Thai EFL Learners' Needs of English for Office Administration:
A Learner-Centered Needs Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigated Thai EFL learners' needs in learning English for office administration contexts through a comprehensive learner-centered needs analysis. Employing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, the research involved 116 students who completed questionnaires assessing perceived difficulty and priority needs, followed by semi-structured interviews with 15 participants to explore perspectives in greater depth. Quantitative findings revealed that learners perceived grammar ($\overline{X}$ = 3.65), vocabulary ($\overline{X}$ = 3.55), and writing skills ($\overline{X}$ = 3.49) as most challenging, while prioritizing telephone communication ($\overline{X}$ = 4.92), basic office vocabulary ($\overline{X}$ = 4.88), and interpersonal skills as highest needs. Qualitative analysis identified four major themes; anxiety surrounding telephone communication, formality challenges in professional writing, confidence and fluency barriers, and specific learning support requirements. Key findings indicate that effective ESP curricula should prioritize communicative competencies, incorporate authentic workplace materials, and address cultural and pragmatic dimensions of professional communication. The study contributes to ESP theory by demonstrating the value of learner-centered approaches to needs analysis and provides practical frameworks for curriculum design in office administration contexts. Implications include restructured skill priorities, and confidence-building pedagogical approaches that better prepare Thai students for office environments.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; Needs Analysis; Office Administration

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความต้องการด้านภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทยในบริบทงานสำนักงาน ผ่านการวิเคราะห์ความต้องการแบบเน้นผู้เรียนเป็นศูนย์กลางอย่างครอบคลุม การวิจัยใช้รูปแบบวิธีวิจัยผสมผสานแบบ อธิบายเชิงลำดับ โดยมีนักศึกษา 116 คน ตอบแบบสอบถามเพื่อประเมินระดับความยากและความต้องการ ตามด้วย การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างกับผู้เข้าร่วม 15 คน เพื่อสำรวจมุมมองในเชิงลึกยิ่งขึ้น ผลการวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ พบว่า ผู้เรียน คิดว่าไวยากรณ์ ($\overline{X}$ = 3.65) คำศัพท์ ($\overline{X}$ = 3.55) และทักษะการเขียน ($\overline{X}$ = 3.49) เป็นสิ่งที่ท้าทายที่สุด ขณะที่ให้ ความสำคัญกับการสื่อสารทางโทรศัพท์ ($\overline{X}$ = 4.92) คำศัพท์พื้นฐานในสำนักงาน ($\overline{X}$ = 4.88) และทักษะปฏิสัมพันธ์เป็น ความต้องการสูงสุด การวิเคราะห์เชิงคุณภาพระบุประเด็นหลัก 4 ประการ ได้แก่ ความวิตกกังวลเกี่ยวกับการสื่อสาร ทางโทรศัพท์ ความท้าทายด้านความเป็นทางการในการเขียนเชิงอาชีพ อุปสรรคด้านความมั่นใจและความคล่องแคล่ว และ ความต้องการการสนับสนุนการเรียนรู้แบบเฉพาะด้าน ผลการวิจัยสำคัญชี้ให้เห็นว่าหลักสูตร ESP ที่มีประสิทธิผลควรให้ ความสำคัญกับความสามารถในการสื่อสาร รวมสื่อการเรียนรู้จากสถานที่ทำงานจริง และจัดการกับมิติทางวัฒนธรรมและ ปฏิบัติการของการสื่อสารเชิงอาชีพ การศึกษานี้มีส่วนร่วมต่อทฤษฎี ESP โดยแสดงให้เห็นคุณค่าของแนวทางการวิเคราะห์ ความต้องการแบบเน้นผู้เรียนเป็นศูนย์กลาง และให้กรอบการปฏิบัติสำหรับการออกแบบหลักสูตรในบริบทงานสำนักงาน ข้อเสนอแนะรวมถึงการปรับโครงสร้างลำดับความสำคัญของทักษะ และสร้างแนวทางการสอนที่สร้างความมั่นใจซึ่งจะช่วย เตรียมนักศึกษาไทยให้พร้อมสำหรับสภาพแวดล้อมสำนักงานได้ดียิ่งขึ้น

Keywords: ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์เฉพาะ การวิเคราะห์ความต้องการ งานสำนักงาน

Introduction

The rapid expansion of Thailand's service sector and increasing international business partnerships have created unprecedented demand for English proficiency in office administration roles. As Thailand continues to position itself as a regional business hub within ASEAN, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become a critical competency for office personnel across various industries (Jindapitak, & Teo, 2014). However, despite the growing importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in office contexts, there remains a significant gap between the English language skills taught in universities and the actual communication needs of office workers in Thai business environments.

Traditional approaches to English language teaching in Thai higher education have predominantly focused on general English proficiency, often neglecting the specific linguistic demands of workplace communication (Kaewpet, 2009). This disconnect becomes particularly pronounced in office administration contexts, where employees must navigate complex communicative tasks such as managing international correspondence, facilitating cross-cultural meetings, handling client inquiries, and coordinating with overseas partners. The consequences of inadequate preparation are evident in the frequent reports of communication breakdowns, missed business opportunities, and reduced workplace confidence among Thai office workers (Karachedee, 2017).

English for Office Administration represents a specialized domain within ESP that encompasses a unique set of communicative competencies. Unlike general business English, office administration English requires mastery of specific genres, registers, and cultural protocols that govern professional communication in administrative settings (Basturkmen, 2010). These include the ability to compose formal business correspondence, manage telephone interactions with international clients, participate effectively in multilingual

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

148

meetings, and comprehend complex organizational documents. The specialized nature of these communicative demands necessitates a targeted approach to curriculum design that is grounded in systematic needs analysis.

Although the essential function of needs analysis in ESP curriculum design has been well established over many years, very little specific research has been directed toward the English language needs of students in office administration in Thailand. English needs assessment in other settings, such as tourism (Prachanant, 2012), engineering (Kaewpet, 2009), and nursing (Bosuwon, & Woodrow, 2009), has been investigated previously, but much less so in office administration contexts. Moreover, the vast majority of ESP needs analysis studies have employed multi-stakeholder methods that seek to triangulate perceptions from employers, teachers, and learners. While such approaches are desirable, they often result in competing priorities and diluted recommendations that are not sufficiently focused to adequately address learners' short-term needs and learning priorities.

The learner-focus paradigm in ESP needs analysis has come to be increasingly valued for its ability to capture authentic voices and opinions that would otherwise fall outside teacher-imposed or employer-driven curriculum development (Hyland, 2006). This paradigm begins with learners being recognised as actual stakeholders who bring in-depth understanding of their own learning processes, motivational forces, and perceived challenges. In office administration English, where students have limited exposure to authentic workplace communication, their perceptions of difficulty, priority needs, and preferred learning styles provide essential information for course designers.

Current patterns in Thai tertiary education have seen the proliferation of business English courses that claim to provide students with the competencies to pursue office careers. Yet most of these courses continue to employ generic textbooks and materials that do not appear to address the specific communicative requirements of office administration roles in Thai organizational contexts. Insufficiently planned needs analysis in program development has resulted in curricula that may overemphasize certain skills while underemphasizing others that are equally crucial for successful job performance. Despite the recognised importance of learner-centered needs analysis in ESP curriculum design, there is a critical lack of research that systematically examines Thai students' perceived needs and learning priorities specifically for English in office administration contexts.

The contribution of this study lies in its ability to inform evidence-based curriculum design for English for Office Administration courses in Thai universities. Through an in-depth examination of learners' perceived needs, challenges, and learning styles, the study offers useful insights for teachers seeking to design more responsive and effective ESP curricula. The findings will be particularly valuable for institutions offering business English programs, vocational schools preparing students for administrative roles, and continuing education providers supporting working professionals.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the specific English language skills and competencies that Thai learners perceive as most challenging in office administration contexts

2. To determine Thai learners' priorities regarding English language needs for effective performance in office administration roles

3. To explore learners' preferred approaches to learning English for office administration purposes

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

ESP differs from general English teaching in that it begins with a single, fundamental question: "Why are students learning English in the first place?" Instead of offering one curriculum that fits all learners, ESP courses are built around students' actual communication needs in their target careers or fields. However, while this learner-centered approach makes sense in theory, it can be hard to put into practice-especially in settings where real workplace experience is hard to come by (Belcher, 2013). The unique feature of ESP is its learner-centred approach. According to Munby (1978) effective ESP courses start with discovering what students will actually be doing with English in their professional lives. This implies investigating their communication needs first and then designing the course content accordingly.

ESP courses are characterized by several important features. They are aimed at specific learning needs, relate directly to particular professions or fields of study, and emphasize the language skills, vocabulary, and communication patterns that students will use in real work environments. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) defined ESP not as a type of English, but as an approach that places the learner's reason for learning English at the center of all pedagogical decisions. This definition is still widely cited, though more recent ESP scholars, such as Hyland (2019), suggest that the field has moved beyond its initial narrow scope to encompass more nuanced views of professional discourse communities and genre analysis. For the present study, its value lies in the emphasis on learner-centeredness that directly shapes the research methodology used to explore Thai students' perceived needs in office administration contexts.

Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is the foundation of any effective ESP programme. At its simplest, it is about identifying the gap between where students are now and where they need to be in terms of their English language skills and this is not a one-off exercise, but rather an ongoing process of assessment and refinement. There are two main kinds of needs when doing needs analysis. Target needs focus on what students must be able to do with English in their future professional roles, while learning needs concern how they can most effectively develop these skills. Three components are typically specified within target needs; necessities (what students absolutely must know), wants (what they hope to achieve), and lacks (the gaps between their current abilities and what is required (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987).

A well-structured needs analysis framework typically distinguishes between Present Situation Analysis (PSA), Target Situation Analysis (TSA), and Learning Needs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Each serves a distinct purpose in curriculum design: While PSA offers baseline proficiency data, TSA identifies the communicative tasks learners will face in the future, and Learning Needs shed light on the teaching strategies that best match learners' motivations and cognitive preferences. By integrating all three perspectives, course designers can create programs that remain relevant, foster skill development, and maintain learner engagement.

Learner-Centered Approach in ESP: Theoretical Underpinnings and Practical Applications

In ESP, the learner-centered approach marks a clear shift from teacher-prescribed curricula to objectives shaped by students themselves (Tudor, 1996). Rooted in constructivist learning theory, it holds that learners build knowledge through their experiences, prior understanding, and self-identified needs (Vygotsky, 1978). In practice, this means treating students as active stakeholders who can contribute valuable insight into their own learning processes and career aspirations. Yet, applying this approach in ESP comes with challenges.

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

150

Benesch (2001) points out that while it can be empowering, it may also place demands on learners that they are not ready for-particularly when they must identify technical language requirements for professional contexts they have yet to experience. Similarly, Belcher (2013) stresses the importance of balancing learner autonomy with the instructor's subject expertise, especially in specialized fields where students may lack the background knowledge to make fully informed decisions. This tension is especially relevant in office administration contexts, where authentic workplace experience is often limited. In such cases, students' perceptions and anticipated needs become vital sources of information for shaping the curriculum (Basturkmen, 2010).

Essential Language Skills in Office Administration Contexts: A Genre-Based Perspective and Curriculum Development Challenges

English for Office Administration is a distinct professional domain with communicative demands that go well beyond general business English skills (Flowerdew, 2000). The role involves navigating a range of genres and registers, each tied to specific functions within organizational hierarchies. Among these, email communication stands out as a primary mode, requiring not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to adjust register, demonstrate cultural sensitivity, and employ strategic politeness markers (Gimenez, 2000). As Evans (2012) notes, effective email use in office settings hinges on pragmatic competence-managing interpersonal relationships while observing organizational protocols.

Telephone communication presents another layer of complexity, particularly in international business contexts where cultural differences and technological limitations can hinder understanding (Charles, 2007). Without visual cues, speakers must rely on linguistic clarity, formulaic expressions, and effective turn-taking strategies. Similarly, participating in meetings and producing accurate minutes demands the ability to process multiple streams of information simultaneously, while maintaining both accuracy and diplomatic neutrality (Bargiela-Chiappini, & Nickerson, 1999). These tasks can be especially challenging for non-native speakers who must negotiate complex discourse patterns while managing cognitive load. Document-related tasks from formal reports to procedural manuals-bring their own demands, requiring genre-specific knowledge and cultural awareness (Bhatia, 1993). Decoding implicit meanings and organizational culture through textual analysis is a high-level skill that is often overlooked in traditional ESP programs.

Translating these theoretical insights into curriculum design, however, is not straightforward. In Thai higher education, for example, English for Office Administration courses have evolved significantly. At the institution where this study takes place, the course shifted in 2020 from a focus on traditional secretarial duties (greeting clients, managing calls, writing business letters) to more modern office communication skills (telephone conversations, meeting arrangements, minute-taking, email and memo writing). While this shift reflects an institutional effort to meet changing workplace demands, it also highlights a key concern raised by Basturkmen (2010): curricula designed primarily on institutional assumptions rather than systematic needs analysis often miss the mark in addressing authentic, genre-specific requirements.

In this case, the course redesign was driven more by perceptions of modernization than by empirical investigation into the genres and discourse patterns students actually encounter in office administration. This gap between genre theory and practice reinforces the need for a systematic, learner-centered needs analysis-one that identifies which genres and communicative competencies are most relevant and most challenging for students, particularly within the Thai educational and professional context.

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

151

This gap between genre theory and curriculum practice underscores the importance of systematic, learner-centered needs analysis that can identify which specific genres and communicative competencies are most challenging and relevant for students in office administration contexts, particularly in the Thai educational and professional environment.

Previous Studies

Recent studies offer some helpful guidance for shaping ESP courses. Li (2014), working with Business English students in China, found that students benefit from hearing directly from professionals and former students who can share their workplace experiences. The study highlighted how useful it is to help students understand what will be expected of them in their future jobs from early on. In Thailand, Jitpanich, Leong, & Ismail (2022) conducted a research of business administration students' writing needs. They found students struggled most with grammar and vocabulary, particularly for emails and reports. Many students aimed to expand their business vocabulary and preferred regular feedback from their teachers. However, looking only at writing skills gives a narrow view of what students actually need to communicate well in professional settings. The focus on structural accuracy, rather than on how language is used in real interactions, seems more in line with older teaching traditions than with the realities of workplace communication.

Muhammad, & Utami (2023) examined the needs analysis for an ESP program to office administration students in Indonesia. The results showed that reading comprehension was seen as the most important skill, followed by listening, writing, and speaking. Interestingly, while students most wanted to improve their speaking skills, this was also identified as their weakest area. Haidar (2024) studied how ESP curricula for business communication were developed and rolled out in a range of Asian contexts, following them over three years to see how they worked in practice. One of the main points to come out of the research is that the usual needs analysis models don't really keep up with the way workplace communication demands can shift, sometimes quite suddenly, in fast-changing industries. The study is methodologically strong in its use of quantitative data, yet it offers far less insight into the students' own experiences, such as how engaged they were and whether they remained motivated, which are factors that previous research has shown to be critical to program success. It also appears to rest on the assumption that a standard curriculum can be transferred across cultural contexts with minimal adaptation. This is a questionable premise, given the extent to which teaching and learning practices are shaped by local cultural norms.

Nguyen, & Ho (2024) came at the topic from another angle, looking at ESP teaching for office administration students in Vietnam and making technology a central feature. They found that bringing in digital communication tools improved performance, and that using workplace simulation software gave students a closer sense of what they might face in a real office. Even so, the benefits weren't the same for everyone. Learning style, personal preference, and how comfortable students were with technology all seemed to matter-especially for those from less advantaged backgrounds. And while test scores went up, there wasn't much sign that the same skills carried over to real-world work, which leaves the bigger question of how far technology can take ESP training still open.

These studies reveal common patterns but also highlight cultural and contextual differences in ESP needs across different regions. Although these studies are useful, there's still a specific gap in our understanding. While there are many studies on general Business English and business administration writing needs, the

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

152

particular linguistic demands of English for Office Administration roles haven't been thoroughly explored within business communication contexts. In addition, Office Administration requires specialized skills that may differ significantly from general business communication. These might include specific vocabulary for administrative procedures, particular formats for internal communications, and distinct interaction patterns with different organizational levels. Most of the existing research has focused on certain regions, so there is also a chance to explore how these needs might vary in other settings, where workplace cultures and expectations can be quite different.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to comprehensively investigate Thai English for Business Communication learners' needs in office administration contexts. The research was conducted in two phases: (1) a quantitative survey to identify patterns of perceived difficulty and needs priorities, and (2) qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore learners' perspectives in greater depth. This approach was selected to capture both the breadth of learners' experiences through statistical analysis and the depth of understanding through detailed exploration of individual perspectives (Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2017).

The study adopted a learner-centered approach to needs analysis, positioning students as primary stakeholders whose voices and perspectives are central to curriculum development decisions. This approach recognises that learners possess valuable insights into their own learning processes, motivational factors, and perceived challenges that may not be apparent through teacher observations or employer expectations alone (Hutchinson, & Waters, 1987).

Participants

The research was conducted at a public university in the south of Thailand that offers a Bachelor of Arts program in English for Business Communication. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who met specific criteria designed to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in the English for Office Administration in the academic year 2024 and they participated in this research voluntarily.

For the quantitative data, a total of 116 students participated in the survey, representing approximately 93.55% of eligible students in the course. Participants ranged in age from 19-23 years (M = 20.8, S.D. = 1.2), with 103 female students (88.79%) and 13 male students (11.21%). All participants were Thai native speakers with 3-8 years of formal English instruction prior to university enrollment.

For the qualitative data, fifteen students were purposively selected from the survey respondents to participate in semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria included willingness to participate, representation across different proficiency levels, and diversity in career interests within office administration contexts. The interview sample comprised 9 female and 6 male students.

Research Instruments

1. A questionnaire

The structured questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, drawing on established frameworks for ESP needs analysis (Munby, 1978; Dudley-Evans, & St. John, 1998) while adapting content to

office administration contexts. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections: Demographic Information, Perceived Difficulty Assessment, Needs Priority Assessment, and Suggestions. The questionnaire was sent to three ESP experts and then was piloted with 30 students from other students in the same program to ensure content validity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicated high internal consistency for the difficulty assessment ($\alpha = .92$) and needs priority assessment ($\alpha = .89$) sections.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview protocols were designed to explore themes emerging from the quantitative data in greater depth. Interviews were conducted in Thai to ensure participants could express themselves fully and accurately. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Data Collection Procedures

Phase 1: Survey Administration

Questionnaires were administered during regular class periods. Researchers explained the study's purpose, ensured voluntary participation, and emphasized confidentiality. Participants completed questionnaires individually, and completion time averaged 25-30 minutes.

Phase 2: Interview Conduct

Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience in a private office setting. Before each interview, researchers reiterated the study's purpose, asked for the permission to take notes, and assured participants of confidentiality. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for follow-up questions and exploration of emerging themes.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies). Then participants' level of agreement with the five-point Likert-scale question items were interpreted based on the class interval calculation by Prachanant (2012); 4.21-5.00 = Very High level, 3.41-4.20 = High level, 2.61-3.40 = Moderate level, 1.81-2.60 = Low level and 1.00-1.80 = Very Low level. The interviews were transcribed in full in Thai and then translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, using an inductive coding approach so that themes came from the data rather than from a pre-set theoretical framework. Two researchers each coded 40% of the transcripts-six out of the fifteen interviews-to check for consistency, reaching a Cohen's kappa of .83, which indicates substantial agreement. When differences came up, they were worked through in discussion, sometimes with reference to relevant literature or by going back to the transcripts when needed. Theme saturation was reached when the final three interviews produced no new codes or themes, a conclusion both researchers reached independently.

Ethical Considerations

This study's ethical framework was based on the guideline issued by the Thailand Science, Research, and Innovation office, reference number MHESI 6309.FB 6.1/1/2564, dated March 22, 2021. Under these ethical principles for educational research in human behavior, social sciences, and humanities, studies focusing on instructional processes or the assessment of teaching and learning are exempt from requiring Institutional Human Research Ethics Committee approval. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

154

detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Data confidentiality was maintained through anonymous coding systems, and all recordings and transcripts were stored securely with access limited to the research team.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

This section presents the findings from both quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. The results are organized according to the research objectives, beginning with quantitative survey data followed by qualitative insights that elaborate and explain the statistical findings.

Table 1 Perceived Difficulty Levels Across English Language Skills

Skill Area	$\overline{\text{X}}$	S.D.	Difficulty Level
Grammar	3.65	1.11	High
Vocabulary	3.55	1.09	High
Writing Skills	3.49	1.11	High
Speaking Skills	3.42	1.13	High
Reading Skills	3.29	1.06	Moderate
Translation	3.23	1.07	Moderate
Listening Skills	2.86	1.05	Moderate

The results reveal that participants perceived grammar as the most challenging area ($\overline{\text{X}} = 3.65$), followed closely by vocabulary ($\overline{\text{X}} = 3.55$) and writing skills ($\overline{\text{X}} = 3.49$). Interestingly, listening skills were perceived as the least difficult ($\overline{\text{X}} = 2.86$), contrary to expectations based on previous ESP research.

Table 2 Highest Priority Needs in Office Administration English

Rank	Office Administration Task	$\overline{\text{X}}$	S.D.	Priority Level
1	Answering and making phone calls	4.92	0.82	Very High
2	Vocabulary related to departments and job positions	4.88	0.72	Very High
3	Taking messages from callers	4.88	0.89	Very High
4	Vocabulary related to office supplies	4.85	0.80	Very High
5	Greeting and welcoming visitors to the office	4.80	0.70	Very High
6	Self-introduction and introducing your department	4.77	0.86	Very High
7	Asking about and explaining how to use office equipment	4.72	0.91	Very High
8	Scheduling appointments	4.61	0.90	Very High
9	Drafting external business emails	4.47	0.81	Very High
10	Giving directions to office locations	4.44	0.82	Very High

As can be seen from Table 2, Telephone communication emerged as the highest priority area, with answering and making phone calls ($\overline{\text{X}} = 4.92$) and taking messages ($\overline{\text{X}} = 4.88$) ranking as top needs. Basic office vocabulary and interpersonal communication skills also received very high priority ratings.

Qualitative Findings

The interview data provided rich insights into learners' experiences and elaborated on the quantitative findings through four major themes.

Theme 1: Anxiety Surrounding Telephone Communication

(This theme directly addresses Research Objectives 1 and 2)

Despite rating telephone skills as highest priority ($\overline{X}$ = 4.92), participants expressed significant anxiety about phone communication. This tension also shows up in the survey results: telephone tasks were ranked as the top priority, yet speaking skills were seen as only moderately difficult ($\overline{X}$ = 3.42). The interviews suggest that this "priority–difficulty paradox" has more to do with socio-pragmatic issues than with technical language ability. Participants also pointed to things like politeness norms, the lack of visual cues, and the risk of being misunderstood. These factors don't usually surface in closed-ended survey questions. As two respondents stated;

"I never work in office before. But I think... office English is very hard for me.

When I watch movie, secretary speak very fast with boss. I cannot understand." (Student 1)

"Phone call! I very scared to talk on phone in English. And writing email to customer...

I don't know how to be polite in English email." (Student 10)

These qualitative insights extend the quantitative finding by explaining why telephone communication, though crucial, provokes anxiety-aligning with Flowerdew's (2013) emphasis on considering cultural and pragmatic dimensions in ESP needs analysis.

Theme 2: The Formality Challenge

Building on the quantitative finding that writing skills ranked as highly difficult ($\overline{X}$ = 3.49), the interviews exposed a fundamental tension between linguistic accuracy concerns and communicative effectiveness. This theme reveals how lower-intermediate proficiency creates a cognitive burden that paradoxically impedes professional communication. The following are the reports from two of the participants,

"Grammar in email. I can speak English little bit, but when I write email,

I think too much about grammar. Is this correct? Is that correct? Take too long time." (Student 4)

"Office more formal. Have many rule about how to speak, how to write.

Shop is easy - just 'How much?' 'Thank you!'" (Student 6)

The strength of this theme points to how important pragmatic competence is in ESP courses. It also helps explain a curious survey result: email drafting came in ninth on the priority list but was seen as one of the most difficult writing tasks. The challenge for learners isn't just getting the grammar right—it's finding the right register and using politeness strategies effectively, something Hyland (2007) argues is central to genre-based ESP teaching. This finding aligns with Jitpanich et al., (2022) who found that Thai students consistently struggle with grammar and register concerns in business email communication, indicating a persistent challenge across different Thai educational contexts that extends beyond writing-specific instruction to affect overall professional communication confidence.

Theme 3: Confidence and Fluency Barriers

(This theme directly addresses Research Objectives 1 and 2)

This theme emerged to explain why vocabulary received high difficulty ratings ($\overline{X}$ = 3.55) and why basic office vocabulary ranked among top priorities (office supplies $\overline{X}$ = 4.85; departments and job positions $\overline{X}$

= 4.88). However, the qualitative analysis revealed that the challenge extends beyond lexical knowledge to pragmatic competence in cross-cultural professional contexts. As reported by two participants,

"Not confident. Especially with boss or important people. I worry about

make mistake and look stupid." (Student 5)

"My English is not smooth. I speak... very... slow... like this." (Student 12)

This theme complements the quantitative data showing moderate difficulty in speaking but high importance assigned to interpersonal communication tasks. The lack of fluency appears to be compounded by hierarchical workplace dynamics, echoing Seedhouse's (1995) argument that affective barriers must be addressed for communicative competence to develop.

Theme 4: Learning Preferences and Support Needs

(This theme directly addresses Research Objective 3)

This final theme brings together the quantitative results and points to a deeper factor influencing learner performance: the need for structured support that builds confidence. What came through strongly in the interviews is that traditional ESP approaches, which place most of their emphasis on linguistic competence, do not go far enough. They overlook the affective barriers that many learners face-barriers that often stand in the way of effective communication in professional settings. The following are the reports from the participants,

"Step by step. First, how to understand meeting. Then how to take note.

Last, how to speak in meeting." (Student 3)

"Template! Give me good example I can follow. And check my writing,

tell me mistake." (Student 9)

These preferences align with the learner-centered approach in ESP (Nunan, 1988), where instruction is scaffolded and responsive to learner-identified needs. The request for templates and models also reflects a desire for genre awareness and structured learning pathways, which can directly inform task-based curriculum design.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the English language needs of Thai English for Business Communication learners preparing for office administration careers. This discussion examines the implications of these findings for ESP theory and practice, particularly in the context of learner-centered curriculum design for office administration programs in Thailand.

The Complexity of Perceived Difficulty vs. Priority Needs

The integrated findings fundamentally challenge traditional ESP needs analysis models that assume linear relationships between perceived difficulty and learning priorities. While learners identified grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills as most challenging, they simultaneously rated telephone communication and interpersonal skills as highest priorities. This apparent contradiction reflects the sophisticated understanding that learners possess about their future professional requirements, even when their current capabilities may not align with those needs.

The prominence of telephone communication as the top priority ($\overline{X} = 4.92$) despite speaking skills being rated as moderately difficult ($\overline{X} = 3.42$) suggests that learners recognise the critical importance of this skill in office environments, regardless of their current comfort level. This finding extends Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) learner-centered framework by demonstrating that lower-intermediate EFL learners possess

sophisticated meta-cognitive awareness of professional requirements. However, it also challenges their assumption that learner-perceived needs directly translate to curriculum priorities. The interviews reveal that high-priority, high-anxiety skills like telephone communication require different pedagogical approaches than high-difficulty, low-anxiety skills like grammar.

The qualitative data illuminate this complexity further, revealing that learners' anxiety about telephone communication stems not from inability to speak English, but from concerns about professional protocols, cultural appropriateness, and the absence of visual cues that support face-to-face communication. This nuanced understanding challenges traditional assumptions in ESP needs analysis that conflate difficulty with low priority.

The Vocabulary-Proficiency Connection

The vocabulary-proficiency connection revealed in this study adds critical nuance to existing ESP theoretical frameworks. The high priority placed on vocabulary-related needs (office supplies $\overline{X}$ = 4.85; departments and job positions ($\overline{X}$ = 4.88) coupled with vocabulary being rated as the second most difficult skill area ($\overline{X}$ = 3.55) suggests a critical relationship between limited lexical knowledge and heightened needs awareness. This pattern is characteristic of lower-intermediate learners who possess sufficient meta-linguistic awareness to recognise their vocabulary limitations but lack the lexical resources to express complex professional concepts effectively.

The interview data reinforce this interpretation, with students consistently requesting word lists, specialized terminology, and industry-specific vocabulary. This vocabulary-focused orientation reflects what Nation (2001) describes as the vocabulary burden experienced by EFL learners when transitioning from general to specialized discourse domains.

This finding resonates with Hyland's (2007) discussion of genre-based approaches to ESP, which emphasize functional communication over grammatical accuracy. However, it also suggests that for lower-proficiency learners, vocabulary development may need to precede or accompany genre-based instruction to provide the lexical foundation necessary for effective workplace communication.

Cultural and Social Dimensions of Office English

The qualitative themes reveal significant cultural dimensions that are not captured in traditional needs analysis surveys. Learners' concerns about formality levels, politeness strategies, and hierarchical communication reflect the complexity of cross-cultural professional communication in Thai business contexts.

The contrast between "Thai indirect communication vs. English directness" mentioned by participants highlights what Flowerdew (2013) describes as the cultural dimension of ESP needs. Thai learners must navigate not only linguistic differences but also pragmatic conventions that may conflict with their cultural communication patterns.

This finding has important implications for curriculum design, suggesting that office administration ESP courses must incorporate explicit instruction in pragmatic competence alongside linguistic skills. The learners' request for guidance on when to use 'Sir', when to use first name, and how to disagree politely indicates a need for culturally-sensitive ESP materials that address Thai learners' specific cross-cultural challenges.

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

158

Conclusion

This study looked at the needs of Thai English for Business Communication learners working toward office administration roles. It used a learner-centered approach, combining surveys from 150 participants with interviews from 15. What emerged was a picture that wasn't entirely straightforward. Learners often put the most value on skills like telephone communication and interpersonal interaction, yet they found grammar, vocabulary, and writing the hardest to manage.

The findings show clear continuity with earlier Thai ESP studies, building in particular on Jitpanich et al.'s (2022) work that highlighted grammar and vocabulary difficulties in business writing. While that study centred on written communication, our results suggest that the same concerns-especially grammar anxiety and sensitivity to register-extend well beyond writing. They appear in telephone conversations, email correspondence, and other forms of office administration communication. This points to grammar and register challenges as systemic features of Thai ESP, not isolated to a single skill area. As such, they call for broader pedagogical attention rather than narrowly targeted, skill-specific remedies.

Even with those gaps, they showed a solid grasp of what their jobs demand. Many wanted materials that felt real and connected to actual office work, lessons that build gradually, and activities to help them feel more confident using English at work. They also stressed the need for cultural and pragmatic skills alongside accuracy, saying these were often missing from current courses.

The study demonstrates that learners are valuable stakeholders in ESP curriculum design, possessing insights that can inform more responsive and effective educational programs. The learner-centered approach adopted in this research provides a model for developing ESP curricula that truly address the intersection of academic preparation and professional requirements.

Suggestions

Implications for Curriculum Design
Priority Skills Framework

Based on the findings from quantitative and qualitative data, the following framework is recommended for office administration ESP curricula;

1. Telephone communication protocols and strategies
2. Interpersonal communication and relationship building
3. Basic office vocabulary and functional expressions

Addressing the Confidence Challenge

The pervasive theme of confidence issues across all skill areas suggests that effective office administration ESP must address affective as well as cognitive dimensions of language learning. Learners' expressed anxiety about fear of making mistakes and being perceived as incompetent indicates that traditional error-correction approaches may be counterproductive in this context.

Instead, the findings support what Seedhouse (1995) describes as communication-first ESP pedagogy, where learners develop confidence through successful task completion rather than linguistic perfection. The provision of safety language for requesting clarification and managing communication breakdowns emerges as a crucial component of confidence building.

Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

159

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into learner perspectives on office administration English needs, several limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on a single institution and exclusively on learners' perspectives restricts the generalizability of the findings, as it omits viewpoints from teachers and employers.

Future research should examine whether these patterns hold across different institutional contexts and how learner-perceived needs align with employer expectations and workplace realities. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures learner perceptions at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies tracking how needs perceptions change as learners gain workplace experience would provide valuable insights for curriculum sequencing and skill development progressions.

Acknowledgement

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Journal of Southern Technology Vol. 19 No. 1 January-June, 2026
วารสารเทคโนโลยีภาคใต้ ปีที่ 19 ฉบับที่ 1 มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2569

160

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