

ENGLISH LEARNING NEEDS OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS: FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN ESP CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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Ngày nhận bài: 22/12/2016; ngày hoàn thiện: 15/1/2017; ngày duyệt đăng: 15/3/2017

Abstract

Students majoring in Business Administration (hereafter BA) need to maintain good English competence in response to today's rapid globalization. This study aimed to investigate the BA learners' needs in learning English as an approach to ESP curriculum. With this objective, the research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data from 92 BA students and 8 ESP teachers at Hue Industrial College (HUEIC). The data collected from the questionnaires were processed by SPSS software while the interviews were analyzed according to the responses provided. The findings implied significant factors to consider in the ESP curriculum design for students of BA: (i) speaking and listening should be prioritized; (ii) workplace-oriented skills such as telephoning, writing emails, reading business texts and interviewing should be included; (iii) content-based and skill-integrated materials should be used or developed and (iv) interactive and project-based activities were suggested.

Key words: needs analysis, materials development, English for specific purposes (ESP), language curriculum

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the world-wide economics creates high requirements of effective English education for professional purposes in most countries. Learners with better professional language competences will have more chances for job application and promotion. This reality leads to an increasing demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course development. The literature review reveals that studying learner needs is the very beginning step and serves as a backbone in the process of an ESP course development. This paper reports a part of questionnaire and interview findings in a needs analysis study of English for BA students in the Vietnamese context. The participation of 92 students majoring in BA and 8 ESP teachers at HUEIC helped the research capture the overall picture of English learning needs and informed prominent components in the development of a new English curriculum for students of BA. The survey concentrated on exploring learners' needs in terms of purposes of English learning, needs for language skills, preference for learning approach, ESP topics and materials. The study ended with

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pedagogical implications for efficient and effective ESP course preparation at vocational colleges.

2. Literature review

According to Dudley-Evans's definition (1998), ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions on content and method are dependent on learners' reasons for learning, i.e. students' needs of the target language learning. In this sense, studying and analyzing the specific learning needs of a particular learner group plays a prerequisite role in the ESP course development. Advocating the importance of needs analysis, Kaepet (2009, p. 209) stated that 'no ESP courses should be conducted without needs analysis, be it formal or informal'. It is probably no exaggeration to say that needs analysis serves as a backbone in an effective process of ESP program development.

Regarding the current study, an English curriculum for vocational students was designed in accordance with the learners' needs. Due to the current need at the researcher's institution, this sample program was devised on BA. This major was chosen for the course development since the BA education, at HICOL, has been taught based on predetermined program with institutional needs analysis, in which ESP curriculum is not an exception. Institutional ESP curricula face strong criticism from critical educators such as Tollefson (1989; 1991) and Auerbach (1995) (cited in Jasso-Aguilar, 1999, p.28). Taken this into accounts, this study was conducted in orientation to the development of an English curriculum for BA students.

3. Research methodology

To address the present needs at the researcher's college, this research focuses on investigating Business Administration students' needs in learning English for workplace use, the researcher resorted to a mixed-methods strategy of both quantitative and qualitative method, which is based on questionnaire survey and interviews. Noticeably, the research instruments are designed with reference to the CEF professional profile of business administration. The questionnaires were framed based on CEF professional profile of BA but with essential adaptation, 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 programme or vocationally oriented language course (Huhta et al, 2013, p.14). Based on the questionnaire information, interview schedules were developed for further survey purposes.

The questionnaires were grouped into three main parts: (i) participants' personal information, (ii) their perception about English communication needs and (iii) participants' suggestions towards the ESP curriculum design for BA students at college. The first section consisting of 7 questions concerned participants' personal information, their experience and backgrounds in learning English. The second part of the tool dealt with the student's needs

of English communication in BA. The last part of BA questionnaires including questions 15 to 20 addresses participants' suggestions for an effective ESP course for BA students in terms of focus, methodology, materials, testing and assessment and facilities.

For the purpose of triangulation with various participants' viewpoints, the interviews were conducted with BA students, ESP teachers and BA teachers. In the interviews with the learners, they were asked about their purposes of English learning, self-evaluation of language ability, difficulties in using English, perceptions of English courses at HICOL, English language skills needed for their future job, preferences of content areas and learning activities and expectations towards the ESP curriculum development. In the interviews with the ESP teachers, they were asked about their professional training in GE and ESP and perceptions of BA students' English ability, the ESP courses that they were in charge and the extent to which they thought these courses could help BA students in performing their future jobs. The next items involved the difficulties in teaching English to BA students, students' language skills needed as perceived by the ESP lecturers, common English communication situations and their suggestions of content areas, methodology, testing and assessment. The interviews with subject-specific teachers concerned their perception about BA students' learning needs and the extent BA learners needed English for work, advantages and challenges that BA graduates could get from the frequent use of English in workplace, English language skills needed, kinds of tasks involving English use, common English communication situations and their suggestions of content areas, methodology, testing and assessment in the new ESP curriculum for BA students.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' English learning experience

Questions one to seven in the student questionnaires were designed to obtain a profile of the sample. Each item in this cluster was analyzed by the *Frequency Test* to give the percentages. According to the findings (See appendix A), of the total 92 BA students who participated the survey, 57 were female and 35 were male. This revealed the dominating role of female in the field. Among 92 respondents, nearly half of them were junior students, 23.9% sophomores and 27.2% freshmen. The data suggested that the majority of students (approximately 80%) studied English as long as over 6 years. The students following general English (GE) courses accounted for the highest number (77.2%) and those attending ESP courses were 40 out of 92 participants. This difference was understandable since the ESP courses at HICOL were arranged in the third semesters for sophomore students while freshmen studied GE in the first two semesters. Only a small number of students followed other English courses such as communicative English courses and English language skills at English language centers.

4.2. Purposes of learning English

In order to explore BA students' purposes of learning English, the five-point scale

with 1 as *strongly disagree* to 5 for *strongly agree* was employed. Table 1 showed that the mean score of this cluster was around 3.54, heading for 4 point. This number indicated that the participants expressed their approval with the items listed.

Table 1. Mean score of cluster 1

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean score of cluster 1	92	1.60	5.00	3.5446	.55100
Valid N (listwise)	92				

From the findings (see appendix B), it can be seen that students of BA had various English learning purposes. The majority of them learnt English to translate English-medium sources (M=4.18), to conduct correspondence for workplace aims and to read professional materials. Noticeably, several students expressed their learning purpose of passing the exams at college. This fact indicated that the examination-oriented learning remained prioritized at HUEIC and this proved that the current English program was test-oriented. In addition, few students learnt English to participate in English-based events such as forums, conferences and meetings (M=3.17) and few of them considered English learning as an entertainment (M=3.14). On this matter, five in nine teachers maintained that the students rarely attended the English-medium conferences held at HUEIC. These events seemed to be beyond the students' English competence. Sadly, they went to the English-based meetings just under the college's pressure. Heading for the future workplace contexts, the students were not well aware of the necessity of English use for conference purposes.

Interestingly, the participants expressed their highest agreement with the point that they learnt English for communication (M=4.18) and job application (M=4.13). The ESP teachers disclosed that the majority of students realized the benefits of good English proficiency in daily communication and future job application. This awareness urged several students to make their best in learning GE and ESP as well.

It can be said that there are multiple reasons why BA students want to learn GE and ESP. Therefore, their needs have to be taken into account in the process of English program development in accordance with their learning purposes and the college's orientation.

4.3. Students' needs for language skills

Tables 2 and 3 described the students' needs for language skills to communicate. The five-point scale with 1 as *strongly disagree* to 5 for *strongly agree* was employed for question 9 to examine the BA learners' perception on this matter. The mean score of this cluster was approximately 4 (M=3.82), indicating that the participants needed all four macro language skills for communication.

Table 2. Mean score of cluster 2

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean score of cluster 2	92	2.00	5.00	3.8288	.66499
Valid N (listwise)	92				

The results of needs analyses showed that speaking skills was emphasized as the most needed skills to communicate well. This was illustrated by the highest mean score (M=4.02). Listening skill was also required as much as speaking skill as the mean score of this item was approximately equal to that of listening. The students’ needs coincided with the workplace use of language skills by BA staff. Prior to this learning needs study, the researcher had conducted the situation analysis whose findings revealed that speaking and listening were the most frequently used in their professional practice. Accordingly, BA employees often employed English with clients and business partners for employment purposes such as dealing with requests and complaints, product descriptions and demonstration, telephoning, meeting clients and business associates; small talk, etc. On this matter, the content teachers commented that students of BA should be proficient in speaking and listening skills to function well in their future job. They explained that BA staff had to comprehend different kinds of Englishes spoken by their native and non-native English employers, managers, clients, partners and colleagues. Unexpectedly, these two language skills were not paid enough attention in the current English learning and teaching at HICOL. As disclosed by the majority of the ESP teacher interviewees, reading and writing tended to occupy much more time in the teaching of GE and ESP at this college. The students also needed these two skills for communication (M=3.75 and M=3.65 respectively) but listening and speaking were preferred by most of the students (illustrated by higher mean scores in Table 3 below).

Table 3. Students’ needs for language skills

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Listening skills	92	1	5	3.89	.818
Speaking skills	92	2	5	4.02	.711
Reading skills	92	1	5	3.75	.820
Writing skills	92	1	5	3.65	.882
Valid N (listwise)	92				

As exposed by the BA teachers, reading and writing were not used as frequently as listening and speaking skills in the BA profession. However, it is necessary to notice that the use of language skills depends on the tasks that a BA employee is in charge of. This means that those involved in sales and marketing sections tend to need listening and speaking more than those in production and human resources departments.

A paradox was that while students needed listening and speaking for communication these were considered the most difficult skills and the ones they had the most problems. Therefore, it was advised by all of the content and ESP teachers surveyed that the students should be trained on these language skills more than reading and speaking skills for the sake of daily English communication and for future workplace contexts.

It is true that BA students will work in all the four main sections of BA profession, namely sales, marketing, production and human resources. Therefore, the English curriculum needs to prepare the BA students sufficiently with all kinds of language skills but more emphasis should be placed on speaking and listening skills.

4.4. Frequent English communication situations

Table 4 illustrates the most frequent English communication situations that BA students engaged in. The five-point scale from 1 as *never* to 5 for *daily* was employed. The findings revealed that the students were most involved in finding and using information from different English-based sources. This was illustrated by the highest mean score of 3.01. In the meanwhile, students rarely engaged in other types of communicative events in English such as telephoning, writing emails, academic essays and reports, presentations, fulfilling job applications and CV's. This was showed by the mean scores of these items around 2, i.e. 'seldom' scale. This fact was understandable since the students failed to acknowledge the demands for using English for employment purposes such as products presentations and demonstrations, writing job applications and CV's, writing work-related emails and telephoning in workplace contexts. However, when being asked for information for the situation analysis, the employees working in BA field reported that they usually made phone calls in English to do their tasks at workplace such as dealing with customers' requests and complaints, recording clients' orders and marketing the corporates' products. In addition, many of BA staff added that writing English e-mails or business letters were very common in their job. In addition, it is suggested that BA students should frequently practice writing job applications and CV's and interview role-plays in English in order to meet the foreign corporates' requirements of recruitment.

Table 4. Frequent English communication situations

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Finding and using information from different English sources	92	1	5	3.01	1.032
Writing English e-mails	92	1	5	1.73	.878
Telephoning in English	92	1	4	1.59	.787
Writing English essays and reports	92	1	5	1.78	.924
Writing job applications and CV's in English	92	1	5	1.73	.927
Presentations in English	92	1	5	1.83	.945
Social situations (meeting friends, teachers, supervisors; small talk, etc.)	92	1	5	2.20	.997
Other English communicative situations	92	1	5	1.60	.813
Valid N (listwise)	92				

Seen from Table 4, the BA students were not involved in English-based social situations very often as the mean score of this item was only 2.20. Actually, talking with friends, teachers, supervisors and the like were seldom conducted in English inside or outside classrooms as informed by the majority of the students. The BA learners exposed that they felt unconfident in their English competence and then avoided speaking English in classes or in public. The language teachers also shared this idea, confirming that most of HICOL students were not good at English and they had no command of language skills such as listening and speaking. Therefore, it was understandable when the students did not participate in English-based social situations frequently.

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that the ESP curriculum for BA students should be developed in orientation to meeting their needs and provide them with English for workplace contexts. More specifically, reading professional materials, telephoning, conducting business correspondence, fulfilling job applications in English were advisable in the ESP program for BA students.

4.5. Preference for ESP materials

Question 17 in the questionnaire revealed the students' expectations of ESP materials. The responses were grouped into seven main categories and the five-scale from 1 as *strongly disagree* to 5 for *strongly agree* was used. The data indicated that there was a consistency in the students' response when they shared agreement with the contents suggested (see appendix C). In general, the learners wanted the ESP materials to develop all their English skills (M=3.89), to include updated contents meetings their needs (3.86), to

have clear and appropriate instructions, illustration and arrangement (M=3.84) and to supply them with needed professional language knowledge and skills (M=3.83).

Above all, the learners wanted the ESP materials to develop all their English skills. This was illustrated by the highest mean score (M=3.89). Most of the students believed that having good command of the four language skills would be advantageous for their current study and their future job as well. In addition, since most students' English proficiency was below average, it was reasonable for them to expect the materials to enhance their language skills. There are various skill-integrated English materials for business purposes such as *Market Leader*, *Intelligent Business*, *Technical English*, *Powerhouse* and *Insights Into Business*. In the language teachers' opinions, choosing skills-integrated materials was not very difficult but implementing them into classrooms encountered several problems such as time limited, teaching facilities deficiency and the like. For these reasons, the teachers often adopted and adapted those that would be most appropriate for their students.

The findings also revealed that the students preferred ESP materials with updated contents and professional knowledge. Clearly, English is regarded as a lingua franca in today's international business contexts (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 2005; Planken, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, in press, cited in Huh, 2006). Then, the demands for business English have increased constantly. Most learners want the English teaching and learning to enhance their skills and upgrade their professional knowledge. HICOL students were not an exception when they expected the English materials to provide them with updated contents needed for their workplace purposes. They did not want to adopt solely the knowledge of general English. As disclosed by twelve out of twenty students interviewed, they got fed up with contents of general English that they had learnt from secondary school education. Pursuing BA field, they realized that English for workplace contexts was beneficial for their study and future career. They expected the ESP courses in general and ESP materials in particular to include mainly updated professional information. Basing their teaching on this type of coursebooks, the ESP teachers can conduct content-based instruction. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) summarized five main implicit rationales of content-based instruction: (i) taking into account the eventual uses of the target language; (ii) increasing motivation by using content relevant to learners; (iii) building on the previous experience of the learner; (iv) promoting contextualized use of the target language; and (iv) providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985a; 1985b, cited in Huh, 2006).

From the above analysis, it can be said that much attention should be paid on the development or adoption of the skill-integrated and content-based ESP materials for BA students at HICOL. The purpose is to equip them with necessary language skills and professional knowledge for their future job.

4.6. Preference for learning approach

With regard to the respondents' most preferred approach to English learning, the data indicated that the students liked English learning activities such as whole-class, group-work, and project-based activities ($M=3.47$, $M=3.76$ and $M=3.57$ respectively) (see appendix D). The mean scores of these items heading for 4 point implied their agreement with the items suggested.

Especially, the results depict the positive attitudes of the respondents who opted for teacher-led tutorials ($M=3.76$) since they might get used to their lecturers' traditional method.

Interestingly, individual activities were the least preferred by the BA students ($M=2.86$). Six of the eight teachers interviewed exposed that most of their students liked interactive activities such as pair-work, group-work activities and class discussion. The reason lay in their low level of English proficiency, as mentioned above. The students became more confident as they could get help from the others. They did not hesitate to use the target language in interactive activities. Project-based learning was also opted as the students' preferred English learning approach. It was thought that project-based activities could increase students' motivation and fun in learning and practicing English. Several scholars reported benefits of incorporating project work in second and foreign language settings. Firstly, the process leading to the end-product of project-work enables students to develop their confidence and independence (Fried-Booth, 2002). Moreover, students demonstrate increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward learning (Stoller, 2006, p.27). At the same time, the fact that they are actively engaged in project planning enhances their autonomy (Skehan, 1998). Another reported benefit relates to students' increased social, cooperative skills, and group cohesiveness (Coleman, 1992; Papagiannopoulos et al, 2000, p.36-37). A further frequently mentioned benefit is improved language skills (Levine, 2004). Since students engage in purposeful communication to complete authentic activities, they have more opportunities to use language in a relatively natural context (Haines, 1989) and participate in meaningful activities which require authentic language use (cited in Fragoulis, 2009, p.113-114). Inferred from this analysis of the HICOL students' preference, it was advisable to include project-based activities in English teaching for BA students at this college.

In addition, some students mentioned outdoor activities as their language learning preferences. As for these students, in-class activities were most popular in English learning but sometimes teachers should conduct out-of-class instruction through interactive and communicative activities. This learning approach would be very beneficial in improving the students' language skills. As reviewed by Jazadi (2004, p. 8), the studies conducted by Lamb (2002) and Pickard (1996) indicated that successful learners in EFL (English as a foreign language) context made use of out-of-class English learning and exposures to

maximize the opportunities in learning and practicing English (cited in Risnawati, 2010, p. 50). For this reason, Pickard recommended that classroom activities be supplemented with a range of outdoor activities.

In brief, for bettering BA students' English learning, the instruction should be conducted through different kinds of learning approaches but interactive and project-based activities should be prioritized in the English teaching for BA students at HUEIC.

5. Conclusion

The results of this needs analysis study specified the important considerations for ESP course design at HICOL. In today's wide-ranged development of education, graduates tend to possess needed educational and technical qualifications. They would attain employment success if they have better English proficiency and communication skills. The findings of the current research signified significant factors to consider that contributed to the ESP curriculum development for BA students at HICOL, which are as follows: an ESP course focusing on speaking and listening skills should be developed; language skills for workplace purposes namely telephoning, e-mail writing, interviewing and reading business texts should be prioritized; the use of content-based and skill-integrated materials should be included and interactive and project-based activities should be considered.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Demographic data

			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	Gender	Male	35	38.0	38.0	38.0
		Female	57	62.0	62.0	100.0
2	Academic year	Junior	45	48.9	48.9	48.9
		Sophomore	22	23.9	23.9	72.8
		Freshman	25	27.2	27.2	100.0
3	Length of English learning	1-3 years	6	6.5	6.5	6.5
		4-5 years	5	5.4	5.4	12.0
		6-8 years	32	34.8	34.8	46.7
		More than 8 years	49	53.3	53.3	100.0
4	English learning experience	General English (GE) courses	71	77.2	77.2	77.2
		Communicative English courses	10	10.9	10.9	10.9
		ESP courses	40	43.5	43.5	43.5
		English language skills	1	1.1	1.1	1.1
		Other English courses	1	1.1	1.1	1.1
Total			92	100.0	100.0	

Appendix B: Students' purposes of learning English

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I learn English to communicate	92	1	5	4.18	.725
I learn English to read job-related materials	92	1	5	3.79	.846
I learn English to translate English language sources	92	1	5	3.45	.906
I learn English to pass English exams	92	1	5	3.66	.986
I learn English to apply for a job	92	1	5	4.13	.815
I learn English to conduct professional correspondence	92	1	5	3.52	.832
I learn English to follow English-based training programs	92	1	5	3.25	.885
I learn English to attend English-based forums and conferences	92	1	5	3.17	.968
I learn English for entertainment	92	1	5	3.14	1.023
I learn English for other purposes	92	1	5	3.14	.585
Valid N (listwise)	92				

Appendix C: Preference for ESP materials

I expect the English materials to____	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
include various topics of general and professional knowledge	92	1	5	3.62	.912
include various types of practice exercises	92	1	5	3.74	.837
include sufficient activity books and CDs	92	1	5	3.72	.816
include clear instructions, attractive illustration and appropriate arrangement	92	1	5	3.84	.816
provide necessary professional language knowledge and skills	92	1	5	3.83	.897
develop all of my language skills	92	1	5	3.89	.870
include updated contents meeting learners' needs	92	1	5	3.86	.846
Other ideas	92	1	4	3.07	.589
Valid N (listwise)	92				

Appendix D: Students' preference for English learning approach

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I like to study English in the whole class	92	1	5	3.47	.870
I like to study English in groups	92	1	5	3.76	.732
I like to study English in pairs	92	1	5	3.34	.929
I like to study English individually	92	1	5	2.86	.884
I like to study English with project-based activities	92	2	5	3.57	.775
I like to study English with lectures from teachers	92	2	5	3.75	.673
I like to study English in other learning activities	92	1	5	3.20	.597
Valid N (listwise)	92				

NHU CẦU HỌC TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NGÀNH QUẢN TRỊ KINH DOANH: VẤN ĐỀ CẦN LƯU TÂM KHI THIẾT KẾ CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH

Tóm tắt. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu nhu cầu học tiếng Anh của sinh viên Quản trị kinh doanh (QTKD). Tác giả sử dụng hai phương pháp định tính và định lượng thông qua khai thác thông tin từ phiếu khảo sát và phỏng vấn trực tiếp. 92 sinh viên QTKD và 8 giảng viên tiếng Anh chuyên ngành (TACN) của trường Cao đẳng Công nghiệp Huế tham gia nghiên cứu này. Kết quả cho thấy các điểm cần lưu ý khi thiết kế chương trình TACN QTKD: chú trọng kỹ năng nghe và nói; tích hợp các kỹ năng TACN như điện đàm, viết e-mail, đọc văn bản kinh doanh và phỏng vấn xin việc; phát triển tài liệu giảng dạy theo chủ đề, chủ điểm và kỹ năng ngôn ngữ; và tổ chức hoạt động giao tiếp và hoạt động mang tính cạnh tranh, sáng tạo trong giảng dạy.

Từ khóa: phân tích nhu cầu, phát triển tài liệu giảng dạy, tiếng Anh chuyên ngành và chương trình ngoại ngữ