Using task-based approach in business English courses for English-majors at a Chinese university

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Abstract
Using two-stage surveys, this study investigates 145 China’s English major students’ business communication learning needs, the effectiveness of the task-based approach, and how business English teachers improve task-based approach in business English courses. The results showed that English major students had greater needs of learning output skills of speaking, translation and interpreting than other skills. They expressed specific needs in developing business English reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, using learning resources, learning business cases, business knowledge, language knowledge and simulation tasks. Based on learner needs, a task-based teaching approach was designed and implemented. Most of the participants considered the task-based teaching approach as effective. The most important learning outcomes they reported were relevant to improvements in motivation, learning strategies, confidence, cooperation and business knowledge. Learner autonomy was the greatest improved competence. The largest learning gains were in business knowledge and corporate information. To improve the task-based approach, the participants suggested integrating the business knowledge framework, more instructions on language knowledge and Business English Certificate (BEC) exam preparation, more practice and simulation, oral communication, multimedia resources and pedagogical innovation. For post-course practice, the participants suggested professional lectures, internship, simulation and BEC exam preparation.

Keywords
Task-based approach, business English courses, English-major, Chinese university, implementation and evaluation

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Introduction

From business English teaching perspective, Donna (2000) indicates that it should focus on students’ abilities, using authentic materials and continuous evaluation. The usual teaching methods in business English courses include role play, simulation and case discussion (Frendo, 2005, p.54). Ellis and Johnson (2002, p.219) indicate that due to differences in teaching and cultural environment, there is no best approach for business English teaching. Teachers should interact with the students and the student-centered approach is the most effective. Task-based approach as a typical example of student-centered approach can be applied in business English teaching. Business English teachers could develop specific tasks in the business context to achieve certain learning goals.

In this context, this study aims to further apply task-based approach in business English courses in the university context. This study analyzes business English curriculum design and implementation process. Specifically, this study will investigate English majors’ business English communication learning needs, the effectiveness of the task-based approach, and the potential short-term and long-term learning outcomes.

Critique of existing research

The current status of research on task-based teaching

From the theoretical perspective, Nunan (1991, p.279) indicates that task-based teaching should be based on “needs, interaction in the target language, using authentic texts, learning process, learners’ own learning experiences, while connecting inside and outside classrooms”. According to Nunan (1991, p.280), task can be defined as “an activity or action as the result of understanding or processing the language, such as drawing a map while listening to tape, listening to instructions to complete a task”. The teaching tasks design process can be divided into “identifying task, providing model, identifying enabling skills and devising pedagogical task” (Nunan, 1991, p.282).

Kebble (2012, p.65) indicates that task-based teaching should have four sages, “input, interaction, output and consolidation”. Task-based teaching is based on a series of meaningful tasks and constructivism theories. Task-based teaching can be beyond the classrooms so that cooperative learning can also happen outside the classrooms. Students are positive to task-based teaching. Feryok (2017, p. 717) indicates that task-based teaching is linked with social cultural theories, which both value the importance of practice. Task-based teaching emphasizes “teaching effectiveness, connection with practice and effectiveness in psycholinguistics”. Ellis (2012, p.10) further explains that the task-based approach involves “any of the four language skills” and “involves real-world processes of language use”.

In China, task-based teaching is an important teaching approach. It is used widely in foreign language education and teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and has been found to enhance teaching effectiveness (Lian, 2018). Deng (2018) compares the similarities and differences between task-based teaching and production-oriented teaching. It is similar that both teaching approaches emphasize “holistic education, learning by doing, focusing on input and output and language use”. This is similar to the teaching philosophy of business English teaching.

Using task-based approach in language teaching

Scholars from different countries have conducted empirical research on using task-based approach in language teaching. In the US, Benson (2016) conducts a study with 53 adult learners. The study
shows that task-based teaching can cultivate the language abilities to transfer among different tasks. In Spain, **Mora and Levkina (2017)** discuss the use of task-based approach in teaching English pronunciation. Task-based pronunciation teaching should fully consider the learner factor which influences task performance. In Denmark, **Bao and Du (2015)** discuss the use of task-based approach in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the study has revealed the benefits and challenges of task-based approach. They indicate that task-based approach should fully consider various impact factors when interacting with the context. In Japan, **Yasuda (2017)** has applied the systemic functional theories in genre pedagogy in combination with task-based teaching. The study indicates the effectiveness of this approach, which improves both linguistic knowledge and professional writing skills. In Portugal, **Vieira (2017)** indicates that the task-based teaching practice can enhance autonomous learning development of teacher education majors. This is relevant to the environment of the practicum and the professional development strategies of teacher education majors. In China, **Zheng and Borg (2014)** investigate three middle school teachers’ perceptions of task-based approach. It is considered that task-based approach is closely linked with pair work and group work in communicative language teaching. If the class size is too large, this brings challenges to task-based teaching.

**Using task-based approach in business English teaching**

Internationally, in the business English teaching task design, **Evans (2013)** in Hong Kong thinks that simulated business English activities can be used to design tasks. This includes simulated email, report, telephoning and meeting etc. In the UK, **Thondhlan and Smith (2013)** have used the task analysis framework in the task-based approach to interpret project teaching requirements and series of tasks. The study results show that project requirements are very complex and highly interactive, which can facilitate group cooperation skills.

In business English teaching in the Chinese context, **Liu and Mu (2006)** think that task-based approach can be applied to spoken business English teaching. Through pre-task preparation, in-task design and planning and post-task evaluation, spoken business English teaching can be improved. **Men and Meng (2015)** have found in their experimental study that task-based approach can improve students’ extensive reading scores. **Chen (2016)** thinks that through adjusting teaching content and tasks, setting realistic tasks and creating easy and lovely group work, task-based approach could improve business English teaching design and implementation. **Xie and Ouyang (2017)** have compared different business English courses. Through task-based approach, teaching design can be improved.

The principles of task-based approach are for students to become the language users, especially to simulate the language use and communication activities in the real world (Ellis, 2012, p.3). This is in line with the ultimate purposes of business English teaching, to cultivate students’ cross-cultural business communicative competence in the real world. Thereby, task-based approach can be used in business English teaching. However, currently there are still limited empirical studies. To address this research gap, this study will investigate the use of task-based approach in business English teaching comprehensively.

**Theoretical framework**

Business English teaching requires teachers to be attentive to learners’ individual learning needs, including “general business English listening speaking skills, such as meetings, telephoning and socializing; or telephoning, presentation and negotiation; business reading and writing skills such as letter, documents and reporting” (Ellis and Johnson, 2002, p.191). Therefore, to implement
task-based approach in business English courses should focus on needs analysis, to understand learners’ learning difficulties and the business communication skills for further improvement. The pre-task, in-task and post-task implementation process for the task-based approach can be applied in business English curriculum, to maximize the teaching effectiveness (see Figure 1).

Based on China’s business English national benchmarks, business English courses should mainly cultivate cross-cultural business communication, business practice, business English usage and autonomous learning abilities (Wang et al., 2015). For implementing task-based approach, the pre-task stage should consider intended outcomes, time arrangement and using similar tasks. In-task stage should consider time pressure and number of participants. Post-task stage should consider learner report, repetitive tasks and raising awareness.

The aim of the study is to further investigate the effectiveness of task-based approach, and how to improve course design and implementation process. This study integrates the course evaluation frameworks of Adamson and Morris (2007, p.277) and Xie (2016, p.70), as well as the task-based teaching theories of Ellis (2012) and Nunan (2011). How to improve task-based approach in business English teaching, to better develop the international communicative competence is the main focus of the study. The study will also analyze the teaching effectiveness of task-based approach, to inform the business English teaching. The main conceptual framework can be seen in Figure 2.

Based on the theoretical framework of task-based approach, relevant information such as teaching task design, objective, input, process, task types, teacher and learner’s roles, contexts in the task implementation process, learning outcomes and long-term learning effectiveness can be gathered in the business English courses, to answer the main question: how could business English teachers improve task-based approach in business English teaching, to ultimately answer the research questions.

This study aims to answer the following three major research questions:

1) What are the business English communication learning needs of English major undergraduates in the Chinese university context?
2) How effective is task-based teaching approach in developing international business communicative competence in the Chinese university context?
3) How could business English teachers improve task-based approach in business English teaching in the Chinese university context?

Research methodology

Overview

Based on the university business English course task-based approach evaluation model and the theoretical framework, this study will mainly analyze cases of business English courses for
English majors in a top discipline public university in the east of China. The research methods would involve data collection and analysis methods at different stages (Brown, 2014). These include two-stage surveys, containing rating and qualitative open-ended questions. The data collection would center on business English communication learning needs, the effectiveness of task-based teaching approach and materials, the learning outcomes and personal learning gains, and suggestions for improving task-based approach in business English teaching and post-course practice. The main focus is whether task-based business English courses are effective, and how to improve task-based approach in business English teaching.

**Data collection**

This study uses two-stage survey as the data collection instruments. The first stage survey was administered in September 2019, at the beginning of Business English course. The first-stage survey focuses on the business English communication learning needs of English major undergraduates in the Chinese university context. There are 13 questions, including rating and open-ended questions. The questions were adapted from the research instruments of Nunan (2011, Figure 2. Task-based Approach in University Business English Courses Evaluation Model.)

**Figure 2.** Task-based Approach in University Business English Courses Evaluation Model.
The questions were relevant to the participants’ business English levels, motivation, confidence in using English in the workplace context, prior business English learning experiences, their learning needs and self-evaluation of business English reading, listening, writing and speaking, oral communication needs, favorite business English learning materials and resources, favorite business and corporate cases, the learning needs of cultural and language knowledge as well as the simulation activities needs.

The second-stage survey was administered in December 2019, at the end of Business English course. The second-stage survey focuses on the effectiveness of the task-based approach in improving international business communicative competence in the Chinese university context and how business English teachers could improve task-based approach in business English teaching. There are eight rating and open-ended questions. The questions were adapted from Nunan (2011, p.149), Willis and Willis (2007, p.173), Xie (2016, p.249) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p.142). The questions were related to participants’ self-assessment of learning outcomes, their favorite sessions, the effectiveness of task-based teaching approach and the teaching materials, their suggestions for course improvement and post-course practice as well as the personal learning gains.

The data collection process followed the ethical principles of second language research (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2011, p. 80). Prior to the administration of the surveys, the participants’ consent was obtained and they were assured that the study would benefit business English teaching for better learning outcomes. In order to protect the privacy of the organization and the participants, pseudonyms were used. The survey instruments were initially written in English, which was later translated into Chinese by the researcher. Another senior Chinese researcher was invited to read and edit the survey items, to ensure the coherence and accuracy of the survey language. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2011, p. 119) adopted the similar approach in administering survey in Japanese, translated from English. Most of the survey questions have been used and generated significant results in prior studies. This ensured the reliability and validity of the survey instruments.

Participants

For this study, participants from the English language and literature undergraduate program of a public top discipline university in the east of China were invited to participate. There are 145 participants, who are English-major students, enrolling in Business English courses from September 2019 to December 2019. The selection of participants was based on convenience sampling, as the researcher was also the teacher for the Business English courses. Their average age was 19 years old. The age range was from 18 to 21 years old. There were 14 male participants (9.7%) and 131 female participants (90.3%). Of the total number, 144 participants (99.3%) were in their second year and one participant was in her third-year study. This group of participants were typical of Chinese learners in the higher education institutional context.

For business English levels, 139 participants (95.9%) considered themselves as beginners. Four participants (2.8%) considered themselves as high beginners and two participants (1.4%) considered themselves as low intermediate learners.

For participants’ previous English test scores, over 59% have passed College English Band-4 test. Over 2.7% have passed College English Band-6. Two participants have also taken the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), with the score ranging from 6 to 6.5. One of the advanced learners have also passed intermediate interpretation test.

For participants’ motivations to study business English, over 42% hoped to learn business knowledge and understand the business English as a discipline. More than 26% mentioned preparing for job hunting and career after graduation. More than 22% hoped to improve their
business English level, especially business English communicative competence. More than 8% mentioned the preparation for Business English Certificate test, for both vantage and higher levels. Other motivations included personal interest (4.8%) in business English and earning course credit (5.5%).

**Data Analysis**

A content analysis was conducted on all the responses. For the rating questions, the means and standard deviations were calculated and summarized in Figures 3, 12 and 13. For the open-ended questions, the participants’ responses were written in Chinese or English. For Chinese responses, they were translated into English by the researcher. The researcher then carefully analyzed the responses and grouped them by themes. The frequency of the themes was calculated and summarized in Figures 4–11, 14–17. The percentages of participants for the themes were also calculated and provided in the text explanation of the figures. Then under different themes, participants’ best quotes (Guest et al., 2012) were selected to provide more in-depth information to ultimately answer the research questions.

**Results**

*Business english communication learning needs of english-major undergraduates in the Chinese university context*

The participants self-assessed their business English skills in a rating scale of 0–3, where 0 is the lowest level while 3 is the highest level. The means of business English reading, writing, speaking, listening, translation and interpreting skills are shown in Figure 3. Business English reading skills had the highest mean of over 1.22 and the standard deviation was over 0.6. Business translation and interpreting skills had the lowest mean of over 0.72, with the standard deviation at over 0.53. The means of business English writing, speaking and listening skills ranged from over 0.79, 0.86 to 0.88, with the standard deviation at over 0.59, 0.53 to 0.55. It can be found that these participants were self-perceived as having higher levels of business English input skills of reading and listening and lower levels of business English output skills of writing, speaking, translation and interpreting.

![Means of self-assessed business English skills](image)

*Figure 3. Means of self-assessment results for business English skills.*
To respond to the questions about whether the participants were confident in using English in the workplaces, more than 94% of the participants said they were not confident as they were new in business English languages, particularly the business context. Chen mentioned “not so much confidence. Because I’m not sure if I can work under pressure in that case.” Jiang mentioned “she did not have contact with business English before and can only have very simple communication” (Translation). Xu mentioned “she had limited knowledge and practical experiences. She did not dare to communicate” (Translation). More than 5.5% of the participants mentioned they had limited and some degree of confidence in using English in the business contexts. Xuan mentioned that “he was OK and can ensure communication with partners without barriers” (Translation). Zhang mentioned he can have “basic communication without referring to disciplines” (Translation). Zheng indicated that her degree of confidence was 5 out of 10 points. She did not understand the language meanings in business contexts. She did not understand business and even the meanings in Chinese.

For the prior English learning experiences, more than 87% participants had no business English learning experiences. More than 12% of the participants only had limited experiences in business English learning. These prior learning experiences included listening practices, self-study, reading business and economic news articles, internship in foreign trade companies, and memorizing economic vocabulary etc.

Participants’ most needed reading types are summarized in Figure 4. More than 39% of the participants most needed reading journal articles. More than 23% of the participants most needed reading English contracts. 20% of the participants needed reading trade correspondence the most. Other reading types mentioned included newspapers (15.8%), magazines (including English magazines such as The Economist) (13.7%), online industrial report (13.1%), English novels (7.5%) and advertisements (2%). Two participants mentioned the needs to read business terms.

Participants’ most needed writing types are shown in Figure 5. More than 31% of participants mentioned business Emails were the most important for learning, which was the largest group. More than 28% of participants mentioned business reports and more than 26% most needed to learn to write business letters. Other important writing types that were mentioned included business documents (20%), business meeting notes (17.9%), business contracts (17.2%), press releases (13.1%), and business memos (11.7%), which were all over 10% of the English major participants. More than 2% of the participants also mentioned the needs to learn sentence writing and the writing formats. Two participants mentioned the needs to learn professional terms. One
participant mentioned case analysis and another one mentioned the need to learn to write introductory essays.

For the people English major participants needed to communicate with in English, more than 42% of participants most needed to communicate with foreigners in English, which included foreign students and expatriate teachers. More than 28% of the participants most needed to communicate with native speakers, particularly from English speaking countries. Participants also needed to communicate with business executives including colleagues in the workplaces (6.2%), friends and general public (8.2%) as well as the course teachers (6.8%). Three participants mentioned the needs to communicate with professionals in English. One participant each also mentioned British Parliamentary debate trainer, interviewers and pupils respectively.

Oral business communication skills English major participants most needed to learn are shown in Figure 6. More than 55% of participants most needed to learn business socializing, which had the highest frequency. More than 31% of the participants most needed to learn business conversation/meetings. More than 21% of the participants most needed to learn business presentation. More than 14% of the participants also needed to learn business negotiation. Other needs included business telephoning (8.2%), improving oral expressions and fluency (3.4%) and academic communication in English (0.6%).

Participants’ most needed business English listening skills are shown in Figure 7. More than 50% of the participants most needed to improve listening skills for business news broadcast. More than 34% of the participants most needed to improve skills for business English listening materials. More than 18.6% mentioned business videos. More than 15.8% mentioned business radio programs. More than 4.8% mentioned some basic English skills, such as note-taking and intensive listening skills.

For English major participants’ favorite business English learning resources, more than 27% of the participants mentioned the magazines and newspapers, which was the largest group. China Daily and The Economist were frequently mentioned. More than 15% of the participants also mentioned online and public media resources. These included radios and websites of western media such as CNN, BBC and VOA. More than 14.4% of the participants mentioned videos, which included the TED talks. More than 11% of the participants said they often read news reports. More than 6% of the participants mentioned the value of textbooks as the learning resources, which included the business English course book and Business English Certificate test oral resource handbook.
English major participants’ preferred corporate and business cases are summarized in Figure 8. More than 29% of the participants mentioned cases about Chinese global technology companies such as Huawei, NetEase, Baidu and Tencent. More than 17.9% of the participants mentioned the global technology companies, such as Apple, Microsoft and Facebook. More than 13.7% of the participants preferred E-commerce businesses, particularly Alibaba. More than 10% of the participants preferred fashion and cosmetic companies, including LV and L’ORÉAL. Qian had the following comment:

Though the fashion companies had higher prices and may not be value for money, people still pursue them. (Qian, Translation)

More than 7% of the participants preferred cases about food companies, including Coca-Cola, KFC, McDonald’s and Kraft. More than 5.5% of the participants mentioned sport good cases, such as Nike, adidas and Puma. More than 4.8% of the participants mentioned banking and financial
services companies, such as Goldman Sachs and the Big Four companies. More than 2% of the participants mentioned the international trade cases, such as “how trade companies sort trade disputes and conflicts and how they solve them” (Xiang, Translation). Another more than 2% of participants preferred cases about the famous multinational companies, which are “familiar and typical cases” (Xu, Translation). Other cases mentioned included media, entertainment and public relations (2.7%), chemical companies (Unilever) (1.3%), retailing (Boots) (1.3%), negotiation and meeting (2%), telecommunication (1.3%) and real estate (0.6%).

English major participants’ most needed business knowledge categories are shown in Figure 9. More than 22% of the participants hoped to learn more about business functions including marketing and recruitment, economic and business knowledge. Chu had the following comment:

When to make strategic changes, how to adapt to it and the required talents and professional qualities. (Chu, Translation)

More than 21% of the participants hoped to learn more business language knowledge, including the vocabulary and workplace language use. Shen had the following comment:

The use of business English, how to learn it and how to do self-study after the course ends. (Shen, Translation)

More than 15.8% of the participants hoped to learn the business communication skills and business presentation, as well as business meetings and negotiations. More than 8.9% of the participants hoped to learn corporate culture. More than 8.2% of the participants hoped to learn about business etiquette, which was particularly needed “in cross cultural communication and in English-speaking countries” (Zhan, Translation). More than 7.5% of the participants mentioned the need to learn international trade knowledge. Zhou had the following comment:

The differences in trade between China and foreign countries. The influence of culture on business. The differences of domestic trade and international trade. Trade conflict. (Zhou, Translation)

Other business knowledge areas mentioned included business writing (5.5%), business translation (2%), corporate information including multinationals (2.7%) and BEC test information (0.6%).
English major participants’ learning needs of language knowledge are shown in Figure 10. More than 51% of the participants reported the needs of learning professional terms and syntax. Chu further explained it as “different names of multinational companies, business terms and workplace communication skills” (Translation). Zhan further added “professional words for English socialization and email exchanges” (Translation). More than 24% of the participants mentioned the business English speaking and socializing needs. These included the needs for cultivating “English negotiation and interaction abilities” (Chang, Translation). More than 10% of participants mentioned the needs of leaning business English writing, which included English contract, meeting minutes and correspondence. Another more than 10% of the participants mentioned the needs of learning business English translation and interpretation, which also included the ability of “spontaneous response in business English interpretation” (Shen, Translation). More than 6.8% of the participants mentioned the needs to learn business English listening and more than 6.2% mentioned the needs to learn business English reading, which included “business English articles and newspaper” (Zhuang, Translation). One participant mentioned the needs to learn psycholinguistics and another one mentioned the needs to learn business meeting language, which included “meeting presentation and summary” (Huang, Translation).

English major participants’ needs of simulation teaching tasks to bridge the classrooms with business world are shown in Figure 11. More than 33% of the participants mentioned the needs of business negotiation tasks. More than 22% of the participants mentioned the needs of business meeting simulation, which could show “how business English learners could play different roles” (Shan, Translation). More than 10% of the participants mentioned the needs of having simulations of employment interview, which could include “interview with HR people and communication processes” (Zhu, Translation). More than 7.5% of the participants mentioned the needs for business socializing. More than 2% of the participants hoped to have simulation relevant to international trade. Zhan had the following comment:

It could be simulating the import and export business activities. It is better to have to learn the real contract. (Yu, Translation).

Another more than 2% of the participants respectively indicated the needs of press conferences, business presentation and connecting to workplaces. The following comments were made by the participants:

How to apologize for the mistakes in the business activities and how to write apology texts. (Yue, Translation)
To simulate business cooperation and business analysis and decision-making process.

More than 2.7% of the participants mentioned the needs of learning business telephoning skills. Two participants mentioned business translation. One participant mentioned visiting local companies and another one recommended business case discussion.

The design and implementation of task-based approach in business English courses based on learner needs

Based on the learner needs, the business English teacher has selected relevant business English reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks. The business English teaching mainly focused on the topics of companies, leadership, finance, recruitment, marketing and pay. The task-based teaching activities included latest news updates, topic-based reading, business knowledge introductions, making presentations, topic-based oral discussion, career skills, topic-based listening, cultural knowledge as well as case discussion and case-based group writing. The business and corporate cases were embedded in the task-based teaching activities, which included information about both Chinese and global companies, such as Microsoft, Goldman Sachs, P&G, HP, Boots, Aviva, Nike and Huawei. The teaching materials were mostly based on the course book *Intelligent Business 1* (Trappe & Wang, 2018).

The task-based approach implementation process followed the steps in Figure 1. Through needs analysis, the intended outcomes were specified by the participants. The time for each task would take 15–20 minutes. Similar tasks would be adopted centering on different topics. During in-task stage, the time arrangement was considered appropriate. For the groups for the case study tasks, each group consisted of 10 members. After several task-based group activities, a few participants have indicated the preferences for smaller groups. For post-task learner report, participants suggested the learning outcomes and their perceptions of teaching effectiveness in the following result sections. Repetitive tasks and post-course practice were suggested by the participants. Their personal learning gains including a better understanding of business English as a research field were also reported in the following result sections.

![Frequency of learning needs of language knowledge](image-url)

**Figure 10.** English major participants’ learning needs of language knowledge.
Effectiveness of task-based approach in developing international business communicative competence in the Chinese university context

English major participants’ perceived learning outcomes are shown in Figure 12. Solving language problems by consulting dictionaries and online resources had the highest mean of over 2.7 out of 3. The standard deviation was 0.5085. The means of motivation of continuous learning after the course, knowledge increase in global and Chinese companies, confidence of using English in the business context, knowledge increase in business theories, cooperation in case study group work, and the abilities of producing business English documents all had means over 2 out of 3. The standard deviation ranged from 0.5 to 0.7. Business research skill improvement also had the mean over 1.9 out of 3. The standard deviation was 0.6576. Means of other learning outcomes were under 1.8 out of 3 while all over 1. It can be seen that the most important learning outcomes were relevant to improvement in motivation, strategies of learning, confidence, cooperation in group work and business knowledge which includes both theories and corporate information. It implies that the learning outcomes were in line with the initial business English learner motivation and satisfied the learning needs.

The means of English major participants’ improved competence are shown in Figure 13. Learner autonomy had the highest mean of over 2.26. The standard deviation was 0.6398. Business English language use and international business writing ability also had the means of over 1.9, with the standard deviation of above 0.6. Intercultural business communicative competence and business practice had the means less than 1.8, with the standard deviation at around 0.6. This part of the results was consistent with the perceived business English learning outcomes, which demonstrated the learners’ improvement in independent learning.

More than 82.7% of the English major participants considered the task-based teaching activities in business English courses to be effective and satisfactory. They have gained in the aspects of business English vocabulary, business knowledge and culture, corporate cases, and business English writing skills. These improvements were also in line with participants’ initial motivations and needs of improving business English language use. Participants had the following related comments:

To some extent, I have some understanding of business culture and learnt more business vocabulary. (Sheng, Translation)
I have obtained some basic business English knowledge, which broadened my horizon and laid good foundation for future business work. (Xiang, Translation)

Business presentation helped me to understand business knowledge. The group discussion which includes communication of ideas and summary was very meaningful. (Gu, Translation)

I have learnt some business terms, how to write emails and meeting minutes. I have also learnt some global and Chinese company information. I have improved my business reading skills. (Li, Translation)

Eighty percent of the participants considered the teaching materials, particularly the coursebook as effective in achieving the learning outcome of developing communicative competence. The participants reported having gained extensive knowledge in business vocabulary, latest business news, corporate information and the soft skills in group cooperation and case analysis. Participants had the following comments:

The case analysis part has enabled me to flexibly apply the business knowledge. The discussion and exercises have improve my business English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. (Shen, Translation)

The business news part, and the six sections in every unit, i.e. Reading, Grammar, Listening, Career skills, Culture at work and Dilemma are very targeted to improve my learning outcomes. (Shi, Translation)

The assignments and the group tasks have developed my cooperation abilities. (Bu, Translation)

The personal and specific learning gains of English major participants were reported in Figure 14. More than 49% of the participants indicated their gains in business knowledge and corporate information, which was consistent with the previous findings. These included understandings about “business processes, business conversation, and leadership, to get in touch with the business field” (Ding, Translation). This would also include an “enhanced understanding about companies in China and globally” (Liu, Translation). More than 48% of the participants had gains in business English reading, writing, speaking and listening skills as well as overall competence. This included the abilities to “write email and job application letters” (Chu,
Translation). This also includes “the abilities to communicate with business people” (Shao, Translation). Shen had the following detailed explanation:

I have improvement in business English listening, reading, writing, particularly speaking. Through group discussion, and some daily oral practice, my oral communication becomes more fluent. Through individual writing task, I have a better understanding about the formats of business writing with various types. (Shen, Translation)

More than 44% of the participants reported particular gains in business vocabulary and grammar. For example, Zhang mentioned “she understood the business English and how to communicate in the business contexts. Many words in business contexts had different meanings in the general context. She has learnt a lot” (Translation). More than 15% of the participants had improved their understandings about business English and the research abilities. Zhan said “I have gained a lot knowledge about Business English, such as terminology, recruitment information and different kinds of companies”. More than 13% of the participants mentioned the gains in case analysis and group work abilities, particularly “group cooperation, labor division and team work” (Xia, Translation). More than 8% of the participants indicated the gains in business, global thinking and independent learning abilities. More than 6% of the participants indicated the increase in confidence and interest in business English as a learning subject. This may be achieved through the case study activities which boosted the participants’ confidence to solve work related problems in the future world of work” (Shi, Translation). Other gains included career preparation (1.3%), BEC test preparation (2.06%) and business presentation skills (1.3%). It can be summarized that participants’ reported actual improvements in language and business knowledge as well as other abilities met their initial learning needs and motivations.

How to improve task-based approach in business english teaching in the Chinese university context

English major participants’ favorite sessions in task-based business English teaching are shown in Figure 15. More than 44% of the participants mentioned their favorite sessions in business topics such as companies, leadership, brand, recruitment, marketing and leadership as well as corporate
information. For example, Lin mentioned in her comment for the unit of “recruitment, this unit taught her how to write a resume and the procedure of an interview”. Gu had the similar comment “I prefer recruitment and finance. The former chapter tells me how a company hires employees. The latter chapter tells us some scandals about companies”. Zhou mentioned that “recruitment and finance units were very concrete and practical” (Translation). Gao mentioned the “introduction to Chinese and international companies, particularly related to market information. The content was more interesting and useful while reading the economic journals” (Translation).

More than 26.8% of the participants mentioned that case analysis and group discussion were their favorite sessions, as “analyzing the business cases can broaden their international perspective” (Zheng, Translation). Zhu mentioned that the “group case analysis activities can deepen their understanding about knowledge” (Translation). Sheng has mentioned that “the group discussion about the perfume brand marketing campaign was their favorite session” (Translation).

More than 17.2% of the participants mentioned the news reading at the beginning of the class as their favorite part of the class. Shi mentioned “she can get new business information through the news reading” (Translation). Other favorite sessions included business English writing (8.9%), business English reading (6.8%), presentation activities (4.8%), oral English activities (4.1%) such as business negotiation and oral discussion, after-class assignment (2.7%), professional vocabulary (2.7%) and business English listening (2.7%).

The English major participants’ suggestions for improvement of task-based approach in business English teaching are described in Figure 16. More than 17% of the participants suggested integrating the business knowledge framework. For example Lv “hoped the teaching could focus on the business reading and writing, while analyzing the business cases. The long business reading should be guided by background information” (Translation).

More than 13% of the participants hoped to have more detailed instructions on vocabulary, writing, listening and BEC test preparation. For example, Lin hoped to “have some standard answers and the writing templates” (Translation). Mu also hoped “the teacher could further explain the writing tasks, particularly the writing format” (Translation). Yang hoped to “organize a seminar on how to prepare business writing documents” (Translation). Ma mentioned as the “students’ business knowledge was not solid, they needed to understand the true meanings of business terms” (Translation).
More than 10% of the participants hoped to have more practice and simulation activities. This could include “holding business meeting in English, conversation and negotiation activities” (Xue, Translation). Yu also mentioned “business telephoning” (Translation). Zhuo suggested a focus on the application of business English to practical life (Translation).

More than 6.2% of the participants hoped to organize more oral communication activities, including answering questions and interaction with the teacher. More than 4.8% of the participants hoped to increase business cases and hot topics, as it can “raise students’ interests” (Tu, Translation). Shi hoped to integrate teacher’s personal work experiences and focus on related corporate cases (Translation).

More than 3.4% of the participants hoped to use more multimodal resources, particularly videos (Xu) and “documentaries, to introduce the corporate and business environment” (Zhao, Translation).

Two participants suggested that the teaching methodology should be innovated, “to increase students’ interests and understanding of the knowledge” (Jiang, Translation). 0.68% of the participants mentioned increasing self-learning, business news, and connecting with the world of business.

English major participants’ suggestions for post-course practice are shown in Figure 17. More than 32% of the participants suggested organizing business professionals’ lectures, so that “they could have a clearer understanding about business English learning and roles” (Bian, Translation). Yan suggested having “more lectures such as the sharing sessions by large company staff” (Translation). Sun suggested that “the lectures could be based on practical experience rather than book knowledge” (Translation).

More than 25% of the participants suggested having internship opportunities could be useful. Peng explained that “having some practice and internship could enable the flexible use of business English” (Translation). Xu suggested “more chances into real-working environment, more communication with people who have been successful in this field”. Qian suggested “having an internship with 4–5 students, with guidance could be helpful” (Translation). Ma suggested “having internship could enable the use of knowledge and improvement of business competence” (Translation). Wang hoped to “share some business English job information and share more internship advertisements” (Translation). Cao mentioned “to learn in the real practice could enhance students’ knowledge digestion. This could transform the course information into real company practice to help better understanding” (Translation). This could also include the needs “for information of career planning and CV preparation” (Sha, Translation).
More than 12% of the participants indicated more business simulation and practice. This could include “business meeting and negotiation, to apply the information into practice to enhance business English level” (Fu, Translation). Cheng mentioned to simulate the business scenarios could increase understanding (Translation).

More than 5.5% of the participants mentioned BEC exam preparation lectures. More than 2.7% hoped to organize more company visits, which could “enable the application the knowledge into real life” (Zhan, Translation). More than 2% of the participants hoped to organize topic-based seminars, “around the business and trade conditions” (Fei, Translation). Also more than 2% of the participants hoped to introduce case companies, so that “the knowledge could connect to reality” (Dai, Translation).

Other suggested post-course practices included organizing oral communication activities (2%), watching business videos (1.3%), attending business conference (0.6%), business courses (0.6%) and organizing competitions (0.6%).

**Discussion**

**The business English communication learning needs of english major undergraduates in the Chinese university context**

The English major participants self-assessed their business English skills in the beginning of the course. Business reading skills had the highest mean while business translation and interpretation had the lowest mean. The means of input skills of listening and reading were higher than output skills of writing, speaking, translation and interpreting. More than 90% English major participants were not confident about using English in the workplace at the beginning of the study. More than 85% of participants had no prior business English learning experiences. For reading, English major participants most needed to read journal articles. For writing, they most needed to learn to write business Emails. For oral communication, they most needed to communicate with foreigners in English. They most needed to learn business socializing. For listening, they most needed to learn to listen to business news broadcast. They most liked to read magazines and newspapers, such as *China Daily* and *The Economist*. For business and corporate cases, they most liked the Chinese technology companies’ cases, including Huawei as a typical example. They most needed to learn knowledge about business...
functions, such as recruitment and marketing. For language, they most needed to learn professional terms and syntax. For simulation teaching, they recommended business negotiation tasks. According to Frendo (2005), these are typical of business English curriculum components. Moreover, this study also indicates that for this group of English major participants, the teacher should focus more on output skills, such as speaking, translation and interpreting than input skills. For the successful design and implementation of task-based approach, Nunan (2011, p.15) indicates that conducting needs analysis to understand learners’ perceptions is vital. Learner’s perceptions may influence the task implementation process and the expected learning outcomes. This thorough analysis of the learner needs is also complying with the principles of learner-centeredness, which is significant for the implementation of task-based approach.

The Effectiveness of task-based teaching approach in developing international business communicative competence in the Chinese university context

Based on the learner needs gathered at the beginning of the course, the task-based approach was designed and implemented in business English courses, based on the steps in Figure 1. Then at the end of the course, the effectiveness of the task-based teaching approach was investigated. More than 82% of the participants considered the teaching activities as effective. Eighty percent of the participants considered the teaching materials as effective. For self-assessed learning outcomes, the most important learning outcomes were relevant to improvement in motivation, strategies of learning, confidence, cooperation in group work and business knowledge. For improved competence, learner autonomy had the highest mean. Participants’ greatest learning gains were in business knowledge and corporate information. It can be seen that in this study, the investigation of the effectiveness of task-based teaching approach and learning outcomes is based on learners’ evaluation and self-assessment. This approach has been confirmed in Nunan (2011, p.149). While the learner evaluation and self-assessment are becoming popular, this can facilitate the development of “learner autonomy and the learning processes”. Ellis (2012, p.325) also indicates that such task-based pedagogical evaluation results are “student and learning-based”, which look at learners’ attitude changes, personal growth and other language development etc.
How business English teachers improve task-based approach in business English teaching in the Chinese university context

English major participants’ favorite sessions were in business topics, including recruitment, marketing, leadership and finance. They also preferred case analysis and group discussion, as well as news reading. English major participants’ suggestions for improving the task-based approach in business English teaching included integrating the business knowledge framework, more instructions on vocabulary, writing, listening and BEC test preparation, more practice and simulation activities, more oral communication activities, more multimodal resources (particularly videos) and the innovation in teaching methodology. Their suggestions for post-course practice included organizing business professionals’ lectures, internships, business simulation and practice, BEC exam preparation lectures etc. Ellis and Johnson (2002, p.39) indicate that for pre-experience learners such as the English major participants for this study, “support materials such as videos and texts” are important. The results of the study seemed to expand the scope of support materials and activities. According to Ellis (2012, p.321), the adoption and improvement of task-based approach requires an innovationist perspective. This could be based on learners’ experiences and responses, which could facilitate the adaption of task-based approach to create better learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study applies task-based approach in business English teaching. The study is based on the implementation model (Figure 1) and evaluation model (Figure 2) of using task-based approach in university business English courses. The results showed that the participants had greater needs of learning output skills of speaking, translation and interpreting than input skills of reading and listening. Most of them were not confident about using English in the workplace and had limited prior business English learning experiences. They had specific needs in developing business English reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. They preferred media resources for learning and Chinese technology company cases. They hoped to learn business function knowledge and professional terms and syntax. For simulation tasks, they most hoped to have business negotiation. The majority of the participants considered the task-based teaching activities and materials as effective. The most important learning outcomes were relevant to improvement in motivation, strategies of learning, confidence, cooperation in group work and business knowledge. Learner autonomy was the greatest improved competence. Business knowledge and corporate information were the most mentioned learning gains. English major participants most favored the sessions centering on business topics. For improving task-based approach, they have suggested integrating the business knowledge framework, more instructions on language knowledge and BEC exam preparation, more practice and simulation, oral communication, multimedia resources and pedagogical innovation. For post-course practice, the participants suggested professional lectures, internship, simulation and BEC exam preparation.

The results of the study can refine task-based approach in business English teaching, which ultimately facilitate multiple learning outcomes. The results of the study may inform university business English course design and implementation, which have important implications for business English teaching practice in China and different cultures. It is also valuable for the establishment of business English national benchmarks and policymaking. The results of the study can help to achieve the learning outcomes of business English communicative competence and all-rounded practice. Though the study has been conducted with only one group of English major students, the research process and experiences can be applied in future research. Future research should further focus on pedagogical innovations in the task-based approach and the design of suitable and effective teaching materials.
Appendices

Appendix A

Adapted from Nunan (2011, p.120), Nunan (1988, p.14)

Survey on Task-based Language Teaching Needs Analysis

1. Gender __________ Age __________ Major __________ Grade __________
2. Please describe your business English level

Beginner  High beginner  Lower intermediate  Intermediate  High Intermediate  Advanced  Native level

3. Please write your previous English test score (IELTS, TOEFL, BEC, TEM-4, CET-4/6)
4. What’s your motivation for taking the course?
5. How confident are you with using English in the real world business context? Why?
6. Please explain your prior experiences with learning English for the real world business context.
7. 1. Reading:

What are the most important for you to learn now for reading: ____________________________
newspapers magazines trade correspondence advertisements journal articles online industrial reports English novels English contracts.

2. Writing:
Which is the most important for you to learn now for writing: ____________________________
business letters business documents business contracts business Emails business meeting notes business memos business reports press releases.

3. Listening and speaking:

Who is it most important for you to learn to speak with now?
Which speaking skill is the most important for you to learn now?
business conversation/meeting business presentation business negotiation business socializing business telephoning.
Which listening skill is the most important for you to learn now?
business videos business English listening materials business news broadcast business radio programs.

8. What are your favorite business English learning materials and resources?
9. What is your favorite company/business case that you hope the course can focus on?
10. Please rate your business English reading, writing, speaking, listening, translation and interpreting skills in a rating scale, (0 is the lowest level, 3 is the highest level, please circle)
11. Please suggest the business knowledge you expect to learn in the course.
12. Please suggest the linguistic knowledge you expect to acquire in the course.
13. Please suggest teaching tasks to connect with the real world business context.

**Appendix B**

Adapted from Nunan (2011, p.149), Willis and Willis (2007, p.173), Xie (2016, p.249) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p.142)

**Survey on Task-based Language Curriculum Assessment**

1. Please circle the number in the following table. (0 is the lowest, 3 is the highest)

|                          | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Business English reading skills |   |   |   |   |
| Business English writing skills |   |   |   |   |
| Business English speaking skills |   |   |   |   |
| Business English listening skills |   |   |   |   |
| Business English translation and interpreting skills |   |   |   |   |

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Self-Assessment

1. I have cooperated in case study group work. 0 1 2 3
2. I can solve my language problems by consulting dictionary and online resources. 0 1 2 3
3. I can communicate in English in the business context. 0 1 2 3
4. I can produce business English writing documents, such as email, letter, report, memo and action minutes. 0 1 2 3
5. I have reached a high level of proficiency in business English reading. 0 1 2 3
6. I have reached a high level of proficiency in business English writing. 0 1 2 3
7. I have reached a high level of proficiency in business English listening. 0 1 2 3
8. I have reached a high level of proficiency in business English speaking. 0 1 2 3
9. I am able to cope better in the business area that I plan to pursue. 0 1 2 3
10. I have developed strategies for life-long learning and I am a more independent learner. 0 1 2 3
11. I can carry out business telephoning in English better. 0 1 2 3
12. I can make business English presentation better. 0 1 2 3
13. I can analyze business cases in English better. 0 1 2 3
14. I can hold business English meetings better. 0 1 2 3
15. I can have business conversations in English better. 0 1 2 3
16. I can have business socialization better. 0 1 2 3
17. I can make business negotiations better. 0 1 2 3
18. I have improved my business research skills. 0 1 2 3
19. I have increased knowledge in business theories. 0 1 2 3
20. I have increased knowledge in both global and Chinese companies. 0 1 2 3
21. I am more confident when I use English in the business context. 0 1 2 3
22. I am more motivated to continue learning independently after the course. 0 1 2 3
2. Which of the following competence have you improved? (0 is the lowest level, 3 is the highest level, please circle).

| Competence                                      | Level |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Intercultural business communicative competence | 0 1 2 3 |
| Business practice                               | 0 1 2 3 |
| Business English language use                    | 0 1 2 3 |
| Learner autonomy                                | 0 1 2 3 |
| Intercultural communicative competence          | 0 1 2 3 |
| International business writing ability          | 0 1 2 3 |

3. Write down two things you enjoyed about the lesson.
4. How effective are the teaching activities? Can they help to obtain the intended learning outcomes?
5. Are the teaching materials, such as coursebook, handouts effective to obtain the intended learning outcomes?
6. What improvements would you suggest for repeat courses?
7. What would you suggest for follow-up to this course? (such as internship or professional lectures)
8. Please list the outcomes of the course for you personally.

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