# A Study on the Learning Needs of Chinese Adult English Majors in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** This present study employs a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews to explore the core learning needs of adult English majors. A total of 376 adult learners participated in the questionnaire survey based on which in-depth online interviews were conducted with 27 students. In addition, 10 instructors were interviewed to triangulate the findings from student questionnaires and interviews aiming to provide contextual insights. Four major findings emerge from the investigation. Firstly, regarding social needs, learners show clear differences across occupational roles and a strong communicative orientation. Secondly, target proficiency is mainly at B1–B2 level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR). Additionally, process-related needs emphasize flexibility, efficiency, and adequate support. Lastly, resource-related needs include preferences for competent and approachable teachers, acceptance of digitalized textbooks depending on user experience, expectations for improved facilities and digital resources with training support. Based on the results, the authors made detailed suggestions for curriculum reform, instructional resource allocation, and assessment system optimization.

***Keywords*:** adult higher education, English major, learning needs

## 1. Introduction

With rapid social and economic development, adult higher education has become increasingly important in China. It now promotes lifelong learning rather than merely offering academic qualifications. Teaching models have become more learner-centered, technology-supported, and practically oriented. Adult English learners differ from full-time students in their motivations, learning approaches, and multiple constraints. Urbanization and globalization have further intensified demands for cross-cultural communication and workplace competitiveness[2], creating new challenges and expectations for adult English learning in higher education.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on Learning Needs of Adult English Learners abroad

International research on adult English learners' needs has moved toward contextualization, process orientation, technological support, and evidence-driven analysis. Studies show that adult learners' needs are highly contextualized and utility-oriented, extending beyond general skills to communicative competence, specific genres, and task completion[1]. Research also refines target needs through strategy and affective support[3] and uses technology and assessment for evidence-driven improvement[4][5]. However, large-scale, cross-context longitudinal research remains insufficient. Needs analysis should therefore address what to learn, how to learn, and how to verify learning.

### 2.2 Research on Learning Needs of Adult English Learners in China

In China, research on adult English learning has shifted from contextualization and competency orientation to technology empowerment. Early studies emphasized language knowledge and examinations, later expanding to comprehensive competence, workplace contexts, and social participation. Surveys reported a disconnect between demand and provision, undermining learner motivation[6]. With internationalization and digitalization, research has addressed cross-cultural communication, ESP/EAP, and intelligent learning support, while revealing a gap between classroom provision and adult learners' interactive oral needs[7]. Adult learners' needs are highly contextualized and differentiated, prioritizing oral communication in authentic tasks, information retrieval, cross-cultural negotiation, and problem-solving, varying

by industry, job, and learning stage[8]. Chen[9] categorizes learning needs as social and individual, aligning both with educational provision to prioritize high-demand, high-gap modules.

Domestic research has expanded from "what to learn" to "how to learn, on what basis, and how to verify learning"[10]. However, gaps remain in large-sample, cross-provincial, multi-institution longitudinal studies and learning-analytics evidence. Adult English majors are often generalized without differentiation by training level, job background, or learning tasks. Task and genre details, process-oriented support, and formative assessment remain insufficient. AI's contributions, thresholds, and biases also require validation, while personalized resource provision, accessibility, and ethical oversight remain weak. In response, this study focuses on adult English majors in specific institutional contexts, aiming to complete a "needs—provision—outcomes" loop and provide empirical support for curriculum reform and policy-making.

# 3. Research Methodology

## 3.1 Research Questions

1) What are the specific learning needs of Chinese adult English majors in higher education?

2) What strategies should be adopted to better meet their learning needs?

## 3.2 Research Participants

376 adult learners participated in the study, who were currently enrolled in three English programs at the School of Continuing Education of a key university in Shanghai. These English programs include 1) the five-year English undergraduate program for high school entrants (hereinafter "Five-year Students"), 2) the three-year English top-up undergraduate program (hereinafter "Three-year Students"), and 3) the three-year Business English top-up undergraduate program (hereinafter "Business Students").

## 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

### 3.3.1 Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire in this study was primarily based on Chen's[9] university English learning needs analysis model as the theoretical core. It systematically investigated the social needs for English learning, learners' target English proficiency and skill improvement directions, learning process requirements, and learning resource needs, aiming to comprehensively present the authentic learning status and needs of full-time university students

Building on this framework, the study further integrated Hutchinson and Waters'[11] "Target Needs–Learning Needs" distinction and Dudley-Evans and St. John's[12] comprehensive model, emphasizing a dynamic examination of learners' gaps between current and desired proficiency levels across five dimensions: target context, present context, learner characteristics, learning needs, and learning environment. This ensured both the scientific structure of the questionnaire and the relevance of individual items. The "Survey on the English Learning Needs of Adult English Majors in Higher Education" consisted of two sections, totaling 31 items. The first section collected personal information from students (7 items; see Table 1). The second section, titled "Learning Needs," was designed around the central question of "how students wish to be supported" and examined students' core learning requirements across four dimensions: social needs for English learning, target English proficiency and skill improvement directions, learning process needs, and English learning resource needs (24 items, Items 8–31; see Table 2). Data from these two sections served as the basis for subsequent differential analysis and strategy development. The questionnaire was administered online via the "Wenjuanxing" platform. A total of 376 responses were collected; after removing invalid and incomplete responses, 369 valid samples were retained, yielding an effective response rate of 98.14%. Reliability and validity analyses of these 369 valid responses were conducted using SPSS 27.0. As shown in Table 3, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.903, and the validity coefficient was 0.879, indicating that the instrument possessed good reliability and validity and was suitable for further analysis.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Questionnaire Respondents**

| Demographic Variable | Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 94 | 25.47% |
| | Female | 275 | 74.53% |
| Age | 18-30 | 146 | 39.57% |
| | 31-40 | 160 | 43.36% |
| | 41-50 | 49 | 13.28% |
| | Above 50 | 14 | 3.79% |

| Demographic Variable | Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Employment Status | Full-time | 301 | 81.57% |
| | Part-time | 22 | 5.96% |
| | Unemployed | 35 | 9.49% |
| | Retired/Other | 11 | 2.98% |
| Occupation Type | Government/Institution Staff | 18 | 5.57% |
| | State-owned or Private Enterprise Staff | 188 | 58.2% |
| | Freelancer or Self-employed | 37 | 11.46% |
| | Service Industry & Others | 80 | 24.77% |
| Marital Status | Single | 200 | 54.2% |
| | Married | 169 | 45.8% |
| Program Type | Five-year Students | 74 | 20.05% |
| | Three-year Students | 249 | 67.48% |
| | Business Students | 46 | 12.47% |
| Grade | First grade | 194 | 52.57% |
| | Second grade | 82 | 22.22% |
| | Third grade | 77 | 20.87% |
| | Fourth grade | 12 | 3.25% |
| | Fifth grade | 4 | 1.08% |
| Total | | 369 | 100% |

**Table 2. English Learning Needs Dimensions for Adult English Majors**

| Dimension | Items | Sub-dimension | Example Item |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal Information | 7 | | How old are you? |
| Students' English Learning Needs | 24 | Social Needs in English Learning | To what extent do you think mastering English is helpful for your current work? |
| | | Learners' Target English Proficiency & Ability Improvement Needs | What level of English proficiency do you expect to achieve through studying in the Adult Higher Education English program? |
| | | Learning Process Needs | Which teaching method do you prefer? |
| | | Resource Needs in English Learning | What are your core expectations regarding the use of "digital-intelligent" technologies in English teaching and learning? |
| Total | 31 | | |

**Table 3. Reliability and Validity Test Results of the Survey Questionnaire**

| Reliability | | Validity | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cronbach's Alpha | Number | KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy | Approximate Chi-Square | Degrees of Freedom (df) | Significance (Sig.) |
| .903 | 369 | 0.879 | 3672.418 | 630 | .000 |

### 3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Based on the survey results, this study further conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 students to supplement details and individual differences that could not be fully captured by quantitative data. The interview protocol for students was developed and refined based on the preliminary survey findings: the researcher identified key issues and ambiguities revealed in the quantitative data, explored their underlying causes and contextual factors, and designed interview questions accordingly. The overall dimensions and structure of the interview protocol were kept consistent with the questionnaire. Ultimately, the student interview protocol was divided into two sections: the first section covered basic personal information, and the second section addressed the students' English learning needs (see Table 4). All interviews were conducted one-on-one online via Tencent Meeting, with each session lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview transcripts totaled

404,000 words. Meanwhile, to establish triangulation between student survey and interview data and provide contextual supplementation, this study also conducted interviews with 10 teaching staff members via WeChat or Tencent Meeting. These interviews focused on six core topics (see Table 5), with each session lasting approximately 45–120 minutes, and the interview transcripts totaling about 130,000 words. All participants were informed of the research objectives and scope prior to the interviews and provided consent for full recording. Interview recordings were transcribed within 48 hours, with all data de-identified and anonymized to ensure privacy and ethical compliance.

**Table 4. Dimensions of Student Interview Guide**

| Dimension | Items | Example Questions |
|---|---|---|
| Personal Information | 2 | Please briefly introduce your basic background. |
| English Learning Needs | 17 | What kind of English teacher do you prefer? Why? |
| | | What teaching methods and class schedules do you prefer? Why? |
| | | Regarding student evaluation, which type do you prefer? |
| | | Do you think big data and artificial intelligence affect your English learning? |
| | | Do you like current textbooks you use? Do they meet your needs? |
| Total | 19 | |

**Table 5. Dimensions of Teacher Interview Guide**

| Dimension | Items | Example Questions |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher Personal Information | 2 | Please briefly introduce your personal background. |
| Students' Overall English Proficiency and Difficulties | 1 | How would you evaluate the overall English proficiency of current students? |
| Curriculum and Social Demand Alignment | 4 | To what extent do the offered courses align with students' real workplace and daily life scenarios? |
| Teaching Process and Classroom Management | 4 | How do you typically organize the classroom and interact with students during daily teaching? |
| Learning Strategies and Autonomous Learning Development | 2 | Do you consciously teach specific English learning strategies in class? |
| Teaching Materials and Resources | 4 | How do you evaluate the current textbooks, platforms, and hardware conditions? |
| Institutional Observations and Reform Suggestions | 7 | What reform suggestions do you have for the overall course system and assessment design? |
| Total | 24 | |

# 4. Research Findings

## 4.1 Social Needs in English Learning

Regarding social needs, nearly 80% of adult English majors (77.24%) recognized the positive impact of English proficiency on career development, indicating strong practicality and necessity in actual work contexts. In interviews, two-thirds of respondents (18 participants) mentioned the indispensability of English in multinational companies, foreign trade communication, international meetings, and professional documents. For example, S2 noted that she often communicates with foreigners, explains requests in English, and prepares quotations or contracts. In contrast, those who perceived English as moderately helpful (13.55%), barely helpful (5.69%), or not helpful at all (3.52%) totaled about 22%. Interviews suggested this was mainly due to limited opportunities to use English at work. S10 stated that her job rarely requires English, except for occasional document reading every few months.

Overall, adult learners' workplace English needs show two characteristics: significant differences across job positions and a strong orientation toward communicative application. Learners in international or external communication roles perceive more direct benefits, whereas those in localized positions perceive weaker benefits. Nevertheless, English ability is becoming an essential tool for most adult learners to enhance workplace competitiveness and expand career opportunities. Regarding core language knowledge, learners emphasized authentic language use and communicative function, especially pragmatic and discourse-level competence. For core language skills, they prioritized practical applicability, with the greatest demand for speaking and listening relevant to real-life communication.

## 4.2 Learners' Target English Proficiency and Competence Development Goals

Regarding learners' target English proficiency and competence development goals, the majority of participants aimed for levels within the B1/B2 range, corresponding to the "intermediate–upper-intermediate" tier of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)[13]. A small number of learners, however, sought either to achieve higher-level proficiency or to consolidate foundational skills. In terms of competence development, learners predominantly focused on oral communication, with speaking skills being the most prominent area of demand. In contrast, competencies related to autonomous learning, intercultural communication, academic writing, and digital literacy were comparatively less emphasized and perceived as less urgent.

## 4.3 English Learning Process Needs

Adult learners' needs regarding the English learning process can be summarized as "flexible and efficient, practically oriented, adequately supported, and reasonably assessed."[5] In terms of instructional mode, learners showed a preference for blended learning with a primarily online component, allowing for better time management between work, family, and study commitments. Regarding teaching methods, learners expected instruction to be systematic and clear, while incorporating more interaction and case studies to enhance engagement and practical value. However, due to constraints on time and energy, learners exhibited relatively low acceptance of teaching formats with heavy task demands, such as task-based learning. This was corroborated in interviews. For instance, student S9 remarked,

- S9: Although doing projects can be rewarding, as working adults, our time is limited, so it feels burdensome. (Interview S9)

Concerning learning approaches, learners preferred experiential and digital learning, viewing inquiry-based and independent study as supplementary methods. The demand for collaborative learning was comparatively low due to the high time cost of coordination.

Regarding course components, learners placed the highest priority on language skill development, followed by grammar and communicative competence, while viewing intercultural communication, ESP, and intelligent learning methods as supplementary skills. In terms of resource support, learners expected recorded lectures to be shorter, more concise, accompanied by comprehensive supporting materials, and delivered via more convenient platforms. They also hoped instructors would provide more systematic guidance on learning strategies.

Finally, in terms of assessment and scheduling, learners favored comprehensive evaluation and more flexible, formative assessment approaches. They preferred a combination of intensive weekend study and short weekday evening sessions to balance learning with work and personal life.

## 4.4 English Learning Resource Needs

### 4.4.1 Learners' Needs Regarding the "Teacher and Textbook" Dimension

Learners preferred teachers who combine professional competence with approachability, rather than those perceived as strict or distant. They expected richer, more engaging, and interactive lessons, with clear explanations, targeted practice, and direct post-class resources for efficient self-study. Some also wanted more post-class support and offline or live sessions. Regarding digital resources, over half welcomed teacher-recommended materials for efficiency, while others preferred concise guidance. Most were open to "digital-intelligent" textbook reform, though some remained cautious, needing more evidence of usability and effectiveness.

### 4.4.2 Learners' Needs Regarding Institutional Support

Learners rated four institutional support areas on a 5-point scale. Information retrieval training ranked highest (mean = 4.03), followed by advanced teaching facilities (4.00) and digital-intelligent resources (3.95). Platform and software training ranked lowest (3.84), as some learners found such operations intuitive and preferred instruction files over class time. Overall, learners expected a more user-friendly environment, abundant digital resources with clear guidance, and practical skill training, with flexible, optional training formats to accommodate diverse needs. Student interviews confirmed this point; for example, S1 noted,

- S1: Training on teaching platforms and software isn't really necessary. Providing us with an instruction file is enough—we don't want to waste class time on this.(Interview S1)

Based on these findings, institutions can offer targeted training for online platforms and software while allowing learners

to choose whether to participate and in what format, thereby accommodating diverse needs.

#### 4.4.3 Learners' Needs Regarding Educational Policy Makers

Adult learners' policy-level expectations focus on available, timely, and sustainable external support. For digital-intelligent teaching, they value immediate assistance such as real-time interaction, timely feedback, and personalized support, while demand for immersive environments, intelligent assessments, or online collaboration is weaker. For social resources, they prefer online learning communities and authentic cross-cultural communication over offline activities. As S17 noted, learners hope for online international exchange or volunteer projects to use English authentically. Overall, they need flexible, convenient, practice-oriented external platforms extending classroom learning into broader social and international contexts.

# 5. Recommendations for Meeting the Learning Needs of Adult English Majors

## 5.1 Layered Curriculum Design Centered on Authentic Communication Scenarios

Curriculum designers should structure layered courses around authentic communication scenarios, organizing tasks by workplace and everyday contexts and designing content according to occupational needs. This ensures different learner groups gain practical oral, listening, pragmatic, and discourse training within limited time. Fan[14] applied task-based teaching in business English for foreign trade: students simulated real trade roles, completed progressive tasks, and were assessed through presentations, peer review, and teacher scoring, enhancing both language use and autonomous/collaborative learning[15].

## 5.2 Oral Skills Enhancement and Integration of "Digital-Intelligent Literacy" Based on Layered Objectives

Since learners' target proficiency is mainly intermediate to upper-intermediate and oral communication is the most prominent need, the curriculum should strengthen oral and communicative training at that level, such as situational dialogues, meeting expressions, clarification, and negotiation. Teachers should also design challenging extension tasks for high-level learners to promote differentiated advancement within their "zones of proximal development"[16]. Because self-reported demand for digital and AI-assisted skills is relatively low, institutions should avoid standalone courses; instead, teachers should integrate information retrieval, material filtering, AI-assisted writing/translation, and reflective learning into unit tasks and assignments.

## 5.3 Blended Teaching Implementation and Integrated Learning Support: "Online First, Offline Reinforcement"

It is recommended to implement blended teaching and learning support integration along the path of 'online first, offline reinforcement.' Teachers should retain the flexibility of online courses, enhance interaction and oral practice through offline sessions, micro-divide recorded lessons, normalize strategy guidance, and make formative assessments operational to create a sustainable learning loop. Teacher interviews provide direct evidence supporting this blended path.

## 5.4 A teacher–institution–policy collaborative support system for digital English learning

This study proposes a teacher–institution–policy collaborative support system guided by classroom practicality. At the teacher level, a pathway of "clear instruction—frequent interaction—continuous follow-up" is recommended, extending support into after-class activities. At the institutional level, schools should provide integrated facilities, easy resource access, guided technology use, and responsive problem solving. At the policy level, authorities can establish "policy-driven initiatives—funding assurance—platform connectivity," making interactive live classes and personalized support sustainable while expanding online communities and exchange projects for authentic language use.

# 6. Conclusion

This study uses a mixed-methods design combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to examine English-major learning needs in adult higher education. Four findings emerge. First, social needs differ by occupation and are strongly communication-oriented: learners in foreign-related jobs perceive more direct workplace benefits, with overall needs focusing on speaking, listening, and pragmatic/discourse competence. Second, target proficiency is mainly at B1–B2 level, with oral communication as the priority. Third, process needs emphasize flexibility, efficiency, and support: learners prefer online blended instruction with clear explanation, frequent interaction, sufficient practice, recorded lessons, user-friendly platforms, strategy training, comprehensive assessment, and flexible scheduling. Fourth, resource needs include: (1) teachers combining professionalism and approachability, with acceptance of digital textbooks depending on user

experience; (2) institutional provision of advanced facilities, digital resources, and training; and (3) policy support, online learning communities, and intercultural exchange opportunities. Accordingly, four strategies are proposed: tiered curriculum design based on authentic communicative scenarios; oral-skill strengthening with digital-intelligence literacy; blended learning with "online as main, offline as reinforcement"; and coordinated teacher–institution–policy support. Limitations include insufficient interdisciplinary integration; future research should strengthen collaboration across applied linguistics, educational technology, psychology, sociology, and vocational education.

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