Applying Problem-Based Approach in Business English Courses for China’s English Majors

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Abstract
To enhance pedagogical innovation, the study reports on an investigative study using surveys and teacher participant observation of 121 English-major undergraduates about using problem-based approach under active learning framework in business English teaching, learning outcomes, and suggestions for the teaching and learning process to cultivate professional soft skills. Based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the study found that the problem-based approach should focus on business English communication skills development. The study also found that participants preferred problems related to recruiting and marketing. The participants commented positively on the effectiveness of the problem-based approach and reported personal gains in soft skills. To refine the problem-based approach, the participants suggested having more diverse problems and activities, more time, and higher-quality group discussion. Follow-up problem-based activities should include more personal reflections, extended practice activities, learning materials, and teacher feedback. The study suggests strategies for implementing problem-based approach applicable for both Chinese and international contexts.

Keywords
problem-based approach, active learning framework, business English course, professional soft skills, English major undergraduates, China

Introduction
Active learning approach can be defined as “students participating in teaching activities and taking charge of their own learning. It would mean series of teaching strategies involving analyzing, integrating and evaluating ideas” (Gogus, 2012, p. 77). Active learning approach is a typical learner-centered teaching model and suits business English teaching. Active learning theories integrate constructivism theories. The active learning approach involves problem-based teaching, students’ collaborative project and simulation (Simpson, 2017).

As noted by Ellis and Johnson (2002), business English teaching is influenced by different disciplines. Both skills-based training and management training approach can be used in business English teaching. Business English teaching mode calls for student-centeredness and adaptation to diverse learning environments. Ellis and Johnson (2002) also mention that the approach which suits the practical situation and teaching environment is the best. Therefore, there is considerable room for innovation in and reform of teaching modes. Traditional theories of how to teach business English mention the use of simulations and role-plays (Frendo, 2005). There has been constant innovation in the theory of business English teaching by borrowing teaching methods from other disciplines. Wang et al. (2015) indicate that business English courses aim to cultivate business practice, critical thinking, and autonomous learning skills. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argue that an active learning approach can cultivate students’ higher order skills, such as “analysis, synthesis and evaluation” (p. 2). This suggests that the active learning framework and concept are best suited to the needs of pedagogical innovation in business English teaching.

Against this background, this study further applies problem-based approach under the active learning theories in university business English courses and explore the soft skills cultivation. Dell’Aquila et al. (2017, p. 2) define soft skills as “some interpersonal skills including communication, conflict cultivation, negotiation, leadership, active listening, creative problem-solving, strategic thinking, decision-making, team-building, influence and selling.” The soft skills cultivation objective has surpassed the research scope of problem-based
approach under active learning framework. This study provides empirical guidance for improving business English teaching via the problem-based approach and active learning theories, with a focus on cultivating soft skills.

The State Council of China issued the vocational skills improvement action plan (2019–2021) in 2019. This document emphasized the need for innovation in the training content and to improve vocational skills, general professional quality and employment skills. This study focuses on the general professional quality, which is soft skills cultivation. Problem-based approach under active learning framework is adopted in business English teaching, to explore the effectiveness and usefulness of soft skills development, which ultimately improves business English teaching and expands the scope of pedagogical innovation.

**Literature Review**

**Research Status Quo and Trends of Active Learning**

Previous studies in China have mainly focused on the application of active learning theories in basic English education. Yao (2019) and Liu (2019) discuss the application of active learning theories and practice in transportation leader training. P. Li (2010) discusses the application of active learning theories in engineering education. Against the “internet plus” background, Xu (2019, p. 44) has introduced three active learning theories used in the UK, including “ripples of learning, E-activities and Re-engineering Assessment Practices.” From initiating active learning process, online learning platforms and effective evaluation, the active learning and teaching strategies have been enriched. In a college English teaching context, Hu (2020, p. 103) indicates that through “classroom interaction, authentic discourse, collaborative learning and student autonomy,” students could be transformed from passive learners into active learners. Zhao and Zheng (2014) investigate China’s university students’ beliefs, learning strategies, and cooperation in a project context. In the Chinese context, project learning approach has been used in business translation teaching (D. F. Li et al., 2015) and chemistry, biology, and arts classes (Pfeiffer & Fu, 2007). Problem-based teaching approach has also been used in business courses (Zhao et al., 2017).

International research has applied the active learning approach in disciplinary education such as business education (Stinson & Milter, 1996) and cross-cultural team learning (Higgins & Li, 2009). Spooren et al. (2018) argue that an active learning environment is helpful to challenge students and encourages them to join in the learning process. This includes quizzes, role-plays, games, and case-based learning. In the political education, decision-making simulation tools are used for students to join in the learning. Mintztes (2020, p. 9) indicates that “concept testing, constructive knowledge, meta-cognition, problem-based and case learning, interactive learning” can be used to create an active learning environment in a university classroom.

Studies in different countries have examined the application of active learning theories in teaching. For example, in Japan, Matsushita (2018, p. 7) indicates that the Japanese education sector has become interested in the active learning approach since 2000. Relevant reports have indicated that active learning enables learners to join in the learning process, rather than teacher having one-sided lecturing. The active learning approach should include “heuristic method of teaching, experiential learning, investigative learning, group discussion, debating and small group activities.” The application of the active learning approach in Japan’s middle and elementary education began in 2014. Related research appeared after 2015. In a dental English course, Rodis and Locsin (2019) adopt such active learning approaches as international group discussion, student teacher experience, and role plays. In Korea, Kim’s (2019) research finds that using mobile technology and interaction can enhance medical English active learning status. In Iran, Moghaddas and Khoshsaligheh (2019, p. 190) in their research find that project-based teaching under the active learning framework is helpful for improving “quality of translation, critical thinking and cooperation.” In the US, Mendez-Carbajo (2020) uses the federal data system to design active learning activities.

For soft skills cultivation in business English curriculum in China, Ding (2011) suggests that the teaching model and ideology should change with improved curriculum and flexible teaching methods, so that students get more engaged. Wu (2020) argues that business English teaching should focus on cultivating professional skills. The teaching design should be made in line with job needs, and the teaching methods should be more innovative to deepen teaching reform. Shi and Cai (2008) recommend that business English skills training courses should be in line with the job requirements. In the higher vocational business English context, Qian (2020) analyzes business English professional skills, including business knowledge, English expressions, and professional quality. On this basis, business English should center on student needs and collaborate with the companies. Moreover, internationally, Dell’Aquila et al. (2017) indicate that digital environment based games can be used in cultivating professional soft skills. Pfeiffer et al. (2011, p. 302) have categorized the soft skills training courses as “time management, work-life balance, communication and leadership, conflict management, cross-cultural communication and professional socialization.” Pfeiffer et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of cooperation and learning community in soft skills training. Massaro et al. (2016) mention the use of a soft skills training model to conduct executive training.

However, there is still a lack of research on how to apply specific teaching strategies under active learning theories in university business English teaching to cultivate professional soft skills. On the basis of prior research, this study aims to
Active Learning Theories and Problem-Based Approach

Active learning theories refer to a series of diverse and flexible teaching methods and strategies. Paul and Elder (2006, p. 39) indicate this involves micro teaching strategies such as “encouraging student thinking, connecting learning with students’ daily events, problems and practical solutions, questioning students systematically.” Erol et al. (2015) and Idsardi (2020, p. 17) have divided active learning into four levels. This study focuses on level 4. In level four, the lecturer can build up environments, in which students can evaluate and develop the ideas. Students are responsible for building new knowledge groups. Problem-based learning and teaching is one of the key teaching strategies. Problem-based approach can be embedded in business English teaching. Every teaching theme can have real-world problem-based team activities. Students need to read the background knowledge, conduct research, engage in group discussions, and prepare for oral report and written report.

In addition, Hodges (2020, p. 29) has divided active learning theories into four types based on student engagement. This includes “interactive (dialogue, co-creation), constructivism (generating, transfer), active (integrating and application) and passive (receiving, storing and recall).” The focus of this study is on the first three dimensions, which are interaction, constructivism, and active learning. This study analyzes the transition from teacher’s lecturing, students’ passive learning model to student-centered teaching model. Whether this transition can facilitate the cultivation of professional soft skills is the core issue for this study.

The specific focus of this study is problem-based approach under active learning framework. Kek and Huijser (2017, p. 15) indicate that problem-based learning starts from medical education. The features of problem-based learning include “authenticity, problem solving skills development, student-centered, self-directed learning, integrated knowledge, small group collaboration, self and peer assessment” etc. Jensen et al. (2019) indicate that problem-based learning is based on real-life problems and that the implementation of problem-based learning varies in different disciplines. Zhao et al. (2017) indicate that problem-based learning is one of the most promising teaching methods in Asia’s business education. It integrates content, thinking and communication, facilitating deep, and meaningful learning. Otieno (2019) indicates that the problem-based approach enables students to learn to solve problems without much prior knowledge, which is learner-centered and students are no longer only recipient of knowledge. Gallego and Casanueva (2009) experiment problem-based learning with large groups of business students and note significant gains in academic performance. In the English for specific purposes context in China, Xia (2010) applies problem-based learning approach in business English courses, and reports positive outcomes.

This study will integrate problem-based approach into specific problem-solving group activities. Through design and implementation of various themed activities, students’ professional soft skills are to be cultivated. Ansarian and Lin (2018) in their book on problem-based learning in language classes mention that there could be challenges in the implementation to tutors, students, designing of materials and resources, and assessment methods, though their review indicates positive experiences of problem-based learning with learners and tutors. This study would like to further investigate the challenges and effectiveness of using problem-based approach in business English teaching, drawing on empirical evidence.

Using Problem-Based Approach under Active Learning Framework on Cultivating Professional Soft Skills in Business English Courses

In Japan, Ono and Matsushita (2018, p. 192) have conducted research on the effectiveness of project-based learning and teaching. The evaluation is done through students’ self-assessment before graduation (indirect evaluation), to evaluate their changes in “knowledge and understanding, professional knowledge, attitude and temperament.” A total of 80% of the graduates indicated they were better able to identify problems, collect, analyze and integrate information to solve problems. Another university in Japan has conducted written assessment (direct evaluation) to assess students’ knowledge and understanding. On the other hand, the professional soft skills such as problem solving and interpersonal skills were evaluated by the teachers in small group activities. The accuracy of professional soft skills assessment still needs further validation.

This study will focus on the use of problem-based approach, which is based on the business English evaluation framework of Adamson and Morris (2007, p. 277) and Xie (2016, p. 70; see Figure 1). From course design (needs analysis, the embedding of active learning theories, learning motivation, student engagement), the effectiveness of teaching strategies based on active learning theories (problem-based learning and teaching), learning outcomes (intended and unintended), to the effects of professional soft skills cultivation, this study aims to seek answers to the three research questions.

Research Questions

This study aims to apply active learning theories in business English teaching and cultivate professional soft skills. The study focuses on the use of problem-based teaching strategies under active learning framework. The study selects one China’s
public university as the research context. It focuses on studying English major undergraduates, who enroll in the course *Business English*. The research questions are as follows:

Research question 1: What are the needs of using problem-based approach under active learning theories in business English teaching from English-major undergraduates’ perspectives?

Research question 2: How effective is the problem-based approach in business English teaching and what are the learning outcomes from English-major undergraduates’ perspectives?

Research questions 3: How should practitioners optimize business English teaching using problem-based approach which facilitates cultivating professional soft skills from English-major undergraduates’ perspectives?
Research Methodology

This study integrated quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Brown, 2014, p. 3), which uses mixed methods for data collection to collect both numerical and non-numerical qualitative in-depth information. Under the active learning framework, first-hand data were collected, particularly on the application of problem-based approach under active learning theories in business English courses, in the stages of needs analysis, curriculum design, implementation, and professional soft skills cultivation and evaluation. The data collection methods included pre-course and post-course surveys (including rating and open-ended questions, such as Sekita & Mitamura, 2018, p. 178), and teacher participant observation. The participants, data collection, and data analysis processes are described in the following sections.

Participants

The selection of the participants was based on convenience sampling. The participants in the study were 121 second year English major undergraduates, who enrolled in Business English course in September 2020, at a “Top Discipline” public university in the east of China. Their average age was 21 years old. Their age ranged from 18 to 20 years old. There were 15 male participants and 106 female participants. More than 94% of the participants reported they were beginners of business English. Around 2.4% of the participants reported being at high beginner and lower intermediate level of business English respectively. One participant self-assessed herself at intermediate level of business English. Around 1.6% of the participant had taken the College English Test-Band 4 (CET-4) and College English Test-Band 6(CET-6). One participant had participated in advanced English training and one participant had an IELTS score of 6.5.

The participants’ self-reported English levels are presented in Figure 2. More than 63% of the participants reported themselves as intermediate at English reading, which had a higher percentage than the other categories. Comparatively speaking, more than 59% of the participants reported themselves at basic level of English speaking, higher than the other categories. More participants reported themselves at basic level of English writing while more participants reported themselves at intermediate level of English listening. Only one participant reported himself at advanced level of English listening and speaking.

Data Collection

The data collection included two-stage surveys. The first stage survey (see Appendix A) was administered at the beginning of the business English course, in September, 2020. There were eight rating and open-ended questions, adapted from Kim (2008, p. 151), Frendo (2005, p. 18), and Xie (2016, p. 250). The questions were relevant to the participants’ English proficiency, the areas in which they needed to improve, the situations and topics which need problem-based learning activities, the challenges in problem-based learning activities, and their favorite corporate settings for problem-based activities.

Based on the participants’ needs, a range of problem-based activities were designed in business English teaching. The problems were selected based on the section “Dilemma” of Intelligent Business 1 (Trappe et al., 2018). The Dilemma centered on the themes of companies, leadership, marketing, recruitment, finance, and pay. The problems were mainly about safety of a pipeline company, CEO selection, perfume marketing, interview questions design, cutting costs, and leadership problems, which were adapted and designed from real-world business cases. In solving problems in the activities, the participants needed to read the case background, conduct group discussion, suggest solutions, and complete oral reports and writing tasks as group tasks. The writing tasks were about email, report, letter, or action minutes. The problem-based activities were conducted every 2 to 3 weeks during the 4-month-long business English course. Participants had in-class group discussion and meetings while they also worked together after class to finalize the group writing tasks. They would reflect on their teamwork experiences while cooperating with other group members to solve various problems, make decisions, and judgment. It could also be a unique communication and socializing experience. In this process, the core professional soft skills are expected to be developed, along with other intended business English learning outcomes in language and knowledge.

The second stage survey (see Appendix B) was administered at the end of the business English course, in December, 2020. There were 11 rating and open-ended questions, adapted from Rosca (2019, p. 84), Simpson (2017, p. 6), and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 143). The questions were related to the participants’ rating of the problems, their experience and evaluation of the problem-based learning and teaching activities, their learning gains, effectiveness of the problem-based approach in supporting their business English learning, suggestions for refining and improving the problem-based approach, improvement in business English competence and professional soft skills, and follow-up problem-based activities.

During the research process, the researcher (who was also the teacher) met these participants once in a week and also engaged in participant observation of the problem-based teaching and learning process. Although there was no requirement of ethical approval in the research context, the participants’ consent was obtained and they were assured that the research outcomes would benefit their business English learning. The research process followed the ethical principles of second language research (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2011, p. 80). To protect the identities and confidentiality of
the participants, pseudonyms were used throughout the research process. The questions in the survey instruments were first designed in English and then translated into Chinese so that the participants would understand them fully. The Chinese wording was checked by a senior researcher who had research experience and knowledge in both English and Chinese. The questions in the data collection survey instruments had been used in previous research and generated meaningful outcomes, which ensured validity and reliability of the survey questions.

**Data Analysis**

For the rating questions in the two-stage surveys, the means and standard deviation was calculated, which were presented in Figures 3, 7, and 15 as quantitative information. For the open-ended questions, the responses were mostly provided by the participants in Chinese and occasionally in English. The researcher read the responses several times and then categorized them by themes. The percentages of participants of the themes in response to the questions were calculated and presented in Figures 4 to 6, 8 to 14, and 16, along with interpretation of the figures also as quantitative results. Some selected best quotes (Guest et al., 2012, p. 267) were translated into English, to provide additional information for answering the research questions as qualitative results. Moreover, the teacher/researcher’s participant observation provided unique insider’s insights and explanations about using problem-based approach in business English teaching.

**Figure 2.** Participants’ self-reported English levels.

**Figure 3.** Participants’ needs of business communicative activities.
Participants’ Needs of Problem-Based Teaching and Learning in Business English Courses

The participants’ reported needs in terms of business communicative activities are presented in Figure 3. Participants were asked to rate on the business communicative activities on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the least needed and 5 being the most needed. It can be seen that dealing with visitors had the lowest mean of less than 4 while all other business communicative activities had the means of 4, which were needed for English improvement. The standard deviation for dealing with visitors was 1.0221 while for other business communicative activities, the standard deviations were all at 1. This implies that dealing with visitors is the least needed business communication skill.

The participants’ suggested scenarios for problem-based teaching and learning are summarized in Figure 4. More than 43% of the participants mentioned business communication scenarios such as negotiations, business meetings, reports, and email writing. This also included “socializing with business partners and customers and greet customers” (Translation, Participant 1). More than

Results
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The participants’ suggested scenarios for problem-based teaching and learning are summarized in Figure 4. More than 43% of the participants mentioned business communication scenarios such as negotiations, business meetings, reports, and email writing. This also included “socializing with business partners and customers and greet customers” (Translation, Participant 1). More than
17% of the participants hoped to have the problem-based teaching designed based on current affairs. This could include “recent business news and the explanation of the key business activities” (Translation, Participant 2). More than 10% of the participants mentioned workplace scenarios. Participants had the following comments.

We should create the practical scenarios. We have not experienced business settings and have many things we do not know. We hope the teacher could create typical settings for us to practice after class and give feedback. (Translation, Participant 3)

We should know how to solve problems if we meet in the workplace communication. (Translation, Participant 4)

Corporate settings are very practical. (Translation, Participant 5)

Corporate mechanisms and the way of cooperation among corporate staff. (Translation, Participant 6)

More than 9% of participants mentioned business knowledge and corporate cases. More than 8% of participants mentioned interview and recruitment. This included those of interviews of “joint ventures and foreign companies” (Translation, Participant 7). Another around 8% of participants hoped to have settings in international trade and cooperation. This included “Sino-US trade war, BRICS country cooperation and the Belt and Road” (Translation, Participant 8). Participant 9 had the following comment.

Figure 6. Participants’ preferred corporate cases for problem-based teaching and learning.

Figure 7. Means of participants’ rating of usefulness and interest of the six major problems in business English teaching.
In the scenario of international commerce and communication, we could strengthen our knowledge in the learning activities.

(Translation, Participant 9)

More than 7% of the participants preferred to have classroom activities and practice such as speaking and role plays, led by the teachers. The scenarios suggested were all based on concrete business and workplace contexts.

The participants’ perceived challenges of problem-based teaching and learning are summarized in Figure 5. More than 52% of the participants perceived the lack of language skills, including vocabulary, speaking, writing, and questioning skills as the main barriers of problem-based teaching and learning activities. Participant 10 mentioned “not knowing where to start and not able to write reports and emails” (Translation). Participant 11 also mentioned that this included the challenge in “personal ability, which requires constant attempt, as practicing in unfamiliar areas brings great difficulties” (Translation). More than 26% of the participants were unfamiliar with the business contexts, practices, and the workplace environment. This implies that these learners required inputs into the real business world. Participants 12 and 13 had the following comments.

To solve the problem requires us to understand the context. The greatest challenge is to solve local problems. However, this may fail because of lack of information. (Translation, Participant 12)

We are constrained by personal experience. If there are no fixed listening guidelines and processes with little teacher involvement, the activity may disorganize. (Translation, Participant 13)

More than 17% of the participants claimed lack of business background knowledge. Participant 14 mentioned “the needs...
of looking for information and to organize to draft a guideline clearly to reach conclusions” (Translation). More than 5% of the participant indicated the low efficiency in group cooperation. This may be because “the group members may communicate in their native language in Chinese” (Translation, Participant 15).

The participants’ preferred corporate cases for problem-based teaching and learning are summarized in Figure 6. More than 38% of the participants preferred cases involving business communication, such as negotiations and business and trade meetings. Participant 16 indicated “marketing communication to attract potential customers or shareholder investment” (Translation). Participant 17 mentioned “meeting foreign customers in the multinational companies’ headquarters.” More than 16.5% of the participants mentioned industry cases, such as in the banking industry and online shopping or e-commerce settings. More than 14% of the participants preferred to have Chinese corporate cases, which includes Huawei, as it “respects frontline staff, have innovation spirit and performance” (Translation, Participant 18). Participant 19 mentioned “new media company annual meetings such as Alibaba and ByteDance” (Translation). Participant 20 mentioned “the setting of a meeting in Wanda, in which the financial target has been set” (Translation). More than 11% of the participants preferred cases involving foreign companies, such as “adidas while conducting a market satisfaction survey when having a new technology innovation” (Translation, Participant 21). Starbucks was mentioned by Participant 22, “with different marketing strategies in Asian and Australian markets” (Translation). Participant 23 mentioned cooperation between Coca-cola and Chinese tea companies to have joint product launch (Translation). The case of L’Oréal on how to expand in the Chinese market should be discussed (Translation, Participant 24). More than 2% of the participants mentioned the “recruitment cases, such as how to raise questions, set standards and plan the process” (Translation, Participant 25). More than 3% of the participants also mentioned the language and translation service companies’ cases as interesting. In summary, the participants expressed the desire for a wide range of corporate cases for use as teaching materials via a problem-based approach to learn business English.

The Effectiveness of Using Problem-Based Learning Approach in Business English Teaching and the Learning Outcomes From Participants’ Perspectives

In the second-stage survey, the participants rated about the usefulness and interest of the main problems in business English teaching in a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was the lowest and 5 was the highest, shown in Figure 7. For usefulness, the problem of a US holiday resort recruiting and interview had the highest rating of 4.25 and leadership problem was closest at 4.02. A CEO selection problem was rated at 4. All other problems were perceived as useful with ratings between 3.6 and 3.8. For interest, the perfume problem had the highest mean at around 4.12 while the safety problem of a pipeline problem was the least interesting with a mean at around 2.8. The holiday resort recruiting problem was moderately interesting with a mean at 3.9. Other three problems were slightly less interesting, with means ranging from about 3.3 to 3.5. Based on thematic analysis of the six problems, the most useful problems were those related to recruitment, leadership and selection, and the most interesting problems were those related to marketing and recruitment.

The participants also rated about the problem-based teaching methods used in business English courses. More than 47% of the participants considered it as good and additional more than 26% rated it as very good, though around 10% rated it as average. A small proportion of the participants also provided additional comments. This included the need for “background information” (Participant 26). The participants mentioned that the problem-based approach was “a new model” (Translation, Participant 27) and they had “a better understanding about the reading text” (Translation, Participant 28), though the factor of “lack of practice” (Translation, Participant 29) could create difficulties. Participant 29 mentioned that “while the problem-based teaching and learning helped understanding of the unit themes, it also made the learning more interesting” (Translation). Participant 30 mentioned that problem-based teaching and learning “expanded their horizons and inspired creativity” (Translation). Participant 31 mentioned that “the teaching aims were clearer” (Translation). Four participants highlighted the needs of connecting the problems with more current affairs in daily life, as well as “cases which were happening in China” (Translation, Participant 32).

Moreover, the participants also evaluated their personal experiences in problem-based learning activities, which are summarized in Figure 8. More than 38% of the participants commented that they had developed teamwork in group activities, as well as other professional soft skills such as problem solving, cooperation, presentation, critical, and in-depth thinking skills. Participant 33 mentioned that she experienced “unprecedented group cooperation, business problem solving and learnt relevant business operation knowledge” (Translation). Participant 34 described that “she fully developed group cooperation, including task allocation. Group news sharing was a good learning method” (Translation). Participant 35 also expressed the similar views that “students could participate in the activities and had better understanding of the problems” (Translation). Participant 36 mentioned that “she had preview of the class and then joined in the group discussion in class. She developed communication and writing skills” (Translation).

More than 14% of the participants commented that they had very good experiences in problem-based learning activities. For example, participant 37 mentioned that “she had
very good experience as she could communicate with classmates and complete the tasks while improving business English language levels” (Translation). Moreover, more than 13% of participants mentioned that they had acquired business and language knowledge. For example, participant 38 mentioned that “she learnt business knowledge as well as had English listening and language learning” (Translation). Participant 39 also mentioned that “she could apply the knowledge in practical problem-solving” (Translation).

More than 11% of the participants mentioned that the problem-based learning activities could enhance class atmosphere by “making it livelier” (Participant 40, Translation) and engagement and text understanding. Participant 41 mentioned that “while discussing practical problems, she had the feeling of being in the scenario as it was very practical” (Translation). More than 10% of the participants also mentioned that the problem-based learning activities were very interesting.

However, the participants also highlighted that the problems of “lack of background knowledge and life experiences” (Translation, Participant 42), “lack of practice experience” (Translation, Participant 43), “lack of high-level thinking” (Translation, Participant 44), “lack of connection with personal life” (Translation, Participant 45), “lack of aims in discussion” (Translation, Participant 46) etc. could affect their personal experiences in problem-based learning activities.

At the end of the course, the participants commented on the actual difficulties they experienced in the problem-based learning and teaching, summarized in Figure 9. More than 27% of the participants mentioned the difficulties in understanding the problem context to obtain a solution. For example, participant 47 reported that some problem contexts were strange and difficult to understand (Translation).

More than 22% of the participants mentioned the problem of lack of vocabulary and language skills. Participant 48 said that “there were too many new words and company names which were difficult to memorize. They were parts of business English but were challenging” (Translation). Participant 49 mentioned that the “vocabulary was rare which created reading difficulties. While looking for extended materials, it was difficult to find real-time authentic materials.”

More than 17% of the participants mentioned the lack of background business knowledge and thinking skills. Participants 50 and 51 had the following comments:

I have little knowledge about the company and people, which was strange. This lead to the inability to solve the problem comprehensively, such as the Nissan CEO selection case when the candidate had work experience in many countries (Translation, Participant 50).

As a student, I have little understanding about corporate leadership and cost. This created difficulties in making a plan for the problem (Translation, Participant 51).

Moreover, around 11.5% of the participants highlighted problems with group cooperation and discussion. Participant 52 said that “group discussion for the case study had too many people. There was no way to hear others’ ideas” (Translation). More than 4% of the participants did not have practice experience to understand the problem context. Other difficulties included limited time in having problem-based learning (2.4%) and lack of understanding of business writing format (2.4%). The participants’ insights into these problems suggest directions for improving the implementation of the problem-based approach.

The participants’ favorite problem-based learning and teaching activities are summarized in Figure 10. More than 24% of the participants selected the perfume marketing case. Participant 53 commented that it was “close to life, to solve a problem from the consumers’ perspective” (Translation). Participant 54 explained that “the perfume case was close to women’s life. I engaged fully and was very interested in the group discussion. I had more knowledge about perfume and could provide more reasonable ideas” (Translation). Participant 54 added that “the activity was close to young people’s choices. Like the sneakers, should the businesses with or without brands change to meet young people’s needs? This interested me” (Translation).

More than 16% of the participants favored the holiday resort interview and recruitment case. Participant 55 mentioned that the case contained a lot of “interesting and useful knowledge” (Translation). Participant 56 observed that “the interview and recruitment questions were very close to the life” (Translation). Participant 57 explained that the case contained wide discussion space, which was relevant to life and mentality” (Translation).

More than 14% of the participants preferred the group discussion activities, because they can “apply knowledge in solving problems” (Translation, Participant 58). Participant 59 added that in group discussion, “there was flexible mindset and group members helped each other” (Translation). Participant 60 mentioned that “there could be very new ideas, which were not thought of” (Translation). More than 8% of the participants praised text-based reading, vocabulary, grammar, and career skills and writing instruction. For example participant 61 had the following comment:

I am interested to learn of many brands, which I could find in the daily life (Participant 61, Translation).

More than 5% of the participants liked news sharing, because “it was about important case and could follow social development closely” (Participant 62, Translation). Participant 63 described it as follows:

I have learnt a lot in looking for news and editing the document. (Participant 63, Translation)
Other favorite activities included CEO’s selection (4.1%), leadership problem of a joint venture (2.4%), safety problem of a pipeline company (0.8%), autonomous learning (2.4%), business knowledge learning (1.6%), and listening exercises (0.8%).

All of the participants (100%) mentioned that they had acquired and gained things from the learning process. Their personal gains are summarized in Figure 11. More than 38% of the participants reported gains in problem solving, critical thinking, and practice development, which are important professional soft skills. Participant 64 described it as follows:

I solved problems using business English knowledge in a particular setting while learning business knowledge and English language. (Translation, Participant 64)
Participant 65 also mentioned “problem-based critical thinking and autonomous thinking” (Translation). Participant 66 shared that “once a problem was solved, there would be something to learn in the process, such as dealing with interpersonal relations and applying for a job etc.” (Translation). Participant 67 described the process as “a new learning method, which could help in text learning and daily life. She could analyze and solve the problem” (Translation). Participants 68 and 69 said as follows:  

I learned through the practical cases operation and decision-making, which expanded the horizon of thinking on problems (Translation, Participant 68).

I developed thinking and questioning skills” (Translation, Participant 69).

More than 28% of the participants gained more business and corporate knowledge. Participant 70 said this was “a systematic understanding of knowledge in a specific area through an integrated task” (Translation). Participant 71 added “basic business knowledge and etiquette” (Translation). Participant 72 increased knowledge about “famous companies’ history and operation in China and abroad” (Translation). Participants 73 and 74 had the following explanation:  

I gained a lot in business knowledge, such as self-introduction, job introduction, corporate cost, leader selection. I built up the repertoire to cope with the real-life challenge”. (Translation, Participant 73).

I learnt designing interview questions and expected responses, as well as brand concept and innovative thinking, (Translation, Participant 74).

More than 23% of the participants gained in business English language including vocabulary. Participant 75 mentioned having learned “many business English expressions, which could benefit career development” (Translation). Participant 76 added as follows:

I improved communication skills and English competence” (Translation, Participant 76).

Over 11% of participants added gains in teamwork. Participant 77 added the following comment:

I cultivated group cooperation skills, to express own views in brainstorming. I also acquired the skill to summarize. (Translation, Participant 77)

Other gains included business English writing skills (7.4%), and data search and analysis skills (1.6%).

More than 98% of the participants felt that they had been encouraged to express their own views. The specific activities are summarized in Figure 12. More than 45% of the participants mentioned in case study and group discussion, they could express their own views. Participant 78 mentioned that “students took turns to join in discussion and reporting” (Translation). Participant 79 described that in “group discussion, sometimes he can gather all the information of his peers and express in final expression.” More than 16% of the participants mentioned that all of the activities encouraged expressing own views. Over 14% of the participants mentioned answering the teacher’s questions and following the teacher’s instructions, which encouraged them to express their own views. Participant 80 said “I was excited and loved answering questions” (Translation). Participant 81 added that “even the answers to the question were not very good, the teacher would correct and I was not embarrassed” (Translation). Other activities included warming up (0.8%), presentation (2.4%), and pair talk (0.8%).

More than 96% of the participants considered problem-based teaching and learning activities to have been effective.
in supporting their business English learning. The reasons are summarized in Figure 13. More than 23% of the participants reported that the activities had expanded business and corporate knowledge. Participant 82 mentioned having gained the “knowledge about the job and companies” (Translation). Participant 83 said “she knew many Chinese and international big companies and had knowledge about business processes” (Translation).

More than 23% of the participants improved their creative thinking, problem solving and autonomous learning skills. Participant 84 said this “kept her thinking in learning” (Translation). Participants 85, 86, and 87 observed as follows:

My thinking was not superficial and I found the neglected problems. (Translation, Participant 85).

I could use business English mindset to think and solve problems, and then express. (Translation, Participant 86).

It could “inspire creative and effective thinking”. (Translation, Participant 87)

More than 14% of the participants said it improved business English language competence. Participant 88 added that “she could understand the context in which the business English vocabulary was used” (Translation). Participant 89 explained that “problem-based activities were more targeted and it made business English learning more detailed.” More than 10% of the participant explained that it applied knowledge to practice. For example, participant 90 said “it helped to covert the knowledge point into integration.” Participant 91 described that “in business communication, people analyze the problems and background of market and try to give them answers. These that I learn from the process of asking and answering can be beneficial.” Participant 91 said “simulation in business English contexts increased the feeling of experiencing” (Translation). More than 6% of the participants said that the approach had improved their motivation and interest in learning. For example participant 92 said as follows:

I was interested in business knowledge and had happiness in solving problems, (Translation, Participant 92).

Participants’ Suggestions for Optimizing Business English Teaching Using Problem-Based Approach While Facilitating Cultivating Professional Soft Skills

The participants’ suggestions for optimizing business English teaching using problem-based learning and teaching activities are summarized in Figure 14. More than 24% of the participants suggested improving the design and increasing the diversity of the problems. Participant 93 mentioned that the “forms of problems and questioning methods should be improved” (Translation). Participant 94 added that “the problems should be close to life and the familiar areas” (Translation). Participant 95 said the “problems should be more open-ended” (Translation).

More than 17% of the participants suggested increasing more diverse reading, oral, and practice activities. Participant 96 suggested that the “reading texts could be more diverse” (Translation). Participant 97 added that “the scenarios should be more real with guidance” (Translation). Participant 98 suggested “including more corporate cases and video materials” (Translation). Participant 99 hoped to have even “debate and extended reading” (Translation). Participant 100 hoped to “have scenario-based simulation” (Translation).
Participant 101 even hoped to organize a “scenario-based drama based on the problems” (Translation). Participant 102 suggested “increasing the writing of business proposal and product promotion texts” (Translation).

More than 19% of the participants recommended increasing the duration and quality of group discussion. Participant 103 said this “could enable every member to express views and further explore the solution” (Translation). This could also “increase the student engagement” (Participant 104, Translation). Over 9% of the participants hoped to have teacher feedback, participation, interaction, and evaluation. For example, participant 105 said “I needed feedback, to see if my expressions were original” (Translation). Participant 106 also hoped to “have more detailed teacher comment to simplify the language and improve the proposal” (Translation). More than 5% of the participants also hoped the number of people in the groups could be reduced. The suggestions provided by the participants could greatly improve business English competence and soft skills.
improve the design and implementation process of the problem-based approach. This was agreed by the researcher/teacher while observing the problem-based teaching and learning process.

At the end of the course, the participants also rated about their improvement in business English competence and professional soft skills development, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was the lowest and 5 was the highest, as summarized in Figure 15. The majority of the competence and soft skills categories had the means of over 3. Teamwork and group cooperation had the highest mean of over 3.85. Business culture knowledge was the closest, to be over 3.8. The means of the other competence and professional soft skills ranged from 3.23 to 3.76. Business practice competence had the lowest mean of 2.92, which was below 3 (out of 5). The results imply that the participants needed further development in business practice, although they had reported moderate improvement in other categories of business English competence and professional soft skills development. The researcher/teacher also would plan to develop more business practice activities, such as workplace and project-based learning programs.

Finally, participants also provided their suggestions for follow-up problem-based teaching and learning activities, shown in Figure 16. Over 34% of the participants mentioned personal reflections, summaries, and reports on the learning experiences. For example, participant 107 hoped to “have reflection and summary on group work labor divisions and the new knowledge acquired” (Translation). Participant 108 mentioned to have “group members’ job report” (Translation). More than 19% of the participants asked for extended practice activities such as debate, role play, simulation, and corporate visits. Participant 109 explained that “if there was no practice, confined to only textbook, learners would not have great progress” (Translation). Participant 110 hoped to have “job interview role play” (Translation). Over 12% of the participants hoped to have extended learning materials such as corporate cases and current affairs reading materials. Participant 111 said “this could enable a better grasp of knowledge and culture through searching for more solutions and similar cases” (Translation). Participant 112 hoped to “have extended reading with real-life and familiar cases” (Translation). Over 9% of the participants wished for more teacher feedback. The activities included “teacher’s comments on personal and group reports, with selected demonstration with sample work” (Translation, Participant 113). These suggestions could help to fine-tune the follow-up activities for the problem-based approach.

**Discussion**

The discussion of the findings will center on the following three sections, which are, participants' needs, perceptions of effectiveness of using problem-based approach in business English courses, the learning outcomes and their suggestions of optimizing the approach to cultivate professional soft skills.

**Participants’ Needs of Problem-Based Teaching and Learning in Business English Courses**

The participants had generally strong needs of learning business communication skills, with the exception of dealing with visitors, which was least needed skill. For scenarios of problem-based teaching and learning, close to half of the participants wished to engage in concrete business communication activities, including negotiations, meetings, and business writing. For preferred cases of problem-based activities, more than one third of the participants preferred business communication, such as negotiations and business and trade meetings. These participant needs and preferences are suitable and necessary for the design and development of problem-based activities. Kek and Huijser (2017, p. 15) mention that the elements of problem-based approach include “authenticity, problem-solving skills development, student-centered, self-directed learning skills development, integrated knowledge and small group collaboration.” In this study, the learners were able to construct their own learning environments in small groups and develop their preferred business communication skills in a problem context based on real-world scenarios, representing a different and unique teaching and learning experience.

As to the perceived challenges of problem-based approach, more than half of the participants mentioned lack of language skills, such as vocabulary, speaking, writing, and questioning skills as the main barriers. Legg (2007) mentions that the diversity of linguistic and cultural background could make the implementation of problem-based approach complicated. This study provides another case of using problem-based approach in a unique linguistic and cultural context of business English course, in which English is used as a foreign language and learners have to overcome various challenges in the problem-based learning process.
The Effectiveness of Using Problem-Based Learning Approach in Business English Teaching and the Learning Outcomes From Participants’ Perspectives

For participants’ perceptions of the problems, the US holiday resort recruiting and interview had the highest usefulness rating. For interest, the perfume problem had the highest mean. To evaluate problem-based activities, more than two thirds of the participants commented that it was good or very good. In evaluating their personal experiences, more than one third of the participants commented that they had developed teamwork and other professional soft skills. For actual difficulties in problem-based activities, fewer than one third mentioned that it was hard to understand the problem context. When talking about the difficulties of problem-based approach to students, Ansarian and Lin (2018, p. 43) mention that students’ “cognitive skills such as reasoning and research skills are required” in the problem-based context. They also mention that the difficulties could cause “anxiety and demotivation” in some cases (p. 44). In this study, the results provide empirical evidence of positive learning experiences.

More than 20% of the participants said their favorite problem-based activity was the perfume marketing case. All of the participants said they had gained something in the learning process. More than one third said they had gained in professional soft skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and practice development. The majority of the participants felt they were encouraged in the learning process, with the case studies and group discussions mentioned by more than 40% of the participants. The majority of the participants considered problem-based learning activities as effective in supporting their business English learning. Under one third said it expanded business and corporate knowledge. However, English and Kitsantas (2013) mention that in implementing problem-based approach, not all the students would have the same level of professional soft skills, such as problem-solving and critical thinking. This might create imbalance in implementing the problem-based group activities. This study has provided empirical evidence of the positive learning outcomes of the problem-based approach used in business English courses and the potential of developing professional soft skills.

Participants’ Suggestions for Optimizing Business English Teaching Using Problem-Based Approach While Facilitating Cultivating Professional Soft Skills

For optimizing problem-based approach in business English teaching, fewer than one third suggested improving the design and diversity of the problems. Other suggestions include increasing more diverse reading, oral, and practice activities, increasing the duration and quality of group discussion. Jensen et al. (2019) also mention that the problem-based approach in the higher education context can be diverse in its implementation process, using various models and strategies. The findings of this study thus provide empirical evidence of problem-based practice in business English teaching by developing diverse implementation strategies.

For cultivating professional soft skills, most of the business English competence and soft skills categories had the means of over 3 while teamwork and group cooperation had the highest mean of over 3.85. Kek and Huijser (2017) analyze that in the problem-based learning context, the development of professional soft skills and business English competence must be purposefully built in the curriculum design, teaching and learning process to be effective. This study is providing another evidence for the positive outcome of professional soft skills development by using problem-based approach.

For follow-up problem-based learning and teaching activities, more than one third mentioned personal reflections, summaries, and reports on the learning experiences. Other suggestions included extended practice activities such as debates, role-plays, simulations, and corporate visits, extended learning materials such as corporate cases and current affairs reading materials and provision of more teacher feedback. Kek and Huijser (2017) also mention that for the problem-based learning context, having reflection and providing feedback are necessary so that learners know how to improve. This study generated suggestions for additional follow-up activities which could expand the scope of problem-based approach.

Conclusion

This study reports an empirical investigation using two-stage survey and teacher participant observation with 121 second-year English-major undergraduates about needs and effectiveness of problem-based approach under active learning framework in business English teaching, the learning outcomes, and suggestions to optimize the teaching and learning process to cultivate professional soft skills. The study finds that participants’ needs, preferred scenarios and cases of problem-based approach in business English teaching focus on business English communication skills development, such as negotiations and meetings. Lack of language skills could be perceived main challenges and lack of understanding about the problem context could be the main difficulties. When evaluating the problem-based approach, participants preferred recruitment and marketing problems. While praising the effectiveness of the approach, the participants also reported personal gains in soft skills such as teamwork and business English competence. To improve the problem-based approach, the participants suggested having more diverse problems, activities, longer time, and higher quality of group discussion. Follow-up problem-based activities should
include more personal reflections, extended practice activities, learning materials, and teacher feedback.

This study has provided empirical insights into designing and implementing problem-based approach under active learning framework in business English courses for English major students in the Chinese context. Theoretically, this study has provided a unique case on how to optimize problem-based approach in a real pedagogical context. Practically, the study results provide reference to practitioners on how to develop and implement problem-based approach using active learning theories to cultivate professional soft skills. From the policy aspect, it also provides a local case for fine-tuning business English teaching benchmark. Although the study was conducted only in one university context, the research process could be replicated in other cultural settings. Further research should further focus on applying problem-based approach and other active learning-based teaching strategies such as project-based approach in different higher education contexts and generating more empirical evidence of their usefulness and effectiveness.

Appendix A

Problem-Based Learning Needs Analysis

Adapted from Kim (2008, p. 151), Frendo (2005, p. 18), Xie (2016, p. 250)

1. Gender ______ Age ______ Grade ______
2. Please describe your business English level (Please ✓)
   Basic Intermediate Advanced
   Native or near-native

3. Please write your previous English test score (IELTS, TOEFL, BEC, TEM-4, CET-4/6 ______)
4. Please indicate the level of your English proficiency in the following areas (Please ✓).
   Basic Intermediate Advanced Native or near-native
   Writing Reading Listening Speaking

5. I need to improve my English in order to better (Please rate in a scale of 1–5, 1 is the least needed while 5 is the most needed):
   1 2 3 4 5
   - Deal with visitors
   - Understand presentations
   - Give presentations
   - Take part in meetings
   - Chair meetings
   - Read reports
   - Write reports
   - Deal with emails
   - Speak on the telephone
   - Socialize with business partners and/or customers
   - Deal with suppliers
   - Deal with customers

6. In which situations/topics would you recommend the teacher to design problem-based learning activities?
7. What you think are the greatest challenges when you are experiencing problem-based learning activities?
8. What are your favorite company settings, for which the problem-based learning activities will be developed? Please provide details including company names and industries.

Appendix B

Problem-Based Learning Curriculum Assessment

Adapted from Rosca (2019, p. 84), Simpson (2017, p. 6), and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 143).

1. On a scale from 1 to 5 rate the usefulness and the interest in the activities chosen for the problem-based teaching tasks. (1 = the least useful/interesting and 5 = the most useful/interesting).

| Problems                                      | Useful (1–5) | Interesting (1–5) |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| (1) Safety problem of a pipeline company      |              |                   |
| (2) Leadership problem of a joint venture     |              |                   |
| (3) Marketing a branded perfume problem       |              |                   |
| (4) A US holiday resort recruiting and interview problem | 5            |                   |
| (5) A cost cutting problem for a consumer products company | 4            |                   |
| (6) A CEO selection problem                   |              |                   |
2. What was your overall view of the problem-based teaching activities? Circle any of the five options:

very poor
poor
average
good
very good

Additional comments

3. Please describe your experience in the problem-based learning activities.

4. Point out the problems you have encountered throughout the problem-based learning activities.

5. Which of the activities did you like best and why?

6. Do you feel you have learned something from this problem-based learning activities? Please circle.

Yes
No
Yes and No

If your answer is yes specify your learning gains.

7. Do you feel you have been encouraged to develop your own opinion? Please circle.

Yes
No
Yes and No

Which activities have encouraged you to develop your opinion?

8. How effective do you consider problem-based learning activities to be in supporting your learning of business English? Please provide reasons.

9. How do you think this problem-based learning activities might be improved?

10. Which business English competence have you improved? (1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest)

| Business language knowledge | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Business culture knowledge | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Business knowledge | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Business practice competence | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Critical thinking and innovation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| International business writing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Oral presentation/reporting skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Business soft skills: judgment/communication/socialization/decision-making/action | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Teamwork and group cooperation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Problem-solving skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

11. What would you suggest to follow up to the problem-based learning activities?

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