

## A Comparison of Industry English Needs with University Students' Strengths<sup>\*</sup>

### การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบในความต้องการทางภาษาอังกฤษระหว่างองค์กรธุรกิจกับความสามารถ ของนักศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษา

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#### Abstract

Working with business is a part of people's everyday life. The purpose of this research is to examine the English language proficiency needs for people to work in business. It assesses the points of views of business workers (both operational and management levels) and English major students in a faculty of education in order to improve the related courses at a public university in Nakornpathom province, Thailand. This study investigates what English language skills that graduate students or new employees are expected to have. It helps explain the needs from both sides of employees and employers. Moreover, students, or pre-experience learners, have limited comprehension about business through textbooks, teachers, and other written documents. Therefore, there is still a gap between learning and working in a real business environment and studying one in a classroom. This present study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from employers who work in various business industries in order to investigate the needs of Business English from working people in authentic situations.

\* The study investigates the comparison between the needs of employers from business sectors and the English proficiency of university students so that the course of Business English can be adjusted and applied to meet employers and students' needs.

การศึกษานี้เป็นการศึกษาเปรียบเทียบระหว่างความต้องการทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษจากองค์กรธุรกิจและความสามารถทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาเพื่อพัฒนารายวิชาการสอนภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจเพื่อจะได้ปรับปรุงและประยุกต์ใช้ให้ตรงตามความต้องการของทั้งองค์กรธุรกิจและผู้เรียน

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Also, questionnaires were distributed to students of English major who did not have a background in business for the purpose of comparing their levels of English language proficiency with the industry needs. After that, the collected data were analyzed in order to develop a Business English course for the students who will graduate and become regular workers in the international business environment.

**Key words:** Business English, business communication needs, English language skills for business

### Introduction

As businesses have expanded into new and international markets, there has been an increased need for using English as a medium for communication. Employees need to work across countries and languages. Business leaders use English to speak with other business leaders and government officials even in countries where English is not the official language. English is an international language for all types of communication that will help communicate through all types of matters. In one example cited by Ellis and Johnson (1994, p. 17), “A Finnish paper company sells worldwide and has subsidiaries in Europe, including Britain. Its telephone operators, secretaries, sales personnel, factory managers, and engineers all need to speak English.”

International businesses have been increasing operations in Thailand every year. It is undeniable that Thai people involved in business contexts need to use the English language as an important means of communication. The English language skills are unquestionably required to establish and expand wider connections in the globalized contexts of business (Mognhode & Woldemariam, 2015).

The purposes of this research are to examine the needs of business English as indicated by employers from business sectors and compare those needs with present university student skills. We use this information to develop a course for pre-experience employees, who have the basics of English language but have not established the content knowledge of business before working yet. Several scholars reported on the needs of four language skills that were necessary for Thai workers. Even though different studies emphasized on each particular skill (Supatakulrat & Wasanasomsithi, 2005; Wongsothorn et al, 2002; Sonsaardijit, 1989, as cited in Meksophawannagul, 2009). The research studies have found that, except reading, the other skills are considered approximately equal importance by industry professionals.

Not all employees in businesses possess enough background knowledge in business English. Thus, the basic learning and teaching in Business English. According to Frendo (2005, as cited in Klibadze, 2012), Business English is an umbrella term for a mixture of General English, Business English, and English for Specific Purposes, a term used to describe the target language that is inaccessible to people who are not members of a particular language community. For instance, people working in the accounting department use language of accounting (specific lexis) to discuss on accounting matters (specific contexts). In other words, Business English differs from other varieties of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) as it is an integration of specific content, for instance, particular job area or industry, and general context including the general ability to communicate more effectively (Klibadze, 2012). Nowadays, Business English reveals its absolute significance as millions of people in widespread areas use English in their business activities in different fields such as finance, commerce, and service and in various contexts, such as small business, multinational, and manufacturing and service organization contexts. When considering most business industry sectors, the English language level and skills are often mentioned in employee application forms in terms of recruiting policies. An advanced level of English is often considered one of the skill sets that enables applicants to increase their employability and promotion opportunities with international businesses (Didiot-cook, 2000).

With the changing business environment in the 21st century, it is important to satisfy pre-experience learners' needs due to the requirements of having established students' language competence and business skills in English for their future jobs (Jendrych, 2011). For the former, the pre-experience employees will derive benefits from mastering English language skills; for this reason, they will not be rejected in the business sectors. It can be clearly seen that the businesses that have outsourced communication jobs to companies in India and the Philippines have done so because of the need for having skilled English communicators. Therefore, oral communication skills and interaction are needed for the organizations to develop (Lockwood, 2012). Also, improving written communication skills are required for employees due to the fact of having to communicate with their counterparts internationally via emails and reports for task achievements. Besides, research has found that most hotel staff need to improve their listening and speaking skills for the effectiveness of intercultural communication (Umera-Okeke, 2008, as cited in Nomain, 2014). As for the latter, considering the content of the business knowledge, a needs analysis has revealed that a significant request by employees was on-the-job training (Aunreun, 2005, as cited in Nomain, 2014). For example, travel agents sometimes lacked the essential training to work collaboratively with

related organizations. According to a study of investigating the needs of English for banking and finance professionals in Taiwan, Wu and Chin (2010) discovered that reading content such as various financial and legal documents is a necessary content skill of employees in order to effectively analyze the content specific information.

With regard to the recent growing courses of business English, they are designed to integrate language and skills in business contexts in order to increase effective communication as well as establish successful business relationship (Dudley Evans & St. John, 2012). Making decisions on designing a business English course is critical. Not only basic language skills but also cross-cultural skills are key considerations to design the course. Xiǎolíng (2009) designed an ESP course aiming developing specific business communication skills, focusing on listening and speaking for communication. Students were taught through thematic units taken the form of language-centered business cases, business skills, and other activities. The course was structured to provide opportunities for the students to experience in a global business environment. Thus, the parameters of course design is the major factor which ESP teachers need to carefully examine and balance in planning a course in relation to business contexts. Dudley-Evans and St. John (2012, p. 145) outlined the following questions that helped represent the positions of organizational framework for course items.

1. *Should the course be intensive or extensive?*
2. *Should the learners' performance be assessed or non-assessed?*
3. *Should the course deal with immediate needs or with delayed needs?*
4. *Should the role of the teacher be that of providers of knowledge and activities, or should it be as a facilitator of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?*
5. *Should the course have a broad or narrow focus?*
6. *Should the course be pre-study or pre-experience or run parallel with that study or experience?*
7. *Should the material be expansive or specific to learners' field of work and background?*
8. *Should the group taking the course be homogeneous or should it be heterogeneous?*
9. *Should the course design be worked out by the language teacher after consultation with the learners and the institution, or should it be subject to a process of negotiation with the learners?*

Providing that ESP teachers are able to make use of the parameters in a course design, they can develop an extremely successful business course which is responsive to the needs of the business learners together with the needs of the industry sectors. In the authentic situations of business communication, Interactional modification becomes a key method through which people find meaning. Thus, business interaction is seen to be a useful resource for what is needed and important in the English for business. The use of interaction in language learning has been promoted in order to improve skills of language learners' performance (Long, 1985, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1993). It is also suggested to increase language acquisition for language learners. Therefore, English business communication for both employers and pre-experience employees should be increased and promoted through interaction. Dudley-Evans and St. John (2012) also mentioned that other factors such as assessment and evaluation should be taken into consideration for achieving intended course objectives. One of the distinctive characteristics is concerned with learning-centeredness, when the teacher emphasizes learners' needs and abilities. In this format, the teacher facilitates learners to maximize their learning by having them practice and handle tasks with other related skills. It has been growing and increasing topic recently because each learner has different needs and are from different background knowledge. Schema theory is one role that is important in language comprehension. According to schema theory, a text only provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own, previously acquired knowledge. (Barlett, 1932; Adams and Collins, 1979; Rumelhart, 1980, cited in Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983).

In this study, the subjects, English-major students, were assumed not to have prior knowledge about business English skills (because of their age and background). The research questions asked employees working in the middle and management levels about the language usage in their work in order to adjust to the content of Business English course, including activities that could be related to the tasks of the employees' jobs. To develop a course, generally, there is no one 'best' method or theory to cover all content of business English or to be able to define the needs of workers from the business, and students (the new coming employees) from the universities. The result found from this study was suggested to apply to eclectic approach related to the needs from job-experienced employees and employers, and learning methodology. Not only could the results make us aware of the needs of English language for business, but it also shed more light on valuable information the course development to meet the needs to be beneficial for learners and organizations.

### **Research objectives**

1. To compare the needs of Business English from business employers in industries and the skills of university students
2. To assess the aspects of English language skills for business from business employers in the industries and university students
3. To analyze the methods of communication and authentic learning materials in business environments the business employers need and the university students would like to improve

### **Research methodology and instruments**

The two main research instruments were interviews and the questionnaires. The interview was a semi-structured interview with ten managerial positions, held by eight Thai people and two Filipino people. The positions included a director, a manager, a supervisor, and trainers in the hotel, trading, airlines, marketing, telecommunication, manufacture, restaurant, public relations, and consumer product industries. They were selected by purposive sampling. They worked in organizations where universities graduates tended to be interested in applying for jobs.

The semi-structured interview was divided into five sections to investigate opinions about the importance and the needs of Business English skills that the managers, directors, or supervisors were looking for from new employees. They were also questioned about the methods of communication and authentic learning materials in business. The questions were open-ended in order to acquire thorough aspects of each question. The interviews were lengthy which indicated in-depth needs and problems the managers had encountered with employees whom lacked the target language skills. The insight information from the interview shed light on the interviewees' direct experiences, needs to solve language barriers, and desires for future employee development.

The second part of the research included a student questionnaire. It was sent to 96 subjects who were students pursuing an English major at the Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University (Sanam Chandra Palace campus). The questionnaire was outlined the similar sections in order to have parallel structure as the interview. It was divided into three parts: demographic data, defining needs of business skills, and defining Business English materials. It intended to address the aforementioned research objectives. It provided the information about the students' business English proficiency and the employees' needs in business English related to their jobs and tasks that required English language skill, The answers to the

questions revealed their views on the importance and needs of English for business, aspects of English language skills they needed, and methods of communication and materials to which they wanted to improve to respond.

*Research procedures:*

1. Designed semi-structured interview and questionnaires from the English for Business's course description, syllabus, language learning theories, contents, commercial textbooks in the related topics, authentic learning materials such as brochures, guideline, manuals, business articles, newspapers, etc. They were also designed from the information provided by people working in business sectors from informal interviews. Both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were checked, evaluated, and validated by experts in the fields of English language, curriculum and research, and business sectors. The feedback was taken into consideration with the revision of both instruments.
2. Contacted and made appointments with ten directors, executives, and supervisors from ten organizations for interviews selected by purposive sampling from various business types. As for the questionnaires, they were distributed to students who were studying at the Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University (Sanam Chandra Palace Campus)

*Research analysis:*

1. Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were summarized and transcribed to conclude the main points of English language needed, similarities, and differences of the questions in aspects of 1) the importance and needs of business English, 2) the aspects of business English and that management levels are expecting from the university students, and 3) the current methods of communication the employees are using.
2. Data gathered from questionnaires in a Likert scale format were recorded, input, and analyzed by SPSS. The respondents are asked to rate their proficiency and needs of English for business purpose, and the Business English material. The results include frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

### **Results of the study**

The research results are designed to highlight the aforementioned three main aims of this research study.

Highlighting the general information about types of business and jobs where English is needed, managers revealed that there were both employees who graduated from the particular field of the position as well as from English language majors. In regards to English

language field graduates, they were able to work as secretaries, receptionists, public relation, sales representatives, customer service, call operators, copy writers/script writer, and proofreader, or in such departments as, human resources, marketing, mass communication, and advertising. They specified that they preferred employees who were fluent in English language over the knowledge of the content areas. That is to say, employers looked for new employees who obtained the characteristics and abilities of language fluency over accuracy, good accent and pronunciation of English, confidence, world knowledge, eagerness to learn new things, activeness, cheerfulness, creativity, thinking skills, and responsibility. That was because the nature of each products and services were different and the new employees mostly needed to have specific training for a particular knowledge of the product or service.

Figure 1 and 2 displayed types of businesses and jobs in the students' interests. Most students reported that they were interested in tourism, airlines, hotels, and media business, respectively. In term of types of jobs, they indicated that they were interested in working as a customer service agent, a writer/editor, a marketer, an administrator, or a receptionist.

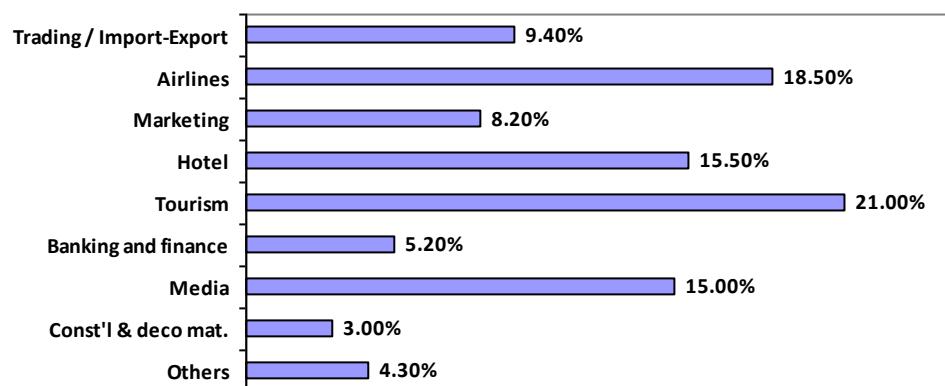


Figure 1: Types of business of students' interests

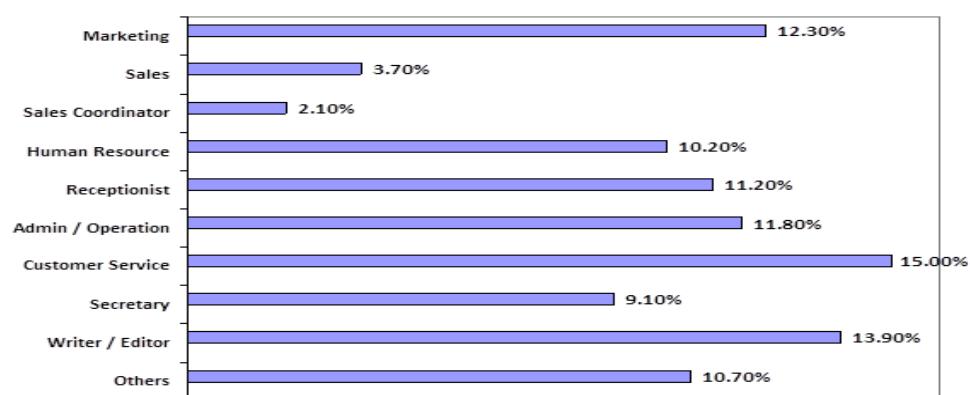


Figure 2: Types of jobs of students' interests

The results show the correspondence of both the industries' needs and of the students who graduate from English language fields are similar. To elaborate, employers would like to accept the employees who have good language skills in positions where many students report their interests in working. Thus, there is a positive relationship between the demand in the markets for the businesses and jobs and the students' interests and skills as the supply.

### **1. The importance and needs of Business English**

All of the managers in Thai and international companies reported a high need for students with English language skills. Almost all of them had a company goal to move toward regional and international markets. English language was needed to communicate with foreign and Thai customers as well as employers and other colleagues in the company's branches inside and outside Thailand. The industries like tourism, airlines, and international trade reported a significant requirement of English language skills for communication because almost all customers were foreigners. Not only was English necessary for oral communication, but it also was used in the processing of English documents such as emails, contracts, project documents, brochures, and reports. At the operation level, a search of information was the key success factor for the fast-changing globalization. It was needed to have employees who could search for various kinds of information such as market trends, manufacturing corporations or other markets, and expansion of the company in other countries. Thus, English language was important to search for information on customers' needs and future plans.

Table 1 illustrates students' opinions on the importance and the needs of Business English. They agreed on speaking skills as the most important skills for their work in the future following by listening, reading, and writing. Apart from the four basic English language skills, they added that business English was important because it would help them work in a business field if they knew English language and some business content especially technical terms. The lowest level of agreement was on the problem on reading, while grammar, vocabulary, and speaking had higher levels of agreement as problems.

Table 1: Students' opinions towards the importance and the needs of English for Business

Description	Mean	SD
Speaking skill is the most important in my work in the future.	4.70	.564
Listening skill is the most important in my work in the future.	4.42	.790
Reading skill is the most important in my work in the future.	4.29	.807
Writing skill is the most important in my work in the future.	4.26	.785
Business English is important for me.	3.97	.852
I can work in many places if I know English for business.	3.89	.832
Listening is the biggest problem for me.	3.76	1.103
Technical terms are the biggest problem for me.	3.73	.774
Grammar is the biggest language problem for me.	3.69	1.009
Vocabulary is the biggest language problem for me.	3.66	.892
Speaking is the biggest language problem for me.	3.57	1.023
Writing is the biggest language problem for me.	3.42	.981
Pronunciation is biggest most language problem for me.	3.41	1.022
Reading is the biggest language problem for me.	2.99	.946
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>.438</b>

Clearly the results indicate that both managers and the students agree that oral communication skills are important and necessary in business English. When the students tend to look at the use of English in general while the employers can give specific reasons in details how business English is important related to the aims of the companies toward regional and international markets that signify more use of English language skills.

## 2. The aspects of English language skills for business

The results found that the managers stated that communicating via emails has been the most important aspect of English language skills at the moment because they needed to respond with customers at almost all levels through emails. It was the most quickly communication that acquired reading and writing skills. They checked emails all the time. Thus, reading and writing were considered equally essential, especially in regards to using emails. Those were also the skills needed for letter correspondence, drafting, meeting agenda, meeting reports, abbreviations, and messaging texts. Next, oral communication was reported the second important aspect of language skills including negotiating, telephoning, describing information, face-to-face communication, discussing, and presenting skills. Last, only 20

percent of the managers reported their focus on the aspects of business knowledge and information. The managers referred to those aspects for business situation analyses, current trend predictions, customer's needs, problem-solution management, and daily transaction processes.

From the students' reflection of their language skills for business, overall most of them indicated that their reading was mostly at the good level. They further revealed that their speaking and listening were at an average level while their writing mostly fell into both good and average levels. Only three to seven percent of the students reported that their four skills were at excellent or poor levels. Table 2 shows the aspects of language skills for business that students would like to improve.

Table 2: The aspects of English skills for business the students are proficient

Description	Mean	SD
<i>I'd like to improve my listening skills</i>		
to take notes of the important points.	4.30	.809
to summarize in brief.	4.28	.791
to converse.	4.20	.841
to take order.	4.15	.821
<i>I'd like to improve my speaking skills</i>		
in oral presentation.	4.35	.754
to ask for and give information.	4.21	.794
to greet and say goodbye.	3.60	1.138
to thank.	3.60	1.156
<i>I'd like to improve my reading skills</i>		
to improve my understanding of the main points of the text while I'm reading.	4.25	.808
to translate the reading passage.	4.21	.893
to increase general knowledge.	4.20	.878
to enhance job-related knowledge.	4.10	.814
to collect information for decision making.	4.01	.900
to acknowledge and follow order.	3.91	.872
to analyze business situations.	3.90	1.010
<i>I'd like to improve my writing skills</i>		
to summarize business points.	3.96	.994
to ask for and give information about goods and services.	3.94	.916
Total	4.07	.554

The students were asked to give further detailed information following several tasks of each skill, the first three skills they expressed the need of improvement included speaking skills for oral presentation, listening skills for note taking, and listening skills for summarization, respectively. Apart from the aforementioned listening skills, other tasks of listening skills showed the most skills the students would like to improve including listening to converse with the interlocutors and to take order. The results of speaking skills showed that the students would like to improve their speaking for asking and giving information rather than general greeting, saying goodbye, and thanking. Interesting information was found in the reading skills. Even though the many students rated their reading skills at the good level, they marked high scores on every reading tasks they would like to improve. The tasks shown range from the highest score—reading skills to improve their understanding of the main points of the text, to translate, to increase general knowledge, to enhance job-related knowledge, to collect information for decision making, to acknowledge and follow order, and to analyze business situations. As for writing skills, the average scores indicated the relative equal needs of improvement in summarizing and asking and giving information about goods and services.

Thus, students still have high demand in improving all four language skills for business, although they addressed that their overall language skills are at good and average levels.

### **3. Methods of communication and authentic learning materials in business environment**

The results revealed that methods and materials of communication corresponded directly to the aspects of language skills the managers needed the employees to obtain. To elaborate, using email was the method that most managers highly required. The following methods and materials of communications that they most frequently employed in their works were listed as telephone conversation, letters, memorandum, short notes, business news and articles, face-to-face interaction, leaflets and brochures, work instructions, financial and shipping documents, graphs and charts in business reports, and teleconference, respectively. Some managers added that particular methods and materials absolutely depended on particular characteristics of each job. In other words, most executive management needed to deal with letter correspondences, meeting reports, analysis reports, and current situation reports, while receptionists greeted customers who commonly dealt with emails, face-to-face conversation, and other materials to give information to the customers such as brochures, map, and attraction guides.

Table 3 displays the mean scores on students' views on methods of communication and authentic materials in business environment. The results indicated that students would like to improve their knowledge and skills to respond to the telephone conversation, notes and summaries from seminars or meetings, and business news and articles the most. Students also showed relatively the same interests in improving how to respond to meeting reports, product description, business contract, emails, and complaints. The lowest mean score suggests that responding to faxes was not considered highly important. It suggests that some type of material is unknown to students.

Table 3 Methods of communication and authentic materials in business environment

Description	Mean	S.D.
I'd like to improve my skills to respond to:		
telephone	4.04	.893
notes / summaries from seminar or meeting	4.04	.753
business or economic news and articles	4.02	.858
meeting reports	3.97	.831
product description	3.95	.790
business contract	3.94	.998
email	3.90	.801
complaints	3.88	.770
business letters	3.79	.994
requests	3.77	.876
sales reports	3.72	1.013
financial statements	3.69	1.042
work instructions (WI) / manuals	3.68	.979
graphs / charts / tables	3.67	.890
circulars / internal memos	3.57	.758
feasibility reports	3.55	1.001
fax	2.93	1.117

In conclusion, English for business was found to be important and needed in all business sectors. Students were also aware of its importance and needs. While employers wanted to see the improvement in skills of communicating via emails, students were more

concerned with their listening and speaking skills. In terms of methods of communication and authentic materials, employers indicated that email is the most frequently used. Students revealed their concern to improve their response to telephone conversations. Even though they showed the needs to improve listening and speaking skills, they pointed out they wanted to improve reading and writing skills such as notes and summaries from the seminars and meetings, business articles, and meeting reports.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

English is the globally dominant language of our time (Crystal, 1997). The purpose of this research was to see if the English needs of business employers matched up with the business English students wanted to study at university.

This research has two main components. It examined the perceptions of business leaders comparing to those of students to see how well the perceptions lined up. The key results showed that not only international but also Thai companies responded to the needs of English for business. It can be explained that the trend of most companies is to grow to regional and international markets. Students agreed with the needs of business English, though they had more concerns on content knowledge than language skills. It is possibly because they have not been exposed to the authentic business environment. Thus, they should be provided more opportunities to interact with business persons or situations.

Moreover, when asked about aspects of English language skills for business, employers focused on communicating through emails while students struggled in speaking and listening skills. It can be speculated that students are unlikely to view the authentic communication as good as employers in the field. The oral communication seems to be more of their concern because it is an impromptu communication which inexperienced employees might not feel confident to communicate content knowledge, although, for example, they have advanced skills in English language.

Finally, business employers replied that email is the highly used method of communication and authentic materials, whereas students wanted to get familiar with and improve their skills to respond to methods of oral communication and technical reading and writing. It seems that students have not been exposed to the business field yet. Also, they are more cultivated in teaching areas. Thus, students should be given business experience or simulation before getting jobs in the field.

Overall, there was a lot of overlap between the needs of business managers and the skills that students perceived they needed. It is vital for university English faculty members to bridge the gap between what students know and what they need to know for work.

### Recommendations

This research highlights the need for close collaboration between employment opportunities and university academic coursework. Faculty and administrators should do more to stay in contact with local employers of university graduates to make sure that the coursework is preparing the graduates to excel in the areas where employers need. The finding corresponds to the principle of business English that language skills should be integrated with content knowledge development. This research also suggests that communicating via emails, speaking, and listening is important and needs to be better emphasized in business English classes. Furthermore, students should spend more time in business English technical writing. Finally, students should be facilitated to be exposed to the more authentic materials such as emails, telephone conversation, letters, news, reports, and face-to-face interaction of real business environment. This will promote students' confidence before and when entering into the real business sectors. Consequently, employers will be more able to provide them with better employment opportunities.

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