

Learning Experiences of Chinese Salesman in B2B Settings: A Present Situation Analysis

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Abstract

Salesman plays a crucial role in the success of foreign trade sales enterprises, especially those small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Business English as lingua franca helps in information exchange in the process of business-to-business (B2B) setting. Therefore, the English proficiency of a salesman becomes the core competitive power for the development of an enterprise. This study, as a part of needs analysis aiming to identify the salesman's language needs, is to check out the learning experiences of salesmen in foreign trade SMEs in China. Learning experience is one part of the present situation analysis. This research adopted a quantitative questionnaire survey method. There were 57 salesmen respondents participated in the questionnaire survey. Most of the respondents have English certificates, which means they have at least basic English ability. The results showed that few companies provide training to the salesman. This indicated that the SMEs do not pay attention to the training for salesman. Most of the training courses were held in Chinese, which may hinder the effect of training. The SMEs should change their training strategies and provide proper training courses to effectively improve the salesman's English overall proficiency.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Language Training, Salesman, Language Needs, B2B Settings

Introduction

English is a global language and has been used in various fields, including business, academics, sports, and daily life. In this research, English is studied in the field of business. Previous studies have reported that English has been regarded as the global language or lingua franca (Paruppali, 2019; Shrestha et al., 2018). With the convenient exchange and population flow around the world, English is an indispensable language for occupational purposes. English serves as a lingua franca in the business world, especially in B2B international business, which facilitates communication across diverse cultures (Mehrajuddin, 2022). Therefore, in this globalized environment, English proficiency becomes

a crucial factor that affects business communication (Barat, 2023). Salesman as the face of the enterprises Javalgi (2014) should improve their English proficiency.

The development of foreign trade in China has been a key driver of economic growth. In recent years, small and medium foreign trade enterprises have increased in terms of quantity and economic contribution. Foreign trade salesmen play a crucial role in this process. Under the circumstance of global business, business English has become an important communication tool. In the interaction with foreign customers from all over the world, foreign trade salesman is facing huge language and culture challenges. Especially, under the context of business English as lingua franca, the requirements for salesman's English proficiency are increased.

Under this circumstance, the requirements for the foreign trade salesman have increased. It's urgent to improve the salesman's English proficiency to improve foreign customers' communication experience. Language training for the salesman becomes necessary and urgent.

Proper design for the successful training is a must. Needs analysis is the first step for training. The learner in this research is the foreign trade salesman in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in China. As part of a language needs analysis for foreign trade salesman, this study checked the training status of the SMEs in China.

Literature Review

The research is part of a needs analysis project. Needs analysis (NA) was coined under the theory of English for Specific Purpose (ESP). NA is an approach to identifying a group of learners' needs (Richards, 2001). In the same vein, Nunan (1998, p. 13) defined NA as "techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design". Course design in universities should be based on needs analysis, while the training course should also consider the needs of the employees. Training needs analysis is the first step in the training process to identify the skills, concepts, and attitudes that require improvement (Bansal, 2017).

Popular used NA approaches include present situation analysis (PSA) (Richterich and Chancerel, 1980), learner situation analysis (LSA), and target situation analysis (TSA). This study, as a part of an NA research, focused on PSA. PSA is the starting point of a NA process. PSA identifies learners' "weakness and strength in a language, skills, and learning experience" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 125). This study aims to find out the learning experience by checking the training status of the salesman in SMEs.

A mass of research has offered valuable insights into various aspects of workplace people's needs. Said and Darus (2011) conducted research on the writing skill of bank managers, and found that English writing was one of the frequent tasks of the bank managers. There was no assistance with workplace writing in the bank. This indicated that adequacy of training should be provided for the bank employers. Even the training in economic unity like banks cannot provide proper language training, the situation in the SMEs can not be better.

The study by Carol et al (2011) highlighted the importance of authentic materials from the workplace to improve the students' English proficiency. The participants of this study are employers from all walks of fields. Ali and Aireen (2012) stressed the English oral communication needs of the intern in human resources development, by adopting the method of questionnaire. Oral communication skills are important in the workplace. The tasks identified in the research included "establishing social relationships with clients, making and arguing for an issue before superiors or colleagues, and providing training through

discussions, workshops, etc” (Ali and Aireen, 2012, p536). The research aims to provide actual situation for improving courses for HRD undergraduates. Rajprasit and Hemchua (2015) checked the use of computer engineers’ workplace English in Thai. The study emphasized the use of realistic knowledge and skills in the material, and awareness of BELF, and the importance of listening skills in real workplace in the pedagogical course design. These studies obtained data from the workplace or the employees, while the final purposes were for pedagogical implications but not for employees.

Singh & Harun (2020) examined the needs and the usage of English language in the field of industry. This study found that there was a gap between what is taught in higher education courses and the workplace language needs. English language ability of employees learned in higher education courses cannot make them adapt to the real workplace needs. All the four language skills were important. While most of the participants have difficulty in the detail tasks like online ticketing, online hotel reservation, negotiation with customers, and dealing with complaints. It was suggested that the training courses should focus on public speaking and interpersonal communication skills. The study range in this study is not scoped in business only. Needs analysis should be conducted for a specific group of learners who are doing the same kind of work.

In the study by Hidayat (2023), project-based learning is an effective way to improve student sales skills, which can be borrowed to workplace training to improve the employees’ sales performance. Kim (2021), with the aim of investigating the use and needs of workplace English communication skills among Korean corporate employees who need to interact with foreign business partners, found e-mail was the most frequently used written communication tool. While having conference calls is another common task of the participants. The participants in the study expressed their eagerness for authentic and practical training courses. The two studies provided methods and specific information to the training needs of salesmen.

The above studies discussed the importance of language in workplace performance and provided important information on the training for working people. While language training for the salesman in B2B settings has not studied yet. Based on the above studies, this study checked out the training status of foreign trade salesmen in the SMEs in China.

Method

The questionnaire is a time and cost-saving tool to collect data (Jones, 2013). This study adopted a quantitative method to find out the actual training situation in foreign trade SMEs in China. It is a self-developed questionnaire. All the questions are related to the training they received. The questions included their gender, company size, training experiences, and courses in the training. After finishing the questionnaire, the researcher invited two foreign trade sales managers who have been working in this field for more than 10 years to help read and comment on the research questions. They helped revise the expression of each question. One of them suggests adding one more question to check what language is used in the courses. Since the salespeople are communicating with their customers in English, the language they use in the course could influence the effectiveness. At last, the language used in the courses was added to the question.

The questionnaire was uploaded to a questionnaire website, which is <https://www.wjx.cn/>. This website is professional in distributing questionnaire surveys. After uploading the questionnaire, there will be a link, those who open the link can do the questionnaire and submit it.

The salesmen are distributed in many companies, and the researcher does not know too many foreign trade salesmen. Therefore, the researcher obtained the data by convenient sampling and snowball sampling. The researcher sent the questionnaire to three salesmen she knows and asked the three salesmen to invite their friends to do the questionnaire. The two sales manager who helped in revising the questionnaire also distributed the questionnaire to their colleagues. Their friends sent the questionnaire to salesmen they knew. Finally, a total of 57 respondents returned the questionnaire. All the participants are from Xingtai, Hebei province, China, where the research is based.

The data was analyzed by percentage. The percentage could effectively be represented visually in tables. Detailed results were presented and discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

First, the results of the demographic profile are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	24	42.11%
Female	33	57.89%
Total	57	100%

Table 1 presents the gender of the respondents. 42% of the respondents are male, while 57.89% of the respondents are female. The gender distribution of the respondents is in balance.

Table 2

Company Size

Company Employees	Number	Percentage
1-50	27	47.37%
50-100	9	15.79%
100-250	12	21.05%
250-500	9	15.79%
>500	0	0

Table 2 shows the sizes of companies the respondents work in. 47.37% of the respondents are working in companies with 1-50 employees. 15.79% of the respondents are working in companies with 50-100 employees. There are 21.05% and 15.79% of the respondents are working in companies with 100-250 and 250 to 500 employees respectively. No respondents are working in companies with more than 500 employees. This means that the respondents are in the scope of the study.

Learning experiences in this study were identified from two aspects. One is the certificates the respondents hold; the other is the training they received at the workplace. Table 3 shows the certificates the respondents have. Certificate can tell the respondents' English ability to some degree. Since the respondents did the tests maybe years ago, the certificates cannot mean exactly their English ability.

Table 3

English Certificate Respondents Have

Certificate	Number	Percentage
No Certificate	13	22.81%
CET 4	17	29.82%
CET 6	22	38.6%
TEM 4	5	8.77%
TEM 8	10	17.54%
BEC Primary	1	1.75%
BEC Advance	1	1.75%
BEC Vantage	2	3.5%
TOEFL	1	1.75%
IELTS	1	1.75%
PET	1	1.75%
Total Respondents	57	

From Table 3, the certificate with the most holders is CET 6, with 22 respondents taking 38.6%. The second largest number of holders is CET 4, with 17 (29.82%) respondents taking CET 4. These two certificates are the tests with the most takers in China since university undergraduate students must pass these two certificates to achieve their diploma. CET primarily tests students' basic vocabulary quantity and the ability to use grammar. According to the CET Syllabus (1994: 2-4), CET holders should be able to comprehend the primary ideas and significant details presented both explicitly and implicitly in listening and reading materials.

There were 13 (22.81%) respondents have no English certificates. English certificates can imply the English language proficiency of the test-takers, while it does not mean without certificates, they do not know English. They may could not pass the tests in the university and learn at the workplace.

The following certificates with relatively higher holders are TEM 4 and TEM 8. TEM series are for English majors, while CET is for non-English majors. There is no speaking test in either CET or TEM tests. To pass the tests, the students focus on writing, reading, and listening. They do not prepare for speaking. Therefore, most of the students' oral speaking is poor. The exams could potentially lead to students performing low proficiency in using English in real work situations (Ren, 2011). However, this indicated in another aspect that these respondents have basic English ability.

There are 2 (3.5%) respondents who have BEC Vantage. 1 respondent each holds BEC Primary, BEC Advance, TOEFL, IELTS, and PET certificate. These certificates test the test-takers' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Especially, IELTS examines the test-takers logical thinking and language expression skills. No matter CET, TEM or the listed other tests, most of the respondents have basic English ability.

SMEs possess the potential for growth and profitability (Reddy, 1955). Training can have a positive impact on a salesman's performance (Johlke, 2006; Román, 2002). However, training in SEMs for salesman is not good, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Companies Provide Training

Training	Number	Percentage
Yes	19	33.33%
No	38	66.67%
Total	57	100%

Among the 57 respondents, only 19 respondents received workplace training, taking 33.33%. The rest 38 (66.67%) respondents do not have workplace training experiences. Hyman (1992) claimed that training in the workplace was normally ignored by companies because of its high cost and time-consuming feature.

Table 5

Training Fund

Payer	Number	Percentage
Self-paid	13	68.42%
Company	9	47.37%

Among the 19 respondents who received workplace training, 13 (68.42%) respondents took self-paid work-related training. 9 respondents received training from companies. This means 3 respondents attended training paid by themselves and arranged by their companies.

According to the results shown in Table 2 and Table 3, only nine companies arranged training for the salespeople. This result is in consistency with the findings of Rosa (1994) and Rabie (2016) that the lack of training in foreign trade enterprises is a common issue, especially in SMEs. The problems may be because of limited resources, lack of strategic plan, no awareness of training, or lack of funds. The SMEs do not have the awareness of the importance of salesman training. While training is a practical way to enhance the salesman's performance which can bring more profit to the company Bekteshi (2019), and improve the competitiveness of SMEs (Djastuti, 2020).

Table 6

Training Courses

Courses	Language	Number	Percentage
Language	English	8	42.11%
Price Negotiation Skills	Chinese	8	42.11%
Basic Foreign Trade Procedure	Chinese	13	68.42%
Ways to Develop Customers	Chinese	5	26.32%
Product-related	Chinese	11	57.89%
Total Respondents		19	

Table 6 shows the courses of the training. Totally five courses were listed. Among the five courses, 42.11% (8) of the respondents had Language and Price Negotiation Skills courses each. 68.42% (13) of the respondents have the Basic Foreign Trade Procedure training, which is to teach respondents how to do the work. This course has the largest number of respondents. Then the second most provided course by companies is the Product-related

course, which is to provide product knowledge in Chinese. The course with the last number of respondents is Ways to Develop Customers, with 26.32% (5) respondents.

It is found that among the five courses, only the course of Language was provided in English, other courses were all in Chinese. Since English is the communication tool with customers, four of the courses were in Chinese, this could not promise the taught skills can be expressed properly in English when communicating with customers. The effectiveness of the four courses can be promised only if the salesmen have a good command of English. According to Peterson (2005), language training is a crucial part for salesmen in the B2B context. The role of language is also emphasized by Ruthu et al (2023).

Limitation

The study, as part of a needs analysis on the foreign trade salesman's language needs, checked out the actual training status in SEMs in China and provided meaningful information that training is urgently needed by the salesman in SEMs.

While the study was limited to the use of one single method to obtain the data. Expect questionnaires, interviews should be adopted to dig out more information on the training of the salesman and employers. The participants of the questionnaire are all from one place where the researcher is based. The source should be from more places in China to make the result comprehensive.

Conclusion

English has become a lingua franca in the B2B setting. English proficiency of the salesman directly influences the progress of the business. Facing the new challenges brought by the development of globalization, it is urgent to improve the salesman's English proficiency. This study, under the guidance of the present situation analysis, checked out the salesman's learning experience from their former learning experiences and current training status at workplace. It was found that all the salesmen have basic English ability by checking the English certificates they hold. Training status shows the learning at workplace. Most of the companies do not provide training. Most of the training courses provided by the companies do not have language courses. Courses like negotiation skills were held in Chinese, which may discount in effect for salesman communicate with customers in English not in Chinese. It is necessary and urgent to provide proper training content to salesmen.

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