Needs Analysis of Business English Graduates: A Case Study of Shandong Jiaotong University

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Abstract

Needs Analysis Theory has offered a theoretical framework for ESP curriculum design and is an irreplaceable tool in ESP teaching. As the most active branch of ESP, Business English can not exist without conforming to the approach of ESP and its study should follow the framework of ESP. This paper tries to do the learner's needs analysis from the perspective of Business English graduates with an aim to giving implication to Business English learning and teaching.

Key words: Business English; ESP; Needs analysis

INTRODUCTION

With the enormous and unprecedented expansion in economic activities in China in recent years, the study of Business English began to attract increasing interest and awareness. Business English belongs to the discipline of "English for Specific Purpose" (ESP) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). As a sub-branch of ESP, the research on Business English follows the general theoretical framework of ESP, whose most important part is needs analysis. Needs analysis refers to "the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students" (Brown, 1995, p.35). The identified needs can be used to design teaching activities, developing test and teaching materials, even to reevaluate goals and objectives of a well-established language programs. In order to offer better Business English courses that can meet the needs of Business English learners, it is necessary to analyze the needs perceived by different stakeholders when designing Business English courses. The graduates, who already knew well their lacks and wants when they are undergraduates, also have a better understanding of the target needs in their workplace. This paper tries to analyze the target needs and learning needs from the perspective of Business English graduates.

1. NEEDS ANALYSIS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING

Needs analysis has existed in the world of language education for two or three decades. During this time, a huge amount of literature has explained what needs analysis is and how it has been worked out through the years. Needs analysis, as a term related to language teaching, first appeared in the 1920s (White, 1988; West, 1997). However, it became popular in the decade of the 1970s and early 1980s by means of some major publications which were associated to ESP teaching such as those by Richterich and Chancerel (1980) or Munby (1978). With the focus transferring from learners' language needs to the learning need, needs analysis was

applied in the English for General Purposes (EGP), and has been an indispensable step in the course design of foreign language teaching.

The role of needs analysis in any ESP course is invaluable. It is considered as a prerequisite in any course design (Richterich & Chancerel, 1987). It is considered as one of the key stages in ESP, the others being course and syllabus design, selection and production of materials, teaching and learning, and evaluation. (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Johns (1991) also considers needs analysis as the first step in course design as it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities.

Four models of needs analysis are gaining much recognition by researchers. The four models are Munby's Target Situation Analysis (1978); Allwright's Present Situation Analysis (1982); Hutchinson & Waters' model (1987) and Dudley-Evans & St. John's Model (1998). Hutchinson & Waters' model (1987) differentiate target needs and learning needs. Target needs cover the learners' necessities, lacks and want in the target situation. In their model, learners' needs, which embody the subject position of learners, were highlighted. This paper tries to analyze the target needs and learning needs of the Business English graduates based on Hutchinson & Waters' Model (1987) of needs analysis.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design of the Questionnaire

The present study is designed to survey the target needs and learning needs of the Business English graduates with a view to giving implication to Business English curriculum design. The questionnaire is designed according to Hutchinson & Waters' Model (1987) for needs analysis. The questionnaire consists of a set of multiple choices and an open-ended question prepared to be answered by the participants. Before distributing the questionnaire, an open interview was given to participants, who were asked about their opinions and advice on Business English learning and teaching. Some information about the teaching materials, teaching methods and classroom activities in the courses had been obtained and the information is very important for the design of the questionnaire and was paid special attention to.

The questionnaire includes information like the learners' background, the importance of particular language skills in the personal, academic, and professional domains, a self-rating of perceived ability and a rating of how much emphasis should be given in class to particular language skills. The aim of students' questionnaire is to elicit information on their perception of their language needs and wants, their current language abilities and competencies, their language competencies in particular skill related to the academic field.

2.2 Participants

52 respondents aged from 25 to 28 participated in the questionnaire survey. They are among the 73 business English students who graduated from Shandong Jiaotong University in 2010 and 2011. These graduates took at least 13 courses in business English during their 4-year undergraduate studies and have at least 1 year working experience in business after graduation. For their similar academic and working experiences, they serve a reliably source of information for the evaluation of students' needs at different working position in light of the courses they took at school.

2.3 Data Collection & Data Analysis

Since the graduates' workplaces are located in several cities, the questionnaire was sent and collected among graduates through QQ chat-box and email with a detailed instruction on how to do it. All the 52 questionnaires were answered and returned. Finally, interviews were used to supplement the information obtained via the questionnaire in order to achieve greater reliability and validity.

The returned questionnaires were first numbered, and the data was input to the computer and then processed with Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 16.0.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 52 questionnaires were administered among graduates of Shandong Jiaotong University now working in 52 organizations of various types. Most of the organizations are orientated in international businesses. All the questionnaires were collected. Below is an overview of respondents' working background.

3.1 Types of Organizations

In terms of the types of organization the graduates worked, nine respondents are working in state-owned businesses and 25 in private companies, accounting for 17.3% and 48.1%, respectively; five are in joint-venture and 13 in foreign companies, they represent 9.6% and 25%, respectively. Among the 52 respondents, seven work as sourcing, five as interpreter, accounting for 13.5% and 9.6% , respectively. Sales and assistants make up the majority of the respondents; nineteen students are sales representing 36.5%; the rest respondents, 21 in total, work either as secretary or manager assistant, and they account for 40%.

3.2 Frequency of Using English

Although all respondents were English majors graduates, the frequency of using English various in different working settings. Thirty-seven respondents reported to use English either "often" or "very often" and they together account for 71.1%. Seven respondents use English sometimes, whereas 8 rarely use English and they represent 13.5% and 15.4%, respectively.

3.3 Frequencies of Using English and Types of Organizations

Given the differences in the frequency of using English, it is interesting to know how the frequency is distributed in different types of organizations and if there are significant differences among various types of organizations. Results of Chi-square tests are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1 clearly indicates there are statistically significant differences in the distribution of frequencies of using English in different types of organizations (X^2=23.28; P <0.05). While 33.3% of respondents from state-owned businesses reported to use English rarely, which is the highest among all types of organizations, the categories of joint-venture and foreign companies see no such reports. Additionally, the percentage of respondents in foreign businesses takes a lead in the category of using English "very often", which is followed by the private sector (36%), state-owned sector (11.1%) and joint-venture sector (0%). This trend continues if the categories of using English "often" and "very often" are combined. Taken together, 100% of respondents in foreign companies reported to use English either often or very often, which

leaves far behind the percentages in the private (68%) and state-owned (55.5%) sectors. The results meet common expectation that graduates working in foreign companies have more opportunities to use English than in other types of organizations, as the number of foreign employers and employees are in proportion higher than that in other sectors, and speaking English is a must on many occasions. It was also expected in the beginning of this study that graduates working in joint-venture companies would have high frequency to English in their working settings, at least not lower than those in private and state-owned companies. But the result indicates otherwise. One possible reason for this result is the relatively small-sized sample, which does not represent the whole population.

3.4 Distribution of the Frequencies of Using English and Types of Positions

Having studied the distribution of frequency of using English in different types of organizations, we are now interested to know whether there are significant differences in the frequency distribution of using English in different working settings. Chi-square Test is again used, the results of which are shown in table 2 below.

Table 1
Chi-Square Test Results of the Distribution of the Frequency of Using English in Different Types of Organizations

Differences (in percentage)		State-owned n=9	Private n= 25	Joint-venture n= 5	Foreign n= 13	X^2	p
Frequency of use of English	Rarely	33.3	24	0	0		
	Sometimes	11.1	8	60	0	23.28	.006
	Often	44.4	32	40	38.5		
	Very often	11.1	36	0	61.5		

Table 2
Chi-Square Test Results of the Frequency Distribution of Using English in Different Types of Positions

Differences (in percentage)		Sourcing n=7	Translator n=5	Sales n=19	Assistant n=21	X^2	p
Frequency of use of English	Rarely	0	0	5.3	33.3		
	Sometimes	0	20	5.3	23.3	16.41	.059
	Often	57.1	60	47.4	19		
	Very often	42.9	20	42.1	23.8		

Although the results show that the differences in frequency distribution among different types of positions have not reached a statistically significant level (X^2=16.78; p=0.059), yet still the differences are striking. In general, respondents in the sourcing and sale positions use English more frequently than those in other two positions. The sourcing position reports highest percentage in using English "very often" (42.9%), which is followed by sales (42.1%), assistant (23.8%) and interpreter (20%). This pattern continues if the categories "often" and "very often" are combined. More respondents in sourcing (100%) and sales (89.5%) responded to use English either often or very often than those in the other two positions. This result is not surprising because both sourcing and sales person

need to communicate with foreign partners often during the process of international business transactions. What does seem surprising, at least apparently, is the relatively lower frequency of using English in interpreter's position. Follow-up interviews with the interpreters revealed that they all work in large-scaled enterprises, where many employees and even top manager are able to use English with certain proficiency in business. As a result, they have opportunities to do translation work only on important occasions, such as ceremonies, banquets, and high-level negotiations. Such occasions are few, if any, and for the rest of their working hours, they mainly do secretarial work for their top managers.

3.5 Attitude Toward Types of Knowledge and Skills

In the syllabus designed for Business English students, knowledge and skills in four areas are stressed: language, business, cross-cultural communication and humane attainment. Study on the needs of graduates in different working settings can offer valuable suggestions for the modification of existing syllabus.

Of 52 respondents, 19 expressed that as a priority they need to learn more business knowledge and skills, which represents 36.5%. Cross-cultural communication knowledge and skills rank the second. 16 respondents, representing 30.8% chose this item. Humane attainment and language knowledge and skills took the third and fourth place, with 11 counts (representing 21.2%) and 6 counts (representing 11.5%), respectively.

3.6 Attitude Toward Knowledge and Skills, Positions and Types of Organizations

Table 3 and 4 illustrate respondents' attitude toward knowledge and skills to be learned with top priority in relation to different positions and types of organizations. It can be seen that there exist differences among different positions (X^2=11.12; p=0.267) and types of organization (X^2=9.16; p=0.432), but the differences have not reached to statistically significant levels.

Table 3
Attitude Toward Knowledge and Skills in Different Positions

Differences (in percentage)		Sourcing n=7	Translator n=5	Sales n=19	Assistant n=21	X^2	p
Knowledge and skills	1	14.2	0	15.8	9.5		
	2	42.9	0	36.8	42.9	11.12	.267
	3	0	80	31.6	28.6		
	4	42.9	20	15.8	19		

Note. 1 stands for language, 2 for business knowledge & skills;,3 for cross-cultural communication and 4 for humane attainment

Table 4
Attitude Toward Knowledge and Skills in Different Types of Organizations

Differences (in percentage)		State-owned n=9	Private n=25	Joint-venture n=5	Foreign n=13	X^2	p
Knowledge and skills	1	0	12	20	15.4		
	2	55.6	28	0	53.8	9.16	.432
	3	33.3	32	40	23.1		
	4	11.1	28	40	7.7		

Note. 1 stands for language, 2 for business knowledge & skills, 3 for cross-cultural communication and 4 for humane attainment

In terms of respondents of different positions and their attitudes toward knowledge and skills, sourcing regards both businesses (42.9%) and humane attainment (42.9%) knowledge as the priorities of learning, whereas sales and assistants think that business knowledge (36.8% and 42.9% respectively in their own categories) is needed most. A striking figure stands out in interpreters' responses. 80% of them regard cross-cultural knowledge and skills as the priority to be improved, a result contrasting sharply with those of other groups. A tentative explanation for this result could be that while respondents in sourcing and sale position may use English more frequently (as indicated in 3.4), the content of their communication is more business specific and the success of communication is subject less to cultural differences between speakers. In contrast, interpreters may be exposed to a wider range of topics in communication. Follow-up interview with the interpreters revealed that they had experienced difficulties particularly in translating speeches in banquets, ceremonies which are laden with cultural differences. Another reason could be that interpreters have less room to avoid cultural conflicts than respondents of other positions. They are usually unable to determine the contents of communication. Unlike respondents in sourcing and sale positions who may often change their topics of discussions with business partners when cultural conflicts arise, interpreters have to stick to the ideas of source language and translate them faithfully into target language. So, instead of shunning from the cultural conflicts, they have to be mediator to reconcile the cultural differences. Circumstances of such naturally demand cultural knowledge and skills.

3.7 Teaching Materials

Concerning the graduates most favorite textbooks, about 48.1% of them prefer original English edition, with the English-Chinese bilingual text follows, with the percentage of 46.2%. Few of them choose English books edited by Chinese authors and the textbooks edited all in Chinese. This ranking of priorities coincides with the result of undergraduates, which confirm the fact that the original English version books are ideal for Business English learning.

3.8 Frequency Rating for Using English in Different Business Activities

Having discussed respondents' attitude toward types of knowledge and skill, we are now interested in how frequently the graduates engage in different business activities. These activities reflect the use of English skills of four dimensions: speaking, reading, writing and translating. Table 5 is an overview of the data collected from participants' responses on a 5-point rating scale.

3.8.1 Ranking of Business Activities

In terms of oral English skills, respondents reported highest frequency rating on telephone, which is followed by presentation, group discussion, negotiation and banquet. On the reading skill dimension, instruction manuals are read more frequently than professional books/journals and biding materials. Respondents gave highest frequency rating to email on the dimension of writing skills, which is followed by contract, memo, report and academic paper. In terms of translation skills, business letter has the highest rating whereas the rating of interpretation is lowest.

Cross-dimension comparison of frequency values reveals 6 activities received rating higher than average frequency rating—2.765, which indicates that they are more frequently engaged in by the graduates. The most frequent business activity is writing emails (4.21), followed by translating business letters (3.5) and documents(3.37), making telephone calls (3.25), drafting contracts (3.23), reading instruction manuals (2.92).

3.8.2 Frequency Rating Categorized by Positions

Table 5 above also indicates there exist great differences in the frequency of using English in different business activities, with the mean values ranging from 1.85 to 5. A further analysis may reveal whether there are differences among the frequency ratings given by respondents of different position. For the convenience of comparison, the four positions are merged into two groups: S&S (sourcing and sales) group and T&A (translator and assistant) group. They are so grouped because of the nature of their responsibilities. While respondents in the sourcing and sales position mainly engage in transaction activities, translators and assistants are mostly involved in supporting activities.

Table 5
Frequency Rating for Using English in Different Business Activities

	Business activities	Mean	SD	Ranking
Oral skills	Telephone	3.25	1.22	1
	Presentation	2.65	1.42	2
	Group discussion	2.62	1.24	3
	Negotiation	2.40	1.24	4
	Banquet	1.85	0.826	5
Reading skills	instruction manual	2.92	1.26	1
	Professional books and journals	2.50	1.26	2
	Biding	1.94	1.05	3
Writing skills	Email	4.21	1.23	1
	Contract	3.23	1.50	2
	Memo	2.65	1.30	3
	Report	2.52	1.38	4
	Academic paper	1.90	0.94	5
Translation skills	Business letter	3.50	1.46	1
	Document	3.37	1.31	2
	Interpretation	2.73	1.26	3

Table 6
Independent Samples *T*-Test Results of Frequency Rating Categorized by Types of Positions and Language Skills

	Activities	Position	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Speaking	Telephone	S&S	26	3.35	1.056	0.565	0.575
		T&A	26	3.15	1.377		
	Presentation	S&S	26	2.5	1.364	-0.775	0.442
		T&A	26	2.81	1.497		
	Negotiation	S&S	26	2.81	1.266	2.461	.017
		T&A	26	2.00	1.095		
	Group discussion	S&S	26	2.65	1.231	0.222	0.825
		T&A	26	2.58	1.270		
	Banquet	S&S	26	1.96	0.824	1.008	0.318
		T&A	26	1.73	0.827		
Reading	Instruction manual	S&S	26	3.35	1.231	2.536	.014
		T&A	26	2.5	1.175		
	Bidding documents	S&S	26	2.12	1.177	1.187	0.241
		T&A	26	1.77	.908		
Reading	Professional books and journal	S&S	26	2.85	1.461	2.041	.047
		T&A	26	2.15	.925		

To be continued

Continued

Activities		Position	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Writing	E-mail	S&S	26	4.6538	0.84580	2.766	.008
		T&A	26	3.7692	1.39449		
	Report	S&S	26	2.7692	1.45073	1.317	.194
		T&A	26	2.2692	1.28243		
	Book Writing	S&S	26	2.00	1.16619	0.655	0.515
		T&A	26	1.8077	0.93890		
	contract	S&S	26	3.8462	1.22286	3.210	.002
		T&A	26	2.6154	1.52517		
	Memo	S&S	26	2.6923	1.28901	0.212	0.833
		T&A	26	2.6154	1.32897		
	Academic papers	S&S	26	1.4231	0.75753	-1.036	0.305
		T&A	26	1.6923	1.08699		
Translating	Letter translation	S&S	26	4.00	1.29615	2.602	.012
		T&A	26	3.00	1.46969		
	Document translation	S&S	26	3.8077	1.20064	2.556	.014
		T&A	26	2.9231	1.29377		
	Interpretation	S&S	26	2.9231	1.26248	1.094	0.279
		T&A	26	2.5385	1.27219		

Independent samples t-test results in table 6 indicates that in general, in almost all business activities (with exception of giving presentation and writing academic papers), respondents in sourcing and sales position use English more frequently than translators and assistants. In terms of writing activities, there are statistically significant differences between the two groups in drafting contracts (t=3.21, p=.002), and writing emails (t=2.766, p=.008). In speaking activities, the most significant difference is found in negotiation (t=2.461, p=.017). Moreover, respondents in souring and sales groups engage significantly more in reading English instruction manuals (t=2.536, p=.014) and reading professional books/journals (t=2.041, p=.047). Even in translating activities, sourcings and sales take significantly more participating in translating letters (t=2.602, p=.012) and documents (t=2.556, p=.014).

These results, though surprising, echo our discussions in section 3.4 that graduates in the supporting positions have fewer opportunities to use English in their working settings, as more and more people in other positions are able to use English.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1 The Business English Curriculum Design Should Cater to the Change of Society

It is an irreversible trend that school teaching should face the needs of the society. The needs of Business English teaching is changing according to the needs of the society, which is the testing site of University talents and has great wash back effect to Business English teaching. Result of this research shows that, in the workplace, due to its efficiency and low cost, email communication has already gained an advantage over other means of communication. Feedback shows that the graduates have higher demand for email writing techniques. However, email writing is always overlooked in Business English classes due to the outdated textbooks, in which students learn business correspondence through specimen letters and model phrases. Besides, telephoning is another important performance area in business communication. Telephoning can be distinguished as a performance area even though it actually refers to a channel of communication and may cover a wide range of situations and types of interaction. This is because the language used on the telephone is highly conventional and formalized. Telephoning also requires well-developed skills in exchanging information, clarifying and explaining.

4.2 The Balance of the Four Modules

It is a long discussed issue of how to balance the proportions between the "four modules" of Business English teaching: language, business knowledge & skills, cross-cultural communication and humane attainment. According to the results in the questionnaires, business knowledge & skills should be highlighted in the teaching of Business English. It seems that there is a contradiction of time distribution between the "four modules". In the author's view, language capability can be enhanced during the teaching of business, cross-cultural communication and humane attainment content, in other words, the improvement of English proficiency can be the byproducts teaching other knowledge.

4.3 Cultivate Lifelong Learning Ability for the Students

Lifelong learning is advocated by the modern society. Language learners should improve their language proficiency by means of effective learning strategies. It can be drawn from the results of the questionnaires that students from different positions, different types of organization have different priority for the demands for the knowledge and language skills. One can't stay in the same organization or position for the lifelong period. As an old Chinese saying goes, "it is better to teach one how to fish than simply give him a fish". Business English teachers are encouraged to cultivate the students' interest for English learning and improve their learning efficiency and their self-learning abilities to cope with the needs of changeable working position. The students' need is the source and driving force of their study. A Business English teacher should get a comprehensive understanding of the students' needs and timely adjust the teaching contents, improve teaching method and teaching mode and maximum the teaching effect of Business English teaching.

CONCLUSION

Needs analysis, as an ongoing and dynamic process, constructs the first step of course design. This paper tries to find the needs of Business English graduates and this helps to find the needs of society to Business English talents. This may offer practical guidance for the curriculum design, the selection of teaching material and teaching method. For the limited number Business English graduates from SDJTU，however, this research has collected responses from a relatively small pool of former students. More studies are expected to conduct among a larger size of participants from different schools from different districts. Needs analysis is a comprehensive and dynamic work, in the future, it is necessary to make a constant and comprehensive research (from the perspective of undergraduates, Business English teacher and employers) in needs analysis for Business English curriculum design.

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