

# A study of factors that influence learners' self-evaluation of College English

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**Abstract.** In today's China, both college students and the society are demonstrating an increasingly higher demand for College English education. However, the learners' satisfaction degree is low, so that courses of English for Specific Purpose and courses for general education are welcome among learners. This research surveyed over 400 learners in the Business English classes at Wuhan University and used the data collected to verify the assumption that the key factors that influence learners' self-evaluation of College English are frequency of changing teachers, learners' satisfaction levels of English textbooks and their degree of participation in language learning group activities. The research applied correlation and independence tests to the variables and then fit the data into an Anova model. Through backward selections, the software identified the best model to explain learners' self-evaluation. The major findings are that, (a) learners' satisfaction levels with English textbooks are not correlated with their self-evaluation of College English; (b) the participation degrees in group activities and their frequencies of changing English teachers could partially explain their College English self-evaluation. The research has potential to assist with College English reform and optimizing the curriculum design of Business English.

**Keywords:** Self-evaluation, teacher changing frequencies, textbook satisfaction levels, group activity participation degrees.

## INTRODUCTION

As freshmen become better masters of English and the scenario of globalization and economic integration demands higher standards for English competence in the Chinese talent market, College English has been undergoing unprecedented changes. However, there is a decrease in College English satisfaction and some learners think they have not made noticeable progress in English by attending College English classes (Li, 2017). Given these circumstances, what should be prioritized is a fundamental reform instead of moderate changes. For top universities, the reform is more urgent, because a majority of students attend these major institutions to continue English learning after high school graduation.

In accordance with the demand from learners and the society alike, two types of English courses (English for

general knowledge and ESP)<sup>1</sup> are offered as complementary courses in some universities. Under the guidance of *the Instruction Guide for College English Teaching and the Educational Program for Undergraduates in Wuhan University*<sup>2</sup>, a new program was implemented beginning in 2013, which changed College English into two types and four categories courses. Type A refers to College English courses and Type B includes courses for skills, culture and specific

<sup>1</sup> Follow-up courses for College English are ESP courses, English courses for skills and courses for general purpose.

<sup>2</sup> The Instruction Guide for College English Teaching and the Educational Program for Undergraduates in Wuhan University, issued in 2013, initiated the curriculum reform of College English in the university.

purpose respectively. College English teaching duration was shortened from four terms to two or three. About 90% of the students learn College English for three terms while the rest 10% have only two terms for College English. In the last one or two terms, students are free to choose any Type B courses (regarded as College English follow-up courses) that appeal to them. Business English, an ESP course, was offered to sophomores for the first time in the 2016 spring term. The curriculum design and teaching practice are meant to help learners with their future work and professional studies.

The course of College English is of three to four terms' duration in the undergraduate program. But why do the learners show lower self-evaluation than expected? What factors influence learners' evaluation of College English? If the learners appreciated the course design of Business English and teaching approaches adopted, what are the reasons behind the dissatisfaction? For what purpose and motivation did students choose the course? What should be improved in the curriculum design and how should teaching be improved? In order to respond to these questions, a survey was administered to Business English learners at the end of the term in June, 2016. It is premised that an analysis of survey data will provide information that will offer insights for the reform of College English delivery in Chinese universities.

## METHODOLOGY

### Survey design and data analysis

According to *the National Criteria for the Teaching Quality of Business English at High Educational Institutes*, Business English is composed of four core elements, language, business, cross-culture and countries. Business knowledge includes economics, management, accounting, business operation, information technology. Business skills refer to both general and specific skills. The essential objective of Business English focuses on communicative skills and business operational skills (Liu, 2015). The Business English, as a follow-up course after College English and a substitute course for College English, complies with the national criteria, but it should be different from the course for Business English majors because it has its own specific purpose, learner background and schedule. The emphasis is on communicative skills, general business skills and limited specific skills. The survey statistics show that only 16.2% of learners have participated in BEC (Business English Certificate) test or have a plan for it. Most learners attend the content-based course to improve English proficiency. There are three modules, namely business theories, business skills, and business language and communication, which work together to help create an authentic workplace situation for English learning and improvement of their English proficiency. Survey results

reveal that the learners respond positively to the course design and teaching approach.

About 900 students (12% out of the total) registered with the course, and it supports the fact that there is a great demand for Business English among college students. At the end of the course 450 copies of Business English Questionnaire were distributed to 10 classes (randomly chosen from the 18 classes). 437 copies with complete answers were returned. Items 1-3 are meant to understand learners' motivation. Items 4-6 are designed to obtain learners' evaluation of College English teaching method and teaching effect. Items 7-8 are asked to analyze the acceptability of the teaching approach of "learning by doing" used in Business English, and measure the degree to which the expected goal has reached from the perspective of the learners. Item 9 aims at a comparative study of College English and Business English, and Item 10 is for open answer, designed to get new and fresh advice and suggestions from the learners, which may be adopted to improve the curriculum design and teaching practice of Business English, and offer beneficial reference for College English reform.

The survey is designed to obtain the learners' self-evaluation of College English (textbooks) teaching materials, teachers, teaching and the progress students think they have made, to analyze learning motivation, and to test if the course of Business English can meet learners' demand for their future work and professional studies. One hypothesis was designed for testing which was that the factors that affect learners' self-evaluation of the progress that they think they have made include frequencies of changing English teachers, learners' satisfactory levels of English textbooks and group activity participation degrees. In order to test the hypothesis, the author applied correlation and test of independence to the variables and then fit the data into an Anova model. Through backward selections, the software identified the best model to explain learners' self-evaluation. Table 1 shows the questionnaire and statistics.

### Survey statistics description and introduction of the Business English course

**Item 1:** How many times have you changed English teachers from the second term on?

From the second term on, the students in Wuhan University are granted the online access to choosing their favorite College English teachers and they can transfer to the corresponding classes. Reasons for changing teachers are diverse, but an important one is that they transfer for better teaching resources and for better learning effect. It is premised that high frequencies of changing teachers mean high dissatisfaction of teachers. This item is meant to determine a possible correlation between learners' self-evaluation and frequencies of

**Table 1.** Business English questionnaire and statistics.

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| <p>1. How many times have you changed English teachers from the second term on?</p> <p>A. 0 (141 people)</p> <p>B. 1 (195 people)</p> <p>C. 2 (78 people)</p> <p>D. 3 (21 people)</p> <p>2. Do/did you have a plan for BEC?</p> <p>A. Yes (71 people/16.2%)</p> <p>B. No (366 people/83.2%)</p> <p>3. Reasons for choosing the course (multiple choices allowed):</p> <p>A. obtaining business knowledge (224 people)</p> <p>B. no more interested in College English (162 people)</p> <p>C. improving English proficiency (283 people)</p> <p>D. getting higher score (99 people)</p> <p>4. Your self-evaluation of English after three terms' College English learning:</p> <p>A. obviously better (20 people/4.6%)</p> <p>B. a little bit better (230 people/52.6%)</p> <p>C. the same as in high school (70 people/16%)</p> <p>D. worse than in high school (117 people/26.7%)</p> <p>5. How do you think of the <b>New College English</b> and other textbooks? ( multiple choices allowed)</p> <p>A. fresh and new content (22 people)</p> <p>B. old content (137 people)</p> <p>C. limited practical use (196 people)</p> <p>D. no practical use (184 people)</p> <p>6. Your comment on College English:</p> <p>A. interesting and useful (40 people)</p> <p>B. boring but useful (127 people)</p> <p>C. boring and useless (338 people)</p> <p>D. hard to comment (321 people)</p> <p>7. How do you think of the frequent group activities in Business English class?</p> <p>A. fruitful (134people/30.6%)</p> <p>B. limited beneficial (247people/56.5%)</p> <p>C. fruitless (45 people/10.3%)</p> <p>D. a waste of time (11 people/2.5%)</p> <p>8. Your reaction to the assignment of each group activity:</p> <p>A. happy with it (183 people/41.8%)</p> <p>B. ok with it (247people/56.5%)</p> <p>C. trying to avoid it (7 people/1.6%)</p> <p>D. hating it (0 people)</p> <p>9. Compared with College English, the most significant difference that Business English shows is (multiple choices allowed):</p> <p>A. more practice opportunities offered (313 people)</p> <p>B. more practical knowledge and skills involved (272 people)</p> <p>C. easier to pass the final exam (94 people)</p> <p>D. more interesting (160 people)</p> <p>10. What's the biggest gain from Business English or the pity you feel? (open)</p> |
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changing teachers.

**Item 2:** Do/did you have a plan for BEC?

BEC has been widely accepted by many enterprises and educational institutes to measure the English proficiency of candidates in an authentic work environment. The survey statistics show that only 16.8% learners have (had) a plan for the test. The low percentage of BEC participants proves that there is a demand for ESP although learners have no plan for the related certificate test, which means ESP should be paid more attention to in foreign language curriculum design. The connections and differences between high school English and College English textbooks (teaching materials) show no significant disparity in rigor between the two (Li, 2017). Is this one of the reasons for the negative self-evaluation of College English? The research tries to answer the question through this survey. Analysis of Social Needs for College English, Foreign Languages in few scholars have indicated that some students have completed the task of College English in high school, so College English can be replaced by ESP courses including English for Academic Purpose (Jigang, 2012). A survey on the social demand for College English showed that 42.1% of those interviewed believe that College English should focus on application proficiency and they hope that what they are learning matches what the workplace demands so that they can speak, read and communicate more efficiently (Xuewen *et al.*, 2011). Some scholars suggest that College English prioritizes how to write academic reports, attend international academic conferences and communicate in the academic way.

**Item 3:** Reasons for choosing the course (multiple choices allowed)?

This item helps to explore the learning motivation of Business English and the result shows that 64.7% learners choose the course for improving English proficiency. The bulk of College English textbook content is about liberal arts with little attention paid to professional topics, which contributes to enhancing humanistic qualities and everyday communication. However, it is insufficient to meet the demands of *Instruction Guide for College English Teaching*. The instruction requires that learners master 400 profession or future work related words. More than half of the learners surveyed have a desire for business knowledge that is closely relative to workplace. Instead of being limited to trade negotiations, Business knowledge for general purpose covers business etiquette, business writing, and business secretary. In short, learners can improve English proficiency through Business English.

**Item 4:** Your self-evaluation of English after three terms' College English learning?

The research tries to get learners' self-evaluation of

College English and compare the progress they have made through College English and that through Business English. The learners had accomplished three terms' English learning before they chose this course. However, among those surveyed, 16% learners think they have made no progress by learning College English and 26.7% learners even believe that they were better English masters in high school. This course focuses on the applied skills of English as a working language, including three modules, namely Business topics, Business skills and Business knowledge. The content-based course makes a disparity in the rigor that College English lacks. The course design, based on the conception of teaching and learning English by doing (Li, 2015), is workplace oriented.

**Item 5:** How do you think of the *New College English*<sup>3</sup> and other textbooks (multiple choices allowed)?

**Item 6:** Your comment on College English?

It is widely believed that learning results are influenced by teachers and textbooks. Item 5 is meant to study the relevancy between textbooks and learners' self-evaluation. If there is a correlation between the two variables, it means that textbooks exert influence on learners' negative self-evaluation or positive self-evaluation. Item 6 is asked to get learners' overall assessment of College English, which can be of some reference value for the course design of Business English. The results show that only 40 students thought that College English was interesting and useful.

**Item 7:** How do you think of the frequent language learning group activities in Business English class?

**Item 8:** How is your reaction to the assignment of each group activity?

The two items are meant to measure to which degree the teaching idea of "learning by doing" is accepted by the learners. The learner-centered Business English is based on the teaching idea of "learning by doing", different from the traditional approach of indoctrination. The course designer holds firmly that application proficiency of language comes from practice (doing things) (Li, 2015). The learners are required to get necessary information about relative business concepts online so that they can get down to case analysis and group activities in class without difficulty. Business skills are presented through group activities like presentations, sitcoms and business simulations. Interaction is highly appreciated by the whole class when some groups get others involved in the simulation by asking them to correct the mistakes and explain the reasons. In the simulation they magnify

<sup>3</sup> *New College English* is a widely used textbook series published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

potential mistakes that are hard to identify or easy to ignore so that they can learn proper etiquette norms by doing. Compared with College English, Business English offers the learners better chances to be exposed to the language knowledge and skills for application (Dongchun, 2013). 30.6% learners think they have gained a lot from the course and 56.5% of the questionnaire participants think they have got something, which confirms the acceptance of the course design and teaching approach.

Though students had to take part in language learning group activities frequently, 41.8% learners like them. 56.5 feel they can participate and only 1.6% (7 people) avoid it if possible, which shows "learning by doing" is not only workable and it is appreciated by learners. In College English there are activities organized by teachers, but these activities are liberal arts oriented and deviated from workplace. Some teachers doubt if learners can gain enough basic knowledge and skills without teachers' detailed teaching. Yet the truth is that knowledge monopoly has been disintegrated by the internet and the access is within everyone's reach. Learning by doing is more efficient than teachers' indoctrinating teaching.

**Item 9:** Compared with College English, what is the most significant difference that Business English shows (multiple choices allowed)?

This item helps to differentiate Business English and College English from the perspective of learners. 71.6% learners think the most significant difference in teaching approach is that there are more and better chances for them to practice in the former. 62.2% learners indicated that Business English is more application-oriented so it is more practical as a matter of fact.

**Item 10:** What's the biggest gain from Business English and what is the pity you feel?

This is an open item meant to get the learners' assessment on the Business English teaching method and content. Many learners prefer to have more time on job application interview and business etiquette. In addition, they would like to have more teacher-and-student interactions, and more interactions between the presenting groups and audience. The feedback shows that curriculum designing should meet learners' demand for profession and future work (Qiufang, 2012).

About 60% learners indicate that course duration is limited and class size is too big (50 students per class). Business English lasts one term with twelve units and three modules. If it is extended to two terms and the class size is smaller, learners can benefit more from the learning.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Statistical analysis

The low self-evaluation of College English reveals that

the learners are not satisfied with the course. If the factors that affect learners' self-evaluation are identified, changes and reforms can be made to improve teaching and enhance learning efficiency. Excluding personal differences of learners, the author suspects that self-evaluation is influenced by factors like teachers, textbooks, teaching approaches and the interrelation among the three factors. The factor of teachers is frequencies of changing teachers, textbook referred to in the survey is *New College English* (published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press), and teaching approach indicates the group activities involved in the Business English classes. The three factors of frequencies of changing teachers, satisfaction degree of textbook and group activity participation levels are used as the explaining variables, and the explained variable is the learners' self-evaluation of College English.

### #1. Item 1 vs. Item 4 correlation

1 and 4 distribution:

l4n

| l1n | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  |
|-----|----|----|----|----|
| 1   | 9  | 82 | 17 | 33 |
| 2   | 10 | 95 | 38 | 51 |
| 3   | 1  | 42 | 11 | 24 |
| 4   | 0  | 10 | 2  | 9  |

Only 4.6% learners feel they have made notable progress through College English learning. 32% learners have never changed their teachers while 45% learners changed teachers for once. According to the tree diagram, [1] 0.1122018, the correlation coefficient is low, showing no obvious correlation. Since the two variables are ordinal data, Kendall rank correlation coefficient is calculated again (Figure 1):

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> cor (1n, 4n, method = "kendall", use = "pairwise")
[1] 0.097162
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It shows a correlation of 0.

### #2. 1 vs. 4 independence test

The data show no notable linear correlation, but there may be other correlation so the next step is to test the mutual independence. Because the two variables are ordinal data without assumption of normal distribution, mann whitney u test is chosen for the traditional chi-square test to prove that different frequencies of changing teachers equal corresponding self-evaluations.

Wilcoxon rank sum test with continuity correction  
data: 1n and 4n

W = 57462, p-value < 2.2e-16

Alternative hypothesis: true location shift is not equal to 0  
p is significantly smaller than 0.05, refusing null hypothesis, which shows that learners at different



Figure 1. Data Distribution

Table 2. Model Selection

| Step         | Df Deviance | Resid. | Df Resid. | Dev AIC   |
|--------------|-------------|--------|-----------|-----------|
| 1            | 426         | 360    | .2958     | -64.77577 |
| 2 - 1n:5d 1  | 0.21471112  | 427    | 360.5105  | -66.51721 |
| 3 - 5d 1     | 0.07343668  | 428    | 360.5839  | -68.42882 |
| 4 - 1n:Q5b 1 | 0.50827030  | 429    | 361.0922  | -69.81749 |
| 5 - 5b 1     | 1.62098100  | 430    | 362.7132  | -69.87358 |

frequencies of changing teachers feel different about the progress they have made in College English. Frequencies of changing teachers and progress in English are not mutually independent and there is nonlinear correlation between them.

#3. 4 vs. 5, 4 vs. 8, 7 vs. 8

The same method is used to explore the relationship between the evaluation of textbook and progress in English, and the relationship between group activity participation levels and English progress. The result shows some linear correlation between 7 and 8 (Kendall rank correlation coefficient: 0.4105672)

#4. Model selection

Finally all the possible explaining variables are put into anova model to explain the learners' self-evaluation by using backward selection based on the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) to choose the optimum model. Initial Model:

$$4n \sim 1n + 5b + 5d + 8n + 1n * 5b + 1n * 5d + 1n * 8n$$

In the initial model the explaining variables include

frequencies of changing teacher, satisfaction degrees of textbooks, group activity participation levels, correlation between the frequencies and textbooks, and the correlation of frequencies of changing teachers and group activity participation levels (Table 2).

Final Model:

$$4n \sim 1n + 8n + 1n:8n$$

According to AIC, three explaining variables are chosen in the final model: frequencies of changing teachers, group activity participation levels and the correlation between the two variables (Table 3). The parameter value p of frequencies and degrees is smaller than 0.05, refusing null hypothesis with confidence level above 95%. In other words, the two variables are explaining variables with the coefficient being not zero. But the correlation is not significant enough to explain learners' self-evaluation. There is great potential for further studies.

In summary, (a) the statistic results show that there is no notable relationship between textbook satisfaction degree and learners' self-evaluation of College English; (b) frequencies of changing teachers (1) and group activity participation levels (8), are notably related to learners' self-evaluation of College English (4), so they can partly explain the learners' self-evaluation, but the

**Table 3.** Final Model Generated from Backward Selection Model according to AIC

| Df        | Sum Sq | Mean Sq | F value | Pr(>F)  |
|-----------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1n 1      | 4.7    | 4.693   | 5.563   | 0.0188* |
| 8n 1      | 3.3    | 3.327   | 3.944   | 0.0477* |
| 1n:8n 1   | 2.0    | 2.032   | 2.409   | 0.1214  |
| Residuals |        | 430     | 362.7   | 0.844   |

Signif. codes: 0 '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

relationship between the explaining variables and the explained variable is nonlinear, which suggests that other factors may be involved, and it is worth further studies; (c) there is a linear correlation between group activity participation levels (8) and the gain they think that they have obtained from the activities (7), which proves the workability of learning by doing; 4) there exists no linear correlation between the gain they feel they have obtained (7) and the learners' self-evaluation of College English (4), which means the gain they have got from Business English group activities is not the same as the learners' self-evaluation (4), because it is only the evaluation of College English.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The learners' self-evaluation reveals their learning effect. The relatively low evaluation of College English suggests it is not only necessary but also urgent to reform College English fundamentally. As the survey analysis shows, teachers and teaching approaches are factors that affect learners' self-evaluation. As a result, teaching approaches and teaching quality (the factor of teachers) are equally essential for College English reform. The influence the factor of textbooks exerts is not as significant as is supposed, which means the reason for the problem faced with College English does not mainly come from textbooks, in other words, it is not high time to cancel College English or replace it with courses of other types. What leaves much room for further studies is why so many learners think the textbooks are boring, which will be explored in the follow-up research. Since there is linear correlation between the group activity participation levels in Business English and the gain students feel that they have obtained through group activities, learning by doing applies to both Business English and College English. For most students in top universities, it is easy to get the basic language knowledge through autonomous learning. If they have more time to spend on practice their learners' self-evaluation will be positive. The key to College English reform is, to some degree, how the English class can be changed from teacher-centered to student-centered, giving the chance of learning by doing to the learners.

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