

WORKPLACE ENGLISH COMMUNICATION NEEDS AND ESP CURRICULUM: AN ANALYSIS OF MISALIGNMENT

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Abstract: This study aims to examine English communication needs at workplace contexts in comparison with the current English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum at Hue Industrial College. For this purpose, a mix-method approach was employed for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The questionnaire survey and interviews were administered with the employees from eleven corporations. The findings reveal workplace communication of English as required by the employees majoring in business administration (BuAdmin) and yield some mismatches between the current ESP curriculum and the current needs. This comparison reveals a valid proposal for a new ESP curriculum of the setting under research. The study would bring more insights into the field of teaching English for professional purposes.

Key words: Curriculum, English for specific purposes (ESP), English language needs, workplace communication

1. Introduction

The demands for learning and teaching English for workplace purposes have been increasing rapidly in the era of rapid integration. Employees in almost all areas of specialization need to possess a decent level of English proficiency to communicate well at work.

However, it is reported in most studies that the English proficiency of labour forces, especially in non-English speaking countries such as Thailand, China, South Korea has not met the demands of the internationalized workplace (Hart-Rawung, 2008, p. 10). This limitation has urged countries to highlight English for workplace use as a dramatically urgent need. Attention has been paid to the teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) much more than ever.

While it is really essential to enhance learners' proficiency in general English, their professional communication needs should be satisfied in the English programs so that they can keep up with the trends of globalization and the market. In this respect, the current research aims to identify the actual needs in terms of English for communication at work. Then, the study examines the mismatch between the HUEIC's current ESP curriculum and the English communication needs at workplace contexts so that a vocational English curriculum can be designed in alignment to the industry needs.

2. Theoretical background

The rapid development of international business and the highly-required labor market have brought about the growth of ESP and created more demands for the ESP program development. It is likely inefficient or inadequate if language teaching and curriculum design do not consider particular groups of students (Long, 2005). As commented earlier by other authors

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(Jordan, 1997; Holliday & Cooke, 1982; Richterich & Chancerel, 1977), context influences the teaching and learning of ESP. On this issue, Basturkmen (2010, p. 8) confirms that ESP concentrates on when, where and why learners need the language either in study or in workplace contexts. In this sense, decisions about what to teach and how to teach are specified by descriptions of how language is used in the learners' work or study contexts. On this matter, Huhta, Vogt, Johnson, Tulkki and Hall (2013) suggested that a need analysis should identify the communicative tasks and the discourse that learners have to deal with in their future profession.

Additional factors to consider when looking at the context of teaching and learning are related to the educational environment, called situation analysis (Richards, 2001) or constraints analysis. In this study, the current English curriculum was taken into accounts to examine its misalignment to the graduates' target situations of using English. This aimed to explore possible solutions to the teaching of professional English to vocational students.

3. Research methodology

The researcher adopted a mixed-methods strategy of both quantitative and qualitative methods, which is based on questionnaire survey and interviews. The research instruments were designed with reference to a professional profile of business administration, the basic purpose of which was to describe the language and communication needs for workplace context at a level of detail sufficient to create an effective ESP training program or vocationally oriented language course. Based on the questionnaire information, interview schedules were developed for further survey purposes.

One hundred and twenty-six BuAdmin employees from 11 corporates were involved in this study. The questionnaires and interviews were devised to explore the employees' actual English communication needs at work and their suggestions towards the ESP curriculum design for BuAdmin students at college.

4. Findings and analysis

English language requirements

According to the recruitment information from the employers investigated, the employers identified English as one of the prioritized standards in recruitment. Though English criteria in these companies differed, the employers generally expected their employees to have English competence at certain levels that can help them in their job contexts. A common requirement was that the employees should be able to communicate efficiently in English. This was understandable since most corporations in Vietnam realized the challenges on entering the new era of integration (Trung, 2016; Viet, 2015; Vietnam News, 2016). They had to possess skillful labor forces in response to the higher demands of international cooperation. Particularly, English played a key role for mutual understanding and collaboration among business partners. In recognition of this increasing demand, English has been chosen as the unique foreign language and a compulsory subject to all learners in the HUEIC language programs. Most importantly, the HUEIC Project of Foreign Language set level 3 (CEFR-B1) as the college graduates' English language standard. While it is really essential to enhance the students'

proficiency in general English, their professional communication needs should be satisfied in the ESP program so that they can keep up with the trends of globalization and the market.

English communicative activities at work

Concerning the actual use of English in BuAdmin workplace settings, a question in the questionnaire was raised using the five-point scale with 1 as *never* to 5 for *daily* to elicit the answers. The data in Table 1 showed the mean score of this cluster centering around 3 points (M=2.47). This means that the BuAdmin employees tended to use English for BuAdmin workplace activities. The data revealed that the two most frequent activities were *reading and using information from professional sources* (M=3.23) and *writing English emails and business* (M=2.88).

Table 1. English communicative activities at work

Communicative activities	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading and using information from professional sources	126	1	5	3.23	.931
Writing e-mails and business letters	126	1	5	2.88	1.336
Reading/writing invoices and certificates	126	1	5	2.40	1.259
Telephoning	126	1	5	2.49	1.144
Negotiating	126	1	5	2.15	1.051
Making oral presentations, demonstrations and product descriptions	126	1	5	2.10	1.072
Reading and writing reports and summaries	126	1	5	2.64	1.120
Reading/writing contracts	126	1	5	2.66	1.247
Writing memos and minutes	126	1	5	2.68	1.184
Writing CV's, job applications	126	1	5	2.27	1.046
Social talks, meeting clients and business associates	126	1	5	2.53	1.025
Other activities/situations	126	1	5	1.70	.879
Mean of cluster	126	1	5	2.47	.839

The table above indicated that emails and business letters were the most frequently writing tasks in the BuAdmin profession. The BuAdmin employees working in the section of foreign customer services answered in the interviews that they often dealt with their work through emails and tended to read and write English emails every day. A survey study on written business communications conducted by Louhiala-Salminen (1996) revealed that mails and telefaxes were the most common mediums of communication. In 2004, Grosse investigating Mexican business executives' English use reported email and phone calls as the most frequently used communication channels. In comparison with these studies, the use of emails in the current research was still popular while the use of fax tended to reduce.

As shown from Table 1, the mean scores around 2.6 indicated the participants' less frequent access to reports and summaries, contracts, memos and minutes. The texts related to orders and purchasing such as invoices and certificates were less frequently proceeded by the respondents ($M=2.40$). In addition, the low mean scores implied that the participants rarely used English for presentations, demonstrations and product descriptions and for negotiating (2.10 and 2.15 respectively). Using English for business meetings (e.g. presentation, negotiation, briefing, conference, seminar and social meetings) was not considered as a frequent task in BuAdmin jobs at the companies surveyed.

Some employees also mentioned other situations at work ($M=1.70$) in which they were involved in English such as participating in the English club (at Company 3), using English-medium software in banks and travelling. However, those listing these items accounted for a low percentage (6.3%). Meanwhile, CVs and job applications were considered the least popular documents that the respondents had access to ($M=2.27$). It was true since almost all the companies involved in this study did not require the candidates' minimal English proficiency certificates with their CVs and application forms written in English. This questionnaire result was relatively contrary to the interview data while the respondents suggested that BuAdmin graduates should know how to write English CVs and application forms. In their opinions, this would help them in the employment outcomes.

As can be seen from Table 1, these English business tasks involved all four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The skills tended to be used equally through reading and using information from different English sources related to BuAdmin job, writing English e-mails and business letters, oral presentations and telephoning with foreign clients, business partners and employers. However, all the four macro language skills as well as business English subskills have not been paid equal attention to in the current ESP curriculum at HUEIC. The English program for BuAdmin students concentrates on vocabulary, grammar and reading skills while other language skills and areas have been widely neglected. This is actually a common problem in the EFL education in Vietnam and ESP teaching is not an exception. Most ESP curricula in Vietnamese universities often concentrate on vocabulary, grammar and macro language skills (Duong, Bui & Bui, 2005; Nguyen, 2015; Vu, 2015) while neglecting training students on professional skills. This reality implies a dramatic change in teaching ESP to vocational students.

English communicative topics at work

The five-point scale with 1 as *never* to 5 for *daily* was used to elicit the frequency of the employees' involvement in the English communicative topics at work. The data in Table 2 indicated that the most popular topics in BuAdmin profession were *work and jobs* ($M=2.86$), *sales and selling*, *marketing*, *production* and *finance*. These are, by chance, the main professional areas of BuAdmin job. Some other professional topics (e.g. statistics, stock market and international economics) were rarely mentioned in BuAdmin profession ($M<2$).

Table 2. English communicative topics at work

English communicative topics	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
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Work and jobs	126	1	5	2.86	1.136
Marketing	126	1	5	2.42	1.083
Finance	126	1	4	2.30	.974
Human resources	126	1	4	2.10	.950
Production	126	1	5	2.40	1.111
Sales/selling	126	1	5	2.54	1.122
Strategy	126	1	5	2.10	1.034
Quality	126	1	5	2.32	1.078
Brands	126	1	5	2.23	1.052
Stock market	126	1	4	1.70	.888
International economics	126	1	4	1.79	.897
Management	126	1	4	1.94	.901
Business operations	126	1	5	2.1	.985
Statistics	126	1	4	1.84	.889
Others	126	1	5	1.56	.844
Mean of cluster	126	1	5	2.47	.939

The questionnaire findings coincided with the interview data when the five content teachers mentioned *finance, sales/selling, production and human resources* as the main issues in the BuAdmin profession among several content areas reported in the interviews (e.g. education, cultures, people and shopping, marketing, finance, human resources, production, business operations, trades and sales, strategy, quality, brands and statistics).

Noticeably, *stock market, international economics and statistics* were rarely discussed at the workplace. The mean scores of these items were below 2, indicating the low frequency of BuAdmin employees’ engagement in these topics. It was also approved by the content teachers that the communicative topics related to *stock market, international economics and statistics* were rarely conducted in English at the workplace.

It can be inferred that BuAdmin graduates are likely to engage in basic communicative issues at work such as sales, marketing, production and finance. The interviewees recommended that an effective ESP curriculum needed to include these topics since BuAdmin graduates would frequently be involved in these communicative matters in future workplaces. However, these themes have not been sufficiently included in the HUEIC’s ESP curriculum (see Table 3).

Table 3. The current ESP curriculum for BuAdmin students

Module	Themes	Objectives
1	Introductions	Introducing yourself and others
2	Work and leisure	Talking about work and leisure
3	Problems	Describing problems where you live
4	Sales	Presenting and buying a product
5	People	Negotiating: dealing with problems
6	Markets	Participating in discussions
7	Companies	Describing companies
8	Cultures	Identifying problems and agreeing action
9	Jobs	Interview skills

From the findings, there exists a mismatch between what the BuAdmin graduates actually need in terms of English for BuAdmin and what they have been prepared for at HUEIC. The

issues *Production* and *Finance* and professional language skills such as telephoning, reading/writing emails, memos, minutes tend to be untouched in the ESP curriculum. This fact is understandable. In the position of an English teacher at this college for such a long time, I have found that three essential steps in their development, namely environment analysis, needs assessment and course evaluation (Nation & Macalister, 2010) have never been conducted to check if the ESP courses address the social demands, students' professional needs and learning needs of English for vocational purposes.

In recent years, the ESP programs at HUEIC including ESP curriculum for BuAdmin students follow a semester-based system which includes fifteen-week semesters with 3 credits. Each credit is equivalent to 15 teacher-led hours. The curriculum and syllabus with reference to the target learning outcome achievement are determined by the program designers and administrators, including the head of Training Department, the head of Foreign Language Department and English teachers. No analysis of students' target needs and learning needs has been found in the language program development. In order to enable graduates to attain minimal proficiency, the teachers are expected to apply learners-centered approach in classrooms. In reality, communicative language teaching (CLT) has not been applied frequently. Though the teachers were well aware of the benefits of CLT, they failed to apply it to HUEIC English classes. Students' low proficiency levels and big classes have caused the hesitation in practicing productive skills, especially speaking. Little time has been reserved for the students to utilize the target language productively.

From the afore-mentioned, there exists a number of problems in the current English curriculum at HUEIC. It is anticipated that the mismatch between the current ESP curriculum and their target needs and learning needs might result in the students' low English proficiency and limited communication skills.

5. Conclusion and implications

The above analysis indicated the misalignment between the HUEIC language curriculum and the BuAdmin graduates' language demands for workplace settings. While the predetermined ESP curriculum for BuAdmin students heavily impacted the theory-based teaching practices, language used at work illuminated functional and communicative priorities. This mismatch implied considerations for the development of an industry-oriented ESP program and the adjustment of methodology in alignment to the students' English communication needs in their future workplace. The workplace-oriented needs analysis was considered as a valuable channel and essential starting point to develop syllabus and choose teaching approaches. The employers' expectations and employees' needs regarding English for workplace communication could help ESP designers and teachers anticipate what specialized content knowledge and language functions are most necessary to meet the graduates' communication at work. Then, the actual language practices can be conducted appropriately.

In addition, the research suggested a change in the methodology. This study found out that the classroom approaches adopted by ESP teachers were generally inappropriate. Thus, they were advised to employ communicative approach for classroom practices. For this, interactive activities such as pair-work and group-work tasks were advantageous. Interactions between

pairs and groups of students were thought by the researcher to be important in the development of linguistic and communicative competence. Therefore, ESP teachers were recommended to adopt these classroom techniques and activities.

In a word, in order to enhance the students' English proficiency and prepare them with professional English communicative skills appropriate to the current globalized context, developing a new ESP curriculum in alignment with the students' workplace communication needs is worthwhile and in need of promotion in the current educational setting.

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NHU CẦU GIAO TIẾP TIẾNG ANH VÀ CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH: PHÂN TÍCH NHỮNG ĐIỂM KHÔNG PHÙ HỢP

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu nhu cầu sử dụng tiếng Anh đối chiếu với chương trình tiếng Anh chuyên ngành hiện nay tại trường Cao đẳng Công nghiệp Huế. Để đạt được mục đích này, tác giả kết hợp phương pháp định tính và định lượng. Đối tượng nghiên cứu gồm những nhân viên làm việc tại 11 doanh nghiệp, tham gia khảo sát bằng bảng hỏi và trả lời phỏng vấn. Kết quả chỉ ra nhu cầu giao tiếp tiếng Anh cấp thiết đối với công việc quản trị kinh doanh, đồng thời cũng cho thấy những điều bất hợp lý giữa chương trình tiếng Anh chuyên ngành với nhu cầu đó. Việc đối chiếu này tạo cơ sở thực tiễn cho việc xây dựng chương trình tiếng Anh chuyên ngành mới phù hợp với bối cảnh nghiên cứu. Đề tài này cũng đóng góp tích cực vào việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh đáp ứng nhu cầu công việc.

Từ khóa: Chương trình học, tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, nhu cầu sử dụng tiếng Anh, giao tiếp tại nơi làm việc

NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN VÀ CHIẾN THUẬT SỬ DỤNG TRONG KHI NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN