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# Business peoples' perceptions of English language use and its importance in the Chinese business world: a mixed-methods study

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a study measuring business people's perceptions of English language use and its importance in the Chinese business community. Utilizing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, an analysis of cross-validated data from 1505 questionnaire participants and 30 interviewees revealed that business people in China do not use English as frequently as their national language, Mandarin Chinese, in their dealings. Nevertheless, the findings also indicated that business people are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of English as a medium of communication in the business world. The findings have meaningful implications for practitioners of English for specific purposes, policymakers, and materials developers.

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## KEYWORDS


Business English; English as a lingua franca; use of English; communication; business people; China

## 1. Introduction

English is rapidly becoming the leading lingua franca in the contemporary business world. Scholarly interest in the professional use of English has increased in recent decades, including in China (e.g. Du-Babcock, 2018; He & Li, 2023). There are several reasons for this. Firstly, China's rapid economic and social development since the 1990s has made it an increasingly influential trading partner. It is currently one of the fastest booming global economies, as evidenced by its healthy gross domestic product and Belt and Road Initiative, as well as being 'the largest contributor to global growth since the financial crisis of 2008' (Global PEO Services, 2022, para. 2). Notably, in 2014, overseas direct investment in China exceeded foreign direct investment for the first time and China is now the leading trade partner of more than 140 countries and regions (ChinaIRN, 2015; Xi, 2022).

Secondly, China's influence has extended to other economic sectors, such as education, culture, and heritage. For example, it is the third most preferred destination for international students and the third largest exporter of cultural products after the USA and the UK (Chhapia, 2014). These factors indicate that if Chinese companies plan to conduct business in the contemporary multilingual and multicultural working

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environment, English must be employed as an official corporate language (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013), which requires speakers proficient in English. Therefore, it is essential to promote English as a business lingua franca at the university level, as this will serve to increase the employability of students planning careers in fields such as commerce, international trade, insurance, and banking.

A plethora of international studies have focused on various aspects of the English language, including a large number of perception studies. However, on closer inspection, the current literature indicates that further research is required to explore English as a language of international and intercultural communication in the global business domain (He, 2020), including in the Chinese context (e.g. Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020a). Until recently, perception studies have mainly been limited to the teaching–learning process (e.g. He, 2017; Zhao & Wang, 2015); few have concentrated on business communication. To build on the current understanding of theories and models of professional communication, business communication requires increased attention and empirical evidence, hence the current study.

For instance, in China, Mandarin (or Putonghua in its spoken form) has always been considered the only official language and working lingua franca for inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic communication. In contrast to the use of English in domains within non-English-speaking countries such as Brunei, English is seen as a foreign language, with its use primarily restricted to education and fields such as diplomacy and tourism (Henry & Ho, 2016). Hence, Chinese peoples' perceptions of the use and importance of English in China in general and the business community in particular have rarely been examined (Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020a). Similarly, there have been few studies on the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in mainland China's business sector (Yao, 2017). This study therefore fills this gap by scrutinizing the use of English in China from the perspectives of Chinese business people.

To achieve this, the article reviews relevant literature on business English as a lingua franca (BELF) worldwide, particularly in Asia (including China). The article then introduces the research design and presents a mixed-methods study of Chinese business people's perceptions of English use. The data are then discussed in relation to previous studies. Finally, the study's limitations, suggestions for future research, and the implications of the findings are presented.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Business English as a lingua franca**

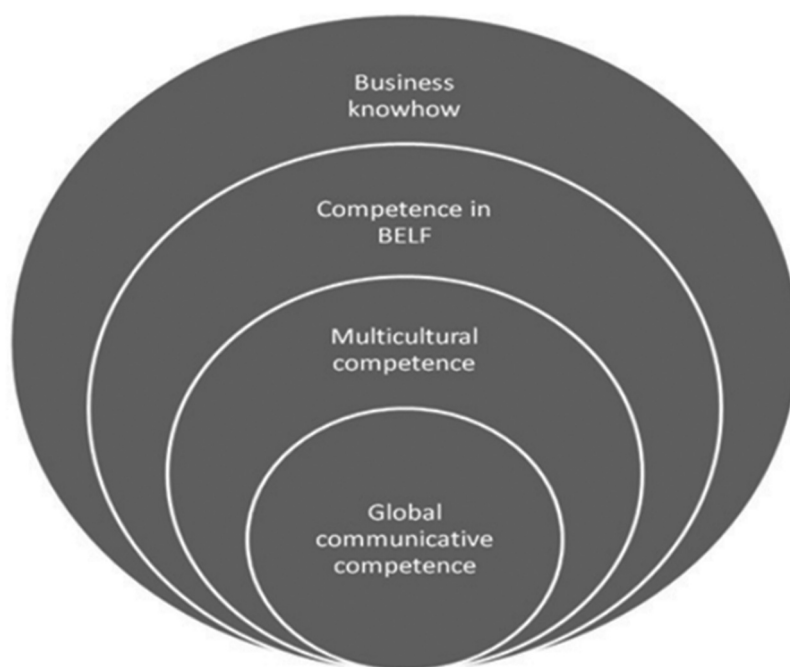
BELF is defined as 'a neutral language of communication between business people whose English is not their first language' (Dimeski, 2021, p. 149). It is immensely important, as 91% of employers in international corporations consider English highly relevant to their professional performance (Martins, 2017). Unsurprisingly, BELF is interrelated with ELF but nevertheless deserves its place in the field of communication. For instance, aspects of ELF, including settings, speakers, and interactions between individuals, can all be applied to BELF scenarios (House, 1999; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Roshid, Webb, & Chowdhury, 2022). However, the variation, contextuality, and dynamism of BELF all contribute to its distinctiveness. BELF is

extremely specialist in nature, heavily dependent on context, and lacks a sophisticated structural framework. Some of the contextual features of BELF discourse distinguish it from ELF; for example, the degree of rapport in an organization, joint expertise as professionals, and a co-active business setting. Such elements are manifested in business-specific terminology rather than general English, a simpler form of English that focuses on candidness and intelligibility rather than the accuracy of grammar, and professional aptitude, especially in business settings. According to Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011), three factors determine effective BELF communication: accuracy of information (getting the facts right); clear, explicit, and direct discourse; and appropriate tone and politeness (making recipients feel good).

All things considered, the uniqueness of BELF within ELF encapsulates the setting in which it is employed (international business), the roles played by those using it (professionals), and the ultimate objectives of their interactions (e.g. ensuring jobs are completed and establishing a rapport) (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). Just as importantly, BELF addresses both the teaching and research conducted in the domain of business English to facilitate the transmission of business between native speakers of English and those speaking alternative languages and between non-native speakers in workplaces where English is employed (Lopez, 2022). BELF is also characterized by its neutrality – it is a neutral tool for all interlocutors; its practicability – it focuses more on practical and efficient business communication rather than native-speaker-norms; and its cultural diversity – its users are from different cultural backgrounds (Martins, 2017). Therefore, BELF users can achieve their communicative aims through their command of ELF, specific business contexts, and related cultures (Seidlhofer, 2011).

This discussion of the concept and development of BELF as an international business language would not be complete without corroborating Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen's (2013, p. 17) assertion that 'professional competence in today's global business environment involves communication knowhow as an integral element of business knowhow' and that proficiency in BELF is especially important in a globalized context. The conceptual framework of BELF devised by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013), presented in Figure 1, depicts global communicative competence surrounded by three layers: multicultural competence, competence in BELF, and business knowhow. The first layer, multicultural competence, encompasses knowledge and skills in handling scenarios requiring communication with people from disparate national, institutional, and professional backgrounds. The second layer, competence in BELF, denotes 'competence in English "core", business-specific genres, and communication strategies focusing on clarity, brevity, directness and politeness' (2013, p. 28). As stated previously, BELF is highly context-specific, vibrant, and unique and thus tolerates disparate forms. The final layer therefore focuses on business-specific knowledge. It includes two closely related elements: 'the particular "domain of use" and the wider, overall goals, norms, and strategies of business shared by the business community' (2013, p. 29).

As indicated in the aforementioned framework, proficiency in BELF is vital as it facilitates successful business communication across contexts and forms an essential element of professional competence in the business world. Moreover, all elements of the framework are included in the concept of BE, serving as the tool of communication for various trade and business encounters. For instance, the use of BE by Chinese business people working with foreign partners, including Asian countries, clearly unites



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of BELF (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011, p. 258).

various Asian Englishes, such as Japanese English and Indonesian English, under the umbrella term of BELF. Additionally, the close connection between BE and the aforementioned framework renders the latter a useful pedagogical tool that should be integrated into university curricula across China to facilitate the training of competent business people.

## **2.2. Previous research on BELF**

Studies on the use of English in the business world are not only rare, but have also frequently been conducted outside China. For the past two decades, BELF has garnered much attention in Europe (Du-Babcock, 2018) and multiple studies have examined English as a business language in global contexts (Nickerson, 2014). For instance, Ehrenreich (2010) found that English has become a necessary medium of communication among upper management team members in a German multinational company. In addition, English in the business world is ‘highly collaborative, both in spoken and written’ modes, regardless of company size (Cogo, 2012, p. 287).

Research on the development of BELF in various Asian regions has revealed that people exhibit similar characteristics when using English in communication (Kameda, 2013). Further to this, Phumpho and Nomnian’s (2019) study of Thai business people using English in various industries within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) identified the following challenges: international business partners struggle to understand each other’s English; insufficient knowledge of partners’ culture problematizes communication; different communicative styles (e.g. pace, intonation, accent)

reduce the efficiency of communication; and indirectness is needed to reduce cultural sensitivity, which makes communications less efficient as partners need to confirm mutual understanding.

In addition, Henry and Ho (2016) found that a code-switched Malay-English variety of English was commonly used in 40 online retail business transactions in Brunei. Based on 92 emails from Bangladesh business corporations, Roshid, Webb, and Chowdhury (2022) reported that via digital communication, especially email, those employing BELF generate novel versions of written English that may be problematic for entrepreneurs whose proficiency in English is less sophisticated. Nevertheless, research conducted recently indicates that professionals working in business are cognizant of the difficulties that arise regarding the English language and are committed to enhancing their English proficiency (Lopez, 2022), especially in relation to speaking and writing. Strengthening BELF training in these organizations is advocated (Lopez, 2022).

In Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles model of World Englishes, BELF studies can be found in both Outer and Expanding Circle (e.g. Phumpho & Nomnian, 2019) countries. Comparative studies between these circles have also been conducted (e.g. Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013). These reveal that BELF is frequently used by people with different mother tongues to conduct business successfully, despite insufficient knowledge about the partners' culture (Phumpho & Nomnian, 2019).

Wu's (2014, p. 130) review of 8672 academic articles revealed that BELF teaching and research have increased since the People's Republic of China was founded; furthermore, BELF literature will continue to grow. Such research encompasses teaching methodology, modes, and learning strategies, syllabus design, course assessment and reform, translation studies, systemic functional linguistics-based studies, and discourse studies.

Although empirical studies on BELF in China since Wu's (2014) review have been rare, four merit consideration. In the first of these, Kankaanranta and Lu (2013) interviewed 17 professionals and concluded that Chinese business people should value direct BELF communication and be cognizant of its multicultural and flexible nature. Conversely, Rixer's (2016) research on eight participants from a multinational company identified misunderstandings in BELF communication between Chinese and Nordic people, but this did not impede business as they employed effective communicative strategies such as confirmation with follow-up questions, speaking slowly, non-verbal or even written communication, and, most successfully, keeping information short and simple. In addition, Chinese people's use of 'yes' to indicate listening actively might be understood by Nordic people as agreement, hence awareness of cultural differences can enhance the efficiency of intercultural communication.

In two large-scale projects analyzing 307 English emails sent by BE graduates to international clients in China's trading companies, Liao and Nesi (2017) reported that although the graduates' command of English was restricted, communications were successful as they focused on conveying meaning rather than grammatical accuracy. The authors recommended adopting different authentic BELF texts in classroom teaching rather than focusing on grammar. Analyzing questionnaire data obtained from 227 professionals working in China (and interview data from 11 of these), Yao and Du-Babcock (2020a) found that English was becoming increasingly important in Chinese companies, especially multinational corporations, and that culture and language were equally important.

### 2.3. Research context and questions

As a result of China's expansion overseas, English is the de facto language of communication in all trade and business situations (Dimeski, 2021; Martins, 2017). Hence, BELF has become an essential topic for discussion. The current study illuminates this issue to further advance China as a serious business and trading contender.

English-medium business programs are offered in numerous universities, often eliciting high satisfaction ratings from students (CUCAS, 2022). This has also been observed outside China, for instance in Spain and Austria (Arno-Macia et al. 2020), with students acquiring a more sophisticated comprehension of the characteristics of specific modes of communication, and how to ensure they are fully prepared for their prospective place of work. Consequently, Zhao and Wang (2015) argue that university English in China should be geared toward ESP. They believe that such reformation is necessary because the current English language provision does not fully address the diverse disciplinary language needs of students (Li, 2019; Wen, 2012). Similarly, the use of ELF in China's business world (e.g. Dai & Liu, 2016; Yao, 2019), where English use has exhibited 'a tendency to increase in both frequency and variety' over the past few decades (Yao, 2017, p. 1), also seems to be insufficient.

As very recent academic debates indicate, twenty-first-century English for specific purposes (ESP) courses require tasks, simulations, cooperative projects, flipped methods, and blended learning (e.g. Cai, 2019; Dou, Chan, & Win, 2023; Yélamos-Guerra, García-Gámez, & Moreno-Ortiz, 2022; Zaafour & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2022). In China, for example, students have already been encouraged to use the ESP linguistic corpus as technical support for learning English (Zheng & Wu, 2019), and Zhu (2020) called for an evaluation test system to be set up to homogenize processes for assessing ESP language. This will involve applying competence standards established using e-portfolios and apps.

All of these aspects seem to be prospective elements of teaching and learning ESP in China. Moreover, they will supply a growing body of information to facilitate the expansion of ESP research along with the delivery of ESP courses that are more pragmatic in nature, of which English for Business Communication is a prime example. Against this complex backdrop, this study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What are business people's perceptions of English use in China's business world?
- (2) How important is the use of English in these sectors, both currently and in the future?

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research design and data collection

This section presents a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study conducted in China. The rationale for using both quantitative and qualitative methods was threefold: to generate a comprehensive understanding of the topic; to enhance the explanatory power and quality of the data; and to ensure the outcomes were both reliable and trustworthy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The data were collected in two stages. The first involved the collection and analysis of numerical questionnaire data reflecting participants' perceptions of the frequency of English use in various business sectors in



China. The second stage involved the collection and analysis of textual data gathered from semi-structured interviews with selected questionnaire respondents.

The questionnaire was adapted from the Language Use in the Professional World survey developed by Evans (2011), which was appropriate for this context. It elicited data relating to: demographic information; the general pattern of language choice in the business community; the frequency of English use in the business community; and the importance of English in this domain. Prior to collecting the data, a pilot study was conducted with a small sample to gauge the difficulty of items. Questionnaire items were also subjected to a Cronbach's alpha test, yielding robust scores of between 0.82 and 0.89 for internal reliability, respectively (George & Mallery, 2003). Hence, no modifications were made to the questionnaire items.

To triangulate the data, individual interviews were conducted with 30 business professionals (15 male and 15 female participants), all of whom completed the questionnaire. Interviewees were selected based on age, gender, company size, and type of industry or workplace. They were asked the following three questions:

- (1) Do you use English in your business? Why/why not?
- (2) Is English important in your business? Why/why not?
- (3) Do you think English will become more or less important in your business in the future? Why/why not?

All interviews were conducted online and recorded with participants' consent. To ensure accuracy, they were conducted in Putonghua, a language in which interviewees felt more at ease expressing their opinions. The interviews were then transcribed and checked for errors before being translated into English, following which back translation was undertaken to maintain accuracy.

### **3.2. Participants and sampling procedure**

The questionnaire was administered to 1635 Chinese participants working in China. COVID-19 restrictions meant that it was not possible to collect data face to face. To recruit as many people as possible, a snowball sampling method was employed. A Web-enabled questionnaire link was sent to parents and relatives working in the business sector. Upon completion, participants were asked to invite friends and colleagues working in business sectors to complete the questionnaire. Through this method, we collected reliable data as 1505 (92%) of the 1635 responses were deemed valid (i.e. those with incomplete/repetitive items were considered non-valid).

Of these, 725 (48.2%) of the responses were from females and 780 (51.8%) were from males. Regarding age, most participants were in their forties or late thirties (Table 1).

On average, participants had 9.5 years of experience in learning English. Specifically, 257 (17.1%, standard deviation [SD] = 3.6) had studied English for five years or less, 685 (45.5%, SD = 3.9) for 6–10 years, 413 (27.4%, SD = 4.2) for 11–14 years, and 150 (10.0%, SD = 3.3) for 15 years or more. Regarding the highest educational level achieved, 328 (21.8%, SD = 4.5) were awarded a senior high-school certificate or equivalent, 275 (18.3%, SD = 3.7) a higher diploma, 736 (48.9%, SD = 5.1) a bachelor's degree, 160 (10.6%, SD = 3.4) a master's degree, and six (0.4%, SD = 4.0) a doctoral degree. Most



**Table 1.** Participants' age distribution ( $N = 1505$ ).

	24 years or below	25–29 years	30–34 years	35–39 years	40–44 years	45–49 years	50–54 years	55 years or above
Number	28	76	124	305	461	345	145	21
Percentage	1.8	5.0	8.2	20.3	30.6	22.9	9.6	1.4

**Table 2.** Participants' years of working experience ( $N = 1505$ ).

	≤5 years	6–10 years	11–15 years	16–20 years	21–25 years	26–30 years	31–35 years	36–40 years	≥41 years
Number	430	176	107	311	338	103	34	6	0
Percentage	28.6	11.7	7.1	20.7	22.5	6.8	2.3	0.4	0.0

were deemed well educated according to years of English learning experience (mean = 9.5,  $SD = 3.4$ ) and the highest level of education achieved (78.2% obtained a higher diploma and above). Moreover, 40.3% of the participants had worked for 10 years or less, 50.3% for 11–25 years, and 9.5% for more than 26 years (Table 2).

In terms of job rankings, the majority were in the 'middle' rank (40.1%,  $n = 604$ ), followed by 'junior' (37.8%,  $n = 569$ ) and 'senior' (22.1%,  $n = 332$ ) ranks. These participants worked in 31 industries/professions from all eight economic regions in China. However, they were not evenly distributed across these industries; for example, participants from finance, manufacturing, and trade accounted for 37.4% of the total, while those from electronics, the chemical industry, and entertainment accounted for only 2.1%. Details of the 31 industries and their related percentages are presented in Table 3.

Most participants were from Chinese-owned companies (64.0%,  $n = 963$ ), with the remainder working in foreign-owned companies (25.7%,  $n = 387$ ) and China–foreign joint ventures (10.3%,  $n = 155$ ). Most participants were working in large firms (67.2%,  $n = 1,012$ ), while 193 (12.9%) were working in medium-sized companies and 300 (19.9%) in small companies.

The questionnaire also measured participants' self-assessed spoken and written English ability on a six-point Likert scale (1 = poor to 6 = excellent). Table 4 presents this self-assessment in two categories: low ability and high ability. The cumulative

**Table 3.** The 31 industries in which participants worked ( $N = 1505$ ).

Industry	n	%	Industry	n	%	Industry	n	%
Finance	213	14.2	Retail	39	2.6	Environmental protection	21	1.4
Manufacturing	192	12.8	Transportation	38	2.5	Optics	19	1.3
Trade	156	10.4	Engineering	38	2.5	Catering	18	1.2
Service industry in broad sense (excluding those specified in this table)	101	6.7	Advertising	36	2.4	Law	18	1.2
Construction	67	4.5	Insurance	32	2.1	Textile	15	1.0
Media and communication	61	4.1	Publishing	31	2.1	Agricultural technology	15	1.0
Information technology	49	3.3	Telecommunication	30	2.0	Electronics	14	0.9
Energy	49	3.3	Tourism	27	1.8	Chemical industry	12	0.8
Internet	46	3.1	Public relations	26	1.7	Entertainment	6	0.4
Logistics	45	3.0	Real estate	25	1.7			
Clothing	42	2.8	Marketing	24	1.6			

**Table 4.** Self-assessed English ability ( $N = 1505$ ).

	Poor	Somewhat poor	Not good	Good	Very good	Excellent
	Low ability			High ability		
Spoken English	361 (24.0%)	192 (12.8%)	295 (19.6%)	272 (18.1%)	272 (18.1%)	113 (7.5%)
Written English	366 (24.3%)	193 (12.8%)	249 (16.5%)	304 (20.2%)	262 (17.4%)	131 (8.7%)

percentages of low ability for spoken English (56.4%,  $SD = 3.6$ ) and written English (53.6%,  $SD = 3.7$ ) suggest that more than 50% of the participants lacked confidence in their English skills. This suggests that university English teaching has not fully equipped students for future professional development.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Using SPSS, the data were analyzed descriptively by generating percentages. For ease of understanding, some items were further divided into sub-categories. For example, the frequency of using English in business, which was measured on a six-point Likert scale (1 = never to 6 = always), was further divided into two categories: low frequency (1–3) and high frequency (4–6). The interview data were analyzed using thematic coding with MAXQDA 2022, a software program designed to analyze and code textual data. The purpose was to identify essential and notable patterns in the data through recurring frequencies.

## 4. Results

This section analyzes the data in relation to the two research questions. [Section 4.1](#) focuses on business people's perceptions of English use in China's business world, while [Section 4.2](#) reports the importance of English use in these sectors, both currently and in the future.

### 4.1. Business people's perceptions of English use in China's business world

Section 2.1 of the questionnaire focused on participants' choice between English and Chinese in their business reading or writing. It comprised 16 items responded to on a five-point Likert scale (1 = always English to 5 = always Chinese). Frequency analysis revealed that while most participants always (35.3%,  $n = 532$ ) or usually (38.9%,  $n = 585$ ) used Chinese at work, only 25.8% ( $n = 388$ ) used Chinese and English equally (15.0%,  $n = 225$ ). Because these participants were using English in a Chinese-dominated environment, their English use could be regarded as frequent. Therefore, they were combined with those who usually (9.9%,  $n = 149$ ) or always (0.9%,  $n = 14$ ) used English at work. The top five types of text participants chose to write or read in English were websites, external email messages, professional journals/magazines, letters, and promotional materials.

Regarding spoken communication, 21.1% ( $n = 318$ ) of participants claimed they would speak or listen to English in business, while the others (78.9%,  $n = 1187$ ) would choose to use Putonghua. Regarding written communication, English was a frequent choice in spoken business communication, although not as frequent as Mandarin. The top five speaking/listening situations in which English was preferred were presentations,

conferences, formal meetings/negotiations, job interviews, and staff training/development. This indicates that business English modules in China should enhance students' English language abilities in these situations.

Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 of the questionnaire examined the frequency with which English was used for different business purposes on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 6 = always (almost every day). Table 5 presents the English writing, reading, speaking, and listening frequencies. These were collapsed into two categories: high frequency and low frequency. The table reveals a significantly higher percentage of participants in the low-frequency category (77.9%,  $SD = 4.4$ ) than in the high-frequency category (22.1%,  $SD = 5.2$ ). The top five types of text most frequently written in English were external emails, promotional materials, letters, reports, and minutes. Regarding reading in English, 24.5% ( $SD = 3.9$ ) of the participants were in the high-frequency category and 75.5% ( $SD = 4.5$ ) were in the low-frequency category. The participants read the following top five text types in English: external emails, websites, promotional materials, letters, and professional journals/magazines. Notably, three types of text (external emails, promotional materials, and letters) appeared in the top five lists for writing and reading. Perhaps due to the recent prevalence of WeChat, Skype/QQ (0.1%,  $SD = 7.0$ ) was the least used written method in business communication.

Regarding the frequency of speaking or listening to English at work, 19.2% of participants were in the high-frequency category, while 80.7% were in the low-frequency category (Table 5). The top five speaking or listening situations were telephone conversations, formal meetings/negotiations, informal meetings/discussions, presentations, and WeChat, with Skype/QQ being the least used.

The interview data complemented and triangulated the questionnaire responses to further enrich understanding of the perceived frequency and significance of English use in China's business world. Question 1 explored whether Chinese business people used English in the workplace and their motivations for this. Most interviewees reported that English was sometimes, although seldom frequently or always, used. The reasons were varied and are presented in descending order of the number of mentions in Table 6.

The quantitative data on the reasons why Chinese business people use English in the workplace were further supported by the qualitative data. Specifically, three interviewees stated the following:

- (1) Yes, we use English sometimes since we occasionally have foreign tourists who do not understand Chinese. Due to the rapid spread of globalization, English has become an international language. Besides, English is beneficial for employment and connecting with one another through social media since English is the default language of some social media platforms. (Interviewee 2)

**Table 5.** Frequency of English use in business communication ( $N = 1505$ ).

	Never	Seldom	Not very often	Sometimes	Often	Always
Mode of communication	Low frequency			High frequency		
Writing	560 (37.2%)	409 (27.2%)	203 (13.5%)	191 (12.7%)	118 (7.8%)	24 (1.6%)
Reading	510 (33.9%)	324 (21.5%)	303 (20.1%)	221 (14.7%)	122 (8.1%)	25 (1.7%)
Speaking or listening	601 (39.9%)	380 (25.2%)	235 (15.6%)	145 (9.6%)	119 (7.9%)	25 (1.7%)

**Table 6.** Reasons for Chinese business people to use English in the workplace.

Reason	No. of mentions	Percentage
English is a global language	19	63.3
English is a prerequisite for career opportunities	16	53.3
English guarantees access to a better education	15	50.0
English is the default language of many social media platforms	12	40.0
English is the top language of the Internet and makes life more entertaining	11	36.7

- (2) Yes, English is often used at work since we usually provide financial services for companies with international trade. Besides, with the increasing use of English to interact with people from other countries, we have been given access to a wide variety of sources worldwide such as various social media for either work or entertainment. English is often the default language of these social media. (Interviewee 5)
- (3) Yes, I do use English, although not frequently, in my business when we make international trade. English is the global language through which we can access limitless knowledge and information. Without English, people in China may not be able to connect worldwide and they might live in isolation from the rest of the world except for the nations using Chinese; for example, Singapore. (Interviewee 19)

#### **4.2. The importance of English use in these sectors, both currently and in the future**

Participants were also asked to rank the importance of Chinese and English (both spoken and written) in business communication on a six-point Likert scale (1 = completely unimportant to 6 = extremely important). This was collapsed into two categories: high importance and low importance. The results presented in Table 7 indicate that 90.5% (SD = 2.5) of participants considered Putonghua highly important, with the percentage for written Chinese even higher at 93.0% (SD = 2.7). The two cumulative percentages for spoken and written English were 53.3% (SD = 3.5) and 53.4% (SD = 3.4). Overall, Chinese was considered far more important than English, but more than 50% of participants still perceived English as important, indicating that its use is significant in China's business world.

Section 4.2 of the questionnaire gauged participants' perceptions of changes in the importance of using Chinese and English in business communication. As presented in Table 8, slightly more than 50% of the participants perceived the importance of Putonghua and written Chinese as remaining approximately the same (68.0%, SD = 3.8; 64.6%, SD = 3.7). They also claimed that spoken and written English had become increasingly important in their business (60.3%, SD = 3.8; 58.8%, SD = 3.5).

The responses to interview Questions 2 and 3 confirmed these results. Question 2 addressed the extent to which English had become important in interviewees' businesses and the possible reasons for this. Most interviewees indicated that English had become more important. Table 9 presents the reasons in the decreasing order of mentions.

Reasons for the English language becoming more important in the workplace were elaborated on by three interviewees as follows:

**Table 7.** Importance of languages in business communication ( $N = 1505$ ).

Language	Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Of some importance	Important	Very important	Extremely important
	Low importance			High importance		
Putonghua	22 (1.5%)	20 (1.3%)	102 (6.8%)	242 (16.1%)	322 (21.4%)	797 (53.0%)
Written Chinese	16 (1.1%)	31 (2.1%)	59 (3.9%)	233 (15.5%)	352 (23.4%)	814 (54.1%)
Spoken English	266 (17.7%)	259 (17.2%)	178 (11.8%)	181 (12.0%)	194 (12.9%)	427 (28.4%)
Written English	243 (16.1%)	288 (19.1%)	170 (11.3%)	169 (11.2%)	191 (12.7%)	444 (29.5%)

**Table 8.** Changes in the importance of languages in business communication ( $N = 1505$ ).

Language	Less important	More important	About the same
Putonghua	23 (1.5%)	459 (30.5%)	1,023 (68.0%)
Written Chinese	21 (1.4%)	512 (34.0%)	972 (64.6%)
Spoken English	190 (12.6%)	907 (60.3%)	408 (27.1%)
Written English	203 (13.5%)	885 (58.8%)	417 (27.7%)

- (4) English has become increasingly important in my work. I am working for an information technology company, and sometimes we need English to communicate with foreign colleagues speaking English as their L1 or L2. Besides, it is necessary for us to update our knowledge and skills with the latest information technologies using English. (Interviewee 1)
- (5) I think English has become increasingly important since I have colleagues and supervisors who speak English or other foreign languages as their L1. The language in which we talk to them is English. In addition, we have some equipment imported from Germany, and the language we communicate with those German experts is also English since it is a global language known by both sides. (Interviewee 25)
- (6) English should have become more important in my business, although I have only worked for five years, as we publish a few English books occasionally. Besides, as far as I can see, English is still a global language despite the negative effects of COVID-19. That is, English has become more important both locally and internationally. (Interviewee 20)

A few interviewees answered 'not sure' because they seldom or never used English.

Question 3 asked whether interviewees thought English would become more or less important in their business in the future and to justify their responses. In response,

**Table 9.** Reasons why English has become important in the workplace.

Reason	No. of mentions	Percentage
The need to communicate more with foreigners, as English was the only language they both knew	20	66.7
English as a working language	15	50.0
English as a tool for external information and knowledge	14	46.7

almost all interviewees believed that English would become more important (Excerpts 7–9), including those who had not previously used English, as they felt they might need to do so in the future. However, one interviewee said she did not know and argued that Mandarin might become more important in the future, if not more important than English (Excerpt 10). The reasons given by the 29 interviewees are presented in Table 10 in descending order of the number of mentions.

The following excerpts support this numerical data. In the first three excerpts, the participants emphasize the growing importance of English in their businesses. In the fourth, the interviewee sounds less confident:

- (7) English will be increasingly significant because China is playing a cumulatively important role globally ... we need English since it is the most commonly used language in the world. Moreover, Chinese people are watching an increasing number of English movies, variety shows, and TV series. As a result, I think that the importance of English will increase in China. (Interviewee 11)
- (8) Maybe more important ... Many large companies in China are opening branches abroad, including in English-speaking countries and European nations, so more talents proficient in English are needed. Hence, the importance of English will [increase]. (Interviewee 16)
- (9) English will be more important because China's young people have started learning English from middle school, and some of them even from primary school. They can make use of English in their lives. Additionally, a growing number of movies, TV series, variety shows, and online entertainment in English are watched all over the world. In other words, people have formed the habit of entertaining themselves via both Chinese and English. English is also the dominant language for ... social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. My perception is that English will become more important. (Interviewee 28)
- (10) Not sure. As we know, China is playing an increasingly ... important role globally, especially with the influence of 'the Belt and Road Initiative'. Furthermore, an increasing number of Chinese people are becoming rich, and they want to embark on tourism in foreign countries, but their English is poor, so ... Chinese-speaking guides are in high demand in some Southeast Asian countries. All these elucidate that Mandarin might be considered a universal language instead of English. (Interviewee 2)

**Table 10.** Reasons for English being more important in the future.

Reason	No. of mentions	Percentage
English will continue to serve as the global lingua franca	28	93.3
English helps people to move outward and/or upward in their careers	26	86.7
English will continue to be the most useful language in social media and on the Internet	25	83.3
More foreigners will come to China as the nation is widening the Open Door Policy	23	76.7
China's global role is more important than ever	19	63.3
More Chinese companies are conducting business abroad	14	46.7
English is useful for both knowledge and entertainment	8	26.7
Communicative needs between people of different nations are increasing given further globalization	2	6.7

## 5. Discussion

Importantly, this study represents the first large-scale investigation into perceptions of English use in China's business world. This section discusses the results in relation to the two research questions. First, the findings suggest that English is perceived as being used comparatively little in business communication, and Chinese remains the preferred language. Nevertheless, participants believe that English is important and will become more so. This is expected, as English is now considered a significant business lingua franca. Therefore, China's continuing Open Door Policy and growing global importance will entail using English (He, 2015, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2021). Given China's dramatic rise in the global economy, the use of English in business communication may become increasingly urgent. Indeed, Yao and Du-Babcock (2020a, 2020b) assert that an increasingly significant role is played by English when communicating in the workplace in mainland China, especially in multinational enterprises where its use has become a business norm, albeit influenced by contextual variables such as proficiency and professional responsibilities.

The widespread use of English in China has even produced a local variety of English named China or Chinese English (He, 2020; He & Miller, 2011; He & Zhang, 2010; Xu, 2010; Xue 2022). However, some scholars (e.g. Li, 2019) argue that China English is more suitable for describing the form of English that most accurately represents the socio-cultural realities of China and is distinct from the more pejorative terms Chinese English or Chinglish. With the acceptance and further development of this new variety, Chinese speakers will become more confident in their own brand of English and more willing to use it for occupational purposes, as they will not be perceived as deviant or sub-standard users of English (Li & He, 2021).

The results imply that university English teaching in China must redirect English instruction toward helping learners use it for specific purposes rather than general education. For instance, Interviewee 1 stated that it was 'necessary for [business people] to update their knowledge and skills with the latest information technologies using English.' This aligns with Zhao and Wang's (2015) ESP suggestion, although the data for this study were gathered from Chinese business professionals rather than university students and their English teachers.

Recent government policies released by the Ministry of Education in 2021 have negatively influenced the status and value of English. One new policy prohibits higher institutions from rejecting applicants who choose a non-English foreign language in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). Consequently, the number of students opting to do this in the 2021 NCEE reached an all-time high of more than 200,000 (Jiemogaokaoriyuzhinan, 2021). This has impeded the call for developing a BELF curriculum in tertiary institutions. However, the current results indicate that business people feel English will become increasingly important (see Excerpts 7–9), although Chinese still appears to be the preferred choice (see Excerpt 10 and Table 7). This augurs well for the vitality of the Chinese language in China.

The perceived future importance of English is consistent with previous research. For example, Ufier (2016) argued that countries with better English proficiency generate higher national incomes and exports. The ability to speak good English may imply productivity and unobserved skills such as better cognitive and analytic capabilities



(Stohr, 2015). Notably, despite the comparatively low frequency of English use, China has dramatically advanced economically, socially, and technologically. Against the background of globalization and World Englishes, most participants believed that English will play a more significant role in China's business world, both locally and globally. Moreover, Guo and Sun (2014) reported that proficient English communication skills are positively related to the future earnings of university graduates in China.

Furthermore, given that more than half of the questionnaire participants lacked confidence in their ability to use English in the business world (Table 4), some suggested that university English teaching should focus on equipping students with practical English skills that will be useful in their future careers and workplaces. For instance, students could be trained to write emails, promotional materials, letters, reports, and minutes in English for business communication, considering the different varieties of English used in related nations. Similarly, ESP modules on business negotiation, meetings, and presentations should cater for students' professional development needs (Guo & Sun, 2014).

## 6. Conclusion and implications

The findings of this mixed-methods study indicate that although English is employed in various business industries across China, this does not occur as frequently as expected because Chinese, China's only official language, is still the preferred language. Nevertheless, English is now perceived as important in China's business communication and will become even more significant.

Like other studies that employ snowball sampling, this study cannot be considered representative of everyone in China's business world. However, including participants from different parts and industries of China mitigated this. Additionally, to collect additional information, focus groups could have followed the interview stage, and the validity of the findings could have been assessed by evaluating the responses across participants within each group.

Despite the limitations, this article provides a springboard to further research business English across other domains in China's business world. Such research should investigate how to enhance Chinese business professionals' efficacy and skills in English communication while still at university. Future research may also assess the effectiveness and impact of recruiting successful business people as part-time teachers for business English programs to enhance university students' target language competence and effective functioning in occupational settings. In addition, ethnographic studies could be conducted in a specific business context to assess the use of English for business-related activities or collect a corpus of language in a business workplace to analyze instances of English and Chinese use.

The study has implications for university English language instructors, policymakers, and materials developers. First, English teaching in higher education should adopt ESP to equip students with the multicultural competence needed to communicate in professional business English, especially now that World Englishes and China English are becoming increasingly acceptable (He, 2020; Xu, 2023). Accordingly, English language courses for students in commerce, international trade, insurance, and banking programs should promote situational or task-supported syllabi where students complete business-oriented meaningful tasks in the target language.

In the proposed ESP approach, high-quality materials must be designed to develop the skills and competences that business people need. To produce such resources, materials designers should work closely with local business employers and employees to build a more favorable environment to enhance students' business English communication skills and introduce them to the nuances of the business world.

Finally, policymakers must place a stronger emphasis on BELF in the tertiary curriculum and consider more broadly the importance of Asian and World Englishes in the development of Chinese businesses. To be fully prepared for their jobs, university graduates must demonstrate a high level of BELF competence, effectively communicate with international business people using Asian Englishes and World Englishes, and exhibit profound knowledge and understanding of their field.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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