

# Business English Learning and Teaching and Curriculum Adaptation from Non-English Major Undergraduates' Perspectives: The Case in a Chinese University



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**Abstract** This chapter aims to explore non-English major undergraduates' understandings of outcomes and problems in business English learning and teaching as well as their suggestions for curriculum adaptation and post-course practice upgrading at a Chinese university. The methodology includes questionnaires with six open-ended questions and participant observation with 147 non-English major undergraduates in one public university in the east of China. The results of the study show participants' improvement in vocabulary learning and development in writing skills, business culture and knowledge, collaboration and negotiation skills and career potential. However, there are still problems in learning business vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and general vocabulary due to language proficiency limitations. Communicative teaching approaches, such as group discussion and presentations, writing, reading, and translating activities are considered as useful activities. Videos, business simulations, and role plays are suggested for business English curriculum adaptation. Post-course practice should connect with workplaces with more communicative events. This study has significant implications for needs analysis research, business English teaching practice, and policy for both China and worldwide contexts.

**Keywords** Non-English major undergraduates' perceptions · Business English learning and teaching · Curriculum adaptation · Chinese university context

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## 1 Introduction

As well documented in the literature, needs analysis is an essential step of *English for specific purposes (ESP)* curriculum development (Basturkmen, 2010). Paltridge (2012, p. 180) summarizes that needs analysis, as a necessary element in *ESP* course design, comprises the process of investigating the needs in the “target situation and learning situations.” These include identifying the communicative needs in the target contexts, learners’ inadequacy in communicative competence development and the “learner’s views” on language learning. Brown (2009, p. 281) summarizes that needs analysis researchers should also understand the “background information, dialects, interaction variables and means of communicating” to gain a comprehensive understanding of the learning and communicative situations.

Moreover, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 59) indicate that analyzing learner needs enables the appropriate decision on learning materials and course delivery approach. Needs analysis can be conducted in flexible ways, including interviews, questionnaires, and online forms combining “placement tests” with questionnaire responses. Paltridge (2012) also emphasizes using more than one approach to gather information in the needs analysis research, as it guarantees the credibility and reliability of the results.

This chapter focuses on learning needs analysis in business English courses, as a key branch of *ESP*, in the Chinese university context. It investigates learners’ understandings of outcomes and problems in business English learning and views on developing teaching activities, adapting the curriculum as well as upgrading the post-course practice.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *Understanding Outcomes and Problems in English Language Learning*

Previous studies in different contexts have revealed varied outcomes and problems in English language learning using questionnaires. Based on the study of Sary (2015) in the Indonesian context, students’ perceptions of English learning difficulties and the preferences of strategies are investigated in the university setting. The study reports that the main problem is in “vocabulary and grammar” (p. 75) which affect the development of writing skills. Moreover, writing and listening skills are considered the most difficult in the learning process. Additional learning resources are suggested to solve the learning problems. In the context of Thailand, Ngersawat and Kirkpatrick (2014, p. 1365) investigate students’ English language problems and learning strategies in a bilingual program. It is reported that students’ major problems lie in “writing skills” due to various limitations in vocabulary and grammar use. In the context of using “open web-based educational resources” in business

English courses, Dina and Ciornei (2015, p. 314) find the useful types of online print and audio resources. The difficulties of learning business English in this setting lie in listening activities, reading texts, vocabulary, and making presentations. The learning outcomes include more than half of the students improving their “fluency and business language comprehension.”

For business English courses, it is also necessary to define the learners’ language abilities and design the course accordingly (Ellis & Johnson, 2002, p. 43). Frendo (2005, p. 15) indicates that it is important to investigate learners’ “current situation” and “target situation,” so as to obtain the training gap. The course design process involves the development of “syllabus and methods” based on the understanding of learner “constraints and learning strategies.” In this context, this study aims to understand learners’ outcomes and problems in business English learning using questionnaires, as parts of the needs analysis and curriculum adaptation research.

## ***2.2 Theory and Practice of Business English Curriculum Adaptation***

The theory and practice of business English curriculum adaptation follow the *ESP* principles. Basturkmen (2006, p. 28) summarizes that *ESP* curriculum should include the elements of “language system, language use, language skills and conceptual and cultural content.” *ESP* curriculum should prepare learners for their study in the academic settings or professional job in the workplace environment. Similarly, Harmer (2015) indicates that the content of business English curriculum largely depends on whether the students pursue business life in the future or are already in the workplace. The student background and needs can determine the proportions of language and business content. Business English curriculum keeps a balance between language and business elements.

Moreover, the learner-centered models (Nunan, 1988) could be applied in the business English curriculum adaptation, which are learning needs centered. Saraceni (2003) suggests that learners could be actively involved or empowered in the curriculum adaptation process. The adapted course content should be relevant to learners and authentic. The curriculum adaptation process should be flexible and learner-centered. In the higher education context, Cleveland-Innes and Emes (2005, p. 100) indicate that learners could play the roles of “content expert and learner support,” while the curriculum should offer “flexible delivery and blended learning options.” McCombs (2015, p. 61) indicates that it is necessary to build healthy relations and learning environment to meet learner needs and involve learners into the learning process.

### ***2.3 Business English Teaching and Learning in the Chinese University Context***

Business English teaching and learning in the Chinese university context are institution specific. They follow different models, depending on the institutional curriculum focus. According to Yuan (2012), institutions in China have been following the models of “English + Business” (p. 81). The business courses are taught in either Chinese or English in the business English programs.

The recent studies have been focusing on enhancing practical business skills. For example, in the Chinese university context, Yu (2015) compares the differences in students’ language needs before and after the practicum through questionnaires and learning journals. The study finds that students’ needs transform from language learning for general purposes to business and interdisciplinary language learning. The business practices enhance their motivation to learn business English. In a similar Chinese context, Wu (2015) investigates the connection of practicum with business English curriculum development using questionnaires. The study finds the positive connection of language knowledge and skills, and business knowledge and skills courses with practicum and employment. The study suggests establishing a system of practical skills development to improve business English curriculum and students’ employment.

The learner-centered model has also been applied in business English teaching. Ellis and Johnson (2002, p. 38) have suggested the “learner involvement” in deciding the course content and teaching approach both at the beginning and during the implementation process. Learners could play important roles in course development. In the Chinese context, the study of Liang and Qin (2016, p. 94) suggested that in using learner-centered model in business English teaching, “needs analysis and learning situation analysis” are especially required. The teaching approach should be varied to cater to student needs. Li (2017, p. 38) has also suggested that learner-centered model should be used in developing the “course objective, course content and teaching approach.” These are in line with the traditional business English teaching theories.

## **3 Research Questions**

This study aims to further explore the business English curriculum development in one Chinese university context. The study explores non-English major undergraduates’ learning needs and problems and understandings of teaching activities as the basis for curriculum adaptation and upgrading. The study mainly addresses the following three research questions.

1. What are non-English major undergraduates’ understandings of outcomes and problems in business English learning at a Chinese university?

2. What are non-English major undergraduates' understandings of business English teaching activities at the Chinese university?
3. What curriculum adaptation can be suggested for business English courses and post-course practice at the Chinese university from non-English major undergraduates' perspectives?

## **4 Methodology**

The methodology of the study combines both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The study mainly uses questionnaires with open-ended questions which generate both quantitative information and “illustrative quotes.” They add more “richness” than purely quantitative methods. The open-ended questions in this study include both “short-answer questions” and “sentence completion questions” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2011, p. 37). The study also uses participant observation as a research instrument to complement the questionnaires with insider perspectives.

### ***4.1 Data Collection***

#### **4.1.1 Paper-Based Questionnaires**

Paper-based questionnaires consisting of six open-ended questions (see Appendix) were administered to all of the participants in the final session of the business English courses in May 2017. The questions were adapted from Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 143), Lynch (1996, p. 135) and Mackay and Palmer (1981, p. 27). The questions inquired about participants' views on the learning outcomes of business English courses, participants' perceptions of the business English teaching activities, the problems they encountered in business English learning, and their suggestions for adapting the business English curriculum and post-course practice. Participants provided their responses mostly in Chinese, which were translated into English by the researcher. Participants sometimes also used English in their responses.

#### **4.1.2 Participant Observation**

Participants' responses were based on their experiences in taking the business English courses offered in the university. Participants met the researcher once a week in class for 16 weeks in four months from February to May 2017. The researcher was also the lecturer of the business English courses. This enabled the implementation of the “complete participant observation” (Lynch, 1996, p. 121), which is used when the observer has an existing role in the observation setting, such

as a teacher gathering data in her own classroom. Complete participant observation is different from non-participant classroom observation. In non-participant classroom observation, the observer may not actively participate in the teaching process and is an outsider. For this study, complete participant observation, in which the teacher was observing the teaching process as an insider, was used with all participants in three classes during the course delivery process. In this complete participant observation setting, the researcher already had a role as a teacher. Through regular written and oral interactions with the participants in and outside class, the researcher could have unique insights on participants' learning experiences and problems or challenges they encountered.

## 4.2 Participants

Participant profiles are illustrated in Table 1. There are 147 participants in the study for both the paper-based questionnaires and participant observation. Over one-third are male and two-thirds are female. They enrolled in the programs of bioscience (21.8%), food science and engineering (23.8%), and Japanese (54.4%) in one public university in the east of China. Over 76% of the participants were in their second year and over 23% in their third year of program study when the study was conducted. Their average age is 20.1 years old. The age range is 18~23 years old. Around 70% of the participants passed College English Test-Band 4 (CET-4) and over 10% had already passed College English Test-Band 6 (CET-6) at the time of study who were mostly third year students from the Japanese programs. The test results showed that most of the participants were at intermediate level of English while the remaining participants were at beginner to high beginner level of English.

**Table 1** Participant profiles

Number of participants	147
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	49 (33.3%)
Female	98 (66.7%)
<i>Programs</i>	
Bioscience	32 (21.8%)
Food science and engineering	35 (23.8%)
Japanese	80 (54.4%)
<i>Years</i>	
Second year	113 (76.9%)
Third year	34 (23.1%)
Average age	20.1 years old
Age range	18–23 years old
Pass CET-4	102 (69.4%)
Pass CET-6	16 (10.9%)

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Participants provided their responses in Chinese and English. The Chinese responses were translated by researcher into English. A content analysis was conducted to analyze the participants' responses (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2011, p. 99). As most of the questions are short answer and sentence completion questions, the analytical process requires systematic process to avoid "rater subjectivity" (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2011, p. 99). The process includes four steps. In step one, the responses to specific questions were read and the broad themes were grouped. In step two, the frequencies of the main themes in the participants' responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaires and their percentages of the total number of participants were calculated (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). In step three, the frequencies and percentages of participants' responses were described in numerical tables, as shown in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. For responses to different questions, the number of themes shown in different tables ranges from 4 to 14. In step four, the illustrated quotes were chosen which best described participants' views on the business English learning outcomes and problems, understanding of teaching activities as well as their suggestions for curriculum adaptation and post-course practice upgrading to answer the three research questions. The insider views of researcher's participant observation playing the role of a teacher, centering on understanding the teaching process and the learning context, provide supplementary information to the questionnaire responses, which ensure the reliability and credibility of the results.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Non-English Major Undergraduates' Views on the Business English Learning Outcomes

Non-English major undergraduates' various views on the business English learning outcomes are summarized in Table 2. Participants indicated outcomes in vocabulary learning, writing skills development, business culture and knowledge development, collaboration and negotiation skills development which benefit their career.

**Table 2** Learner views on the learning outcomes

Learner views on the learning outcomes	Number of participants (Percentage)
Writing skills development	78 (53.1%)
Vocabulary learning	98 (66.7%)
Business culture and knowledge development	55 (37.4%)
Collaboration and negotiation skills development	11 (7.5%)
Career development	2 (1.4%)

### 5.1.1 Writing Skills Development

Over 50% of the participants highlighted the improvement in writing skills, such as in different formats of the business documents and international trade correspondence. Participant 1, who has passed CET-4 expressed her experience as follows:

We may have after-class assignments every time, and it's good for my writing ability and handwriting. If I don't write English for a long time, I may write with hand-shaking. (Participant 1, Food science and engineering)

It also includes the acquisition of the business terms and the ability to use them in the writing. Participant 2, who has also passed CET-4 described her results of writing skills development:

I have learned how to write emails. I have also learned some junction words and the common expressions to make more clear and coherent sentences. (Translation, Participant 2, Food science and engineering)

Moreover, it includes the production of international trade correspondence by using appropriate trade language. Participant 3, who has passed CET-4 expressed her view as follows:

I have learned how to use English in the international trade context according to international regulations. I have also learned the professional terms in different stages of international trade and this improves my writing ability. (Translation, Participant 3, Japanese)

### 5.1.2 Vocabulary Learning

Over 65% of the participants mentioned the acquisition of business English vocabulary such as the international business terminologies in the course learning. Participant 4, who passed CET-4 showed his experience as follows:

I've learned more meaningful and useful words, which also opened my eyes to let me know a bigger world, and get closer to foreign world. (Participant 4, Bioscience)

Participants also mentioned "the common words, such as those used in business interactions and the politeness expressions" (Translation, Participant 5, Japanese, CET-4). The vocabulary also covered "untouched words, such as international trade terms and fixed expressions linked with correspondence" (Translation, Participant 6, Japanese, CET-6).

### 5.1.3 Business Culture and Knowledge Development

Over 37% of the participants increased their understanding and knowledge of the business world. They gained insights into various aspects of the business and companies such as corporate cases and culture. Participant 7, who passed CET-4, had the following explanation:



The course learning has enabled me to understand more about corporate culture and improved my reading skills. I have learned a lot of new knowledge. (Translation, Participant 7, Food science and engineering)

Participants have also indicated the specific aspects of business knowledge gained through course learning, such as marketing and operation. Participants 8 and 9, who both passed CET-4, provided the following explanations:

I have understood many product and market knowledge. I have learned business words, corporate governance, production and advertising, etc. (Translation, Participant 8, Japanese)

I have learned many business related issues and gained further understanding about corporate operation. I have learned many professional words and cases. (Translation, Participant 9)

The knowledge participants gained could be as specific as preparing CV and participating in international trade. Participants 10 and 11, who passed CET-4, explained as follows:

I have learned about business organization structure and ways of product promotion. The CV writing has enabled me to have preliminary understanding about the English use in describing job needs and professional skills. (Translation, Participant 10, Japanese)

I have learned about professional words and knowledge about import and export. I have deeper understanding about insurance, especially international trade insurance. (Translation, Participant 11, Japanese)

#### **5.1.4 Collaboration and Negotiation Skills Development**

Over 7% of the participants also raised the soft skills development such as collaboration and negotiation through group cooperation with other members of the class. Participants 12 and 13 showed their understandings as follows:

I have learned how to have class discussion and cooperate with others. (Translation, Participant 12, Bioscience)

I have learned the importance of group cooperation and improved my confidence in public speaking. (Translation, Participant 13, Japanese)

#### **5.1.5 Career Development**

Two participants especially indicated the benefits to career development. Participant 14, who passed CET-4, explained as follows:

I have a better understanding about business related English. I think business English is close to the job reality and it will help with my future work. (Translation, Participant 14, Japanese)

## 5.2 *Non-English Major Undergraduates' Problems in Business English Learning*

Non-English major undergraduates' perceptions of problems in business English learning are summarized in Table 3. The greatest proportions of problems appeared in business vocabulary. Sentence structure and grammar followed which were in various forms. There were individual differences. General vocabulary also had less than 50% of the participants indicating problems in the learning process.

### 5.2.1 Sentence Structure

More than 61% of the participants indicated problems in understanding complex sentences, such as sentences with inverted structures and long sentences. Participants 15, 16, who both passed CET-4, described their problems:

It's very difficult. Sometimes I will mistake the subjects in some complex sentences. I do not know the meanings, which will lead to some misunderstandings. Sometimes I do not know some prepositional phrases, which will blur the meanings. (Translation, Participant 15, Bioscience, CET-4)

Many sentences are too long, worse still, they may have dashes. It's difficult for me to translate consistently. (Participant 16, Food science and engineering)

### 5.2.2 Grammar

More than 53% of the participants had problems in various aspects of grammatical use, including the tense, article use, complex sentence structure, collocation, and the use of preposition. Participant 17, who passed CET-4, added the specific examples:

I am confused with some grammar rules and do not understand well. (Translation, Participant 17, Bioscience)

A few participants indicated their lack of confidence in understanding the grammatical rules in the business English texts. Participant 18 who passed CET-4, and participant 19, who passed CET-6, described the problems:

My grammar foundation is bad. So it's hard for me to learn. (Participant 18, Food science and engineering)

**Table 3** Problems in business English learning

Problems in business English learning	Number of participants (Percentage)
Sentence structure	91 (61.9%)
Grammar	79 (53.7%)
Business vocabulary	112 (76.2%)
General vocabulary	72 (49.0%)

It's difficult to understand. I do not often use and will not use in the future. It really relies on self-discipline. (Translation, Participant 19, Japanese)

Participants also indicated the long sentence structure which made it even more difficult for comprehension. Participants 20 and 21, who passed CET-4, elaborated as follows:

There are too many clauses which make it difficult to translate and understand. (Translation, Participant 20, Japanese)

The business letters and samples in the book often use complex grammar. If I translate the sentence by myself, I will use unable. But the book will use inability to... I will seldom think of it. (Translation, Participant 21, Japanese)

### **5.2.3 Business Vocabulary**

Over 76% of the participants indicated various problems in learning business vocabulary, such as difficulties in memorizing and unfamiliarity with the meaning. The following participants, who passed CET-4, indicated the details of the problems.

I can't remember long time, we recite them just at that moment. We are too long to review them where we should read them from time to time. (Participant 22, Bioscience)

Some vocabulary is too complex. We do not use them in our daily life. It's difficult to memorize, especially in writing. It takes a long time to use these words. (Translation, Participant 23, Japanese)

### **5.2.4 General Vocabulary**

More than 48% of the participants had various problems in general vocabulary in both memorizing and understanding the ways of using the words. Participants 24 and 25, who passed CET-4, provided their understandings:

It's not clear in which context to use the words and the meanings under different contexts. (Translation, Participant 24, Japanese)

Many general English words have rich ways of use. I did not know before, such as the use of credit, clue, etc. (Translation, Participant 25, Japanese)

## ***5.3 Non-English Major Undergraduates' Understandings of Business English Teaching Activities***

Activities considered by participants as useful are described in Table 4. The largest group of participants mentioned the usefulness of in class group discussion and business document writing. They also raised reading, translation, and group presentations as useful activities. Speaking and listening were raised by a minor group of participants.

**Table 4** Useful activities

Useful activities	Number of participants (percentage)
Speaking publicly in class	2 (1.4%)
In class group discussion	49 (33.3%)
Writing (business documents and correspondence)	43 (29.3%)
Listening and dictation	7 (4.8%)
Reading and translation	29 (19.7%)
Group presentation	22 (15.0%)

### 5.3.1 In Class Group Discussion

More than 33% of the participants preferred in class group discussion as this provided opportunities for the speaking skills development and cultivating their teamwork spirit. Participant 26 and 27, who both passed CET-4, described various positive experiences in group discussion in the case study and role play activities in class:

I like the discussion with five partners in a group, because I can discuss the topic freely and optionally and know how others think. (Participant 26, Food science and engineering)

Group discussion. It promotes cooperation, when we discuss in English, it also promotes my spoken English. (Participant 27, Food science and engineering)

### 5.3.2 Writing

More than 29% of the participants considered the regular writing activities enhanced their written communication skills effectively. They could understand better the formats and the rules of business document including international trade correspondence. Participant 28, who passed CET-4 and participant 29, who passed CET-6, described their experiences:

The topic-based short article or report/resume writing is useful. Though it is difficult sometimes, this is very useful, especially to the students who do not spend after-class time to learn English. (Translation, Participant 28, Japanese)

I have learned how to write international trade correspondence and got familiar with the rules of Writing. (Translation, Participant 29, Japanese)

### 5.3.3 Reading and Translation

Over 19% participants indicated the effectiveness of reading and translation activities in class. Participant 30, who passed CET-4, explained as follows:

The in class translation practice can enable me to get familiar with the key vocabulary and the use of grammar. It can train my quick response ability in instant translation. (Translation, Participant 30, Japanese)

**Table 5** Challenging activities

Challenging activities	Number of participants (percentage)
Group discussion	13 (8.8%)
Listening and dictation	24 (16.3%)
Reading texts	96 (65.3%)
Writing	6 (4.1%)

### 5.3.4 Group Presentation

Around 15% of the participants preferred the group presentation activities in class, which enable them to practice the information search skill and collaboration with other group members. Participant 31, explained as follows:

Small group PPT presentation. Our topic is recruitment. The main content is about the recruitment news in China and abroad. While searching for news, I have developed my information search and screening ability. (Translation, Participant 31, Japanese)

Activities considered by participants as challenging are described in Table 5. The difficulties of the reading texts posed the greatest challenges to the participants. They had problems in understanding the texts themselves and the business background knowledge. Listening and dictation sometimes were also challenging. Group discussion and writing were also mentioned as challenging activities.

### 5.3.5 Group Discussion

Over 8% of the participants indicated the challenges in group discussion using English, due to lack of adequate target language proficiency and limited vocabulary. Participant 32 and 33, who both passed CET-4, explained as follows:

Some difficult discussion questions are challenging. I was not familiar with some vocabulary. So it was difficult to organize the language. (Translation, Participant 32, Food science and engineering)

Some business related units, such as group discussion in class on foreign trade and commercial topics. I actually did not understand it, so I did not know how to answer the question. (Translation, Participant 33, Food science and engineering)

### 5.3.6 Listening and Dictation

More than 16% of the participants indicated the challenges in listening and dictation exercises. The speed and clarity of the listening materials may create difficulties for them to catch up. Participant 34, who passed CET-4 and participant 35, provided their explanations:

Word dictation. It's hard to remember many new words without review. (Participant 34, Food science and engineering)

The listening exercises mostly were interviews. Different interviewee had different intentions. It was a bit difficult to catch the information. (Translation, Participant 35, Japanese)

### 5.3.7 Reading Texts

Over 65% of the participants indicated the challenges they encountered when learning the vocabulary and knowledge in the reading texts on various topics. The reasons included lack of adequate background knowledge such as payment with letter of credit and transportation in international trade and related working experiences as well as limited access in their daily life. Participant 36 and 37, who passed CET-4, explained their experiences:

I do not have work experiences to understand management. It only relies on the book and the teacher's explanation. (Translation, Participant 36, Japanese)

Letter of credit payment is far from our daily life. Even if there was Chinese translation, I still did not understand. (Translation, Participant 37, Japanese)

### 5.3.8 Writing

Over 4% of the participants indicated the challenges in writing activities. Participant 38 from Japanese program indicated that “writing letters are challenging. It combines knowledge and flexible use to compose a letter. It was not simply learning phrases to make them” (Translation, CET-4).

## 5.4 *Non-English Major Undergraduates' Suggestions on Business English Curriculum Adaptation*

A range of business English curriculum adaptation was raised by participants as shown in Table 6. Participants suggested enriching the teaching content and making the class more interesting by increasing teacher–student interaction, exposing the students with latest news and business knowledge. The business English curriculum can also be practical to address the recent concerns on English tests. The largest proportions of curriculum adaptation concentrate on introducing videos, business simulations, group presentations, writing instructions, and vocabulary inputs.

### 5.4.1 Videos and Additional Listening Materials

More than 22% of the participants indicated using more short videos in class to increase their understanding of business English content. Participant 39 and 40, who passed CET-4, provided their suggestions:

We should increase introductory videos on western business activities, typical cases and documentaries for successful career. (Translation, Participant 39, Japanese)

**Table 6** Business English curriculum adaptation

Business English curriculum adaptation	Number of participants (percentage)
Teacher–student interactions	4 (2.7%)
Videos and additional listening materials	33 (22.4%)
More group presentations	12 (8.2%)
Vocabulary and grammar explanations	13 (8.8%)
Additional reading materials	11 (7.5%)
More exercises for both in-class and after-class practice	4 (2.7%)
Speaking practices	4 (2.7%)
Business simulations and role plays	24 (16.3%)
Instruction on business English writing	9 (6.1%)
Content of English for academic study	1 (0.7%)
News-based content	2 (1.4%)
English test content, e.g., BEC, CET-4/6	4 (2.7%)
More interesting activities	3 (2.0%)
Business knowledge introductions	1 (0.7%)

We should increase the videos introducing the practical examples of businesses related to the course. (Translation, Participant 40, Japanese)

### 5.4.2 Business Simulations and Role Plays

Over 16% of the participants indicated the necessity of business simulations and role plays for better application of knowledge into practice. Participant 41 and participant 42, who passed CET-4, had the following examples:

Some dialogue-based class discussion can use role play, such as bidding and negotiation of contracts. (Translation, Participant 41, Bioscience)

The practical business English conversations in daily workplaces, such as how to greet foreign guests. We can have simulations for better understanding. (Translation, Participant 42, Japanese)

Participants also indicated that it would be necessary to “visit international trade companies and simulate international business transactions” (Translation, Participant 43, Japanese, CET-6).

### 5.4.3 Vocabulary and Grammar Explanations

Around 8.8% of the participants mentioned more thorough learning of international business vocabulary. Participant 44, who passed CET-4 and participant 45, who passed CET-6, provided their suggestions:

I think we should increase some words or useful sentences. (Participant 44, Bioscience)

We should have a summary of the key words and professional acronyms. (Translation, Participant 45, Japanese)

#### 5.4.4 Group Presentations

Over 8% of the participants recommended group presentations on various topics. Participant 46, who passed CET-4 and participant 47 provided their suggestions:

The group presentation can be on foreign culture, scenery, and company introductions. (Translation, Participant 46, Food science and engineering)

The group presentation can discuss a recent topic related to business. (Translation, Participant 47, Bioscience)

#### 5.4.5 Instruction on Business English Writing

Over 6% of the participants mentioned that more detailed guidance on writing should be given on specific tasks. Participant 48 and participant 49, who passed CET-4 provided their suggestions:

The teacher comment can enable us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each writing task. (Translation, Participant 48, Bioscience)

English business letter writing should be compared with Chinese letters. (Translation, Participant 49, Japanese)

### 5.5 *Non-English Major Undergraduates' Suggestions on Upgrading Business English Post-course Practice*

How business English post-course practice can be upgraded was suggested by participants from different aspects as shown in Table 7. The largest proportions of upgrading concentrate on enhancing connection with real world business practice and further communicative events after class. Participants also preferred watching short videos for better understanding of the business world. Other suggestions were on organizing competitions, doing exercises such as reading, guidance on writing, group presentations, more knowledge about the business background and vocabulary. One participant suggested travelling to another country as a way of post-course practice.

#### 5.5.1 Competitions

More than 1% of the participants suggested hosting competitions to enhance their business English competence after class. Participant 50, who passed CET-4, provided her view:

We can organize a match about speeches which can exercise our spoken language ability and increase our psychology quality. (Participant 50, Bioscience)



**Table 7** Business English post-course practice

Business English post-course practice	Number of participants (percentage)
Exercises	7 (4.8%)
Competitions	2 (1.4%)
Communicative events	13 (8.8%)
Writing guidance	3 (2.0%)
Videos and additional listening materials	12 (8.2%)
Connection with workplace practice	19 (12.9%)
Group presentations	5 (3.4%)
Travelling abroad	1 (0.7%)
Topic-based English reading materials	4 (2.7%)
Vocabulary learning	1 (0.7%)
Background knowledge introductions	2 (1.4%)

### 5.5.2 Connection with Workplace Practice

More than 12% of the participants recommended enhancing connection with the practical business world and improving their practical business ability. These include designing simulations of business communication activities. Participant 51 and 52, who passed CET-4, provided their suggestions:

We can join in specific business communication and receptions. Relevant lectures should be offered. (Translation, Participant 51, Bioscience)

We can have inquiry-based topics to enable students to seek topics autonomously and carry out English practice. (Translation, Participant 52, Food science and engineering)

Participants also raised some methods to connect with the workplaces. These included “inviting international trade companies to campus for lecturing, so as to have use knowledge with hands-on experiences” (Translation, Participant 53, Japanese, CET-4). Participants also suggested “visiting the companies” (Translation, Participant 54, Japanese, CET-4) and “having some trade correspondence exchanges with companies to use the knowledge in practice and accumulate some experience” (Translation, Participant 55, Japanese, CET-6).

### 5.5.3 Communicative Events

More than 8% of the participants suggested various communicative events after class such as having a group gathering. Participant 56 and participant 57, who passed CET-6, provided their suggestions:

We should have more communication and exchanges, such as performance and role play, etc. (Translation, Participant 56, Bioscience)

Students can check some examples and practical use samples after class for further communication. (Translation, Participant 57, Japanese)

#### **5.5.4 Videos and Additional Listening Materials**

More than 8% of the participants still recommended various kinds of short videos and additional listening materials in their after-class practice. Participant 58 and 59, who passed CET-4, provided further recommendations:

Videos about how people have business transactions in their practical life. (Translation, Participant 58, Japanese)

Business negotiation related videos can broaden students' horizon and enrich the course. (Translation, Participant 59, Japanese)

#### **5.5.5 Background Knowledge Introductions**

Two participants suggested more background knowledge introductions be given such as “the process of international trade” (Translation, Participant 60, Japanese, CET-6).

By participant observation and reflection, the researcher also recognized the limitations of classroom-based teaching and recommended models to cultivate students' practical abilities beyond the classroom. This could be partnering with local companies to better understand the requirements of the real business world and for organizing possible onsite visits. In addition, the business English curriculum should incorporate more student-centered activities, such as project-based learning and to involve students in various stages of the curriculum, including course development, material and methodology selection, and evaluation (Nunan, 2013).

## **6 Discussion**

### ***6.1 Non-English Major Undergraduates' Understandings of Outcomes and Problems in Business English Learning at the Chinese University***

For non-English major undergraduates' understandings of business English learning outcomes, more than two-thirds of the participants mentioned gains in vocabulary learning. They also had development in writing skills, business culture and knowledge, collaboration and negotiation skills and career potential (see Table 2). However in learning business vocabulary, participants still had various problems. This study also has revealed participants' perceptions of learning problems in sentence structure, grammar and general vocabulary (see Table 3). As two-thirds of the participants passed CET-4, they had already had intermediate level of English. However, it implies

that due to the language proficiency limitations, language learning problems occurred in various aspects of the course. Moreover, most of the participants who passed CET-6 were more concerned with further development in international trade knowledge and practice than the key language skills. Donna (2000, p. 126) indicates that for developing specific skills in business English courses, it is critical to consider “students’ abilities” to complete the tasks. The business English courses should especially cultivate students’ competence to use grammar and vocabulary appropriately in different business contexts.

## ***6.2 Non-English Major Undergraduates’ Understandings of business English Teaching Activities at the Chinese University***

For non-English major undergraduates’ understandings of business English teaching activities at the Chinese university, this study has revealed that the participants recommended communicative teaching approaches, such as group discussion and presentations as useful activities. They also suggested traditional language input and output activities such as writing business documents, reading, and translating the business English texts (see Table 4). Participants considered the reading texts as the most challenging activities, followed by listening and dictation, group discussion, and writing (see Table 5). In business English courses, Ellis and Johnson (2002) advocate that the teachers have to be flexible to accommodate “learner’s requirements” (p. 209). This study suggests that the business English teachers have to meet learners’ needs in designing teaching activities.

## ***6.3 Curriculum Adaptation for Business English Courses and Post-course Practice at the Chinese University from Non-English Major Undergraduates’ Perspectives***

For business English curriculum adaption, the largest number of participants suggested introducing videos and additional listening materials (see Table 6). Harmer (2015) suggests the “reversed pyramid” of learning resources which range from “blackboard, whiteboard, cassette to videos and computers” (p. 191). It can be seen that videos are recognized as important resources for language learning. In addition, another large group of participants suggested business simulations and role plays. This is in line with the “other way up” pyramid of Harmer (2015) which suggests that the language learning resources should be connected with “real life and people” (p. 192). Meanwhile, the business English courses often adopt communicative teaching approaches such as simulation and role play, which are differentiated. Role play requires the learners’ awareness of the tasks while simulation requires full immersion into the scenes (Ellis & Johnson, 2002).

For business English post-course practice, the largest number of participants suggested linking with workplaces and having more communicative events (see Table 7). Previous studies by Yu (2015) and Wu (2015) also suggest incorporating the business practice elements into the curriculum. The business practice can enhance the authenticity of the course content, which brings students closer to the business world.

## 7 Conclusion

This study presents an example of learning needs analysis research using questionnaires and participant observation to investigate 147 non-English major undergraduates' understanding of outcomes and problems in business English learning in the Chinese university context. It also explores and interprets their understanding of teaching activities, as well as suggestions for adapting the business English curriculum and post-course practice. The results of the study suggest that business English curriculum should focus on addressing the learning problems in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and reading texts while recognizing the various benefits for improvement in communication skills and business and culture knowledge. The design of teaching activities should be based on student needs. The communicative teaching approaches such as business simulations, role plays, group presentations and discussion are recommended. The business English curriculum adaptation should empower learners by introducing approaches which develop practical business skills such as project-based learning. By partnering with businesses, more communicative events should be initiated as post-course practice to bridge the gap between classroom and workplace.

In theory, the study provides a learning needs analysis research case in the Chinese higher education context. This study informs the current business English teaching practice by providing real life evidence for curriculum reform in both China and worldwide contexts. In policy, the results of the study help to refine the business English program benchmark for different contexts. Though the study is conducted in only one university in China, the research process can be replicated in other cultural settings. Future research should further explore the possibility of implementing student-centered approaches in business English curriculum adaptation and investigate their potential benefits to professional business skills development.

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## Appendix

Adapted from Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 143), Lynch (1996, p. 135) and Mackay and Palmer (1981, p. 27)

Please list the outcomes of the course for you personally.

Describe an activity that you found to be useful and explain why.

What do you think should be added to the course you are taking now?

Your problems in this course (text and specific exercises) where especially related to: (please specify the difficulties within each category)

- (a) Sentence structure \_\_\_\_\_
- (b) Grammatical forms \_\_\_\_\_
- (c) The meaning of business vocabulary \_\_\_\_\_
- (d) The meaning of common English words \_\_\_\_\_
- (e) Others, please specify. \_\_\_\_\_

Which unit/exercise seemed challenging?

What would you suggest for follow-up to this course?

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