

Business English Writing Needs of Business English Graduate Employees: A Case Study in China

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Abstract

Business English Writing (BEW) is a core course for Business English (BE) undergraduates in China, yet pedagogical approaches often fail to align with industry needs. This study explores the BEW needs from the perspective of BE graduate employees. Using a mixed-methods approach, it identifies eight essential BEW genres, highlighting four high-priority forms: email & letter, report, minute, and press release. The study contributes to BEW literature by empirically validating workplace genre priorities and their pedagogical implications, and also English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research by offering empirical evidence for genre-based curriculum design.

Keywords: Business English writing; Business English undergraduate employees; Needs Analysis; Target needs

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1.0 Introduction

Business English (BE) teaching in China, initiated in the 1950s as "Foreign Trade English," was initially confined to specialized foreign trade colleges in economically developed cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Its curriculum focused narrowly on fundamental trade processes (Wang & Ai, 2019). Following the economic reforms of 1978, as foreign trade expanded internationally and the economy transitioned towards a market-based system, the discipline evolved into "Economic and Trade English," broadening its scope. Driven by China's growing global economic engagement, the 1990s witnessed further development, transforming BE from isolated courses into an increasingly comprehensive curriculum. This expansion accelerated significantly after China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, creating a surge in demand for BE professionals (Wang & Ai, 2019). In response to these evolving requirements, under the approval of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, BE was officially established as an undergraduate program in 2007 (Guo & He, 2020). It is now one of the three primary English undergraduate majors, offered at over 400 institutions, with annual enrollments exceeding 35,000 students (Liu et al., 2022).

The BE curriculum evolved beyond its initial focus on international trade or language application, incorporating economics, management, and related disciplines. Within this framework, Business English Writing (BEW) emerged as a core compulsory course. Mastery of BEW provides a distinct competitive advantage in the job market due to the critical need for effective written communication

in solving practical business issues. However, in China, the pedagogical instruction in BEW is still less than desirable (Sun & Asmawi, 2023). Consequently, BE undergraduates perceive a mismatch between BEW teaching and the needs of workplaces (Wang, 2021). There is clearly a need to identify the BEW needs of workplaces to align the BEW curriculum with authentic professional contexts.

Needs Analysis (NA) serves as the methodological cornerstone of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy. The core objective of NA is to accurately identify and articulate the specific language knowledge, communicative skills, and discourse practices learners require to function effectively within their target professional domains. Hutchinson and Water (1987) proposed an NA framework to investigate needs, which are divided into learning needs and target needs. The former, learning needs analysis, is used to analyze the linguistic knowledge and skills required to communicate effectively in their future learning or work. The latter, target needs analysis, is the process of analyzing the learners' goals and how language is used in the target situation (Hutchinson & Water, 1987).

While prior research has explored BEW needs in the engineering industry (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Seeharat, 2017; Thepseenu, 2020) or focused solely on student and teacher perspectives (Guo & He, 2020; Tan et al., 2023), workplace perspectives remain underexamined. Thus, this study aims to examine the BEW target needs from the perspective of BE graduate employees. The findings can bridge the disconnect between what is taught in class and what is expected from BE students at the workplace. It can contribute to research on both NA and BE by providing insights into the workplace's target needs in BEW genres. Furthermore, the results can pave the way for conducting NA, among other courses within the BE undergraduate program. Therefore, the objective of the study is to identify the BEW target needs from the perspective of BE graduate employees.

2.0 Literature Review

Any ESP course should facilitate learners' ability to function effectively in the target situation, so NA should help identify the target needs (Basturkmen, 2022; Wang, 2021). As important stakeholders, the professionals in the workplace should be included in the target needs analysis (Thepseenu, 2020). Over the years, NA has been extensively applied with practitioners across different professional and academic domains, including engineering (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Nateghian, 2024; Seeharat, 2017; Thepseenu, 2020), nursing (Lu, 2018), and hospitality field (Thi & Cheng, 2024). However, BEW studies internationally focused on the engineering industry (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Seeharat, 2017; Tinh, 2018).

Changpueng and Pattanapichet (2015) explored the needs of engineers when writing in English in Thailand. 127 engineers were involved in the study. An important finding of the study was the three most important types of genres required for engineers' working context were request emails, inquiry emails, and reports. Seeharat (2017) also explored the English language needs of 70 engineers at AutoParts Company in Thailand. Using purposive sampling across key departments, data was collected via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Results indicated that specific tasks like email correspondence and reading manuals were highly necessary. Tinh (2018) examined the English language needs of mechanical engineers in Vietnam through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observation for data collection. 93 professional mechanical engineers participated in the research. The engineers regarded writing emails and reports as necessary in their work. Of these, writing emails was seen as the most important and frequently used genre. Writing skills were considered the most important skills compared with other skills.

Despite growing interest in BEW, several gaps remain. First, these studies (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Seeharat, 2017; Tinh, 2018) exhibit a clear over-reliance on the engineering industry, neglecting other sectors where BEW needs may differ significantly. Second, many studies (Seeharat, 2017; Tinh, 2018) exploring engineers' English language needs tend to focus broadly on overall language skills, often treating writing as a minor component. As a result, there is very limited in-depth analysis specifically addressing writing genres or tasks (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015). In China, previous studies (Guo & He, 2020; Wang, 2021; Wang & Fan, 2021) explored the BEW target needs of the workplace.

Guo and He (2020) adopted the NA framework proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and explored 60 BE undergraduates' needs in BEW through mixed methods. They found that business correspondence, business minutes, business reports, resumes, summaries, and memos are the genres that should be included in the textbook and course teaching content. According to Wang (2021), many companies complain that BE undergraduates' unproficiency in BEW, and students also complain about their BEW course could not meet their needs. A mixed-methods design was employed to explore the needs of 105 BE undergraduates in BEW. Results indicated that writing emails or letters, reports, contracts, and memos were the most important writing genres.

The limitation of these studies (Guo & He, 2020; Wang, 2021; Wang & Fan, 2021) was obvious. They were merely based on the students' or teachers' perspectives. Insiders' voices, such as employees, employers, professionals, and graduates (Nateghian, 2024), were not included. There remains a gap in examining the BEW target needs from the perspective of BE graduate employees.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design

A mixed-methods approach, incorporating both questionnaires and interviews, was adopted in this study, as recommended by several researchers for effective needs analysis (Thepseenu, 2020). Specifically, a convergent parallel design was employed, which assigns

equal importance to quantitative and qualitative data to enhance the comprehensiveness and validity of the findings (Creswell, 2021). In this design, both types of data are collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then compared or integrated. This process allows researchers to determine whether the findings converge or diverge, thereby strengthening the overall interpretation.

3.2 Setting

The study was conducted at two universities in Beijing, China's capital and a major political, cultural, and educational center. As home to many top-ranked universities and early adopters of BE undergraduate programs, Beijing offers a representative context for examining BE education. Of the institutions offering BE undergraduate programs in the city, only University X and University Y granted research access. University X, focused on business and management, launched its BE program in 2017 and had about 598 undergraduates and 300 graduates by 2023. University Y, specializing in trade and logistics, began its program in 2016, with 401 undergraduates and 297 graduates by 2023. There were approximately 597 BE graduates in these two universities in total by 2023. Both universities offer a compulsory 32-hour BEW course in the second year. The course trains students in key genres and skills needed for workplace writing.

3.3 Participants

As for the questionnaires, BE graduate employees were selected through simple random sampling. In determining the sample size, as outlined by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), if the number of the population was 600, the minimum sample size should be at least 234. Initially, 270 BE graduates were randomly sampled to respond to the questionnaire, but six of them were removed for short-time responses and identical answers, reaching an effective rate of 97.78%. Therefore, 264 BE undergraduates were ultimately included in this study's final samples.

In terms of interviews, six employees who graduated in 2021 were invited to take part in the interviews because, with more than two years of working experience, they were more familiar with different writing genres in their workplace than those with only one year. The six employees were from different companies, i.e., one joint exhibition company, two international trading companies, one cross-border e-commerce company, one international manufacturing company, and one international medical company, to identify different target needs. The data saturation was reached at the fourth interview for employees. However, interviews continued until reaching a drop-off in new information (Guest et al., 2020).

3.4 Instruments

This study employed the *Business English Writing Target Needs Online Questionnaire*, comprising two main sections. Section A collected data on employees' willingness to participate and demographic details, including gender, years of work experience, and company type. Section B adapted 36 items from the second part of Wang's (2016) questionnaire, focusing on employees' perceived needs in eight BEW genres: letters & emails, reports, notes, meeting minutes, memos, press releases, resumes, and summaries. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Unsure*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*).

This study also used semi-structured interviews to get insights into employees' perceptions of BEW target needs. The interviews were conducted online via the Chinese conferencing application Tencent Meeting, with each session lasting 30–40 minutes. Before data collection, the interview questions were meticulously designed and reviewed by two experts in the field and one pilot interviewee to ensure clarity. All interviews were conducted in Chinese to facilitate natural communication. With participants' prior consent, the sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English. To ensure accuracy, participants were invited to review and verify the translated transcripts. Each interviewee was assigned a code to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees. For instance, E11 refers to employee interviewee 1.

3.5 Data analysis

The data gathered from the questionnaire were keyed into and analyzed by SPSS (Version 29.0) using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed via NVivo software (Version 12, plus) through template analysis, a deductive thematic analysis approach based on the literature findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

4.0 Findings

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative results.

4.1 Demographic profile of BE graduate employees

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the respondents. 72% (n=190) of them were female employees, compared to their male counterparts (28%, n=74), reflecting the gender distribution typical in undergraduate BE programs at the surveyed universities. In terms of professional experience, the majority of respondents (94.7%, n=250) possessed more than one year of work experience, with over half (54.9%, n=145) reporting two years of service, suggesting participants had sufficient workplace exposure to provide meaningful insights into BEW target needs. Regarding organizational context, 39.8% (n=105) and 32.3% (n=85) of the sample were employed in international trading companies and worked for foreign enterprises, and 16.3% were employed by joint companies, followed by 6.8 % by educational institutes. This profile indicates that the participants represent an appropriate population for exploring BEW needs, as they collectively demonstrate substantial experience in professional contexts where English serves as a primary language of business communication.

Table 1. Employees' demographic profile (n=264)

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	74	28
Female	190	72
Year of Working		
One year	48	18.2
Two years	145	54.9
Three years	57	21.6
Others	14	5.3
Type of Company		
International trading company	105	39.8
Foreign company	85	32.2
Joint company	43	16.3
Educational institute	18	6.8
Others	13	4.9

4.2 The quantitative results

The descriptive statistics for the quantitative data are presented in Table 2. The results of these eight dimensions are presented in descending order. A high mean score indicates a high level of employees' perceived expectations to master a specific BEW genre.

Table 2. Employees' perceived needs for BEW genres

Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Letter & email	4.42	0.65	Very high
Minutes	4.35	0.68	Very high
Press release	4.21	0.76	Very high
Report	4.21	0.61	Very high
Summary	4.00	1.00	High
Memo	3.80	0.68	High
Resume	3.35	0.86	Moderate
Note	2.60	1.26	Low

As shown in Table 2, the mean scores of the eight dimensions ranged from 3.39 to 4.42, showing a moderate to very high level of learning expectations for different genres. The dimension *Letter & email* yielded the highest mean score ($M=4.42$, $SD=0.65$), followed by *Minutes* ($M=4.35$, $SD=0.68$), *Press release* ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.76$), and *Report* ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.61$). It indicated that employees possessed a very high level of expectations to master the four genres, i.e., letter and email, minutes, report, and press release. The dimensions *Summary* ($M=4.00$, $SD=1.00$) and *Memo* ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.68$) obtained mean scores above 3.41, implying a high level of expectation. However, *Resume* ($M=3.35$, $SD=0.86$) recorded a lower mean score, showing a moderate level. The lowest mean score of the dimension *Note* ($M=2.60$, $SD=1.26$), suggested that employees possessed a low level of expectation to master this genre.

4.3 The qualitative results

As for the qualitative results, a coding matrix to examine and compare views in genres across employees was generated. The coding matrix, including codes and the number of employees, is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. BEW Target Needs Coding Matrix

Codes	Number of Employees
Letter and email	6
Minutes	6
Press release	5
Report	5
Summary	3
Memo	2
Resume	1
Note	0
Contract	4

Note. Number of employees refers to the number of times a code was mentioned by the employees.

The results from the qualitative data were largely consistent with quantitative ones. As presented in Table 3, all six employees acknowledged the importance and frequency of writing *letter & email* and *meeting minutes* in their work, verifying the quantitative results. See examples as follows:

"Every day, we write emails. Letters are also written through emails. They are the most important. For example, a letter of intent, as long as you send a letter of intent, it's binding. We need to know how to write it correctly." (E14)

"I think meeting minutes are much more frequent than English notes or memos. During meetings, I especially work as note-takers. That's the main job for me." (E15)

Regarding the genres of *press release*, among the six employees, five of them mentioned that their job responsibilities involved writing press releases or advertisements introducing new products or promoting business events, but they found this genre quite challenging. As E13 put it:

"I have one team member who sometimes handles this task of writing press release. Most people are not able to do it. He has specific

responsibilities and may promote new products on the company website.” (EI3)

During the interviews, various reports such as project reports, research reports, and operational reports were mentioned by five employees, who stated that writing reports was a common job responsibility. As for other genres, three employees mentioned that writing summaries was their job responsibility. They needed to highlight key points from different sources of information and report them to their supervisors. Surprisingly, only two employees mentioned that they wrote memos in their daily routine during the interviews. However, it was evident that employees perceived memos as a genre similar to emails. This perception may explain why other employees did not mention using memos. As EI6 put it:

“Memo sounds a bit longer to me, but it sounds like we’ve all done it through email, which is our official means of communication. For thememo, I have written it directly to the leader or sent it on his behalf. We may have called it announcement directly, and our company has an internal platform for direct communication.”

In terms of *resume*, only one employee, i.e., EI-1, acknowledged the importance of resumes. However, other employees commented that even though resume was an important genre, they only needed to update resumes occasionally for new job applications. No employee mentioned that they needed to write notes in English. They explained that for internal communications, they preferred to write notes in Chinese for the sake of efficiency.

Surprisingly, three employees mentioned a genre, i.e., *contract*, that was neither included in the questionnaire nor asked about during the interviews. They mentioned that drafting contracts or assisting legal teams in contract drafting was part of their job responsibilities, which posed challenging tasks. EI3 articulated:

“I am always involved in the writing of contracts. During this process, we realized that contracts or agreements are very important in our company.”

5.0 Discussion

The findings for the BEW target needs indicate the importance of various writing genres, including letter & email, minutes, press release, report, summary, memo, resume, and contract. These findings are partially consistent with previous research, indicating the importance of certain writing genres, such as letter and email (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Guo & He, 2020; Jitpanich et al., 2022; Thepseenu, 2020; Tinh, 2018), report (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Guo & He, 2020; Jitpanich et al., 2022; Thepseenu, 2020; Tinh, 2018), memo (Wang & Fan, 2021), minutes (Guo & He, 2020), and summary (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Guo & He, 2020). In addition to the genres prominent in the literature, this study includes press release, resumes, and contracts as valuable components. Even though only limited studies support the inclusion of press releases (Jitpanich et al., 2022), contracts (Wang, 2021), and resumes (Thepseenu, 2020), the findings of this study emphasize the importance of incorporating these genres into the BEW syllabus.

Both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview findings consistently underscore the critical importance of four key BEW genres: business letters/emails, meeting minutes, press releases, and reports. The statistical analysis revealed these genres received significantly higher perceived importance ratings ($M \geq 4.2$ on a 5-point Likert scale) compared to other workplace writing forms, while thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified them as the most frequently encountered and professionally consequential genres across industries. Given these findings, the current study recommends a strategic reallocation of instructional time within existing BEW curricula. Rather than maintaining equal coverage across all genres, pedagogical priorities should reflect this empirically validated hierarchy of workplace needs, as suggested by the study of Heckadon and Tuzlukova (2021).

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

This study explored BE undergraduate employees' perceived needs for BEW genres, revealing critical insights for curriculum design and workplace communication training. The quantitative and qualitative analyses converged on the eight genres, i.e., letter & email, minutes, press release, report, summary, memo, resume, and contract. Among them, this study highlights the critical role of four key genres, which are emails & letters, minutes, press releases, and reports. Employees emphasized these genres as essential for daily operations and career advancement for their link to professional efficacy. Emails serve as daily communication tools; meeting minutes ensure organizational accountability; press releases work as a strategically valuable genre for corporate communication and brand management; and reports influence decision-making.

Several limitations of this study are acknowledged. First, the findings are context-bound, as participants were limited to BE undergraduates from two universities in Beijing, potentially reducing generalizability to other regions or institutions. Second, the sample size remains small relative to Beijing's broader BE education landscape, limiting representativeness. Third, participant selection was limited to BE undergraduate employees, excluding perspectives from BE undergraduates and instructors, which may affect the findings' comprehensiveness. Finally, as a synchronic study, it does not account for evolving target needs at workplace over time. Future research should address these gaps by expanding geographical and institutional coverage, including diverse participant groups, and employing longitudinal approaches to track changing industry needs.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The research findings contribute valuable insights to English for Specific Purposes research, particularly in Business English, by

informing curriculum development and addressing the disconnect between academic instruction and evolving workplace communication demands.

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