Insights from a Survey into Chinese University Graduates' Perceptions Toward University-Level English Courses

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Abstract

Needs analysis guides course and curriculum design. In addition to mandatory courses, it is necessary for intensive language schools and institutes. Recent university graduates in China are increasingly enrolling in language training at public and private language schools to hone their communication abilities. On the other hand, English courses as the workplace prerequisites for Chinese university graduates have been scientifically researched and found to be exceedingly rare. The research's fundamental premise serves that there is a substantial link between the demands of Chinese recent graduates and university English course design. The aim of this research is to assess the goals, needs, and perceived utility of university English courses among recent on-the-job Chinese graduates over an eight-month period. After evaluating the questionnaire and interview replies, it was concluded that these Chinese young graduates in China had similar learning demands, with listening and speaking skills taking primacy. Additionally, various characteristics were discovered that show why an English course designed for future workplace purposes is advantageous to university students. The results are examined in terms of their pedagogical importance for curriculum creation and classroom practice in English courses at the university.

Keywords: Chinese graduates, university English course, needs analysis, course development

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

For decades, English's dominance as the global language of communication has been undeniable. English language education's impact is growing rapidly as a result of expanding internationalization and globalization (Glinkowska-Krauze et al., 2020). Additionally, English has established itself as the global language of technology and business, despite the fact that English is a topic-specific talent that demands a breadth of subject knowledge (Zentz, 2016). Krashen (2021) noted a significant "English fever" among students across Asia, notably in China, who continue their English studies beyond the obligations of compulsory schooling (Wang, 2020). In actuality, comprehension of the target situation's requirements is crucial for successful and effective English communication. Students' everyday English communication skills are often high as a result of the demand for English. By completing conventional English sessions, students increase their communication abilities. However, following their exit from universities into the labor market, they will need career-oriented English skills to meet employer expectations (Holmes, 2019; Chan, 2019; Aldohon, 2014). Thus, ESP is critical for English language learners and students entering the job market (Tristez Glomo-Narzoles et al., 2021; Ma, 2015). Students should learn as much as they can about their goal situation before they work on their English skills to meet the needs of target companies, program managers, or personnel directors.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In addition, Chinese returning graduates, according to Tran et al. (2021), lack the specialized competence, flexibility, and language abilities required for work in Chinese firms. Possessing both domestic and foreign views via education abroad may be seen as a competitive advantage in China's domestic labor market. Chinese students must strengthen their foreign language skills in order to communicate more effectively with global networks while still maintaining local, social, and economic ties while studying abroad (Zhou, 2020; Singh & Singh, 2017). While studying abroad often exposes Chinese graduates to international practices and viewpoints, whether such exposure and foreign language proficiency are beneficial also depends on the business demands and, in certain cases, the

business model of organizations. In recent years, China's Ministry of Education has pushed to establish university-affiliated extension education institutions in the hope of instilling this virtue in the country's graduates (He, 2020; Xie, 2016). Due to the fact that English is becoming a required course of study at these institutions, many recent graduates decide to take English courses for a variety of reasons. In contrast to obligatory university students, they choose to learn English on their own time, generally after work, and are highly motivated (Jeong, 2021). They take English classes for a variety of reasons, including professional advancement, travel, and self-actualization (Holmes, 2019). Actually, Chinese graduates' learning requirements and course design have received little attention in China.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Based on our understanding, most university-affiliated language centers' curricula are established based on instructors' subjective judgments of what learners desire or what is fashionable (Nickerson, 2017; Woodrow, 2017; Xie, 2016). That is to say, there is a huge disparity between instructor expectations and student desires and options in teacher-manipulated courses. As a result, it is believed and suggested that more in-depth research of EFL learners' perspectives on learning, such as their learning requirements and aspirations, warrants careful attention when developing learners-appropriate courses (Wanchid, 2019; Ma, 2015). Graduates' learning requirements, aims, and preferences for learning will remain theoretical in the absence of an experimental investigation.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

To better understand the goals and objectives of EFL graduates in China, we first looked at their motivations for studying. Plus, since students prefer learning that has real-world applicability, we looked into what makes an English course useful from their viewpoint. This study addresses two research questions:

1) What are Chinese graduates' objectives of post-job English study?

2) What are Chinese graduates' perceptions of the value and usefulness of university English courses?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Notion of Needs Analysis

Needs analysis can be referred to as a systematic and continuing process of eliciting data about students' needs and preferences, assessing the data, and choosing courses based on the data's interpretation (Kováiková, 2015; Sieglová, 2019). Needs include but are not limited to wishes, demands, expectations, justifications, deficits, constraints, and requirements (Davis, 2021; Harland, 2020). That is to say, language learners are motivated by their own individual circumstances. Schuler et al. (2019) claimed that the learning demands of immigrant learners may involve survival and self-sufficiency. It is vital to develop educational programs and curricula that are sensitive to the needs of prospective students, particularly for post-graduate employment. Also, the objective of the needs analysis is to ascertain the teaching-learning requirements for the target language in order to create an effective curriculum (Rose & Sookraj, 2015; Rashidi & Kehtarfard, 2014). When evaluating learners' special needs, we come across the word "need analysis," which had a different meaning in the past than it has now. The needs analysis was conducted in the early phases of ESP (1960s and early 1970s) to ascertain students' communication requirements and approaches for accomplishing certain instructional goals (Dan & Dan, 2018; Liu, 2015). Nowadays, the activities associated with needs analysis vary significantly since the purpose of requirements analysis is to elicit information about students' needs (Otilia, 2015).

2.2 Objective of Needs Analysis

With regards to the purpose of needs analysis, it is universally accepted that doing one helps both teachers and students. To begin with, needs assessment may aid language teachers in understanding which talents learners want to improve and which obstacles they experience. Richards (2005) asserts that needs analysis serves various purposes: 1) determining which language skills a learner needs to perform a specific role, 2) determining whether an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students, 3) determining which students within a group are most in need of training in specific language skills, 4) determining whether members of a reference group desire a change in direction, and 5) determining whether a gap exists between what students can do and what they need to be able to do. Thus, needs analysis seeks to comprehend learners' requirements for evaluating and adapting the curriculum reciprocally. The flip side is that needs analysis allows students to reflect, recognize their needs, and take ownership and control of their learning (Sieglová, 2019). On the other hand, Rahayu et al. (2017) also contend that needs might include learners' rights, referring to the fact that students will be able to better understand the skills they want to learn and the challenges they face if they are involved in the process of making the curriculum.

2.3 Needs Analysis in ESP Courses

Additionally, ESP courses, a subgenre of English education with several unique characteristics, are frequently offered to learners who already know basic English and want to improve their professional communication skills and abilities (Rahman, 2015). ESP courses focus on the practical application of English rather than mastering grammar and linguistic structures. The main distinction between ESP and EGP is that ESP cannot be taught solely in isolation from the actual language usage context (Rahmawati, 2021; Labetoulle, 2017). Simply stated, the needs analysis should identify the relative relevance of the four English skills. Numerous scholars have stressed the critical nature of doing a requirements analysis while creating ESP methodologies and courses (Tesema & Woldemariam, 2016; Wang, 2012). Analyzing learners' requirements may assist in selecting the appropriate ESP course. The needs analysis technique may assist learners in determining what they currently know, what they are capable of, and what they still need to learn. Thus, a major component of ESP training needs analysis. In other words, requirements analysis identifies and characterizes learners' expectations for an ESP course, particularly what they are expected to do with the foreign language in the target setting and how they may master it most effectively over time. The needs analysis process takes into account both student and employer requirements (Wang, 2015; Kong, 2012).

2.4 Related Studies

Foreign needs analysis theory has lately been utilized to study English teaching reform in China (Xie, 2019; Liu, 2015). Since 2000, 17 prominent foreign-language periodicals have produced empirical investigations, including a total of 58 research publications. English language teaching needs analysis in China might be represented by an authoritative publication and quality papers with the topics, area, content, aim, and research scope being evaluated (Guan, 2016). The research focuses on six types of participants, including teachers, graduates, employers, social residents, and other non-human components (such as teaching materials). Among all the research, there were 9 articles about instructors, 39 pieces about students of all levels, 5 articles about graduates, 7 for employers, 2 for social residents, and 2 for other sorts of instructional materials (Shi et al., 2019; Jiang & Zhang, 2017). Clearly, researchers should focus more on school or university students' needs. Concern for ESL students' needs outside of school is quite low. There are just two articles about social residents' needs. There are very few articles regarding graduate and employer needs. Needs analysis for instructors is very restricted. In reality, information sources for needs analysis should be multifaceted. Policy-oriented requirements analysis must take into consideration a broad variety of needs with reference to language development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Participants

This research included 279 Chinese graduates, comprising of 145 men (N = 145, 52%) and 134 females (N = 134, 48%) who acquired their undergraduate degrees via a Chinese International Program at a Thai university and now live and work in China's northern, central, and southern provinces. Notably, all of these individuals had enrolled in and completed college-level general English courses. They were all educated to a minimum of a high school diploma and ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. Although each participant had a different reason for studying English, everyone was extremely driven to study English after work.

3.2 Research Instruments

To facilitate data triangulation (Alexander, 2020; Flick, 2018), the present research used two primary data gathering methods: a needs analysis survey and a structured interview. The needs analysis survey was adopted to ascertain participants' learning requirements and preferences in terms of university English courses, whilst the structured interview was utilized to get learners' judgments of English courses from feasibility and impracticality perspectives.

3.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 57 participants. They were selected based on their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview after the completion of the needs analysis survey. The researchers devised a set of interview questions in order to grasp a more complete picture of these learners' perceptions of course practicality and impracticality. The first two research questions addressed the course's practicality, while the third and fourth research questions addressed the course's impracticality, as illustrated below.

1) Based on your former university learning experiences, which types of English courses do you believe were the most beneficial and practical?

2) What characteristics do these practical English courses have in common?

3) Based on your former university learning experiences, which types of English courses do you believe were less beneficial and practical?

4) What characteristics do these unsuitable English courses have in common?

Prior to identifying critical components of practical or less practical courses, research questions 1 and 3 were used to extract participants' recollections of previous courses they had attended, followed by research questions 2 and 4. In this research article, we confine our discussion in this paper to the perception of course practicability.

3.3.2 Needs Analysis Questionnaire

Data collection was accomplished via the use of a needs analysis survey. The researchers designed the survey with four key objectives in mind, with the first segment focusing on the participants' biodata. The second part, under "intent and motives for studying English," had nineteen sentences outlining several possible purposes. This section allowed participants to express their personal motivations for learning English via the use of the "Yes" or "No" response. The third section asked participants to indicate their favorite way of learning by checking Yes or No. Additionally, we compiled a listing of English courses offered in adult English programs. In section four, respondents were asked to check the course names that sparked their interest. This article's discussion could be limited to the outcomes of section one.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place from February to September of 2021. One of the researchers first contacted many instructors at numerous target language-training education institutions around China, asking for their cooperation in disseminating the needs analysis survey to their adult learners (Chinese graduates). The respondents' replies were tabulated. Fifty-seven adult learners who expressed an interest in participating were required to engage in individual, 10- to 15-minute interviews. The majority of the data was gathered via a needs analysis survey and internet recording interviews. As is customary in a quantitative approach, this study investigated the data using frequency and percentage analyses. Quantitative analyses were utilized to elicit information about the learners' motivations for learning. And on the other hand, qualitative data from verbatim interview transcriptions revealed important characteristics of practical language courses as perceived by learners. The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to facilitate debate among English instructors and course designers about satisfying the requirements of learners in English courses.

4. Results

4.1 Explanations for Chinese Graduate's Post-Job English Study

In order to respond to research question No. 1, "What are Chinese graduates' objectives for post-job English study?" The analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that virtually all participants prioritized listening and speaking abilities. To begin with, the three statements with the greatest agreement rate were those concerning the development of listening abilities. The respondents desired to improve their listening abilities in order to comprehend English-language television dramas, songs, and films (68.45%), international English radio news (74.34%), N = 206), and business conversation with potential international clients in meetings or workplaces (90.53%). Additionally, speaking abilities were deemed critical. Respondents reported that they were studying English to do business in English (85.79%, N = 245), take phone calls or accept international clients (81.27%, N = 225), and converse with international customers (66.27%, N = 184). Furthermore, approximately 94% of respondents stated that their desire to pass internationally standardized English exams such as the Public English Test System (PETS) (51.27%, N =142), New Oriental Cambridge Business English (BEC) (42.56%, N =117), International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (84.23%, N =234), or Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (73.41%, N =203) motivates them to attend English classes. In comparison, significantly fewer respondents expressed a desire to enhance their knowledge or comprehension of cultural aspects (23.73%, N = 64), vocabulary (41.22%), N = 114), grammar (46.72%), N = 128), reading (38.54%), N = 106), and writing skills (33.82%), N = 92). Less than a third of respondents (25.74%) were motivated to study English solely by personal intention or interest. To ascertain Chinese graduates' evaluations of the university English course in terms of its worth and usefulness, we conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews with fifty-seven Chinese graduates. It was used to answer the second research question, "What do Chinese graduates think about the value and usefulness of university English courses?" This was done by looking at what they said about practical university English courses.

4.2 Perceptions of Chinese Graduates Regarding University English Courses

In order to respond to research question No. 1, "What are Chinese graduates' perceptions of the value and usefulness of university English courses?", the analysis of the questionnaire responses is indicated as below in this

section. For the characteristics of practical university English courses that are fundamental, they may be explained on the basis of (a) remarks on course content, (b) specific comments on competence training, (c) course development, and (d) the lecturer's teaching technique and philosophy. The replies of participants are abridged to present a comprehensive description of their perceptions of a university English course in terms of course value and practicability in each of the four dimensions.

4.2.1 Relevant, Practical, Everyday Life Use and Competency-Based

In general, broad remarks on university English course content refer to a learner's holistic perspective of the course content and do not address individual abilities. Table 1 identifies critical aspects. First, participants said course material should be meaningful, attractive, interesting, and relevant to daily occupations or English for workplace skills. They intended to learn something useful so that they might use English in their everyday lives. The course material also needs to be light but with varied practical information concerning world events in English. Also, they claimed their learning abilities were impaired without interaction or engagement with teachers, which sometimes unsatisfied and disinterested them. Apparently, respondent No. 21 stated that an ideal practical course would cater to students of all competency levels, not only the best. Students should find studying texts enjoyable and connected with specific purposes for everyday life use. In summary, the following table excerpts some frequent typical course aspects from student participants' replies while not discussing features highlighted by a single one.

Table 1. Broad Remarks toward University English Course Content

	Student Participant's (SP's) Response
How, in my view, should a practical and perfect university English course be developed and taught?	
SP 3	*....instruct on a topic that is relevant to our day-to-day lives or teach us anything that we can put to use English in our daily lives*
SP 6	*...adopt materials that are simple and interesting when using, and the materials themselves must be enticing to us to use English*
SP10	*....as opposed to only using a textbook, integrate a diverse variety of learning resources from various sources in the teaching process or lesson plan*
SP17	*...provide a noble purpose along with teacher-student engagement in English*
SP21	*It is vital to even provide knowledge that is adequate for all individuals' English competence levels, skills, or specific core abilities*
SP33	*...offer items that might pique the attention or interests of the students toward learning English*
SP36	*Instead of just concentrating on what is written in the textbooks, the teacher should give additional supplemental information that is applicable to everyday life English skills*
SP42	*Teachers should include a wider range of material from the globe and current events into their teachings in order to help students acquire the English skills and knowledge around them*

4.2.2 Language Output Development Focus, Expressions, or Lexical for Daily Use

On the other hand, the following section discusses student participants' comments that are directly related to the acquisition of four English language skills or even other relevant English-based knowledge (e.g., phonics, syntax, or grammar). The interview results revealed that, although some individuals underlined the integration of four English competencies, a greater proportion placed a premium on auditory and spoken abilities. Student 7, for example, concentrated on the capacity to comprehend speech in English-language films and ordinary conversation. Student No. 31 had a similar belief in the significance of auditory and verbal abilities, claiming that listening and speaking were more important than reading and writing. In this line, some students mentioned that a realistic course would have to include several listening and speaking activities to enable the students to fulfil their potential for regular communication, especially with native English speakers. Similarly, participants said that grammar and vocabulary development were critical in English courses. The relevance of pronunciation, on the other hand, was seldom addressed. Furthermore, numerous exam-oriented students, such as S42 and S45, argued that a practical English education should indeed provide them with the information required to advance on standardized English examinations such as the Public English Test System (PETS), IELTS, or TOEIC.

Table 2. Particular Remarks on Skills Development Process in a University English Course

	Student Participant's (SP's) Response
To assist you reach your unique objective of learning English, how should a practical and ideal university English course be planned and taught?	
SP2	*...include daily English terms that are prevalent and contemporary, and instructors may explain how these trendy expressions are produced*
SP7	*Make it a point to help your students learn how to comprehend a conversation in English and how to interpret films in English*
SP9	*...offer opportunities for dialogue and listening activities*
SP10	*place a premium on listening and communicating effectively*
SP12	*...concentrate on ordinary conversation and business language that is relevant to the workplace.*
SP14	*...place an emphasis on listening, speaking, reading, writing, and conversational skills, especially speaking and listening*
SP22	*Learn English so I can speak with people from other countries and read English instruction at workplace. Additionally, we may employ more terminology with our students, and equip learners with additional vocabulary that we may use in a broader range of situations.*
SP28	*...include grammatical instruction that can educate me how to utilize each new term I am introduced to?*
SP31	*...give me the skills I'll need to converse with people from other countries. I believe that it is important to listen to and understand English is sufficient.*
SP36	*...give students information that they may utilize in their everyday lives, rather than only for tests. Students, for example, are able to hold a conversation well with foreigners.*
SP42	*Prepare students for international English examinations like the IELTS, TOEIC, and others by teaching them the necessary information and skill*
SP45	*As long as the instructor assists and shares some English-testing skills or information with us, we should be able to pass our English examinations, particularly Public English Test System (PETS), TOEIC or IELTS.*

4.2.3 All-English Conversation Focus, Intensive Student-Teacher Interaction

Furthermore, course organization relates to the manner in which a language course is taught and the activities that are employed in the classroom. According to Table 3, more participants chose to learn English via dialogue or conversation practice. They agreed that practicing discussions in groups aided in the development of their listening, speaking, and grammatical skills. Apart from group participation, teacher-student interaction also has an effect on classroom performance. According to students 7 and 20, increased teacher-student interaction was important for language development. Regarding classroom language, several respondents wanted the lecturer to use a blend of English and Chinese. S39 even advocated that speaking classes be taught entirely in English. Adult students benefit from increased auditory input during English sessions.

Table 3. General Remarks on the Notion of University English Course Organization

	Student Participant's (SP's) Response
How would you describe the ideal nature or concept of a university English course in terms of course organization and development?	
SP3	*...incorporate several dialogue/conversation methods. Our listening and speaking abilities may be enhanced*
SP5	*...assist learners in developing their grammar via group dialogue or conversation practices*
SP7	*...increased engagement between teacher and student is encouraged, and the instructor may utilize both English and Chinese for mutual communication at the same time...*
P8	*...allow students to perform musical acts, listen to recordings, view movies, and read newspaper articles*
SP11	*Students learn English more effectively and with more enjoyment when they are not subjected to stress or other forms of worry in the classroom*
SP15	*...provide chances for students to put what they've learned into practice*
SP20	*There has to be a solid relationship between instructors and students because excellent communication between instructors and students is essential*

4.2.4 Teacher's Optimism, Friendly Mentor-Like, Positive Class Management

Last but not least, the instructor's personality and leadership have a huge impact on how classroom activities are managed, as well as the cooperation and interaction between students and teachers. The interview data highlighted significant teaching style characteristics that influenced course practicality. First, the instructor must identify the students' learning requirements and competency levels, as well as their comprehension of the lecture. A concrete course should also help students find their own learning goals. Also, instructor zeal was vital. Practical training demands a teacher to be passionate about teaching.

Table 4. Remarks on Teacher's Teaching Approach, Class Management

	Student Participant's (SP's) Response
What would you want your English instructor to be like in terms of style, philosophy, leadership, and management, if you were the teacher?	
SP5	*...caring much or paying close attention to whether or not students comprehend the entire lesson or information shared during the class*
SP7	*...considers student growth and competency to be a top priority*
SP9	*...is an excellent instructor with an enthusiastic attitude, optimistic outlook, and an efficient management style or technique, and a mentor-like demeanor*
SP15	*...understand what students genuinely need in terms of academic and psychological development in order to succeed.*
SP27	*...may assist students in properly understanding their own academic learning goals or learning route for the rest of their lives.*

5. Conclusion and Discussion

According to this survey, Chinese university graduates learn English for a variety of reasons. This corroborates and also supports several research findings that students enrolled in university-level general English classes have unique learning requirements (Kapoe, 2021; Doan & Dan, 2018; Byun, 2017; Moiinavaziri, 2014). Chinese participants ranked the importance of listening and speaking abilities in responding to the first research question. They were enrolled in English lessons in order to increase their comprehension of English-language films, news broadcasts, and social interactions in a variety of daily social contexts. Additionally, many intend to sit for standardized English tests such as the Public English Test System (PETS), IELTS, or TOEIC. Respondents rated reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar as less essential, with just one-third of learners preferring these abilities. Plus, just a few respondents said that they were studying English to boost their self-esteem. This demonstrates that the majority of learners participate in English programs in order to improve their listening and speaking abilities. Additionally, the second study question focuses on the perceptions of Chinese university graduates about the effectiveness of their English courses. Numerous characteristics of practical English courses have been established

in order to provide a comprehensive overview of learners' expectations. Chinese students, on the other hand, wanted instant access to fundamental and practical learning tools. Besides, Chinese learners also prefer classroom activities that require significant peer or teacher-student engagement, such as group discussions. Similarly, they recommend providing additional English input via mutual discussion with the classroom instructor. Fewer than half of respondents agreed that classroom instruction should incorporate listening and speaking abilities, while a minority agreed on all four. Finally, a teacher must be aware of his or her students' needs and assist them in developing their own learning goals.

6. Implication

All in all, communication competency is usually acknowledged as the objective of language training (Yesenina & Galitsyna, 2020). Effective communication requires communicative skills. Language acquisition is about communication, not resemblance. Instead of form, they emphasized meaning, such as textual messages, correctness of language, and language structure. Classroom activities should encourage meaningful conversation; after all, language learners prefer creative role-playing, simulations, and group discussions to repetition and drill (Garcia-Pinar, 2019; Vashchenko & Moroz, 2019). Unstructured learning encourages creativity and spontaneity when using cooperative learning. Children may learn more effectively, efficiently, and enthusiastically (Yen & Gameble, 2021). As a result, cooperative learning may work effectively in adult education (Zulvera et al., 2018; Snytnikova, 2016). Cooperative learning is particularly useful in such diverse groups of adult learners. Furthermore, according to interviews, Chinese learners detest prefabricated texts. They understand the importance of genuine content in real-world contexts. Teachers may filter material for relevancy by establishing the learning aim, goal, and approach. Due to the fact that it is almost difficult to separate language and survival needs in most instances, it is preferable to address both concurrently with real resources for instruction toward language instruction, culture adoption, and practical application (Hartono et al., 2021; Oswari et al., 2020; Saalbach et al., 2013).

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