

A Pilot Study: English Language Needs of the International Trade Salesmen

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Abstract

Under the background of globalization, international trade is taking an important part in the development of the world economy. English communication ability has become as crucial as major related qualities for international business salesmen whose native language is not English. International salesman should have the ability of English communicating skills. Business English is a sub-branch of ESP which has been widely studied. While, as far as the researcher knows, the sub-branch of business English, international trade English is seldom studied. International trade English is a micro part of business English, which should be studied specifically. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the English language needs of international trade salesman in mainland China. Needs analysis through survey questionnaire was done to the international salesman in China. There were totally 114 international trade salesmen participated in the survey. This research investigated English language needs of the international trade salesmen from two aspects, the present language ability of the international trade salesman and the language difficulties they encountered in their daily work. Quantitative data were analyzed using percentage. It was found that the English language proficiency of the international trade salesmen is not enough to do their work well. This paper provides real-time language needs of the international trade salesman, which could offer authentic material to the syllabus design.

Keywords

International Trade Salesmen, Needs Analysis, ESP, English Language Needs, Syllabus Design

1. Introduction

Today, English has acquired its highest reputation in the choice of the world languages. English has become a global language (Graddol, 1997). The increas-

ing use of English has brought many changes in all aspects of human life, especially in educational institutions. English has become the medium of instruction in the education system, in both English-speaking countries and non-English speaking countries (Fadel & Rajab, 2017). As the status of English in business as a lingua franca is disputable (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), Business English has become a hot major in education programs worldwide. This is also true in China's education system.

With the contribution of China has made to the world economy, Business English is becoming more important. Many colleges and universities in China have Business English courses. Basically, Business English major covers courses on basic English language skills, international business, management, and law international economy, which aims to enable the students to use English in international-business, foreign trade, management, and foreign affairs. In this research, the international trade is a micro-branch under Business English, which is rarely studied. In the development of world economy, international trade contributes a major part. English use for international trade should be analyzed to cater for better development of the world economy. The main participants in the international trade are the international salesman. Therefore, it is necessary to know international trade salesman's language needs and design curriculum accordingly. This research is a process of needs analysis of the language needs of the international trade salesman from aspects of their target situation of the international trade salesman and their present language ability, aiming to shed light on the improvement of their language ability and provide authentic materials for Business English syllabus design in Chinese universities.

2. Literature Review

Needs analysis (NA) is a crucial first step of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP refers to the courses or programs that aim to teach a group of students with specific goals (Richards & Schmdit, 2010), no matter for academic purposes or for professional purposes. To reach the goal of students, the first step is to know what they exactly need to learn. That's why needs analysis is crucial in ESP. Needs analysis is a process of doing survey on what the students need, which is "a systematic and on-going process of gathering information about students' need and preferences, interpreting the information, and then making course decisions based on the interpretation in order to meet the needs" (Graves, 2000).

There are more than one NA approach, the most important ones are Target-Situation Analysis and Present-Situation Analysis. Target-Situation Analysis identifies the learners' language needs to prepare them to successfully in academic or professional fields (West, 1994). Present situation analysis is different from target situation analysis that it aims to identify present competence of the learners. Robinson (1991: p. 9) claims that Present Situation Analysis (PSA) is to check out "what the students are like at the beginning of the course". This research conducted the NA from two aspects, one is the present language ability of

the learners, the other is the weakness of the learners. Weakness of the learners are shown by the difficulties they encountered in their real work.

Zhang (2014) identified the language needs of business English major undergraduate students through questionnaires, involving 20 business representatives and 30 undergraduates. The study found that the students' felt needs were different from what the real workplace needs. Workplace needs graduate have business communication skills, international business knowledge, and cross-cultural awareness. However, students paid attention only to English language skills, which implicate that the teaching in classroom should provide knowledge what is needed by the real workplace.

This is not only happening in China, but also in other places. The study by Alghamdi (2019) was to explore the English language needs of undergraduate business major students in Saudi. This study employed a mixed-methods approach, adopting questionnaires and semi-structured interviews by involving business students, language teachers, and business lecturers in the study. Alghamdi (2019) concluded in his study that English language programme was not meeting the students' language needs. It is necessary to thoroughly identify what the real market needs and make proper curriculum accordingly.

The study conducted by Batsila & Shrestha (2022) was on business English taught in Greek vocational secondary schools. This study different from other studies, focused on the workplace needs. Batsila & Shrestha (2022) surveyed 136 and interviewed 8 employers, and analyzed one vocational English textbook. Oral communication, which was lacking in the textbook, was emphasized by the research participants. In the same vein, oral English communicative competence is weak in China (Liu & Yu, 2022). Not only oral communication skills, what else is missing should also be identified to prepare students performing successfully in the work.

3. Method

This pilot study adopted a quantitative research method that aims to investigate the international trade salesman's language needs in real work in China. With guidance of learner-centered needs analysis model proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the research is to identify language needs of working in the international trade salesman in Chinese small and medium enterprises.

3.1. Participants

The participants in the research are the international trade salesman working in the international trade enterprises in China. These participants have been working as an international trade salesman for at least one year. They can tell their needs and difficulties encountered in their work. There were totally 114 international trade salesmen participated in the survey.

3.2. Instruments

The research is a needs analysis on the language needs of international trade sa-

lesman through a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is a self-developed one under the guidance of *Hutchinson and Waters' (1987)* model.

The questionnaire was Chinese to facilitate the students' full comprehension of the items included. For the purpose of investigating the international trade salesman's English language necessities, the questionnaire comprised mainly of two sections: evaluating the current language ability of the participants and language difficulties encountered by the international trade salesman in target situation. This research explores the salesman's present language ability by checking their education history and English related certificates they held. In the section of identifying their language difficulties, questions on the perceptions of the importance of the English language skills used in their work, the frequency of using the English language sub-skills were also concerned and detailed difficulties that had ever happened in their work were asked.

The questionnaire was distributed out in 2022. The research adopted convenient sampling method to collect the data. First, the questionnaire was sent to friends of the researcher, then they sent the questionnaire to international trade salesman they know. The questionnaire was sent to the participants through <https://www.wjx.cn/>, a website which can collect questionnaires and analyze the collected data. Participants can get direct access to the questionnaire by a link generated by the website and do the questionnaire. In 2 months of snowballing sampling, there were totally 114 international trade salesman completed the questionnaire.

3.3. Procedures

The data collection was finished in two months, after which the online responses were set to "stopped accepting responses" to finish the collection procedure. The questionnaire composed closed-ended items and these items were analyzed statistically using percentage calculation.

First, the Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire was checked on SPSS to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The percentages of each item were calculated to check the overall tendency. The results were presented and discussed in the following section.

4. Results and Discussion

NA results based on the responses of the questionnaire will be presented in this section. The main objective of this questionnaire is to investigate the international trade salesman's present English language ability and their difficulties happened in their work.

To promise the reliability of the research questionnaire, the questionnaire was put into SPSS to check the Cronbach's Alpha. Data of each item were keyed into SPSS version 27.0 to run the reliability test as well as the validity test of the questionnaire. By adopting the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test, the researcher can check whether the questionnaire is suitable for the research or not. In general,

when Cronbach's alpha value is higher than 0.7, the questionnaire is considered as acceptable (Shrestha, 2021). A high amount of alpha indicates that the test items are highly connected (Lavrakas, 2008). The Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire was 0.837 for items (as is shown in Figure 1), which indicated the items have high-reliability value and the questionnaire can be used for the research.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.837	30

Figure 1. Reliability statistics.

4.1. Demographic Profile

Figure 2, Table 1 and Table 2 below show the results obtained from section A of the questionnaire, regarding the demographic profile of the participants. The demographic profile, from three aspects, shows the background information of the respondents.

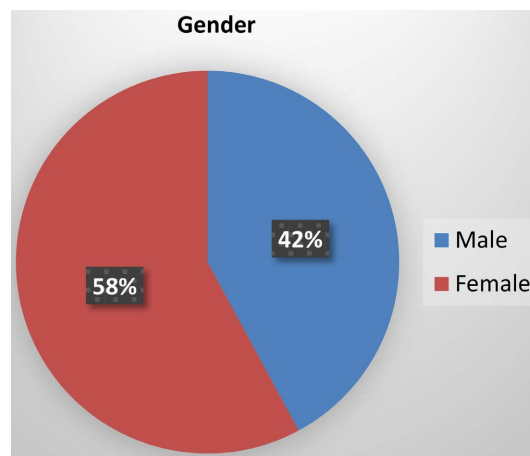


Figure 2. Percentage for gender.

Table 1. Percentage for age.

Age	Quantity	Percentage
<20	2	1.75
20 - 30	48	42.11
31 - 40	56	49.12
41 - 50	8	7.02
51 - 60	0	0
>60	0	0
Total	114	100

Table 2. Percentage for enterprise size.

Company Size	Quantity	Percentage
1 - 50	54	47.37
50 - 100	18	15.79
100 - 250	24	21.05
250 - 500	18	15.79
Total	114	100

There are 114 respondents participated in this study which was composed of 42.11 percent male and 57.89 percent female. There were more female participants than male participants, but the number is relatively in average in terms of gender.

Table 1 shows the age of the participants. Since China began the education reform in 1985, and set up system of nine-year compulsory education in the country (Cheng, 1986). China invested larger amount of funds on education since then. English education in China gained emphasis since the Open Door Policy in 1980s (Lam, 2002). The 114 respondents covered the most age from 20 - 40. People in this age range got good education opportunities. It means the participants are well educated, but not illiteracy.

In the respondents, as shown in **Table 2**, enterprises that most of the respondents are working in are the small companies with 1 - 50 people, taking 47.37%. Rest are also medium companies. That means the small and medium enterprises (SME) are the main force in doing international trade.

SME represent a large part of the economic sector and contribute most of the profit, who is more dynamic and powerful in entrepreneurial activities, as well as innovative in the new management form (Iuliana et al., 2008). Training is one of a crucial strategies for enterprises to develop, however, training in SME is normally ignored, because of underestimation of training outcomes, high cost of training and underestimation of training outcomes (Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). Therefore, it's necessary to do a needs analysis on international trade English to help the SME knows what to train for their workers, as well as to fill the gap of study in Business English.

4.2. Present Language Ability

The present language ability of the respondents will be demonstrated from two aspects, one is their education experience, the other is the English test certificates they have. These two aspects can show the language ability of the respondents objectively.

From their education rate, shown in **Table 3**, it shows that 64.92% of the participants are under-graduated, 29.82% of them graduated from vocational college. In vocational college and undergraduate education system, English is a compulsory course to take (Wang, 2014). According to China's policy, students,

no matter in urban or rural schools, must learn English as a compulsory subject from the 3rd grade on (Hu, 2005), which means the respondents must have 9 years English learning experience, not to mention that 5.26% of participants who are post-graduated. Therefore, all the participants have basic English abilities.

Table 3. Percentage for education status.

Education Degree	Quantity	Percentage
Vocational College	34	29.82
Undergraduate	74	64.92
Postgraduate	6	5.26
Doctor	0	0
Total	114	100

English certificate they hold can tell more detail their English language level. College English Test (CET) is a national English test meant to assess non-English majors' English ability in Chinese colleges and universities (Chen & Webb, 2017). Students who have completed the College English Courses Band 1 to 4, usually in their second-year, take the CET-4 (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). CET-4 certificate is a must for the successful attainment of a bachelor's degree and is a guarantee of a well-paid job.

Both college and undergraduate students will prepare themselves ready for the test and try to get a high score in the test. This test covers listening, writing and reading in general topics. Speaking is an optional section, which is normally ignored by test-takers. This is a fair way to test the language ability of students (Zheng & Cheng, 2008), however, brings problems for students also. Students pay much attention to listening, writing, and reading, but can merely speaking in English (Yu, 1999).

CET-4 and CET-6 are two levels of the same test, and students who have passed CET-4 can take CET-6. According to the Syllabus, CET balances between linguistic knowledge and linguistic competence, between accuracy and fluency, between semantic level and discourse level (College English Syllabus, 1985). Those who have passed CET tests could communicate for general purposes. Other certificates, like TEM-4 (Test for English Major), TEM-8, and IELTS are in a higher level, which means the holder of the certificate has a higher English level than that of CET-4 or CET-6 holder. Like CET serial tests, TEM serial tests, not like IELTS, have no speaking in the test. This makes the Chinese English learners, non-English major students and English major students, weak in speaking.

From the results shown in **Table 4**, most of them have CET 6 (38.6%), and CET 4 (29.82%), the participants in this research are prepared for basic English skills, especially in reading and writing.

Table 4. Percentage for English certificates.

Name of Certificate	Percentage
No certificate	22.81
CET 4	29.82
CET 6	38.6
TEM 4	8.77
TEM 8	17.54
BEC Primary	1.75
BEC Advance	1.75
TOEFL	1.75
IELTS	3.51
Other	5.26
Total	214

The education status and English certificates held by the participants are a relatively objective and convenient way to check the current English language level. From the education status and certificates held by the participants, it proves that the participants have basic English language ability.

4.3. Language Difficulties

Acquired proficiency in English can assist in overcoming language difficulties (Ku & Zussman, 2010). Language difficulties that the participants encountered in their work can show what they lack in real work. By learning specific skills and knowledge need in the target situation, the international trade salesman can improve their English proficiency.

Question on the using status of the four language skills, i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking, tells the basic information of the target situation. As shown in **Table 5**, the most often used language skills are reading and writing, whose Everyday usage rate reach 31.58 percentage and 38.6 percentage respectively. Together with the choice rate of Always, the rates are much higher. It means that reading and writing are the most important language skills in the real work of the international trade salesman.

Table 5. Using of English skills in the work.

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Always	Everyday
Listening	2 (1.75%)	14 (12.28%)	44 (38.6%)	42 (36.84%)	12 (10.53%)
Speaking	4 (3.51%)	10 (8.77%)	44 (38.6%)	44 (38.6%)	12 (10.53%)
Reading	4 (3.51%)	10 (8.77%)	18 (15.79%)	46 (40.35%)	36 (31.58%)
Writing	2 (1.75%)	10 (8.77%)	20 (17.54%)	38 (33.33%)	44 (38.6%)
Total	12 (2.63%)	44 (9.65%)	126 (27.63%)	170 (37.28%)	104 (22.81%)

However, the language skills the respondents want to improve most are listening and speaking. As shown in **Table 6**, 40.35 percent of the respondents strongly agree that they need to improve their listening skills, and 45.61 percent of them strongly agree to improve speaking skills. The rates are prominent. This indicates that the speaking and listening ability of Chinese students is weak (Yu, 1999), for in the education system much attention is paid to writing and reading. Under the influence of test-oriented education in China, the teaching of oral English is ignored since in the primary school curriculum (Liu & Yu, 2022). Until to the higher education, both students' learning and teachers' teaching have been influenced by the the national English test CET 4 and CET 6, the CET tests should consider the examination of speaking. This situation is not only happening in China, but also in Greek. In the study by Batsila & Shrestha (2022), it was found that oral communication was important in real workplace, however, content of oral communication was lack in business English textbook used in vocational secondary schools.

Table 6. English language skills need to improve Urgently.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Listening	8 (7.02%)	2 (1.75%)	12 (10.53%)	46 (40.35%)	46 (40.35%)
Reading	4 (3.51%)	6 (5.26%)	28 (24.56%)	54 (47.37%)	22 (19.3%)
Writing	4 (3.51%)	10 (8.77%)	26 (22.81%)	58 (50.88%)	16 (14.04%)
Speaking	6 (5.26%)	0 (0%)	6 (5.26%)	50 (43.86%)	52 (45.61%)
Grammar	12 (10.53%)	16 (14.04%)	28 (24.56%)	42 (36.84%)	16 (14.04%)
Vocabulary	8 (7.02%)	8 (7.02%)	28 (24.56%)	46 (40.35%)	24 (21.05%)
Total	42 (6.14%)	42 (6.14%)	128 (18.71%)	296 (43.27%)	176 (25.73%)

Detail language difficulties the international trade salesman encountered in their work can provide a micro-picture of the real situation that the international trade salesman met in target situation. From **Table 7**, it shows that all the mentioned language difficulties had happened in their work.

From the result shown in **Table 7**, difficulties like jargon, dialects and pidgin and slang take higher percentage. It means that international trade English tend to be informal. Here it is worth talking about business English and international trade English. Business English, as a sub-branch of ESP and a standard English for business purposes, has been studied. However, there are many parts under Business English, including international trade English (Beers & Bergh, 2010), cross-border transaction English (Zhu, 2017), and cross-border transportation English (Aouizerats et al., 2014). International trade English is a sub-branch of Business English (Yang & Fan, 2020). International trade English is different from Business English (Jiang et al., 2014), who has its own features. Business

English is formal English, but international trade English is formal in some situations and informal in other situations. Especially with the fast development of technology, people have more channels to connect with outside world. In 2023, people tend to use instant messages like WhatsApp or WeChat to communicate in real time and asynchronously (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). In the use of these instant messages, emojis are commonly used to better express the feelings (Koch et al., 2022). To make communication more easier for both parties, colloquial words and simple sentences are more liked to be used in international trade English (Yang & Fan, 2020). It indicates that, people tend to use informal language to communicate through instant message applications. To better communicate, maintain a rapport and keep a close relationship with each other, the two parts need to use some informal expressions. This needs the salesmen learn some regional expressions. According to the results shown in Table 7, international trade salesman should pay attention to the accurate words to avoid of misunderstanding.

Table 7. Detail language difficulties encountered in the real work.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	Often
A	4 (3.51%)	20 (17.54%)	46 (40.35%)	34 (29.82%)	10 (8.77%)
B	10 (8.77%)	22 (19.3%)	46 (40.35%)	28 (24.56%)	8 (7.02%)
C	10 (8.77%)	18 (15.79%)	54 (47.37%)	24 (21.05%)	8 (7.02%)
D	4 (3.51%)	44 (38.6%)	42 (36.84%)	18 (15.79%)	6 (5.26%)
E	14 (12.28%)	18 (15.79%)	56 (49.12%)	18 (15.79%)	8 (7.02%)
F	8 (7.02%)	30 (26.32%)	48 (42.11%)	22 (19.3%)	6 (5.26%)
G	4 (3.51%)	34 (29.82%)	44 (38.6%)	26 (22.81%)	6 (5.26%)
H	24 (21.05%)	34 (29.82%)	32 (28.07%)	18 (15.79%)	6 (5.26%)
I	16 (14.04%)	26 (22.81%)	40 (35.09%)	24 (21.05%)	8 (7.02%)
Total	94 (9.16%)	246 (23.98%)	408 (39.77%)	212 (20.66%)	66 (6.43%)

(Note: A: regional accent; B: Not clear speech; C: jargon, dialects and pidgin and slang; D: grammar; E: less vocabulary storage; F: cannot understand when the topic not familiar; G: lack cross-cultural communication skills; H: wrong body gesture; I: cannot understand long and complex sentences)

Percentage for wrong body gestures are relatively low, which is 5.26% for Often, 15.79% for Always and 28.07% for Sometimes. This may because international trade salesman normally uses written form to communicate with their foreign customers. Difficulties like regional accent, not clear speech are in high percentage of happening in their work, which indicates that the most difficult parts for international trade salesman is still in speaking. The international trade salesman should improve their listening and speaking skills to meet their work requirements.

Difficulties in grammar and cannot understand long and complex sentences are interrelated. Learning of grammar can help students to produce good sentences and understand the meaning of sentences (Sari et al., 2019). The international trade salesman tends to use simple sentence structures to express themselves (Yang & Fan, 2020) in writing. However, when reading messages from their foreign customers, it may have difficulties in understanding the long and complex sentences. Good command of grammar is an important skill to promise effective business communication (Al-Musalli, 2019). Therefore, the international trade salesman should learn more grammar to help them understand messages from their customers more easily and avoid misunderstanding.

Difficulties in less vocabulary storage and cannot understand when the topic not familiar are interrelated. Vocabulary is important for effective communication in workplaces (Huhta et al., 2013), and is seen as the core of communicative competence (Amiryousefi & Ketabi, 2011). Vocabulary storage has an impact on writing and speaking skills (Nation, 2013), which could have an influence on communication. When the international trade salesman communicate with their foreign customers on a topic that he is not familiar with and without storage of relative vocabularies, he cannot understand the meaning or cannot express his thoughts. As mentioned above that international trade salesman have difficulties in understanding jargon and slang, which is also related to lack of vocabularies. Difficulties in less vocabulary storage and cannot understand when the topic not familiar can be resolved by learning words in width and depth.

Cross-cultural communication could improve and facilitate interaction between international trade salesman and their customers from a different nations or cultures (Adler, 1991). Cultural differences can lead to conflicts (Triandis, 2012), can be an advantage for those who have high cultural sensitivity as well (Luo, 2016). Cultural communication skills are important for international trade process. There are several factors that affect the cross-cultural communication, including language barriers, variations in values and norms of behavior, lack of experience, lack of trust, a lack of understanding about other cultures, and stereotypical thinking (Lifintsev & Canhavihas, 2017). In the new technology area, instant messages simplify the process of cross-cultural communication and language barriers as one of the obstacles of cross-cultural communication can be solved by using online translators and auto-correcting (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). International trade salesman should pay attention to other factors that affect the cross-cultural communication, learn knowledge on cultural variations and build strong cross-cultural awareness.

5. Conclusion

The current research tried to identify the international trade salesman's needs in terms of the their present language ability, importance and frequency of the English language skills that are often used in their work. Also, it identifies the international trade salesman's English language lacks by identifying their lan-

guage difficulties encountered in their work. The participants in this research are all educated and have basic English language ability. Most of them have the CET-6 certificate. This certificate can prove their English language level. CET serial tests only test the learners' reading, writing and listening, without speaking. This makes the CET takers not prepare speaking skills. However, this does not mean that they have no problem in reading and writing skills. They should accumulate vocabulary knowledge, and know the expressions of jargon, slang and dialects. Also need to know more about grammar to facilitate them better understanding their foreign customers' messages. The participants in this research have the awareness of improving speaking and listening skills, which means these two English language skills are also important in their work.

International trade English is a branch of Business English (Yang & Fan, 2020), who has the features of Business English. However, with the development of new technology, communication channels have changed, which simplifies the process of cross-cultural communication and clears the obstacles brought by language barriers by using online translators and auto-correcting (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). Before business people communicated with each other by email which is in a formal form; in 2023, they communicate by instant-messages, like WhatsApp and WeChat. The emergence of new communication channel makes the business talk colloquial and informal. Therefore, international trade salesmen should learn some dialects, jargon, and slang.

The study adopted one research method which is a questionnaire to gather the information related, which may have some bias. A comprehensive needs analysis should be conducted via multi-method from multi-sources (Long, 2005). Additionally, due to limited sources of the researcher, the participant quantity is not big enough.

In the future study, more participants from various geographic locations should be invited into the study. Since uneven economic development can cause uneven talent distribution. Their needs will be not same. To make the results more objective and rich, instruments like interview shall be adopted to gain more in-depth insights on the learners' language needs.

International trade English is one of the micro-part of Business English. With the development of the world economy, exchange within the world is much more frequent than before. International trade is playing a more important role in world economy, which deserve much attention of the education field to cultivate required talents. The pedagogic implications should be based on the learners' needs and lacks. Thus, the ESP teachers and course designers should consider these authentic situations and provide course required by the students.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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