

# Needs Analysis for University EFL Learners Majoring in Business English: From Theoretical Frameworks to an Empirical Study in Vietnam

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Received: March 9, 2026

Accepted: June 3, 2026

Online Published: June 22, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n6p31

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n6p31>

## Abstract

In the era of global economic integration, Business English (BE) is becoming more and more important worldwide. In Vietnam, although BE is essential in international economic transactions, there is little research in BE needs analysis. Building on our paper “*Needs Analysis for University EFL Learners Majoring in Business English: A Scoping Review of Research and Practice*” published in the *World Journal of English Language* in 2024, the current research aimed to investigate (1) the expectations of BE students and other stakeholders about the English language needed for the business workplace in Vietnam, and (2) the perceptions of BE graduates’ proficiency in workplace English from business professionals’ perspectives. This mixed-method research included two phases. In Phase 1, questionnaires were sent to 100 undergraduates from one university in Vung Tau City in Vietnam (96 responses) and 43 business professionals in the same city. In Phase 2, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three lecturers, three BE graduates, and five undergraduates from the university. Seven department heads, and seven staff from commercial companies in Vung Tau with international business dealings were also interviewed. This research revealed BE students and other stakeholders alike wanted to see improvements in listening, speaking and writing skills. Most needed topics were banking, sales, and business management. Regarding the current English proficiency, although the business professionals and students self-rated their English proficiency at CEFR B1 level, their lecturers and supervisors judged them to be weak at auditory, oral, and writing skills. The results of this study should provide insights into BE major needs to help university business department heads and instructors to understand the demands for BE both inside and outside the university context, and to adapt curricula, to improve the effectiveness of BE courses as well as learner satisfaction, and better meet the linguistic requirements in business workplaces in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Needs analysis, Target situation analysis, Present situation analysis, Learning situation analysis, Business English

## 1. Introduction

In the context of economic globalization, Business English is essential as a means of communication. According to the International Trade Administration, and the Center for WTO and the International Trade- Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, since Vietnam joined many international economic organizations, such as the WTO (2007), the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (1956), etc. and signed free trade agreements (FTAs), Vietnam's economy has grown steadily over the years. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the GDP grew gradually from 5.25% (2012) to 7.02% (2019), 7.09% (2024), and 8.02% (2025). Therefore, the demand for learning BE is increasing in Vietnam.

Many Vietnamese graduates are facing challenges in English communication in the workplace. In 2015, the Hanoi News reported Vietnamese Department of Higher Education statistics that showed 49.3% of graduates met workplace English language requirements, 18.9% did not meet, and 31.8% needed further training. This is a worrying circumstance as it means just over half of graduates are still not well equipped with English language in the workplace.

Determining language needs in the workplace is vital to the effectiveness and practicality of language courses, especially that of BE. In an English for specific purposes (ESP), this process is called needs analysis (NA). NA is defined as “the systematic collection and analysis of all information necessary for defining and validating a defensible curriculum” (Brown, 2016, p. 4). NA is pivotal in ESP (Gollin-Kies et al., 2015; Brown, 2016; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Long, 2010). Nevertheless, NA in Vietnamese universities is often only via informal teacher-learner conversations (Duong, 2007). Moreover, there are few studies on NA for BE learners in Vietnam.

Recognizing the significance of BE needs analysis and the lack of research on BE needs analysis in Vietnam, this research aimed to conduct a needs analysis for EFL learners majoring in BE. Based on the theoretical frameworks of NA, the findings of this paper help to find out BE needs for EFL learners and their levels of English proficiency. The results will also help evaluate present coursebooks and create more practical teaching content in universities’ coursebooks to accommodate the BE requirements in the workplaces in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of English for Specific Purposes and the Importance of Needs Analysis in ESP

English for specific purposes (ESP) is defined as a discipline providing learners with specialized English for particular situations such as workplace environments (Gollin-Kies et al., 2015; Brown, 2016; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP helps learners understand and use specialist English professionally in a field-specific setting.

Needs analysis is crucial in ESP because it reveals language requirements in workplace situations, learners’ skill gaps, and the learning methods and content needed to help learners achieve their workplace language goals. (Gollin-Kies et al., 2015; Brown, 2016; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Chan, 2021). Brown (2016) stated that “if there is no needs analysis, there is no ESP” (p. 5). “A defensible curriculum” is created to satisfy most of the demands of “stakeholders” who have an interest in the curriculum, namely teachers, administrators, students, etc. (Brown, 2016). Additionally, instructors can use needs analysis regularly to update their syllabus so that students can learn updated workplace knowledge (Gollin-Kies et al., 2015; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks

**Target situation analysis (TSA)** can be described as an investigation into what language aspects learners need to master in the target workplace situations (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

**Present situation analysis (PSA)** specifies learners’ competence levels, strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of the courses (Brown, 2016; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

**Learning situation analysis (LSA)** is an investigation into what the learner needs to do to acquire the course effectively, including learning and teaching methods, techniques, teaching sources (teachers, materials, aids, out-of-class activities) (Hutchinson and Waters (1987).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) considered an ESP course as a journey, the “lacks” as *the starting point*, the “necessities” as *the destination*, the “learning needs” as *the route* to go from the starting point to the destination.

Based on the theories of the authors above, TSA, PSA, LSA can be summarized in Figure 1:

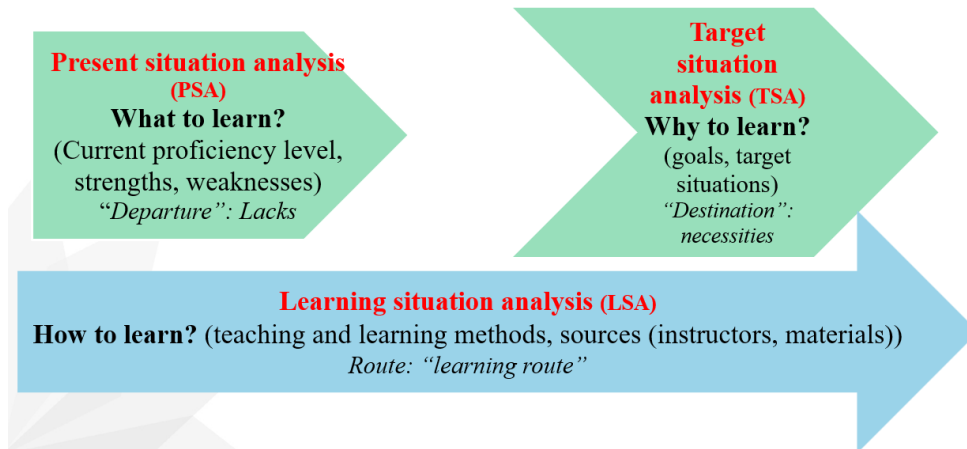


Figure 1. The relationship among TSA, PSA, and LSA (based on the theories of the authors above)

Combining the three frameworks is crucial to identify language needs more accurately and provide a more effective approach for learners (Nguyen & Ho, 2024). The summary of the frameworks is in Table 1.

Table 1. The strengths and weaknesses of three theoretical frameworks (TSA, PSA, LSA)

Theoretical framework	Need analysis	Key points
TSA	Strengths	- Shows final situations in the workplace that learners want to achieve.
	Weaknesses	- Not identify the current level and learning methods of learners to be able to acquire the language. These disadvantages are resolved with the PSA and LSA models.
PSA	Strengths	- Expresses current English proficiency, strengths and weaknesses of learners at the beginning of the course.
	Weaknesses	- Not show workplace situations that learners need to master and approaches to language learning, how learners can learn. These issues are elucidated with the TSA and LSA models.
LSA	Strengths	- Shows how learners learn to achieve expected learning outcomes.
	Weaknesses	- not show learners' proficiency levels and the target situations in details. These shortcomings are addressed with the TSA and PSA models.

(Nguyen & Ho, 2024, p. 211)

2.3 Research Gap and Research Questions

First, many Vietnamese graduates find using communicative BE challenging. Second, a needs analysis is essential. Third, there is little research on BE needs analysis in Vietnam. Finally, previous needs analyses in Vietnam were too simple and unsystematic (Duong, 2007). Therefore, to address this gap, this research aims to investigate the language needs of BE students in a Vietnamese university, and the language strengths and weaknesses of the graduates. The research questions are as follows:

- 1/ What are the expectations of BE students and other stakeholders about the English language needed for the business workplace in Vietnam?
- 2/ What are the perceptions of BE graduates' proficiency in workplace English from the business professionals' perspectives?

There are some hypotheses regarding this needs analysis. First, BE students need both language skills and Business knowledge for their jobs. Second, BE graduates want to improve oral, auditory, and writing skills in the workplace.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design and Instruments

In this research, a mixed-method study was performed with a combination of quantitative research conducted through questionnaires and qualitative research through semi-structured interviews. Many empirical studies conducted in other countries have employed a mixed research method including questionnaires for numerical statistical data and interviews for descriptive justification to have a clearer picture of BE needs (Cowling, 2007; Li, 2014; Mancho-Bar  s & Llurda, 2013; Wu, 2012, Petraki & Khat, 2020). According to Mackey and Gass (2005), interviews and questionnaires complement each other to provide the most comprehensive picture of a specific phenomenon under study.

*Quantitative research through questionnaires* was conducted to gain an overview of BE needs and to assemble information on attitudes, opinions, and expectations from large groups of students and employers. "The survey, typically in the form of a questionnaire, is one of the most common methods of collecting data on attitudes and opinions from a large group of participants" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.92). There are two main types of questionnaire items, namely closed item (multiple-choice questions) and open-ended questions (short answers). In some cases, researchers can combine different question types because "questionnaires can blend different question types depending on the purpose of the research and on what has previously been learned about the research phenomenon (Mackey & Gass, 2005. P.93). In this study, the researchers created a twenty-five-item questionnaire including twenty-two multiple-choice questions about their language needs (questions 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 allowed for multiple answers, and the others allowed only one answer) and three open-ended inquiries (questions 18, 19, 20) on their opinions, expectations, and learning-teaching methods related to the BE course.

Mackey and Gass (2005) noted that methodological triangulation, which means employing various research methods of obtaining data in a single investigation to reach the same research results, helps resolve many of the concerns of a certain method. Various methods make research conclusions more convincing. According to Long (2010), triangulation helps validate the research data and eventually, to increase the credibility of the explanations of those data. Therefore, in this study, *qualitative research through semi-structured interviews* was used to gain a deeper understanding of language needs to meet the labour market in the economic environment as well as BE difficulties in teaching, learning, and materials being used at the university and their expectations about an effective BE course. The researcher used semi-structured interviews since this type of interview offered more flexible opportunities for interviewers to hold an elaborate investigation than a structured interview. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), in structured interviews, also known as standardized interviews, investigators collect verbal responses to compare them through an identical set of questions of all respondents.

This type is more rigid than semi-structured interviews, in which the interviewers use a list of written questions as a guide and freely probe for more information, which means adapting the interviewers' own inquiries to encourage the interviewees to open up and express themselves in their own words and speed. Therefore, in this study, the semi-structured interview was chosen.

All the questions in questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were piloted with two undergraduate students and two business professionals, which led to the reformulation of the questions before official surveys and interviews.

A summary of the research design, participants, and instruments is in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of research design, participants, and instruments

*Summary of Research Design, Participants, and Instruments*

Phase	Phase 1	Phase 2
<b>Design/ Instruments</b>	25-item questionnaires	Semi-structured interviews
<b>Participants / Materials</b>	96 BE students, 43 business professionals in Vung Tau city	3 lecturers, 3 BE graduates, 5 undergraduates, 7 business staff, 7 department heads of local companies
<b>Aims</b>	To have an overview of BE needs	To gain a deeper understanding of BE needs, the reasons for their choices in questionnaires
<b>Research questions</b>	To answer: + <b>Question 1</b> (items: 1-4, 6-7, 9-25) + <b>Question 2</b> (5-8)	To answer: + <b>Question 1</b> (parts 1,2,3) + <b>Questions 2</b> (part 2)
<b>Frameworks</b>	TSA, PSA, LSA	TSA, PSA, LSA
<b>Details</b>	- <b>TSA</b> : items 1 to 4 - <b>PSA</b> : items 5-8 - <b>LSA</b> : items 9-25 + Content: 9-12 + Techniques: 13 + Materials: 14-16 + Teachers: 17 + Comments: 18-20 + Satisfaction: 21-25 <b>Total</b> : 25 questions in a questionnaire	- <b>TSA</b> : part 1 - <b>PSA</b> : part 2 - <b>LSA</b> : part 3

### 3.2 Participants

Triangulation is essential because it helps increase the validity and reliability of data. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), triangulation may involve theoretical, investigator, and methodological approaches. The authors further argue that a single method is often insufficient and that evidence from multiple independent sources is needed to support a study and its conclusions (p. 181). One single data resource cannot offer evidence, which means participant triangulation provides a more precise and comprehensive picture of a specific phenomenon. Thus, in this study, a variety of participants participated in the survey and interview.

In *Phase 1 (the questionnaires)*, the participants were 96 *undergraduates* (19 sophomores (19%), 38 third-year students (40%), and 39 final-year students (41%)) and 43 *business professionals* working in Vung Tau city, Vietnam. These students were enrolled in the BE major, taught by English language faculty, in a large university in Vung Tau City. Then, in *Phase 2 (the semi-structured interviews)* for a clearer understanding of their perceptions of the BE course, the participants were *five undergraduates, and seven business staff, three university lecturers, three BE graduates, and seven department heads of local companies in Vung Tau* (see Table 2).

### 3.3 Data Collection

The principal researcher invited BE students to participate without any kind of incentive. The business professionals were a convenience sample recruited through word of mouth.

*Questionnaires* were delivered to participants through an email link.

*The semi-structured interviews* were conducted in person separately in the Vietnamese language, recorded, and converted into English by

the principal researcher.

To ensure the anonymity, objectivity, and reliability of the survey, no names were mentioned, and all data were stored securely.

4. Results

In Phase 1, the first research question was answered with questions 1-4, 6-7, and 9-25. The second question was based on questions 5-8. Please note that in the data commentary, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

The questionnaires were delivered to 143 participants. Among 100 BE students, 96 responded. The percentage of students in the final, third and second year was 41%, 40%, and 19% respectively, and they all had experience in the most recent course in the BE major.

Of 43 business staff using English in their workplaces, 47% worked in the finance banking sector, 23% in accounting and auditing, 14% in business administration, and 2-6% in other areas like personnel, sales and marketing (Question 1). Many of them were working in local commercial banks such as Vietcombank (VCB), Vietinbank, SHB, SCB, HDB, etc. Regarding their experience, nearly 80% of them had more than 3 years working in their fields, and 19% had from 1 to 3 years working in their jobs (Question 8).

Target situation analysis in Questions 1-4 interpreted the expectations and target goals of the learners. The results showed more than half of the employees and students chose to work in companies located in Vietnam with Vietnamese and foreign customers with 67%, and 55% respectively (Question 2). Approximately two-thirds of them confirmed the importance of BE, with 60% and 66% respectively (Question 3) because they expected that the course could provide them with all BE aspects such as English proficiency (the four English skills), business terminology, and business skills (product presentation, negotiation, interview, correspondence, business etiquette, problem-solving, etc.) with 56% and 70% respectively (Question 4).

Present situation analysis in Questions 5-8 indicated the stakeholders' current circumstances. Figure 2 illustrates that the current self-reported English proficiency of the research participants (Question 5) was mainly between at the CEFR intermediate level (B1-B2 or intermediate to upper-intermediate) and elementary level (A1-A2 or elementary to pre-intermediate), which scored 54% and 29% respectively for the business professionals, 48% and 34% respectively for the undergraduates. 12% of the business staff and 11% of the students said they were at the advanced level.

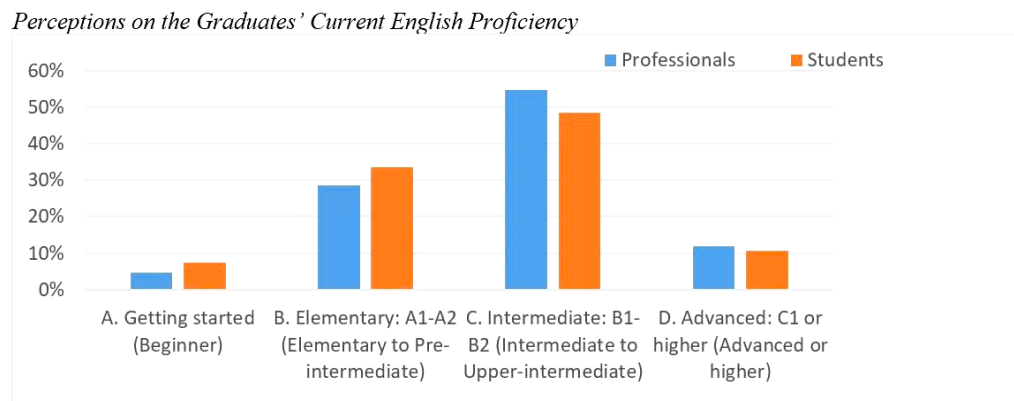


Figure 2. Perceptions on the graduates' current English proficiency

Figure 3 shows the three skills employees and students wanted to improve most urgently were speaking (35% and 32% of respondents respectively), listening (31% and 30% respectively), and writing (28% and 23% respectively) (Question 6). Only 6% of employees and 15% of undergraduates most wanted to practice their reading skills.

The Skills the Stakeholders Wanted to Improve

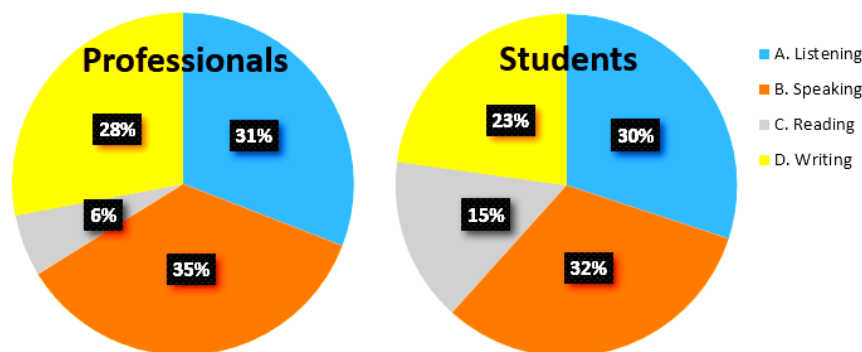


Figure 3. The skills the stakeholders wanted to improve

Figure 4 shows the priority of English aspects that the participants needed to improve most (question 7). The two sets of stakeholders shared the same priority. 45% of them wanted to strengthen their linguistic skills; while 31% expected to reinforce their business skills: communication, problem-solving, negotiation; and 24% for business terminology and economic concepts.

*The English Aspects the Stakeholders Wanted to Improve Most*

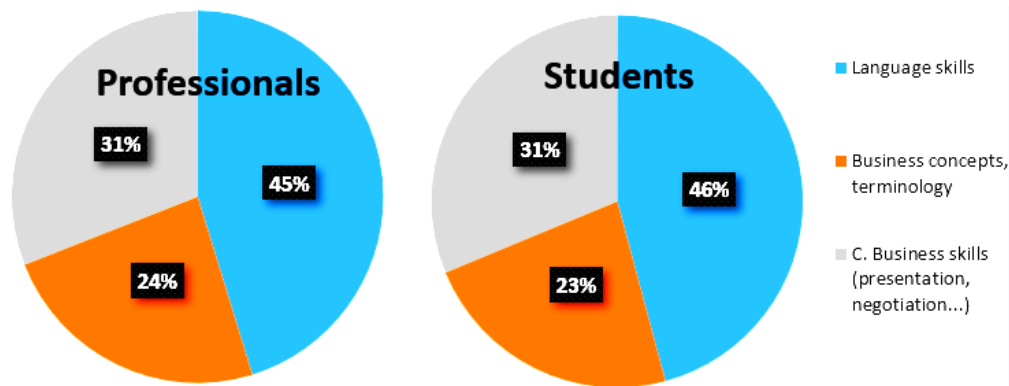


Figure 4. The English aspects the stakeholders wanted to improve most

**Learning situation analysis** included the analyses of content arrangements, teaching methods, teaching materials, and teachers. Regarding the content arrangements, *necessary business topics, and language skills* are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Necessary business topics, language skills, and learning obstacles

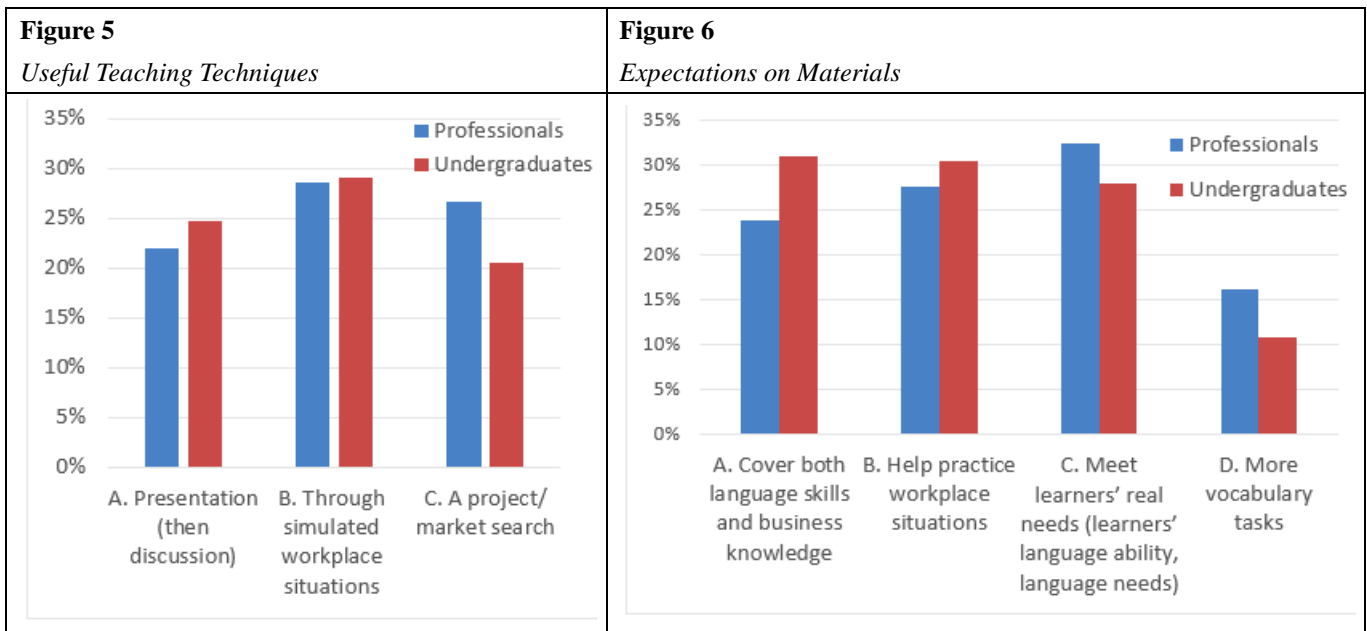
<i>Necessary Business topics, language skills, and learning obstacles</i>		
Question	Professionals	Students
<i>9/ What business area is the most important for your job?</i>		
A. Business management	9%	<b>24%</b>
B. Sales and marketing (e-marketing, international trade, etc.)	<b>19%</b>	<b>24%</b>
C. Accounting and auditing (taxation, etc.)	<b>26%</b>	1%
D. Finance and banking (insurance, etc.)	<b>37%</b>	18%
E. Human resources management (recruitment, labor contract, etc.)	5%	21%
F. Others (manufacturing, etc.)	5%	13%
<i>10/ What spoken and written English skills are the important for your job?</i>		
A. Telephoning	<b>18%</b>	13%
B. Product presentations	12%	<b>19%</b>
C. Negotiation/meetings/interviews	<b>22%</b>	<b>19%</b>
D. Formal correspondence writing (proposals, applications, emails, etc.)	15%	14%
E. Informal conversation (daily communications, etc.)	<b>16%</b>	<b>20%</b>
F. Writing formal reports	<b>16%</b>	14%
<i>11/ What English skills are important for your job?</i>		
A. Listening (interview, telephoning, etc.)	<b>20%</b>	<b>28%</b>
B. Speaking (pronunciation, presentation, etc.)	<b>30%</b>	<b>30%</b>
C. Reading (financial reports, economic documents, etc.)	16%	16%
D. Writing (emails, reports, product descriptions, etc.)	<b>34%</b>	<b>26%</b>
<i>12/ What are the biggest obstacles in learning B.E?</i>		
A. The shortage of suitable teaching materials	14%	<b>24%</b>
B. The shortage of teachers' business knowledge and language knowledge	<b>26%</b>	13%
C. The shortage of suitable teaching methods	<b>26%</b>	22%
D. The shortage of practice of simulated situations	<b>35%</b>	<b>42%</b>

First, regarding teaching content, Table 3 indicates (in bold type) that the most important business areas of the business professionals were finance-banking, accounting-auditing, and business management, which accounted for 37%, 26%, and 19% respectively; whereas those of the students were business management (24%), sales- marketing (24%), personnel (21%), and finance-banking (18%) (Question 9). Regarding important spoken and written English skills for their jobs (Question 10), about 22% of the professionals thought that the most necessary skill was negotiating, meetings, and interviews. About 16-18% thought the most essential skills were telephoning; daily conversation; writing reports; and formal correspondence. Only 12% chose presentation-consultation as the top skill. The perceptions of

students were a little different because their three most important skills were almost equally split between daily conversation; presentation; and negotiation/ meetings/ interviews, which accounted for nearly 20% each. It appeared that oral skills were more emphasized than written skills because they wanted to improve negotiation skills and daily conversation more urgently than other skills. This fact is clearly reflected via question 11; the most necessary skills for both groups were speaking, writing, and listening, which occupied 30%, 34%, and 20% respectively for professionals, and 30%, 26%, and 28% respectively for students.

Question 12 illustrated the biggest obstructions to learning in a BE course. 35% of the professionals and 42% of students thought that the lack of practice in simulated workplace situations hindered them from BE acquisition. While employees blamed inappropriate teaching methods and instructors lacking business knowledge, which occupied 26% each, undergraduates considered the shortage of suitable teaching materials (24%) and teaching methods (22%) as the biggest hindrances.

Second, regarding teaching methods (Q13), Figure 5 indicates that many stakeholders valued simulated workplace situations, market research projects, presentations- discussion, which accounted for 29%, 27%, and 22% respectively for professionals, and 29%, 21%, and 25% respectively for undergraduates.



Third, regarding teaching materials, when asked whether the materials matched the workplace situations (Q14), around half of the stakeholders chose a neutral option, at about 47% for each, which suggested they were uncertain whether material content matched the workplace situations. For the rest of the participants, 33% of the employees expressed partial disagreement on the link between the material's content and the workplace situations. In contrast, 29% of the undergraduates expressed partial agreement on that. Furthermore, Figure 6 (Question 15) shows that employees and students really wanted the materials matching their real needs and language ability (32%, 28% respectively), helping them practice in workplace situations (28%, 30% accordingly), covering both language skills and business knowledge (24%, 31% respectively). In Figure 7 (Question 16), economic documents (contracts, custom declaration, tax declaration, invoice, bills ...), financial statements (balance sheet, business performance, financial notes ...), emails, and news (economic newspapers, advertisements, recruitment, announcement ...) were essential authentic materials that the stakeholders worked with and wanted to access in the BE course, at 28%, 26%, 19%, and 16% for employees; 25%, 22%, 18% and 18% for students.

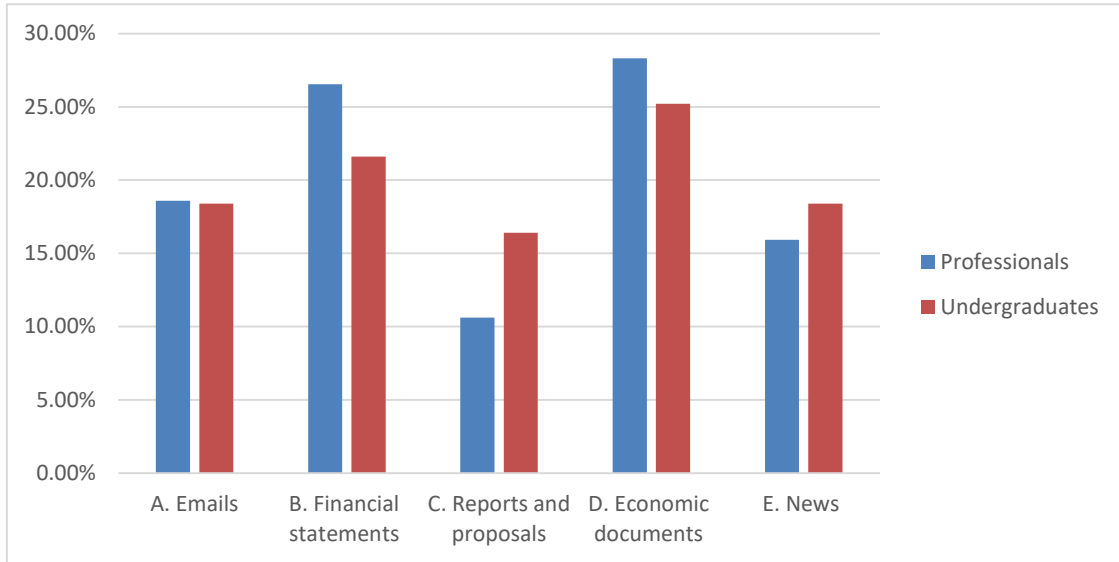


Figure 7. Necessary Materials in the Workplace

Regarding BE teachers, to improve the course effectiveness, most professionals and students would like the teachers to change their teaching methods to design more tasks about real situations in workplaces, at 58%, and 60% respectively. Two other factors were a higher level of English language proficiency and teachers’ enthusiasm, which accounted for around 16% for each factor for each group (Question 17).

After coding the written responses for three open-ended questions (Q18-20), first, for business staff, Question 18 showed professionals chiefly expected the BE course to help them practice more (40%). Especially communicative skills (37%) with more concentration on listening and speaking abilities (19%). Situations similar to the real-life workplace with authentic materials (14%) and real problems (40%) were expected. They also needed specialized vocabulary (28%).

When asked to recall what they learned and did not learn from the BE course (Q19), employees said they had developed specialized terminology the most (33%) and only a little about language skills (7%). Overall, they had really wanted to practice more. 14% of respondents said that the course did not offer them enough time to practice. Some stated that they did not practice with realistic workplace situations (28%) or with authentic and updated documents (19%). In addition, some thought they did not develop communicative skills (21%).

When talking about suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the BE course (Q20), professionals recommended more practice time (42%). Second, they expected students to practice communication more, especially listening and speaking skills (37%), and practice actual situations at work (33%) and actual documents and updates (9%). In addition, the teaching methods of lecturers should be improved (16%).

Second, for students, three open-ended questions (Q18-20) indicated what they learned from the last BE course (Q19). 35% said they developed terminology, 18% practiced language skills, especially listening and speaking, 7% developed presentation skills, and only 2% stated they learned from the workplace situations. However, 16% said they did not practice skills in workplace situations, 11% needed to practice communicative skills, especially speaking and listening, 10% stated that they did not have enough practice. Moreover, some recommendations for course improvement (Q20) revealed that 33% of students wanted to improve their communication skills, especially listening and speaking skills. 31% valued more practice, especially in the simulated situations in the workplace (21%), with more authentic and updated business documents (11%). 5% complained about the teaching methods.

Regarding degrees of satisfaction (Q21-Q25) about the overall BE course, teaching methods, teaching materials, and instructors, around half of the business employees felt somewhat dissatisfied, at 43% with the BE course, 48% with teaching methods, 50% with materials, 40% with instructors. In contrast, more students were satisfied with the BE course, at 55% (See Table 4). Satisfaction with teaching methods was the same at 48%, while satisfaction with materials was lower at 44%. Satisfaction with instructors was almost the same, around 41%.

Table 4. The degrees of satisfaction about the overall BE course (Q21)

21 / What is your level of satisfaction with the Business English program?			
		Business professionals	Undergraduates
1	Very dissatisfied	7%	1%
2	Almost dissatisfied	43%	7%
3	Neutral	33%	23%
4	Almost satisfied	17%	55%
5	Very satisfied	0%	14%
	Total	100%	100%

After **Phase 1 (questionnaires)**, it could be seen that communication needs and practice time in workplace situations were highly valued by both students and business employees. In general, they shared a lot of perceptions in common; however, from Question 21, their satisfaction levels were different. Particularly, more than half of students were almost satisfied with the BE course (55%), whereas about half of the business professionals were almost dissatisfied with the courses (43%). So, what made the professionals feel (retrospectively) dissatisfied with the BE course they took at the university, and why were students almost satisfied with the BE course, but still wanting to improve their listening and speaking skills? **Phase 2 (semi-structured interviews)** would help answer those inquiries.

In **Phase 2 (semi-structured interviews)**, three university lecturers participated in the interviews including one English department head (Lec1), and two senior lecturers (Lec2, Lec3) who had been working in a large university for over 10 years. The goal of the course was “to help students develop language skills in specific contexts in the workplace, business vocabulary, and practice situations for students to use at work” said Lec2. According to Lec1, during the first two years at university, students learned basic language aspects and the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing; From year 3, students entered more specialization such as English for customer care, English for sales and marketing, and English for negotiation. Regarding *the first research question*, learners needed English to work as a bank teller, or as staff in some fields such as sales and marketing, or human resources. For *the second research question*, about the English proficiency level of BE graduates, about 80% of them self-reported they were at B1 and 20% of them estimated they were at B2 level. According to Lec1 and Lec2, the students were weak at writing business correspondence although Lec3 said their listening and speaking skills were weak.

Lecturers estimated that teaching materials met 50% of situations in the workplace, “Although the school has bought foreign books such as Oxford, Cambridge, books only meet 50% of the business cultural contexts and commercial market situations in Vietnam”, said Lec1 and “articles and data were not updated” said Lec2. Regarding time allotment of theory-practice, “based mainly on books, there are very few practice situations; Listening and speaking activities are mainly through presentations, group discussions, and very little role-playing” said Lec1, Lec2 and Lec3. Lec1 said:

*The biggest obstacle is the capacity of the lecturers, because the lecturers have a master degree in TESOL, not in an economic major, so the teachers have to do a lot of self-discovery and only teach based on their little understanding. As a result, students' knowledge is limited. Another obstacle is the lack of real-life situations, and the situations were proposed by the lecturers, but the lecturers do not have much experience in the business field, so we have not done role-play in workplace situations.*

All lecturers wanted students to have more situations in the workplace for students to practice; especially practice listening, speaking, and writing skills with updated actual financial documents.

Three graduates (Grad1, 2, 3) who had finished a BE major from this university a year ago and five undergraduates (Stud1, 2, 3, 4, 5) who were interested in the banking and sales domains took part in the interviews. For *the first research question*, agreeing with university lecturers, they wanted to acquire business terminology and use it in the workplace. For *the second one*, both the alumni and students supposed that they were still at intermediate level and needed to improve listening and speaking, because in class, they had very few opportunities to listen to CDs and communicate. In their opinions, the textbook only meets 50% of the workplace needs due to the lack of actual documents and practice situations. According to Grad1, and Grad2, they were exposed to a real contract, but it was just in a general lecture, so they did not understand well. According to Stud1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, they did not have access to authentic financial statements such as balance sheets and income statements. Most of them estimated that the theory-practice ratio was 80-20%, and they recommended increasing practice time at least to 50% for listening and speaking skills, and including real-life situations. They believed that the biggest obstacle was that the lecture did not have many simulated situations like those in the workplace. “In BE, I found it useful in some situations such as negotiation, product presentation, customer care,” said Grad1. However, Grad2, 3 said that “In a typical class, the lecturer taught vocabulary, reading, group presentations, and discussion. For example, when a customer bought a product and complained, we discussed solutions. She gave few role-play tasks;” “I only practiced 10% of the course,” said Grad2. Although they said the course was 50% satisfactory and effective, this was mainly due to instructors' enthusiasm, and terminology knowledge. Stud3 said:

*I really want to add practical situations to practice. Although I know practicing workplace situations is difficult, I must encounter these situations later in my future job. Thus, I want to practice right now. I want to improve my listening and speaking skills, and increase my terminology even more. I look forward to learning financial statements, and economic documents, because I have not seen real documents in the textbook.*

That is why all students and graduates wanted to practice more through workplace situations, to increase interaction between lecturers and students, and authentic and updated documents relevant to their majors.

The seven department heads of commercial companies (Heads1-7) included four working for Vietnamese and international commercial banks (Heads3-6), one head of the human resources department of a global oil-gas solutions and services company (Head1), one head of customer services of an international accounting- auditing company (Head2), and one head sales manager of an electrical appliances supermarket- (Head7) (See Table 5). For *the first question* on the linguistic needs at the workplace, department heads claimed these seven companies mostly needed employees who had good communication skills and a deep understanding of business terminology. While three international corporations communicated mainly by email and by phone, four Vietnamese businesses transacted mainly in person, by email, and by phone. Consulting, presenting products, and guiding the contract filling were common workplace cases. In addition, one also dealt with salary negotiation and contracting with input suppliers; another also required the ability to translate Vietnamese financial

circulars/regulations to advise the procedures for foreign companies; At a major bank, “Resolving complaints on the phone, presenting products, writing emails to resolve customer complaints both to ensure customer services at the best level and to protect our company staff’s interests were common situations,” said Head3. Their bank staff needed to know language for activities such as opening credit cards, transferring money, and international payments. For *the second question*, most graduates met 40% of the needs of the workplace, and they needed to improve listening, speaking and writing. “Graduates only meet 30%-40% of the needs at the company because they use the wrong terminology with slow reflexes, write emails, and translate poorly, causing misunderstandings, so specialized English terminology is very important in this profession,” said Head2 of the auditing company.

Table 5. List of department heads of the commercial companies (Head 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

*List of Department Heads of the Commercial Companies (Head1,2,3,4,5,6,7)*

Code	Department	Experience	Business field	Scope
Head1	Human resources	14 years	Equipment solutions for oil and gas exploitation, providing oilfield owners around the world	International corporation, headquarter in Japan
Head2	Customer services	8 years	Products and services of accounting- auditing- taxation- business consulting	International corporation; headquarter in England
Head3	Personal credit	6 years	Banking and financial products and services	International corporation, headquarter in the USA
Head4	International payment	11 years	Banking and financial products and services	Vietnamese Joint Stock Commercial Bank
Head5	Credit	10 years	Banking and financial products and services	Vietnamese Joint Stock Commercial Bank
Head6	Corporate credit	8 years	Banking and financial products and services	Vietnamese Joint Stock Commercial Bank
Head7	Sales department	5 years	Products and services related to electrical appliances	Vietnamese Electrical Appliances Company

Finally, *seven sales department employees* (Staff1,2,3,4,5,6,7) who were working at customer-service counters for some commercial banks in Vung Tau City participated in the semi-structured interview. For the *first research question*, foreign customers often used English in transactions such as money transfer, withdrawal, credit card, international payment, savings deposit, foreign currency exchange. Listening, speaking, and writing were more necessary and important than reading. For *the second question*, most of the staff stated the graduates usually needed to improve auditory and speaking skills (5 out of 7 people stated), and writing (2 out of 7 people mentioned). The average degree of staff satisfaction with graduates was 40%, with respondents citing lack of practice, unfamiliarity with workplace situations and workplace documents, and poor economic knowledge among teachers. “Entry-level graduates often do not understand specialized vocabulary properly. I think teachers should have knowledge of economic majors to explain to students well because if teachers don’t understand terminology accurately, they will mislead undergraduates about terminology. This can negatively affect the students’ future workplace performance.” said Staff1. Staff6 explained that “the course should have real-life situations for practice. (...) I only practiced 10%, I want to increase the practice time to 40-50% of the study time.” They all wanted to practice communicating in simulated situations, referencing authentic documents.

After semi-structured interviews, common themes were coded and illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6. A summary of the common themes coded from the semi-structured interviews

Theme	Total	%	Theme	Total	%
The total number of participants	25	100%	The total number of participants	25	100%
<b>QUESTION 1/ BE needs</b>			<b>MORE INFORMATION/ The match</b>		
<b>1.Areas: Finance and banking</b>	17	68%	<b>Materials matched the needs (%)</b>		44%
<i>Sales and marketing</i>	12	48%	<b>Felt satisfied with course (%)</b>		50%
<i>Accounting and auditing</i>	3	12%	<b>Enough terminology</b>	4	16%
<i>Business management</i>	2	8%	<b>Obstacles:</b>		
<b>2.Business terminology</b>	8	32%	<i>Lack of teachers' business knowledge</i>	4	16%
<b>3.Business skills</b>			<i>Lack of workplace situations</i>	21	84%
<i>Telephoning</i>	13	52%	<i>Lack of authentic materials</i>	10	40%
<i>Product presentation</i>	22	88%	<i>Mainly taught terminology, did not have enough practice</i>	16	64%
<i>Negotiation</i>	4	16%	<b>Practice time (in the past course) (%)</b>		26%
<i>Formal correspondence</i>	16	64%	<b>Expected Practice time (%)</b>		55%
<i>Complaint handling</i>	4	16%	<b>Suggestions:</b>		
<b>4.Language skills</b>			<b>Practice in workplace situations</b>	23	92%
<i>Listening skills</i>	25	100%	<b>Practice with authentic materials</b>	14	56%
<i>Speaking skills</i>	25	100%	<b>Internship in companies</b>	2	8%
<i>Reading skills</i>	7	28%	<b>Enhance teachers' business knowledge</b>	4	16%
<i>Writing skills</i>	12	48%	<b>Materials:</b>		
<b>QUESTION 2/ BE English proficiency</b>			<b>Financial statements</b>	7	28%
<b>Graduates were at A2</b>	3	12%	<b>Economic documents</b>	12	48%
<b>Graduates were at B1</b>	6	24%			
<b>Met language requirement (%)</b>		35%			
<b>Weak at terminology</b>	6	24%			
<b>Weak at Business skills</b>	10	40%			
<b>Weak at English skills</b>	12	48%			
<i>Weak at Listening</i>	19	76%			
<i>Weak at Speaking</i>	20	80%			
<i>Weak at Reading</i>	3	12%			
<i>Weak at Writing</i>	16	64%			
<b>Slow reflexes in communication</b>	4	16%			

In Table 6, for the first research question, according to the 25 interviewees, the most necessary areas were finance and banking (17 interviewees, 68%) and sales and marketing (12 interviewees, 48%). The interviewees identified important business skills (telephoning, product presentation, formal correspondence) and language skills (listening, speaking, and writing). For the second research question, in the interviewees' perceptions, graduates' English levels were A2-B1. They thought graduates were weaker in language skills (48%) (oral, auditory, and writing skills) than in business skills (40%). 13 of the interviewees (three graduates, one undergraduate, four business department heads, five business professionals) estimated that graduates, on average, met 35% of what they perceived to be the language requirements of the workplace. The graduates and students who had taken a BE course stated that 44% of teaching materials matched their needs, and they felt 50% satisfied with their last course. The semi-structured interviews indicated that the learners' last BE course had helped them mainly with terminology but had not included enough communicative practice (16 interviewees, 64%) (see "More information" in Table 6), and lacked workplace situations which they really needed (21 stakeholders, 84%). On average, they only practiced 26% of the time in their last BE course, and they wanted to increase this proportion to 55%. They really wanted to practice in workplace situations (23 interviewees, 92%), with authentic materials (56%), and instructors with good language and business expertise (16%).

Interview data complemented the results of the questionnaires to explain the difference in the degrees of satisfaction between students and business staff. Though slightly more than half of students felt satisfied with the BE course (55%) mainly because of the teachers' enthusiasm and approachability and the provision of business vocabulary, about half of the business professionals were dissatisfied with the BE course (43%) due to the shortage of practice time for communicative skills in simulated workplace situations and updated authentic business documents (invoices, economic contracts, forms, etc.)

All stakeholders said that the learning materials should meet the learners' needs (the gap between the learner's level and language requirements in the workplace), and the biggest obstacles to learning BE were the teaching methods because they wanted to increase practice time, especially listening and speaking in simulated workplace situations. Another obstacle identified by the English Department head, one lecturer, one graduate, and one business professional was the shortage of business-related knowledge in the BE lecturers, which could cause misunderstanding of specialized terminology among the language users, and impact negatively on their job effectiveness. To sum up, all stakeholders expected the university to increase the effectiveness of the BE course, with practical workplace situations, updated, authentic documents, and English lecturers with appropriate expertise in business knowledge.

**5. Discussion**

In response to the first research question on the expectations of students and other stakeholders about the English language needed for the business workplace, there was a strong consensus about expectations and language needs. First, most graduate employees and students wanted to work in Vietnam with local and foreign customers (67% for employees, 55% for students), which is similar to the results in Guiyu & Yang's (2016) paper (47% for students). Most undergraduates chose the BE course because of the need to operate efficiently in the

workplace (54%) and to satisfy their own interests (21%), which is somewhat like the previous findings (Li, 2014; Guiyu & Yang, 2016; Wu, 2012; Wenzhong & Cheng, 2013). For instance, the proportions of students who studied BE for those reasons were 60%, 18% respectively (Li, 2014); and 31%, 56% (Guiyu & Yang, 2016). Second, most of them recognized the importance of BE because they expected to learn both language skills and business skills, which is similar to findings in Guiyu & Yang (2016).

Both business professionals and undergraduates in this research focused mostly on finance and banking, sales and marketing sectors, though business staff also cared about accounting-auditing topics, and students were keen on business administration and human resources management. This discovery is similar to that in preceding studies (Capková & Kroupová 2017; Wenzhong & Cheng, 2013) with an exception for intercultural communication which was mentioned in Capková & Kroupová’s (2017) research, but not in our data.

The findings of this research and the previous studies share several common business situations. This research indicated that the most necessary business activities for using English were in-person communication such as meetings, negotiations, and interviews, daily conversation, telephoning and formal correspondence writing, product presentation, and customer care, which were also stated in many preceding investigations (Mei & Siraj, 2013; Mancho-Barés & Llurda, 2013; Capková & Kroupová 2017; Chan, 2021; Cowling, 2007; Wu, 2012; Wenzhong & Cheng, 2013; Liton, 2015). Practice in speaking and listening skills was urgently needed, which was similar to the findings of previous studies (Wu, 2012; Mancho-Barés & Llurda, 2013; Capková & Kroupová 2017; Guiyu & Yang, 2016; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017.) Also, lack of writing skill was strongly noted by stakeholders, particularly by the department heads. This result is similar to that mentioned by Capková & Kroupová (2017) and Wu (2012) where the employers wanted the employees to improve their speaking and writing skills at work. Therefore, it is clear that the expectations for learners in the BE course in this study to get more practice in typical workplace situations, especially oral, auditory, and writing skills are in line with the other research findings listed above.

Regarding the constraints in teaching and designing an ESP course, Lec1, Lec2, Grad3 and Staff1 mentioned the shortage of specific-subject knowledge among English instructors, which also coincides with the research results on challenges and constraints in ESP course design in Cambodia (Petraki & Khat, 2020). The expectations that ESP lecturers also be expert not only in business terminology, but also specialized content may be unrealistic. As Petraki and Khat suggest, team teaching with business specialists is one solution, but it relies heavily on cooperation with those specialists, and has resource implications, specifically for instructor time and salary.

Regarding the second research question on graduates’ English proficiency, our findings differed from those in Guiyu & Yang’s (2016) study in some respects. In their research on BE teaching and development in China, business skills were the students’ weakest aspects, compared to language skills and they wanted to improve business skills and terminology more urgently than language skills. In contrast, our research showed that about half of the students and business professionals found it problematic to speak, listen, and write about business topics, though some students still found reading texts troublesome. That the Vietnamese stakeholders needed to see improvement in language skills more urgently than business skills may reflect the different stages in economic development and expertise in English language teaching between Vietnam and China.

These research findings are principally in accordance with the initial hypotheses. First, BE students expected to learn not only language skills, especially auditory, oral, and writing skills at which they were weak, but also business knowledge. Finance and banking, sales, and marketing remained the most common environments in which product presentation, business communication, and formal correspondence were needed. Second, although the stakeholders self-reported their English levels were A2-B1, they desired to improve listening, speaking and writing skills through more communicative practice time on workplace situations with authentic financial documents; they also expected BE teachers to have more profound expertise in the relevant business field.

The discussion section is summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Comparison of research findings with previous studies

<b>This study</b>	<b>Previous research</b>
Research Question 1/ <u>Business areas:</u> Finance and banking, sales, accounting, and management	Similar to (Capková & Kroupová, 2017; Wenzhong & Cheng, 2013)
<u>Situations:</u> Negotiating, telephoning, formal correspondence, small talks, product presentations	Similar to (Mancho-Barés & Llurda, 2013; Capková & Kroupová, 2017; Cowling, 2007; Wu, 2012; Wenzhong & Cheng, 2013)
<u>Important skills:</u> auditory, oral and writing skills	Similar to (Wu, 2012; Liton, 2015; Mancho-Barés & Llurda, 2013; Capková & Kroupová, 2017; Guiyu & Yang, 2016; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017)
<u>More information: Constraints in teaching:</u> shortage of specific-subject knowledge among English instructors.	Similar to (Petraki & Khat, 2020)
Research Question 2/ Language skills were more important than business skills.	<u>Different from</u> Guiyu & Yang’s (2016): Business skills were more important than language skills

## 6. Conclusion

Regarding *the first research question, the first phase* (questionnaires) and *the second phase* (semi-structured interviews), this research revealed that most graduate employees and students desired to learn both language skills and business skills from the BE course. They aspired to practice communicative skills more, particularly oral, auditory, and writing skills in typical workplace situations, especially in some key economic areas, namely finance and banking, and sales and marketing. In response to *the second research question* on graduates' English proficiency from the perceptions of the business professionals, graduates in the workplace were weak at speaking, listening, and writing skills. They needed language skills more urgently than business skills.

While the students expressed their satisfaction with the BE course principally because of the lecturers' enthusiasm and teaching of terminology, about half of the business graduate staff were retrospectively dissatisfied due to the shortage of practice time for oral, auditory, and writing skills in workplace situations and authentic, updated workplace documents.

The study has shown the status of the BE program in a large university in Vung Tau, Vietnam. Through needs analysis, this research has contributed to ESP, especially on BE needs in Vietnam. Most of the results are consistent with previous studies on language needs. The BE demands in Vietnam and in other countries around the world are similar in many respects. However, in terms of BE proficiency, this study indicated that BE majors in this Vietnamese university were primarily weak at language skills, especially listening, speaking, and writing, and after that they aspired to improve their business skills. This meant that language skills were a top priority for improvement. This result was different from that in Guiyu & Yang's (2016) study at a Chinese university, which indicated that business skills were more urgent than language skills for Chinese undergraduates.

It is necessary to acknowledge some *limitations* in this research. The study is limited by the small population sample of interviewees and only one university being investigated. In this investigation, a high percentage of research participants were working as bank officers. As a result, language needs and workplace situations in international business settings were more specific to bank officers and sales staff. Therefore, since BE students can work in many economic fields at different workplaces, future research could employ a larger number of participants across many business fields to further validate the findings of this research. Also, to make a better generalization, needs analyses of BE majors and courses in other universities and cities in Vietnam should be carried out. Additionally, future participants in needs analysis could include interns, as interns will identify common and necessary workplace communication needs through regular interim self-and-peer reflections and skill improvement planning, as was done in Chan's BE needs analysis in Hong Kong in 2021. Another limitation of this study lies in the use of convenience sampling with participants drawn from a single university and only a few businesses in Vung Tau. As a result, the sample has not fully reflected the diversity of educational settings and industry expectations across regions and universities. Future research can also achieve better generalizability if the research subjects include a wider range of universities and business fields.

As a result of this needs analysis for BE learners in a university in Vung Tau City, Vietnam, some recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of the BE course and accommodating the learners' language needs can be made. First, short-term business training courses should be provided for BE teachers for the teachers to understand and update their economic and business knowledge. Alternatively, greater cooperation between business experts and ESP teachers could be encouraged, and different levels of content-based instruction such as team-teaching could be explored. Second, time for auditory and oral skills and business skills should be increased by raising the time for CD or online listening so that students can be familiar with the pronunciation and speed of the native speakers. Practice time for speaking, listening and writing skills should be increased. Third, focusing on workplace situations in the Vietnamese context would stimulate the learners' interest, learning motivation, and language skill development. Thus, workplace situations with more authentic and updated business documents should be added to supplement the existing coursebook so that learners can improve their reflexes in communication. Once the course content is created based on pre-course needs analysis and is subject to ongoing updates as the course takes place, the learners' satisfaction and the effectiveness of the course will certainly increase.

## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam for supporting this research study.

## Author contributions

M.A. Phu as main author was responsible for data collection, and drafting the manuscript. Doctor Han and Professor Emerita Gollin-Kies suggested manuscript revisions and provided editing support. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Funding: Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

## Informed consent

Obtained.

## Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

## Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned, externally double-blind peer reviewed.

#### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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