

# The Mixed Proportion of Business Knowledge Courses and English Language Courses in Business English Curriculum Design in China

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## Abstract

Business English in China has evolved into a degree programme from an ESP teaching programme in the past decades. The degree programme of Business English major intends to cultivate multi-skilled talents of foreign language to better satisfy the real needs of society and economy through curriculum design and teaching method innovation activities. This paper only focuses on reflecting into the mixed proportion of business knowledge courses and English language courses in the curriculum design of Business English major degree programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It concludes that the basic principle of Business English curriculum design in terms of mixture degree of business and English should be: maintaining 60-70% English language courses and 30-40% business knowledge courses, increasing business knowledge courses within the limit, and showing local features, etc. in order to better achieve the education target of such multi-skilled talents.

**Keywords:** Business English, curriculum design, business knowledge and English language courses, mixture degree, reflection

## 1. Introduction

Business English in China has evolved into a degree programme from an ESP teaching programme in the past decades in China. To be exact, Business English in China has developed from ESP in 1960s as a sub branch of ESP to an independent multi-discipline in 2007 when China Ministry of Education approved the three universities of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou, University of International Business and Economics in Beijing and Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade in Shanghai as the first batch of trial institutions to launch the undergraduate programme of Business English major in the whole country. The reason why the authority approves this new innovative degree programme is mostly because Chinese economy is being globalized, and needs more Business English talents to facilitate its further development, and the graduates of traditional English language and literature major are less competitive.

Ever since then there are over 150 higher education institutions which have been officially approved to start such a similar bachelor degree programme of Business English major in China. And there are also some universities like Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and University of International Business and Economics which have taken the lead in launching master degree programmes of business English in 2008 and doctor degree programmes of Business English in 2011. In a general sense, such a degree programme has demonstrated a very strong development potential as a new discipline in the field of higher education in China since it has been ranked as one of the most welcome programmes pursued by candidates in the National College Entrance Examination in recent years.

However, Business English development in China has also encountered some problems or challenges, for example, it still lacks a well-defined principle or standardized specification for the design of curriculum fit for the cultivation of the multi-skilled talents of Business English, and what is important is that, there are limited

research findings concerning the mixture degree or proportion of business knowledge-related courses and English language-related courses in the curriculum design of Business English major degree programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Thus, it is important to conduct a study on the issue of proper mixture proportion of Business and English Courses in Business English curriculum design.

This paper will aim to discuss the mixed proportion of business knowledge courses and English language courses in the curriculum design of Business English degree programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in China, with the purpose to put forward the basic principle of Business English curriculum design in terms of mixed degree of business and English, and to draw some implications for achieving the education target of multi-skilled Business English talents fit for the needs of the society.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Researches on the Origin of Business English Discipline from ESP*

In the western society, the origin of Business English dates back to the year of 1964 when Halliday proposes the so-called register analysis theory to define register in terms of field, tenor and mode, and makes a study of ESP or technical English and its differences from Ordinary English at the level of sentences and grammatical structures. And in the 1980s-1990s, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, 1993) puts forward the so-called learner-centered approach which emphasizes on the study of ESP on the understanding of learning process and teaching method, where curriculum design, teaching material selection, teaching organization and study evaluation, etc. are integrated together to form a systematic project for achieving teachers' teaching and learners' learning.

However, at the same time, in China, Business English emerges gradually from a sub branch of ESP to become a separate or independent discipline or major. For example, Chinese scholars like Lin (2005), Zhu (2008), Hong (2009), Weng (2010), Yang (2011), etc., have given a similar idea through research findings on a macro level of the new discipline that Business English as a sub branch ESP in China has evolved into a cross-disciplinary discipline or degree programme. In this new discipline, English linguistics and applied linguistics are regarded as its disciplinary foundation with the integration of other disciplinary theories and research methodologies such as business management, economics, culture, and education studies, etc. The focus of the current study is on the application of English language in international business environment as well as the curriculum construction and education models for how to cultivate the international business talents with cross-culture communication abilities fit for business-related professional posts or job positions.

### 2.2 *Researches on Theories of Business English Curriculum Design*

Researches on theories of Business English curriculum design both at home and abroad are mainly summarized as the following:

In the UK, Ellis and Johnson (1994), in the book of *Teaching Business English*, makes a study on the whole process of Business English training courses including the needs analysis of learners, the design of course, the method of teaching and so on. But this research focuses on the training courses for professionals or business managers, which are different from the modules for students of Business English major in a degree programme.

In China, the existing researches on theories of Business English curriculum design are mainly concentrated on the theories of needs analysis, cross-cultural communication, and content-based approach. For example, Wang (2005) makes a study on the curriculum design of Business English, and argues that as a newly developed discipline from ESP, Business English teaching is lack of a sound curriculum design to reach the objective of education for the related talents, so it is necessary to perfect the curriculum design of Business English according to the needs of learners.

Similarly, Ji (2009), in his paper *Key Issues in Business English Curriculum Design*, explores the key factors involved in business English curriculum design and the ways of analyzing the needs of teachers and students in course design as well as the teaching strategies. Xu (2009) publishes a paper called *Needs Analysis and Business English Course Design* and explores how to design Business English Courses based on needs analysis as well.

Li (2011), in his paper *Discussion on Culture Teaching in Business English Teaching*, argues that the application of cross-cultural communication theories to the teaching of Business English in the context of Chinese universities should be conducted in such a way that students are able to learn that Chinese and Western cultures exist as different systems, and to understand the fundamental ideas governing the respective cultural entities.

Furthermore, Zhu and Zheng (2013) make an empirical study on the curriculum design of Business English of International Trade Direction in GDUFS based on the theory of needs analysis, and argue that needs analysis

(also known as needs assessment) has a vital role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course, whether it is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or general English course.

### *2.3 Researches on Mixture Proportion in Business English Curriculum Design*

There are so far very limited research findings in terms of mixed proportion in Business English curriculum design. Online website searches find that Jiang (2012) makes a research on the issue of complexity of Business English curriculum design, and argues that the construction of Business English curriculum system should not only fully consider the complexity of Business English curriculum, but also consider the conditions for the development of Business English curriculum, such as the complexity of teaching staff, and the complexity of teaching materials and teaching methods, etc. But there is a shortage of research on the basic principles for the proper mixed proportion of business knowledge-related courses and English language-related modules.

In the academic researches or practices of Business English teaching, there are different arguments or doings concerning the mixed proportion of business and English in the Business English curriculum, among which some think that Business English curriculum design should contain 50%-50% proportion of business knowledge modules and English language modules, while there are some arguments giving another idea that it should contain about 60-70% proportion of English language modules and about 30-40% proportion of business knowledge modules. But of course, there are also some others believing that it should cover at least about 60% proportion of business knowledge modules and approximately 40% proportion of English language modules.

The first argument of 50%-50% mixed proportion simply means that Business English is completely a new cross-discipline of equally integrating business knowledge and English language together without any dominance of a single discipline. The second argument of maintaining 60-70% proportion of English language courses tries to keep Business English as Business English with English language regarded as the core of the cross-disciplinary programme, which means that Business English degree programme should always be a language degree programme.

But the third argument of at least about 60% proportion of business knowledge modules in the Business English curriculum design conveys the idea that Business English is simply the same as English Business with business as the core of the cross-disciplinary programme, which means that Business English degree programme should be an international business management degree programme or applied economics degree programme rather than a language one.

The following is a reflection into the research question of what is the mixed proportion of business knowledge courses and English language courses in the curriculum design of Business English degree programmes by using some needs analysis tools such as case samples, personal observations and qualitative assessment.

## **3. Mixture Proportion of Business and English Courses in Business English Curriculum Design**

### *3.1 Officially-Defined Mixture Proportion*

Chen and Wang (2009) made an interpretation of China Ministry of Education's Teaching Requirements for Business English Undergraduate Programme in higher Education Institutions. Based on their interpretation, Business English in China has evolved into a new cross discipline which is called EBP (English for Business Purpose) from ESP (English for Specific Purpose), and the theoretical foundation is based on applied linguistics, ESP, cross-cultural communication, business discourses, business management, etc. Business here may be considered to be a generalized concept, and business related knowledge or skills may cover any related knowledge or theories like management, economics, trade, finance, culture, philosophy, law, etc. In addition, the general requirement for the curriculum design of business English undergraduate programme should be about 60-70% of English language related courses and about 30-40% of business knowledge related courses, in order to retain its true nature of English language discipline.

In fact, in the real practices of Business English teaching, most universities have followed the officially defined principle of maintaining the nature of Business English as an English language discipline or degree programme in their curriculum design, in which English language-related modules usually account for about 60-70% proportion. However, there also exist some differences between different universities at different education levels in terms of types of business knowledge-related courses as well as local characteristics of these courses.

### *3.2 Samples of Mixture Proportion at the Undergraduate Education Level*

At the undergraduate education level, universities in China have mostly followed the general guideline of the above-expected proportion of English language courses and business knowledge courses in their Business English curriculum design, in which courses are usually divided into three main modules, including English

language-related courses, culture-related courses and business knowledge-related courses. But here in the paper, culture-related courses such as English National Society and Culture, cross-cultural business communication, etc. are generally classified into business knowledge-related courses.

As the leading institution of Business English education in the whole country, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) and University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) have both maintained the general principle of about 60-70% of English language courses and 30-40% of business knowledge courses in their Business English curriculum design. For example, Table 1 shows that GDUFS sets up 63% proportion of English language related courses and 37% proportion of business knowledge related courses in its Business English curriculum design of 165 credits in the schooling period of four years, while UIBE sets up 56% proportion of English language related courses and 44% proportion of business knowledge related courses in its Business English curriculum design of 162 credits.

Table 1. Comparison of business and English modules between GDUFS and UIBE in the curriculum design of undergraduate degree programme

Type of Curriculum modules	UIBE	GDUFS
English language courses	56%	63%
Business knowledge courses (including culture-related ones)	44% (17%)	37% (8%)

Notes: Adapted from Page 70 of Business English Teaching and Research (Zhu, 2011)

But, the main differences can be seen in the two universities' setting up of culture-related courses taught in English, in which UIBE offers 17% culture-related courses to students while GDUFS only offers 8%. In addition, their differences can also be seen in the names of business knowledge-related courses, for example, UIBE offers such business-related courses as Micro-economics, Macro-economics, Business Introduction, International Trade Organization, Management Principles, Marketing Management, Business Ethics, Import and Export Trade, International Business Law, etc., with no directions of the major divided.

But GDUFS offers business-related courses based on four clearly-defined directions of the major such as Management Principles, Human Resources Management, Business Strategy, and other courses for the direction of international business management; International Trade Practices, International Settlement, China Foreign Trade, International Economics, and other courses for the direction of international trade; Currency and Bank, International Finance, Financial Market, Commercial Bank Management, and other courses for the direction of international finance; Law, International Business Law, WTO, and other courses for the direction of international law, in addition to the open selective courses for all the four directions like Micro-economics, macro-economics, Introduction to Contemporary Business, etc.

In addition, it should be mentioned that even the English language courses may contain business knowledge or skills, such as business-related texts in Comprehensive English, English Listening, English Writing, and English reading, as well as Business English translation.

It is obvious from the above discussion of the samples that although there are some differences in the offering of business knowledge courses in Business English curriculum design between the two top universities, yet they do have maintained the nature of this discipline as an English language degree programme. This means that English language courses are more than business knowledge courses in the curriculum design as a whole.

### 3.3 Samples of Mixture Proportion at the Postgraduate Education Level

At the postgraduate education level, the paper also takes the two leading universities of Business English as a sample, and just compares their two years' degree programmes. In the country, 28 credits are normally required for a two-year master degree programme. In the Business English curriculum designs of the two sample universities, GDUFS and UIBE offer 18 courses and 15 courses with 28 credits respectively to the master degree programme of Business English, among which GDUFS offers 6 business knowledge courses (including culture-related ones) such as International Business Research, Management Essentials, Principles of Economics, International Trade Theory and Practice, Cross-cultural Communication Studies, and International Business Communication Studies, accounting for 30% of the total courses including compulsory and selective ones, while UIBE offers 7 business knowledge courses (including culture-related ones) such as Western Economics, Introduction to Business, International Enterprise Management, Strategic Management/HR Management,

Cross-cultural Communication, and English & American Literature, taking up 46% of the total (See table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of business and English modules between GDUFS and UIBE in the curriculum design of master degree programme

Type of Curriculum modules	GDUFS	UIBE
English language courses	30%	46%
Business knowledge courses (including culture-related ones)	70% (11%)	54% (13%)

Notes: Adapted from the published related sources of website information

From the above table, it is seen that in the design of curriculum modules for Business English master degree programmes, the two sample universities have also followed the general principle of about 60-70% English language courses and about 30-40% business knowledge courses in order to maintain the nature of Business English as a language programme. But the key difference between them lies in the English language courses in the curriculum design: GDUFS has a systematic offering of English language courses such as Social Linguistics, Functional Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Stylist, etc., which is much more than that of UIBE.

### 3.4 Surveyed Expectation of Mixture Proportion in the Mind of Teachers and Learners

In recent years, the authors have conducted two questionnaire surveys and several face-to-face discussions with the teachers and learners of Business English. The main findings show that: teachers differ in the proper mixture proportion of business and English courses in the curriculum design of Business English degree programme, among whom some believe the idea of “the more business knowledge-related courses, the better” in order to satisfy the needs of modern business society for the multi-skilled talents taught, while some believe the idea of maintaining the nature of Business English as a language programme, but agree with the view of properly increasing the percentage of business knowledge courses with the limit of no more than 40%.

However, the students investigated tend to have a common suggestion toward the offering of more business knowledge-related courses in the Business English curriculum design, which is always “the more, the better”, or at least 50%-50%. They expect to study the degree programme of Business English as a business-related major, by which they can systematically and completely master the knowledge or skill of a specific business-related discipline, so that they will become more competitive in the labor market and more competent in their future job positions. Simply speaking, students are very much driven by their career needs and the social needs without taking the fact of Business English as a language degree programme into account.

### 3.5 Samples of Mixture Proportion in Terms of Different Local Characteristics

In recent years, the mixture proportion of business knowledge-related courses and English language-related courses in Business English curriculum design tends to show some local characteristics. For example, in a general sense, the universities in large developed cities tend to offer more business knowledge courses while those in the smaller local cities or inland or less-developed regions tend to offer more English language courses. This is because that the universities in the smaller cities may lack the competent teaching staff to teach business courses in English or bilingual languages, and the universities usually can only set up a very small proportion of business knowledge courses in the curriculum modules such as Foreign Trade Theory, International Trade Correspondence, International Trade Negotiation, International Trade Settlement and Documents, Marketing Management and so forth.

Furthermore, in the offering of the courses, there is another trend becoming popular in the local universities, which is that: they tend to set up their Business English courses of unique local features, for instance, a local university near the region of a clothing cluster area may set up such courses as Clothing Business English and Garment material Identification; a university close to the sea or in a coastal city may offer such courses as Aquatic Product Trade Practice, Marine Business English, and others.

## 4. Conclusion and Suggestions

In conclusion, the degree programme of Business English major in China aims to cultivate multi-skilled talents of foreign language to better satisfy the real needs of society and economy through innovation activities of curriculum design and teaching method, and the existing researches on theories of Business English curriculum design are mainly concentrated on the theories of needs analysis, cross-cultural communication, and content-based approach. But there is a shortage of researches on the issue of proper mixture proportion of

Business and English Courses in Business English curriculum design.

Through reflecting into the samples of mixture proportion of business knowledge courses and English language courses in the curriculum design of Business English major degree programmes from different perspectives, the paper suggest that the proper mixture proportion of business knowledge courses and English language courses in the curriculum design should be: first, follow the officially defined principle of about 60-70% English language courses and 30-40% English language courses to keep the nature of Business English as a language degree programme; second, properly increase business knowledge courses within the limit to fit for the expectation of learners; use the flexible way of setting up business knowledge and English language courses of local characteristics; third, actively explore the proper integration of English language-related courses and English language-related courses rather than separately thinking of them, in order to better achieve the education target of multi-skilled Business English talents.

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