Identifying the Needs of Chinese Business Students for Developing BELF Pedagogy

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the developmental needs of Chinese international business students in the context of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) teaching methodology and investigate how to enhance their intercultural communication competence by developing tailored instructional materials. Conducted at Heilongjiang International University in China, the research adopts an explanatory sequential design, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Through needs analysis questionnaires administered to students and semi-structured interviews conducted with Business English teachers, the study delves into the nuanced requirements of students, aiming to provide essential guidance and insights for designing and implementing more effective BELF courses. The findings reveal diverse needs among Chinese students, particularly in English proficiency, business-specific knowledge, business communication skills, cultural awareness, and acculturation skills. In response to these needs, the study proposes a range of strategies, including integrating business-specific knowledge, enhancing English proficiency, cultivating business communication skills, fostering cultural awareness, promoting acculturation skills, and fostering positive attitudes towards intercultural communication. The research outcomes serve as valuable references for optimizing and developing Business English teaching materials, offering crucial theoretical support and practical guidance for enhancing Chinese students' competitiveness and international communication skills in international business.

Keywords: Business English as A Lingua Franca (BELF), Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), Chinese International Business Students, Needs Analysis, Instructional Materials Development

Introduction

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) is increasingly pivotal in the global business landscape. With the ongoing process of globalization, multinational corporations, international trade, and cross-cultural communication are experiencing unprecedented growth. In such a scenario, the language used in business activities must transcend cultural and linguistic barriers to achieve effective communication and collaboration. Particularly for China, a significant international trade and business hub, mastering Business English as a

Lingua Franca is crucial for enhancing the international competitiveness of individuals and enterprises.

However, Chinese students need help in the field of Business English education. Traditional business English teaching often focuses on language expression and imparting business knowledge but overlooks the cultivation of cross-cultural communication abilities. This has resulted in many Chinese students encountering communication barriers and cultural conflicts in actual business environments, impacting their career development and international communication skills. Therefore, the emergence of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) teaching methodology tailored to Chinese students, emphasizing the development of cross-cultural communication skills, holds significant practical significance and far-reaching implications.

This study aims to explore the developmental needs of Chinese international business students in the context of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) teaching methodology and investigate how to enhance their intercultural communication competence by developing tailored instructional materials. Against this backdrop, the study addresses the following two core questions: 1) What are the needs of Chinese students to develop BELF instructional pedagogy in a business domain? 2) How can BELF instructional materials be developed for Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence in business?

Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) encompasses linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies and cultural insights, facilitating effective communication across diverse cultural contexts (Byram, 1997). It goes beyond information exchange, emphasizing critical engagement and self-reflection (Byram, 1997). ICC involves cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions, emphasizing effective intercultural communication (Fantini, 2019).

The Council of Europe defines ICC as identity, culture, and intercultural encounters constituted by attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills (Barrett et al., et al., 2013). Academic courses can cultivate ICC skills such as critical thinking, essential for navigating international business environments (Southwood & Van Heukelum, 2020).

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) facilitates global business communication by prioritizing effective interaction over strict language standards (Seidlhofer, 2005). It accommodates diverse English proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds, emphasizing adaptability and practical communication skills (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). BELF has become integral to modern business, transcending national language boundaries and blending cultural perspectives (House, 2002). BELF is vital for global business interactions, emphasizing effective communication and cultural awareness.

BELF pedagogy

The study delves into BELF pedagogy in the Chinese context, focusing on methodologies like ESP, needs analysis, task-based teaching, and case studies (Robinson, 1989). BELF, a subset of ESP, prioritizes real-world needs, authentic materials, and intercultural awareness (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2011; Martins, 2017; Klimova & Pikhart, 2020). It is a neutral, practical, culturally diverse mode of communication essential for global Business (Martins, 2017). Some researchers highlight the need for ICC integration in Business English education, stressing its importance in the global economy (Li & Dong,

2021; Jayasinghe & Weeraratna, 2022; Gu, 2023). BELF pedagogy emphasizes practicality, authenticity, and intercultural competence in preparing students for international business.

Needs Analysis in English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Needs analysis in ESP is crucial for understanding learner requirements (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It ensures curriculum relevance and effectiveness (Belcher et al., 2011). The process considers subjective and objective learner needs (Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). Basturkmen (2010) highlighted its role in syllabus design, informing course content and approach. However, reliance on standardized materials can neglect individual learner needs (Cowling, 2007). Needs analysis facilitates the integration of language requirements into curriculum design (Hyland, 2006). Tran and Vo (2023) explored ICC needs among tourism students, emphasizing language challenges and cultural adaptability. Rai et al. (2023) surveyed language MOOCs focusing on ICC, highlighting the importance of soft skills in professional communication.

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT, originating from Prabhu's 'Project' in 1979, focuses on tasks in the target language (Willis, 1996). It prioritizes meaning over form, aligning with a learner-centered approach (Ellis, 2003). TBLT involves open-ended tasks that engage learners in real-life language use (Ellis, 2003). It fosters student-centered, communicative teaching methodologies, promoting problem-solving and innovation (Ellis, 2003). In business English courses, simulated corporate environments can facilitate task-based learning, emphasizing intercultural awareness (Pullin, 2015). TBLT is transformative in language education, moving from traditional structured curricula to learner-focused, engaging approaches.

Gong and Luo (2003) emphasized TBLT's focus on real-world language activities, deconstructed into tasks for skill development. Pullin (2015) advocated incorporating intercultural competence in TBLT for BELF communication, suggesting tasks like simulated meetings and interviews. Yildiz (2019) highlighted TBLT's potential to enhance intercultural understanding in BELF contexts, proposing problem-based approaches. Cai and Lv (2019) stressed integrating ICC into the EFL curriculum using TBLT, promoting cultural knowledge and critical thinking. Xie (2022) examined the efficacy of TBLT in Business English courses, emphasizing student needs in communication skills and the method's effectiveness in enhancing motivation and autonomy.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach aimed at investigating the needs of Chinese business students in learning Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) and developing teaching materials to enhance their cross-cultural communication abilities. The research employs an explanatory sequential design, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. Initially, quantitative data is collected through a needs analysis questionnaire comprising 49 detailed questions to assess students' needs and current status in Business English learning. The questionnaire is administered online using the 'Wenjuanxing' application to identify specific student requirements. Subsequently, qualitative data is collected through semi-structured interviews with six Business English teachers to gather their experiences and perspectives on BELF teaching methodology. These interviews in Chinese and English range from 10 to 30 minutes to gain deeper insights and contextualize quantitative findings.

Data collection comprises two phases: the quantitative phase involves descriptive statistics and regression analysis to analyze questionnaire data and identify patterns of student

needs. In the qualitative phase, data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations are analyzed using content analysis methods, including coding and thematic analysis, to provide contextualization and deeper insights into quantitative findings. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data ensures a comprehensive understanding of the demands for BELF teaching methodology and provides a basis for developing practical teaching materials. Additionally, the questionnaire and interview tools undergo validity and reliability testing to ensure data accuracy and credibility during the design process.

Validity and Reliability

The Cronbach's alpha was used for the calculation. The Cronbach's alpha values for the eight questions surpassed 0.7, indicating the effectiveness and reliability of this question set. As a result, researchers can confidently assert the validity of the questionnaire's structure. Additionally, the insights gained from semi-structured interviews corroborate the quantitative data from the questionnaire.

Table 1: Pilot Test Result

Question No.	Question Categories	Cronbach's alpha in Pilot Test	Internal consistency
1-6	Needs Regarding ICC	0.976	Excellent
7-16	Needs for Business-Specific Knowledge	0.975	Excellent
17-23	Perception of English Competence	0.975	Excellent
24-29	Needs for English Competence in their future work	0.975	Excellent
30-36	Needs for Business communication skills	0.975	Excellent
37-41	Needs for Cultural Knowledge	0.976	Excellent
42-44	Needs for Acculturation skills	0.975	Excellent
45-47	Needs for Attitude	0.975	Excellent

Research Findings

The findings of Question1:

Table 2: Different Needs Regarding ICC of the Chinese Students

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Business Specific Knowledge	121	4.45	0.516	High
2. English competence	121	4.56	0.498	Very High
3. Business communication skills	121	4.33	0.568	High
4. Cultural knowledge	121	4.19	0.734	High
5. Acculturation skills	121	4.12	0.759	High
6. Attitude	121	3.96	0.831	High

The survey highlights the needs of Chinese students in developing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). English proficiency emerges as paramount (M=4.56, SD=0.498), followed by a strong emphasis on Business Specific Knowledge (M=4.45, SD=0.516) and Business Communication Skills (M=4.33, SD=0.568). While Cultural Knowledge (M=4.19, SD=0.734), Acculturation Skills (M=4.12, SD=0.759), and Attitude towards Intercultural Communication (M=3.96, SD=0.831) are rated slightly lower, they remain crucial areas for attention. These findings stress the multifaceted approach needed to enhance ICC among Chinese students.

Business-Specific Knowledge (BSK)

Table 3: The Needs for Business-Specific Knowledge

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Business negotiation	121	4.30	0.666	High
2. Recruitment	121	4.31	0.592	High
3. Business training	121	4.30	0.628	High
4. Business management	121	4.25	0.662	High
5. Business meetings	121	4.16	0.707	High
6. International Business	121	4.15	0.679	High
7. Business communications	121	4.25	0.674	High
8. Business travel	121	4.24	0.659	High
9. Products and Services	121	3.98	0.730	High
10. Business Marketing	121	4.07	0.743	High

Business-Specific Knowledge (BSK) assessment reveals significant needs across various domains. Mean scores ranging from 3.98 to 4.31 indicate high perceived needs, particularly in business negotiation, recruitment, training, and management. Similarly, business meetings, international business, communications, and travel are crucial areas needing attention. Although products/services and marketing scored slightly lower, they still represent significant needs.

Interviews with six teachers reinforce these findings, highlighting students' need for familiarity with international negotiation strategies, human resource management, and strategic planning models. Teachers also noted needing to improve their knowledge about products, services, and marketing. Addressing these gaps can better prepare Chinese students for the complexities of modern business environments and strategic challenges.

English Competence (EC)

Table 4: The Perception of English Competence

Items	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Know the English vocabulary in the Business context well	121	3.62	0.788	High
2. Use grammatically correct English well	121	3.59	0.771	High
3. Understand what other people say in English well	121	3.41	0.760	Moderate
4. Understand what other people write in English well	121	3.62	0.887	High
5. Speak English fluently	121	3.19	0.778	Moderate
6. Speak English naturally	121	3.32	0.942	Moderate
7. Speak English clearly	121	3.34	0.509	Moderate

The analysis of participants' self-assessed English competence shows moderate confidence in vocabulary (M=3.62) and grammatical accuracy (M=3.59). However, proficiency in spoken (M=3.41) and written (M=3.62) English reveals room for improvement, especially in comprehension.

Teacher interviews support these findings, highlighting struggles with spontaneous speaking (Teacher 1), lower fluency (M=3.19), naturalness (M=3.32), and clarity (M=3.34). Teachers also noted a lack of vocabulary range and minimal exposure to authentic English environments (Teachers 2 and 3), emphasizing the need for immersive experiences and diverse vocabulary training. Additionally, gaps in training across all language skills were identified (Teacher 4), with pauses in conversations (Teacher 5) and difficulties in understanding complex texts (Teacher 6). While participants have a foundational grasp of basic English skills, there is a critical need for targeted training to enhance fluency, comprehension, and natural communication. Enhanced programs and practical speaking opportunities are essential to better prepare students for professional interactions.

Table 5: The Needs for English Competence in their future work

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. to write email	121	4.27	0.658	High
2. to write a report	121	3.98	0.719	High
3. when I present	121	4.19	0.745	High
4. in meetings	121	4.31	0.693	High
5. when I make telephone calls	121	4.03	0.836	High
6. when I make face-to-face communications	121	4.22	0.758	High

The analysis of English Competence (EC) in Table 4.5 highlights the high need for English skills in professional tasks. Participants emphasized significant needs for participating in meetings (M=4.31, SD=0.693), writing emails (M=4.27, SD=0.658), presenting (M=4.19, SD=0.745), and face-to-face communications (M=4.22, SD=0.758). There were also notable needs for making telephone calls (M=4.03, SD=0.836) and writing reports (M=3.98, SD=0.719). These findings underscore the essential role of comprehensive English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in various work settings.

Business communication skills

Table 6: The Needs for Business Communication Skills

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Collaboration skills	121	4.27	0.619	High
2. Clear and concise expression skills	121	4.53	0.518	Very High
3. Active listening skills	121	4.19	0.637	High
4. Presentation skills	121	4.33	0.663	High
5. Public speaking skills	121	4.43	0.497	High
6. Body language skills	121	4.22	0.701	High
7. Questioning skills	121	4.16	0.671	High

The analysis of Business Communication Skills in Table 4.6 highlights the critical need for proficiency across various dimensions in professional settings. Clear and concise expression skills (M=4.53, SD=0.518) and public speaking skills (M=4.43, SD=0.497) were rated highest, emphasizing precise verbal communication and persuasive presentation. Presentation skills (M=4.33, SD=0.663), collaboration skills (M=4.27, SD=0.619), and body language skills (M=4.22, SD=0.701) were also crucial, underscoring the importance of effective message delivery and interpersonal interactions. Active listening (M=4.19, SD=0.637) and questioning skills (M=4.16, SD=0.671) were slightly lower but still significant for fostering meaningful dialogue and understanding within teams.

Qualitative insights from teachers further support these findings. Teachers highlighted deficiencies in collaboration, clear expression, body language interpretation, public speaking, and active listening. They emphasized the importance of these skills for teamwork, rapport-building, and conflict management. There is a multifaceted need for comprehensive training in business communication skills. Targeted programs to enhance these skills can significantly improve individual performance and foster a more collaborative and effective professional environment.

Cultural Knowledge

Table 7: The Need for Cultural Knowledge

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. National culture	121	4.45	0.671	High
2. National History	121	4.41	0.703	High
3. Organizational culture	121	4.36	0.645	High
4. Values	121	4.46	0.592	High
5. Faiths	121	4.29	0.747	High

The analysis of Cultural Knowledge in Table 4.8 highlights critical needs in understanding diverse cultural aspects of business. Participants rated national culture (M=4.45) and values (M=4.46) as top priorities, emphasizing their importance for effective intercultural interactions. National history (M=4.41) and organizational culture (M=4.36) were also deemed essential. Knowledge of different faiths (M=4.29) was significant, stressing the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness of religious practices.

Teacher insights supported these findings, pointing to gaps in understanding cultural implications in branding, Western corporate structures, cultural subtleties, and historical contexts. Teachers also noted deficiencies in grasping cultural taboos and sensitivities. Addressing these gaps through targeted education and practical experiences is crucial for professionals to succeed in a globalized market, enhancing cultural competence and fostering respectful international business relationships.

Acculturation skills

Table 8: The need for Acculturation skills

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Try to understand his/her opinion	121	4.41	0.628	High
2. Try to make him/her feel good	121	4.54	0.578	Very High
3. Try to respect his/her faith and national culture	121	4.44	0.644	High

The analysis of Acculturation Skills in Table 4.9 highlights a strong need for abilities that support effective cross-cultural interactions. Participants indicated high needs for making others comfortable (M=4.54, SD=0.578), understanding others' opinions (M=4.41, SD=0.628), and respecting faith and national culture (M=4.44, SD=0.644).

Teacher insights reinforce these findings. Teacher 1 noted difficulties with Western workplace norms, and Teacher 2 emphasized balancing cultural identity with integration. Teacher 3 highlighted the lack of experiential learning, such as cultural immersion programs. Teacher 4 identified a need for managing cultural conflicts, Teacher 5 pointed out assimilation challenges, and Teacher 6 stressed the importance of cultural empathy. These findings underscore the need for enhanced acculturation training, combining theoretical knowledge with

practical experiences. Addressing these gaps will help individuals navigate intercultural environments, build stronger relationships, and communicate effectively in diverse professional settings.

Attitude

Table 9: The Needs for Attitude

Domains	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Positive	121	4.15	0.628	High
2. Confident	121	3.88	0.580	High
3. Patient	121	4.05	0.729	High

The analysis of attitudes for effective intercultural interactions in Table 4.10 highlights key attributes students prioritize. Positivity (M=4.15, SD=0.628) emerges as crucial for fostering mutual respect, while patience (M=4.05, SD=0.729) is essential for tolerance and adaptability. Confidence (M=3.88, SD=0.580) enables assertiveness in navigating cultural intricacies.

Teacher insights further reveal the need for encouragement to engage with diverse cultures (Teacher 1, 4) and the importance of assertiveness (Teacher 2, 5) and courage in addressing cultural differences (Teacher 3, 6). Additional support and training can enhance these attitudes, fostering more effective and confident intercultural interactions in diverse professional settings.

The findings of Question2:

To effectively develop Business English as Lingua Franca (BELF) instructional materials for Chinese students in the business domain, key strategies emerge from semi-structured teacher interviews:

Integration of Business-Specific Knowledge: Embed high-need business-specific knowledge into the curriculum, leveraging case studies to provide practical insights into real-life business scenarios.

Teacher 1: ".... When developing BELF instructional materials, it's vital to integrate high-needed Business-Specific Knowledge acquired through needs analysis survey... employ case study analysis to deepen students' comprehension and application of BSK. This method immerses them in real-life business scenarios, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for success in diverse business contexts ...."

Enhancing English Competence: Focus on developing fluent spoken communication skills, along with practical skills such as writing effective emails and reports, participating in meetings, and making professional telephone calls.

Teacher 1: ".... including modules focused on developing fluent spoken communication skills, through conversational English practice sessions and speaking exercises tailored to business scenarios, empowers students to communicate confidently and fluently..."

Developing Business Communication Skills: Incorporate robust case studies to hone skills like collaboration, clear expression, active listening, and effective presentation while leveraging technology tools for modern business communication challenges.

Teacher 3: "... In crafting BELF instructional materials, a robust integration of case

studies serves as a cornerstone for developing Business Communication Skills.....By immersing students in real-world scenarios, case-based learning facilitates the honing of critical skills like collaboration, clear Expression, active Listening, presentation, public speaking, body Language, and questioning.... BELF instructional materials should prioritize fostering collaboration skills in business contexts, students are better prepared to navigate the intricacies of multicultural teams and the dynamic landscapes of modern business..."

Cultivating Cultural Knowledge: Integrate cultural knowledge modules to understand different national cultures, values, histories, and organizational cultures, essential for effective business communication.

Teacher 2: "... Incorporating cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skills into BELF instructional materials is essential for effective business communication... including understanding various aspects of cultural knowledge.... "

Promoting Acculturation Skills: Include activities promoting empathy and perspective-taking to navigate intercultural encounters confidently, emphasizing practical application through intercultural case studies.

Teacher 2: "... By integrating activities that promote empathy and perspective-taking, students can navigate intercultural encounters with confidence and respect, enhancing their ability to communicate in global business environments..."

Fostering Positive Attitudes: Nurture positive attributes like confidence, patience, and openness towards cross-cultural communication, encouraging active listening, empathy, and adaptability in global business settings.

Teacher 5: "... BELF instructional materials should address attitudes towards cross-cultural communication from the perspective of nurturing positive attributes such as confidence, patience, and openness...It's crucial to design modules that encourage students to approach cross-cultural interactions with a sense of self-assurance and curiosity...By providing opportunities for students to practice active listening, empathy, and adaptability, they can develop the patience and resilience needed to navigate cultural differences effectively...Moreover, fostering an attitude of openness towards diverse cultural perspectives can enrich students' experiences and enhance their ability to collaborate successfully in global business settings..."

The development process should include comprehensive surveys and interviews to identify specific knowledge gaps and needs, balanced teaching emphasizing theoretical knowledge and practical application, and utilization of digital tools for interactive learning. Continuous feedback and assessment mechanisms ensure the refinement and improvement of BELF materials, ultimately enhancing students' business English competence for success in a global business environment.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings from this study offer profound implications for the pedagogy of Business English education, particularly for Chinese business students. Traditional approaches to teaching Business English often prioritize linguistic proficiency over intercultural competence, leaving students ill-prepared for the demands of global business communication. By adopting a Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) pedagogy tailored to the needs of Chinese students, educators can bridge this gap and better equip students for success in international business environments.

Business English curricula should closely reflect actual business scenarios, emphasizing application abilities and problem-solving skills. Flexible teaching methods and diversified assessment approaches, such as project-based learning and case analysis, are advocated to enhance students' comprehensive abilities and practical application skills.

Interdisciplinary integration and practical teaching should be emphasized to enable students to apply their knowledge and skills in diverse cross-cultural environments.

Governments and education departments should increase support and investment in Business English education, enhancing the quality of teacher training and teaching resources. Collaboration between schools/institutions and businesses is encouraged to integrate Business English education with actual business needs. Policies promoting student participation in cross-cultural exchanges and business practice activities can enhance their global competitiveness and employability.

Collaboration between education researchers, business domain experts, and policymakers can promote innovation and development in Business English education. This collaboration can enhance students' understanding of the demands of the business environment, provide them with practical educational resources and training opportunities, and facilitate knowledge exchange and integration across disciplines.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study advances the scholarly discourse on Business English education by investigating the needs of Chinese business students within the framework of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) pedagogy. In an era characterized by unprecedented globalization and interconnectivity, mastering practical communication skills, particularly in English, is paramount for individuals and enterprises.

The research unveils a gap in traditional Business English teaching methodologies, which often prioritize linguistic proficiency at the expense of intercultural competence. This oversight has left Chinese students ill-equipped to navigate the demands of cross-cultural communication in the international business arena. Through a research design, the researcher has illuminated the multifaceted challenges faced by these students and proposed targeted solutions to bridge this gap. By conducting needs analyses and engaging in qualitative dialogues with educators, the researcher has identified a spectrum of developmental needs for Chinese business students. These encompass not only the enhancement of English proficiency, particularly in oral communication and comprehension, but also the integration of domain-specific knowledge, refinement of business communication skills, cultivation of cultural awareness, fostering acculturation skills, and nurturing positive attitudes towards intercultural interactions.

Furthermore, the study transcends theoretical discourse by providing concrete strategies for developing tailored instructional materials and pedagogical approaches. By leveraging real-world business scenarios, task-based Language Teaching, case studies, and interactive learning experiences, BELF pedagogy is a potent tool for equipping Chinese business students with the requisite skills and knowledge to thrive in diverse international business contexts. Moreover, our research underscores the imperative of integrating digital technologies and establishing feedback mechanisms to ensure instructional materials' ongoing relevance and adaptability. This iterative process of refinement enhances the efficacy of BELF pedagogy and reflects a commitment to continuous improvement in response to the dynamic nature of global business communication.

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