, Akyel and Ozek (2010) conducted a language needs analysis research by semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The results showed that undergraduates in this context had difficulties in listening and speaking in the first two years and should be encouraged to adopt effective learning strategies. In the U.S. context, Bosher and Smalkoski (2002) studied student needs using "interviews, observations and questionnaires" (p. 59) and designed the healthcare communication course for immigrant students. Authentic materials and role plays were used to engage students. The course was successful in realizing the training goals.

In a Chinese university context, Yu (2014) indicates that needs analysis should be an essential part of the business English curriculum to ensure course effectiveness. He investigated students' perceptions of business English teaching and suggests increasing social practice and skills development activities. In a similar Chinese university context, in a study based on questionnaires and interviews, Yan (2015) studied non-English major students' motivation of studying English and found they were demotivated because of the past unhappy learning experiences, low language level and difficulties in college English learning content. Zhang (2012) studied English learning needs of non-English major students in a vocational college from the perspectives of "learning environment, teacher and textbook" (p. 118). The results show that students preferred the model of teacher-student interaction and an outside learning environment. This suggests that teachers should give more positive appraisal to encourage learning and adapt the textbook with more interesting and attractive materials. Nevertheless, since the new round of College EFL reform was initiated in China's universities which are becoming more internationalized, it has become necessary to have continuous needs analyses to understand better how developments influence student learning needs and perceptions of teaching, and to adapt the curriculum in line with the trends.

Research questions

This study aims to address two research questions:

1. What are the business English communication learning needs of non-English major undergraduates in the Chinese university context?
2. What are the perceptions of business English teaching of non-English major undergraduates in the Chinese university context?

Methodology

The main instruments used in this study are needs analysis surveys with rating and open-ended questions, and classroom observations. The study is located in one public university in the east of China, which offers business English related courses to non-English major undergraduates enrolled in different academic programmes, within its second round of College English Teaching reform.

Data Collection

The needs analysis survey (see Appendix) was administered at the beginning of the business English courses to 147 participants in early January 2016. All of the participants were taking a four-month business English related programme, including business English (32 teaching hours), business English reading and writing (48 teaching hours) and international business correspondence (32 teaching hours), offered by the School of Foreign Studies within the university.

The needs analysis survey gathered participants' basic characteristics, such as their academic programmes, age, gender and their business English levels (self-assessed). It also asked six open-ended questions, including the English language skills they feel most need improvement, the business English documents they most often read, their job application experiences, the industries they wish to work in, and their perceptions of the business English course content and teaching approach. The questions in the survey were adapted from the questionnaires designed by Freeman (2009), Chan (2014), Helm (2015) and Chaudron et al. (2005).

As the researcher also taught these business English courses, classroom observations were also conducted to identify key information about the participants' needs and perceptions of business English teaching.

Participants

The participants (Table 1) were full-time students who were 70% female and 30% male. Their average age was about 20 with an age range of 17-22. Over 60% of them had passed the College English Test (CET) Band 4. Over 10% of them had also passed CET Band 6. A few were advanced learners who aimed to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Test System (IELTS) or the Business English Certificate (BEC). A large majority (85%) of the participants were in their second year, 17% were in their first year and 24% in their third year.

The participants were all non-English major undergraduates, enrolled at the time of the study in various academic programmes (see Table 2). The largest group (around 50%) were in the Japanese language programme. The second largest group (22%) were enrolled in the School of Business programmes, such as finance, accounting, industrial management and business management. The remaining participants were from the academic programmes of mechanics, nursing, design, Chinese language and education

(5% to 6% respectively). Participants ranged in their self-assessment of business English ability from beginner to high intermediate (Table 3).

Table 1. Participant profiles

Characteristic	Number (%)
Total participants	147 (100%)
Female	103 (70%)
Male	44 (30%)
Age range	17-22 years
Average age	19.96 years
Pass CET-4	91 (62%)
Pass CET-6	20 (13.6%)
First year of study	25 (17%)
Second year of study	87 (59%)
Third year of study	35 (24%)

Table 2. Participants' enrolled academic programmes

Programme	Number (%)
Japanese language	73 (49.7%)
Business	32 (22%)
Mechanics	8 (5%)
Nursing	9 (6%)
Design	8 (5%)
Chinese language	8 (5%)
Education	9 (6%)

Table 3. Participants' self-assessed level of business English

Level	%
Beginner	39%
Higher beginner	17%
Low intermediate	18%
Intermediate	22%
High intermediate	2%

Data analysis

The results of the needs analysis survey were analysed by frequency calculations, to identify the most common features of participants' business English communication learning needs. Responses to the open-ended questions on participants' perceptions of business English teaching were analysed using a thematic approach (Flick, 2011) in order to identify their major concerns and preferences. Typical quotes are used to show the main factors in their perceptions. Moreover, results of classroom observation were recorded and analysed.

Results

Business English communication learning needs

The participants' perceived English skills needing improvement are illustrated in Table 4. Writing and speaking skills were both perceived to require the most attention (both comprising 26.5% of the responses) and it is interesting that these skills are both features of language output. Listening (19%) and vocabulary (15.6%) are the next most highly perceived needs. It is also important to note that in open-ended responses some participants mentioned specifically the need for international trade vocabulary. Reading skills (11.6%) were not perceived as a particularly high need. Only a few participants who were beginners in business English raised grammar as an area requiring enhancement. These results indicate that language output activities should be the focus of business English teaching.

Table 4. English skills most needing improvement

English skill areas	Frequency	Percentage
Reading	17	11.6%
Writing	39	26.5%
Listening	28	19%
Speaking	39	26.5%
Vocabulary	23	15.6%
Grammar	7	4.7%

Documents participants most often read in English are demonstrated in Table 5. The results show that over 22% of participants most often read general interest articles which they specified as magazines, news, lyrics, movies and biography; whereas 11.6% of participants most often read reports and 9.5% specialist articles. Other document types are less commonly read. It is worth noting that there are few compulsory reading materials assigned by English teachers for non-English major students so the reading content of participants is largely individualized according to their programmes of academic study. Indeed, a few participants from the Japanese language programmes claimed they never read articles in English outside the classroom.

Table 5. Documents participants most often read in English

Document name	Frequency	Percentage
Contracts	7	4.8%
General interest articles	33	22.4%
Specialist articles	14	9.5%
Formal business E-mails	5	3.4%
More informal/ chatty E-mails	1	0.6%
Reports	17	11.6%
Memos	2	1.3%
Websites	13	8.8%
Chat page	4	2.7%
Official notices	4	2.7%
Business letters	4	2.7%
Novel	5	3.4%

In response to questions about their speaking and listening needs, 25% of the participants, most of whom are third year students, explained they had applied for jobs or had had job interviews once or twice. Their job application experiences range from private tutoring, being a sales assistant in Japanese clothes chain stores, and positions in the student union. Most of these were part-time jobs. In their job interviews, participants were asked to do self-introductions and to answer practical questions such as "how to balance study and work". The remaining 75% of the participants had not applied for jobs or had any job interviews. Some expressed their willingness to take initiatives to apply for jobs to gain practical work experiences.

The industries participants would like to work in (see Table 6) vary but the largest group is *Finance and Accounting* (12.9%). The majority of these respondents were enrolled in the Finance and Accounting programme and they mentioned "bank" or "investment bank" as their career destination. Translation and Interpretation (8.8%) was selected mostly by students from the programme of Japanese language who are more willing to link their career with Japanese companies. Education (8.2%) was selected by participants who desire careers in "teaching" or "school" and most of them belonged to the Chinese or education programmes at the university. Design or creative industries, such as advertising, industrial design or environmental design were frequently mentioned by 6.8% of the participants, most of whom come from the School of Design. Smaller numbers of participants favoured jobs in the industries of international trade, medicine/nursing and media (4%) or mechanical engineering and marketing industry (2%). A few participants mentioned tourism and computers as their favoured industries.

Though the choices of the participants were highly diverse, it is clear that most of them hoped to apply their academic knowledge to their future job while some of them did also include their personal interests. When expressing preferences of where to work, "multinational company" and "foreign business" are high frequency words in participants' survey responses.

Table 6. Industries participants would like to work in

Industry	Frequency	Percentage
Translation/Interpretation	13	8.8%
International trade	6	4%
Computer	1	0.68%
Mechanical engineering	3	2%
Industrial/Environmental design	10	6.8%
Education	12	8.2%
Medicine/Nursing	7	4.8%
Tourism	2	1.4%
Finance/Accounting	19	12.9%
Media	6	4.1%
Marketing	3	2%

Perceptions of business English teaching

Learning objectives in communicative competence development for the real business world

Participants' objectives were to develop communicative competence for the business world so that they could use it when they commenced work. The comments by participant M and N are quite typical:

> I would like to learn some commercial skills and skills of communication in this course. (Participant M)

> We can communicate with businessman fluently and write formal business e-mails which have few mistakes. (Participant N)

Participants indicated the importance of linking business English teaching to practice in the real world workplaces. The following four participants especially emphasized the linkage of business English teaching with workplace practice:

> It can not only be useful to teach us the knowledge on the books and also teach us how to deal with the issues in practice. (Participant I)

> Students will be able to practice speaking English and simulate workplace. (Participant J)

> Good communication. Good topics. Good cooperation. (Participant K)

> Getting students involve in the current business English situation. (Participant L)

Business English teaching content and materials

Participants wanted the teaching content and materials to be interesting and attractive, and to make use of authentic information input. Thirteen of the participants (8.8%), mentioned the use of videos or movies in business English teaching to enrich the course

content. There was also a higher degree of attentiveness in the video discussion during teaching. Participant A's comment is typical:

> The class can teach professional terms and formats by some videos or simulation exercises. (Participant A)

In addition, participants recommended the inclusion of print media business articles from publications such as The Economist, to obtain more updated business information. Participant B and C offered the following suggestions:

> Information such as international news and politics, trends of culture and science as well as China and international business guru stories. (Participant B)

> News, business stories, business knowledge and the channels to obtain business development. (Participant C)

Moreover, from the cultural perspective, participants preferred to learn more about western culture and knowledge so as to gain an international outlook. Participants C and D expressed their views on this, thus:

> I want to learn more about foreign culture in business or any other aspects. I look forward to gain much information about America. (Participant C)

> Anything about business, for example, cultures, ways of talking. (Participant D)

Business English output activities

Twenty-four of the participants (16%) mentioned that more writing skills development activities should be included in business English teaching and this is an area most needing improvement according to the needs analysis results. There was also a higher participation rate in the business English writing tasks in the classrooms. Participant E and F explained this further:

> We can have more experience in writing different articles and reading more formal English reports. (Participant E)

> How to write formal business contracts and letters. Teaching materials root in real work. (Participant F)

Business English teaching methodology

Participants perceived case methods as critical to enable them to apply knowledge in practice. The researcher witnessed heated case group discussions during classes. Participant G and H made the following clarifications:

> The teaching can be connected with real business. The knowledge can be practical and up-to-date. There can be not only theories but also cases. (Participant G)

> It can teach us some professional and practical information on international business by analysing the cases and investigating the state of affairs. (Participant H)

Discussion

This study investigated non-English major undergraduates' needs and perceptions of business English teaching in a Chinese university. Speaking and writing skills were perceived as most needing improvement by the participants who particularly emphasized the need to improve writing skills for business communication document preparation. General interest articles were most commonly read by participants and these were diverse in forms, ranging from novels to lyrics.

The results suggest that when teachers are designing business English courses for these non-English major undergraduates, it is important to cater to their immediate output-oriented learning needs and provide authentic written materials which should be diverse in topic. The results also suggest that the courses should focus on general business context, which are not discipline focused. This is confirmed in the literature by Donna (2000) who indicated that in order to make skills development effective in business English classrooms, teachers or course developers should first identify students' weaknesses. She suggests that the course design and implementation should focus on "students' ability to achieve a task, use authentic materials or real-life situations and ongoing assessment" (Donna, 2000, p. 126).

For understanding about the business world, the participants lacked adequate prior experiences, though they could envision working in international companies where their academic knowledge from different disciplines could be used in various industrial sectors such as finance and accounting. As pre-experienced learners, they meet Frendo's (2008) description of a group of students who have no job experiences but intend to pursue business careers. Business English teaching in educational institutes is often not as focused as that in workplace settings. Students rely on teachers to provide an overview of the business world. In this case, it is important for teachers to link business English teaching to the industrial workplace contexts to meet students' future professional needs.

Participants' preferences for business English teaching content and materials were for more diverse and authentic content, such as video and media resources. Though previous research has indicated the difficulties of obtaining context specific authentic materials for learners from different disciplines (Flowerdew, 2010), the general authentic business English materials needed by the students can be accessed via web resources. In such contexts, as indicated by Belcher (2009), less specialized authentic materials are useful and suit student needs. Moreover, the participants hoped business English teaching could bring them opportunities to develop global communicative competence for the real business world through approaches such as case methods and simulated practice. In the *College English Teaching Guide* of China's Higher Education Institution College English Teaching Advisory Committee (2014), similar teaching methods are suggested to combine task-based, team-based, project-based and inquiry-based approaches, which are learning-centred. The committee also stipulates that web-based resources and platforms should be provided for cultivating students' autonomous learning competence. Strevens (1988) also emphasized that teachers in this context should focus on basic teaching activities including "shaping the input, encouraging the learners' intention to learn, managing the learning strategies, and promoting practice and use" (p. 44). These are in line with participants' perceptions of effective business English teaching in this study.

Conclusion and implications

In the current college EFL context in China, this study shows how investigation of non-English major undergraduates' needs and perceptions of business English teaching can inform theory and practice in curriculum design and development. The knowledge about students' needs and perceptions can help teachers and course developers to better adapt the curriculum to cater to students' real immediate and future professional development needs in order for the course to be more effective in achieving the objectives of communicative competence development. This offers a useful route for further developments in China's EFL courses, with a more student-centred and practical approach. Though this study offers results for only one Chinese university which may not be generalizable, the needs analysis research process can be replicated in other educational contexts. This study also promotes college EFL reform with solid empirical evidence and feedback, which guides further curriculum revision and upgrading.

Acknowledgements

About the author

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Appendix: The needs analysis survey
(adapted from Freeman, 2009; Chan, 2014; Helm, 2015; and Chaudron et. al., 2005)

Needs Analysis
Name (Chinese) _____   Name (English)_____

Gender_____ Age_____

How would you describe your Business English level?

Beginner	High Beginner	Low Intermediate	Intermediate	High Intermediate	Advanced	Native Level

English Proficiency Test Score (e.g. CET-4, College Entry Test Score, IETLS, TOEFL etc.)_____

Skills and language
• Reading
• Writing
• Speaking
• Listening
• Grammar
• Vocabulary

Which of the areas above do you most need to improve in your English (in order)?

_____

Written texts
• Contracts
• General interest articles
• Specialist articles
• Formal business E-mails
• More informal/ chatty E-mails
• Reports
• Memos
• Business letters
• Faxes
• Official notices
• Agendas
• Minutes
• Websites (please give example)
• Chat pages

Others (please name)

_____

Which of the others do you read most in English (in order of use)?

_____

Speaking and listening
Have you applied for any jobs? Have you had any job interviews? What questions were you asked?

_____

Future career
What industry you would like to work in? What sort of job / work experience you would like to do in the future?

_____

Business English curriculum
What would you like to see to be included (different aspects such as the teaching topics, teaching materials, assignments, curriculum design, activities etc.) in the existing business English course?

_____

In your opinion, what is an ideal business English course?

_____