



Exploration into the Reform Paths of Course Evaluation System under ESP Mode — Taking Business English Correspondence as an Example

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Abstract: English Business Correspondence, as an ESP course, aims at developing students' English writing skills. The author has taught the course for five times, experiencing changes in textbooks and teaching materials. For the 2025-2026 academic year, teachers of this course applied for an educational reform project, and adopted ICLT model in the teaching design of this semester. By the end of the semester, the reform proved effective in improving students' final exam score and satisfaction with the course. Besides, suggestions such as improving interactive atmosphere and strengthening link between the course and reality were also put forward.

Keywords: educational reform, ESP, ICLT, English Business Correspondence, feedback mechanism

1. Introduction

ESP, or English for Specific Purposes, was initiated by Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens (1964), who stressed that English teaching should be designed and carried out as required by various occupations. According to them, ESP is English for civil servants, for policemen, for officials of the law, for dispensers and nurses, for specialists in agriculture, for engineers and fitters.

Through dozens of years of development, ESP has developed into one of the most common concepts and guiding principles in English pedagogy. Scholars at home and abroad have expanded its applicable scope and relevant definitions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Status-quo Abroad

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) proposed ESP as a teaching method included in English pedagogy, fully integrating learners' demands. They divided ESP into English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes.

In the view of Dudley-Evans and St. Johns (1998) and Robinson (1991), ESP has the following benefits for students: To start with, no matter what stage learners find themselves in, their needs are to be spotted; secondly, different learning materials and methods can be accommodated, so as to encourage the development of teaching centering on students' demands; thirdly, ESP is highly sensitive with teachers' specialties and learners' needs, thereby ensuring teachers' involvement in the course.

Fäläus (2017) believed that the difficulty of implementing ESP lies in course design and the role of teachers in that they may face the following difficulties: a lack of ontological knowledge about ESP as available guidelines; the new spheres of knowledge ESP teachers need to learn; and the changing position of English language teaching. Therefore, students' 'needs should be taken into account before selecting course materials. In particular, teachers should not be bound by the content of textbooks, and four aspects need to be taken into account, namely, the input, content, language focus and task. The input can be a recording, a dialogue, or an article; the content, on the other hand, is the thesis or key information of input; language focus, preferably slightly above students' level, considering students' understanding of input content; while the task should show whether the key points of the whole learning process can emerge so that students can apply what they have learned.

2.2 Research Status-quo at Home

Cai Jigang (2004) added that ESP courses are opened according to the specific objectives and needs of learners, aimed at developing students' communicative abilities so as to use English as a working language.

Ding Daqin and Yang Songyan (2014) summarized the teaching concepts and objectives of ESP courses, and pointed out existing problems with ESP's assessment models, such as singular evaluation subjects, lack of interaction between teachers and students; narrowness of evaluation content, lack of practical evaluation, and a strong orientation to attach greater importance to result rather than the learning process; separation of evaluation from teaching, and neglect of feedback. Regarding these problems, they constructed the following principles: integration of evaluation and teaching; turning evaluation into a process; optimization of the environment; they also constructed ESP evaluation models at both macro and

micro levels. The model at macro level is adopted at Academic English Listening and Speaking courses, where the mode of pre-test—training—post-tests is adopted. At the micro level, in-class intervening evaluation and after-class interactive evaluation are constructed, effectively combining teacher-student cooperative evaluation, students' self-evaluation, peer evaluation and corporate evaluation, so as to optimize teaching and evaluation atmosphere.

Jiang Xiao (2024) pointed out three characteristics of ESP as being student-centered, cross-disciplinary, and a combination of theories and practices. She analyzed the connection between ESP teaching mode and College English at application-oriented universities, including the need analysis of ESP teaching mode in English education of application-oriented universities, and the influence of ESP teaching on students' innovation abilities, self-learning abilities, subjective initiative, and analytical skills; the link between ESP teaching mode and the demands for college English education in application-oriented universities. She also put forward the pathways of implementing ESP teaching modes in the college English teaching at application-oriented universities, namely, breaking free from the traditional English teaching mode, pushing forward the implementation of ESP teaching mode in application-oriented college English; enriching the teaching content and optimizing teaching quality with "task-driven teaching; integrating the Internet technology, and pushing forward the continuous progress of ESP teaching of college English courses in application-oriented universities.

2.3 Summary

From researches on ESP at home and abroad, it can be concluded that ESP has three basic characteristics: firstly, targeting at specific groups of people whose goal of learning English is to better serve their study, life and work, and they have been equipped with certain English foundation; secondly, ESP teaching must start from students' practical needs, namely, knowing about language learners' requirements for language learning, and arrange their needs according to priority, so as to show the "learner-centered" teaching concept; thirdly, ESP is also characterized by flexible teaching principles, with practicality being the starting and finishing points, unrestricted by teaching methodology and targeted at meeting students' needs in practical work.

Scholars at home and abroad focus on analyzing the feasibility of theories and potential challenges and difficulties, neglecting the application of ESP to specific teaching courses and practice; most of domestic scholars' practical researches focus on polytechnic colleges oriented toward professional teaching, with a lack of content in terms of teaching practice at undergraduate level. Therefore, to a certain extent, this research can fill in the gap at this level.

3. Research Design

3.1 Pre-teaching Questionnaire Survey

In order to get our hands on the respondents' level of knowledge about ESP and their language competence before taking Business English Correspondence course, we designed a questionnaire that will be attached to this paper, collected 236 valid answer sheets, and got the following results:

Of all respondents, female students are the majority, accounting for 81.36% of the whole population.

Job-seeking and self-improvement are the main motivations of learning English for students, 67.37% of whom fall in this group. Comparatively speaking, only 12.29% of them learn English for further overseas education, much lower than the average level. Therefore, we intend to add more materials related to career development and personal ability improvement to our English teaching design, so as to better fit learners' core needs.

As to language skills, we asked students about their CET-4 scores as a reflection, but set the question as a selective one for them to answer. 87.29% of the respondents answered the question, and 125 students scored between 426 and 497 points, accounting for 52.97% of the entire population, while only 2.97% of them scored between 568 and 638. Given the total score of 720 points, the average level of students in language skills is moderate.

59.75% of the respondents rated their learning stress as "neither too high nor too low", while 33% of them showed "great stress in learning". This suggests the most majority of students have mid- or high-level in learning, implying the need for curriculum optimization and even counselling to help them assuage their learning pressure. In this light, teachers need to diversify their teaching approaches.

While 38.98% of them placed high requirements on their English learning, only 27.97% reported putting great effort into their study. This reflects room for improvement in their efforts. Teachers are suggested to set clear learning targets and formulate reasonable learning plans for students to be more proactive and hard-working.

As 58.05% of the respondents learn English to "increase their chance of landing a good job", English teaching needs to be more practical, increasing the portion of business English and terminologies, to better meet students' demand for employment.

In terms of the teaching language in ESP classes, 182 students opted for bilingual courses, amounting to 77.12% of the whole population. Only 8.05% of them expected teachers to use Chinese predominantly. This means the great majority of learners expect to be immersed in both Chinese and English in ESP classes, so as to catch up with international professional demands. Teachers should therefore favor bilingual teaching approach in course design, and distribute the proportion of Chinese and English reasonably to ensure accurate transmission of professional knowledge while improving students' bilingual application skills.

Slightly over half of all the respondents prefer translation exercises and situational dialogues to over forms of classroom activities, showing their preference for language practices. The textbook for this term happen to have such modules.

With technological advances and the appearance of WeChat and other chatting APPs, only 1.69% of the respondents write in English frequently, showing a severe deficiency in applying written English. Therefore, more writing tasks are to be included in course design to increase students' initiative to communicate in English in written forms.

88.14% of the respondents believe it "very necessary" or "necessary" to learn ESP terminologies, indicating the urgency to combine ESP teaching and professional demands.

67.37% of the respondents have strong wish to use English at work, and 82.2% of them approve of the textbook in meeting their learning needs.

Among all teaching modules, "text analysis and grammar" is students' most favorite one, while writing is their least favorite module.

Students have strong confidence in their adaptability to bilingual teaching, as indicated by 13.56% of them reporting "inability to adapt".

Overall, 86.8% of the respondents believe it "very necessary" or "necessary" to incorporate basic language skills in ESP learning, and more than 60% believe it imperative to start learning ESP in the first term of their first or second year at college, showing their tendency to start ESP learning at an early stage; however, their willingness to learn ESP drops as they become seniors.

41.5% of the respondents consider it reasonable to have two ESP classes every week, showing their satisfaction with the existing curriculum.

59.32% of the respondents favor "Listening and Speaking" in the allotment of teaching hours in ESP classes, while only 15.6% of them favor "Writing", which is out of line with the teaching objectives set by the syllabus.

72.46% of the respondents believe Business English Correspondence crucial or significant to their future career development, suggesting their recognition of the professional value in the course. Case analysis and correspondence simulation are therefore needed to increase students' understanding of the importance of the course.

On the whole, 97.03% of the respondents believe there is "very strong" or "strong" correlation between the teaching content and their future career, but each module helps them in different ways.

77.54% of the respondents reported inadequacy in terminology as their major difficulty in learning Business English Correspondence, showing the great challenge met by students in learning and grasping terminologies in EBC course.

As to the ranking of priority for different elements in EBC course, 56.42% of the respondents believe terminology to be the core of EBC learning.

When asked about their specific suggestions or expectations for ESP learning in EBC course, students' answer show a gap between the teaching content and practice, lack of interaction in class, low efficiency in terminology learning, a lack of cross-cultural knowledge and expertise, imbalanced development of skills, with strong emphasis in writing format and grammar and inadequate training in oral communication, error-correction and application of digital tools.

3.2 Analysis of Student Learning Situation

Before Business English Correspondence, students of this course have taken International Trade Practice, and EBC is a preparation for their studying Foreign Trade Documents in the fourth year. Therefore, the focus of EBC lies in studying the typical structure of business letters and useful phrases and sentences employed in such letters rather than expertise about key terms of foreign trade.

3.3 Course Design

3.3.1 Input

In this part, videos shot by teachers of Jiangxi Institute of Applied Science and Technology were shown to students as a lead-in to new chapters for most of the classes; for Complaints and Disputes, the teacher introduced her own translated text of a complaint letter lodged to Hermes, so as to familiarize students with the way of lodging complaints in real life, combining theory with reality.

3.3.2 Content

In this part, concepts related to each chapter will be explained. Rules and typical structures of letters related to the different links of foreign trade would be covered. Sample letters will also be analyzed in this part.

3.3.3 Language Focus

Key words and phrases related to each chapter will be explained in this section. Students' oral presentation also comprises supplement to the language focus, as they are asked to elaborate on the key words and phrases in the dialogues they performed in front of the class.

3.3.4 Task

a. Presentation.

Students were asked to act out the dialogues in the textbook. Traditionally, teachers would be the sole evaluator of students' performance. This term, after students give their presentations, the teacher handed out a rating scale to the students, asking them to evaluate the presenters' performance in terms of Structure and Organization, Content, Audience reaction, Fluency and Effectiveness of Powerpoint.

In this way, the teacher achieved peer review, (mutual group evaluation) making the final score fairer and promoting learner-teacher-machine interaction. However, such drills suffer from a lack of authentic interaction of any kind, and the main emphasis is on the reading skills.

In order to avoid such deviation of focus, the teacher also asked the students to write down the key words and phrases that they held as important for the course. In this way, their oral presentation also served as an excellent lead-in to the new concepts in the unit, saving efforts on the teacher's side.

b. Exercises.

For this semester, the teacher designed four assignments as follows:

- (1) Envelop Design with correct format
- (2) A letter writing assignment on Inquiry from Yixue
- (3) Reorganization of sentences to make up a counter-offer letter and translate the letter.
- (4) E-mail Writing v.s. business card design

These assignments are much more creative and diversified in form. Assignment 1 and 3 are much easier, while Assignment 2 and 4 are more relevant to writing itself. For Assignment 4, students were given two choices in the experimental class: they can either design a business card or just choose to write an e-mail in plain English. The majority of students chose to write an e-mail, which shows a lack of creative thinking in them.

c. Quiz.

Before the final exam, the teacher handed out three quizzes through Chaoxing platform, covering multiple-choice questions, case study and phrase translation exercises. Compared with the 2024-2025 academic year, there has been an increase in the number of quizzes and the diversity of the examination questions.

In terms of students' performance, this year, all of the three classes averaged 89.75 points in their multiple-choice quiz; for the phrase translation part, Class 1 averaged 99.29 points, Class 2 averaged 90.57 points, while Class 3 averaged 100 points, ranking the top among the three classes.

For the Case Study part, Class 1 averaged 82.53 points, Class 2 averaged 69.71 points, while Class 3 hit an average score of 80.18 points.

d. Practical Training.

There are two practical training assignments in this course, namely, Settlement and Complaints and Disputes. Both assignments are taken from Yixue platform.

In one of the classes, the teacher asked the students to complete the practical training on the computer screen in groups before printing them out.

In the first practical training, students were asked to write a letter related to the extension of letter of credit.

The most frequent error was spotted in the translation of terminologies related to terms of payment.

The students were asked to complete practical training in groups, just like the last term. However, they are only allowed to give the same answer for the first two parts. For the third part of practical training results and analysis, they were asked to divide the letter into different parts, with each member writing one part, so that altogether their writing could form a complete letter. In this way, every group member got different scores, however, some of the members would slack on their assignment and write too few words compared with other members.

For the second practical training, the teacher asked the students to write the same letter in each group, and analyze the letter in accordance with the 7Cs principle in groups.

In the composition of practical training reports, students' suggestions were taken when found reasonable and they become the co-builders of the course.

3.4 Design of Summative Assessment

3.4.1 Classification of Language Assessment

Tests can be grouped into achievement/attainment tests—tests that look back on what should have been learnt; proficiency tests— forward-looking tests that define a student's language proficiency with reference to a particular task which he or she will be required to perform; aptitude tests—tests designed to measure the student's probable performance in a foreign language which he or she has not started to learn; and diagnostic tests—tests that diagnose areas of difficulty so that appropriate remedial action can be taken later, normally taking the form of phoneme discrimination tests, grammar and usage tests and certain controlled writing tests. In this light, practical training, oral presentation and exercises; in the course of practical training, students were asked to analyze the project, thereby accomplishing reflective assessment, and at the end of the semester, students sitting the final exam comprises the summative evaluation.

3.4.2 Design of Final Exam for 2025-2026 Academic Year

Although multiple-choice questions prove useful in helping both students and teachers identify areas of difficulty, they only test knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, etc. rather than the ability to use language; only ten items are included in the first part of the exam.

In the second part of the exam, students were asked to give the English equivalents to five abbreviations. This is an assessment of the students' active vocabulary in writing.

In the third part, students were asked to translate five terminologies in foreign trade into English, also testing their active vocabulary in writing.

Case analysis was added to the normal exam question types. In this part, students are asked to analyze problems with foreign trade procedures, either in terms of packing, mode of transport or marks. They are also asked to offer solutions.

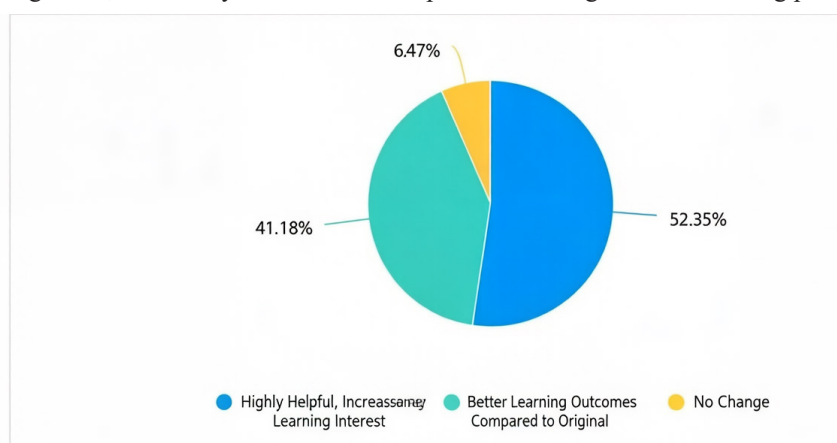
Besides, they are also asked to analyse a business letter as per the 7Cs principle. The letter was generated by AI, so the teacher did a little revision to it to include a few grammatical errors.

In the rating scale, the teacher added a dimension of "creativity" for the Writing part.

In the instructions, the teacher also elaborated on specific requirements, giving students hints on the composition of different parts of the letter.

3.5 Post-teaching Questionnaire Survey

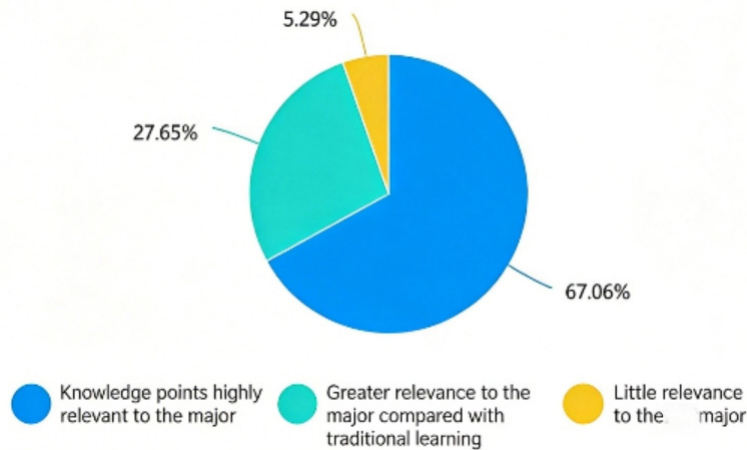
At the end of the course, the teachers handed out another questionnaire to the students, collecting their evaluation of the effect of the educational reform carried out this semester. Overall, 170 questionnaires were collected, and 93.53% of them believed the reform helpful to their study. Of these students, 52.35% stressed an uplift in their interest in learning; 41.84% pointed out good learning effect, while only 6.47% of them reported no change in their learning performance.



*This conclusion is derived from Q1. After a semester of studying, do you think the ESP teaching reform is helpful?

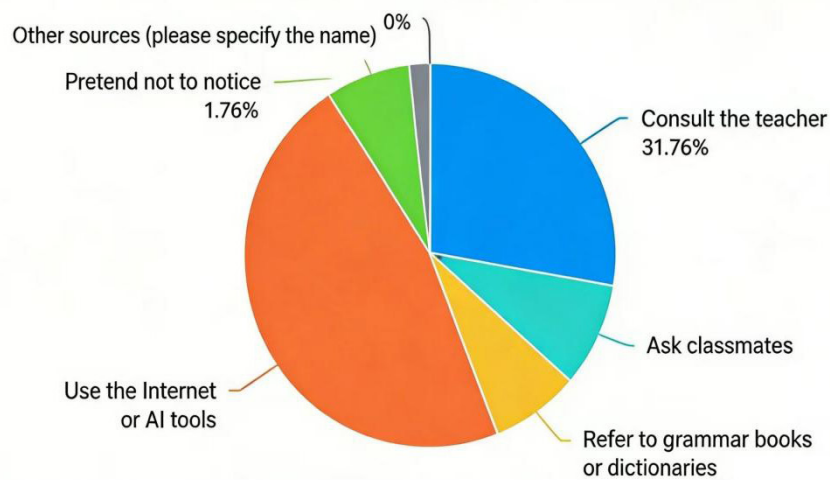
Figure 1. Impact of Uncertainty and Efficiency Differences on Learning Efficiency

When asked about the link between study and reform, slightly over half of the respondents, that is, 67.06% of them, believed there were multiple links, 27.65% reported a strong link, a collective of 94.71% of the respondents giving positive feedback. This means that the reform has greatly improved the link between learning and their specialty.



*This conclusion is derived from Q2: Is the learning after the current reform highly relevant to your major?
Figure 2. Satisfaction with the current teaching methods

Although 97.64% of the respondents were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the current teaching mode, 50.59% of them complained about the lack of active teaching atmosphere, and 44.71% of them still learned for taking tests. 48.24% of the respondents showed a willingness to turn to AI for help when they were accomplishing writing exercises.



*This conclusion is derived from Q16. In writing, if you do not know how to correct the mistakes pointed out by the teacher, where do you usually seek help?
Figure 3. Sources of help in correcting mistakes pointed out by the teacher

In the last part of the questionnaire, students were asked to offer suggestions on the teaching mode after the teaching reform.

The students were also asked about their opinion about the influence of their teachers’ evaluation on their learning. For the limit of time and space, these results won’t be discussed here.

Overall, students held positive attitude towards teaching reform. They believe the new mode more suited to the requirements of practical training raised by their specialty, and has improved the practicality and sense of gain in their learning. However, some students complained about the inactivity of class atmosphere, insufficient combination with the reality, being overburdened in class, and an obvious orientation towards examinations. Most of them wished for an increased level of interactivity, stronger orientation towards practice, improved feedback mechanism and greater fun. Meanwhile, they wish the teachers could reduce irrelevant content to ensure that teaching was closer to reality. All of their responses helped teachers find their way towards future teaching approach.

4. Results

After the final exam, the teachers analyzed students’ performance. It was found that Class 1 averaged 4.98 points out of 10 points, the lowest level in their performance of multiple-choice questions, Class 2 averaged 6 points, the highest level

among the three classes, while Class 3 averaged 5.2 points, ranked in the medium. Overall, such performance showed no direct correlation with their performance in the quiz.

In terms of phrase translation, Class 1 averaged 7.6 points out of 10 points, Class 2 averaged 6.6 points, while Class 3 averaged 6.5 points. The performance of Class 1 and Class 2 was positively correlated with their performance in the quiz, while that of Class 3 was completely out of line with their performance in the quiz.

As to Case Analysis, Class 1 averaged 12 points out of 20 points, Class 2 averaged 10.3 points, while Class 3 averaged 11.1 points. In this case, the performance of all the three classes is positively correlated with their performance in the quiz.

The average score of Class 1 in the final exam was the highest, 73.77 points out of 100 points, that of Class 2 was 71.32, while the average score of Class 3 was 71.69 points.

Compared with the average score of the three classes in the 2024-2025 academic year, respectively 63 points, 66.16 points and 70.49 points, there have been a leapfrog improvement.

5. Discussion

According to the questionnaire on the effect of reform of educational reform and grading of practical training, the reform proved effective overall. Students highly recognize its positive impact on their interest in learning, its relevance to professionalism and help at work. However, problems such as inactive class atmosphere and lack of initiative on the part of the students do exist. Meanwhile, there is a protruding orientation towards examination, reflecting that some teaching links were out of line with reality. In terms of feedback mechanism, students have a strong preference towards teachers' straightforward correction of their errors and offer of suggestions. Besides, teachers are regarded as the most effective means of improving their writing skills, only that the practicality of feedback and depth of explanation need to be strengthened. All of this points to a conversion from knowledge dissemination towards aptitude evaluation of the course.

In the future, firstly, teachers should optimize their course design, increase interactive and practical assignments such as group presentation or analysis of real cases at work), so as to stimulate students' interest and reduce orientation towards examination; secondly, the feedback mechanism should be strengthened, and teachers should offer more specific and explanatory annotations (for example, analyzing the cause of errors), track students' growth path, and ensure the conformity of teaching with professional demands. These measures will undoubtedly push forward a material conversion from "reform in form" to "materialistic improvement", laying a solid foundation for students' career development.

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