



SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES' TRANSITION FROM GENERAL ENGLISH TO BUSINESS ENGLISH IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The transition from General English to Business English presents significant cognitive and affective challenges for first-year undergraduates, particularly in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts where learners often have limited prior exposure to business-related concepts and communication. This study examines a practice-based pedagogical framework designed to support novice Business English learners at a business-oriented university in Vietnam. The framework is grounded in three core pedagogical principles: affective support to reduce emotional barriers to participation; scaffolded instruction implemented through collaborative mini-projects exploring business themes and case-based tasks; and active retrieval practice through gamified vocabulary and content review activities. Data were collected through a mixed-methods end-of-course survey (N = 55), combining Likert-scale responses with qualitative student feedback. The findings indicate that students perceived the framework as highly supportive of their learning experience, with over 90% of participants rating instructional clarity at the highest level. Students also reported greater perceived improvement in speaking and listening skills than in reading skills. Qualitative responses suggest that this pattern may be associated with a supportive classroom environment in which learners felt comfortable communicating despite imperfect language use. In addition, students identified the classroom “bonus-point hunting” system as a motivating element within the gamified review activities, encouraging active participation and engagement. The study concludes that combining affective support, scaffolded collaborative tasks, and retrieval-based review activities may help facilitate engagement and perceived learning among novice Business English learners. Implications for the design of first-year Business English courses in tertiary EFL contexts are discussed.

Keywords: Business English, First-Year Undergraduates, Student Perceptions, Gamified Learning, EFL

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1. Introduction

The transition from General English to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presents significant hurdles for learners attempting to master professional discourse. Krashen [1] established that affective variables like anxiety act as a filter that impedes language acquisition. This phenomenon is particularly acute in specialized settings where students must process complex content alongside new linguistic structures. MacIntyre [2] argues that foreign language anxiety inhibits academic performance and thought processes. While Long [3] and Swain [4] emphasize that silence disrupts the target language output vital for acquisition, King [5] counters that silence is a complex phenomenon hinging on the dynamic interplay between learner-internal and contextual factors. Therefore, the cognitive and affective challenges inherent in ESP courses require careful pedagogical attention.

First-year business students often face a dual disadvantage of low language proficiency and insufficient professional knowledge. These students at the A1-B1 level frequently lack the linguistic resources to express complex business ideas. This deficiency leads to what Horwitz et al. [6] described as communication apprehension. King [5] suggests that silence can be culturally valued in some contexts. However, Harumi [7] and Nakane [8] indicate that silence in the classroom is often a product of anxiety rather than cognitive processing. Consequently, these students retreat into silence or exhibit high anxiety to avoid the social cost of making mistakes. This gap between required performance and actual readiness creates a barrier to effective communication.

This challenge is particularly evident within the higher education landscape of Vietnam. Trinh and Mai [9] note that the English proficiency of non-English majors in Vietnam remains relatively low and uneven. The specific setting for this research is a business university in Vietnam where first-year undergraduates must navigate this steep learning curve. Phan [10] observes that Vietnamese students are influenced by specific cultural teaching-learning practices. These cultural norms often prioritize teacher-centered interaction and may exacerbate passivity. This environment creates a specific need for pedagogical interventions that address both linguistic and affective barriers within the Vietnamese context.

This study aims to evaluate a practice-based pedagogical framework designed to mitigate these issues through Affective Support, Scaffolding, and Gamification. Krashen [1] suggests that lowered affective filters facilitate language acquisition. Building on this concept, Zou, Huang, and Xie [11] argue that gamification promotes positive outcomes in vocabulary acquisition. While Dehghanzadeh et al. [12] suggest gamification supports engagement and satisfaction, Smith and King [13] warn that pedagogical tools must be actively managed to shift discourse patterns. This research therefore investigates how these combined elements support first-year business students in overcoming silence and anxiety to achieve communicative competence.

While the challenges of Business English are well-documented, there is limited research on practical pedagogical frameworks that specifically support novice, low-proficiency (A1-B1) first-year students in overcoming the affective and cognitive barriers of the tertiary classroom.

To address the challenges outlined above, this study evaluates the implementation of a practice-based pedagogical framework for first-year business students. Specifically, the study is guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do first-year business students perceive the instructional clarity and usefulness of a practice-based General Business English course?

RQ2: Which specific pedagogical activities (e.g., mini-projects, gamified review) do students identify as most effective for their engagement and skill development?

RQ3: What underlying factors contribute to students' psychological comfort and willingness to communicate in the classroom?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Affective Factors and Anxiety

The theoretical foundation of this study rests primarily on the role of affective variables in language acquisition. Krashen [1] posits that the “Affective Filter” acts as an internal barrier that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device when a learner is stressed or unmotivated. This filter explains why students may receive ample comprehensible input yet fail to acquire the language due to high anxiety or low self-confidence. Building on this concept, Dewi [14] identifies the fear of making mistakes and negative self-perception as primary internal causes of speaking anxiety. While Dewi [14] emphasizes internal psychological states, Khoudri [15] warns that external factors, such as a teacher's harsh correction style, significantly exacerbate this anxiety.

To mitigate these affective barriers, the pedagogical approach of “wait time” becomes critical. Smith and King [13] argue that extended wait time allows students sufficient opportunity for cognitive processing. They further suggest that wait time can shift classroom discourse from a teacher-centered pattern to a more student-driven phase. However, the application of silence is not a panacea for all interactional failures. While Smith and King [13] advocate for the efficacy of silence, Güneş and Girgin [16] counter that extended wait time alone may fail to elicit participation if the question lies outside the student's epistemic domain. This tension highlights the necessity for “teacher patience” to be active rather than passive. It suggests that the teacher must not only wait but also create a safe environment where “messy” ideas are accepted without immediate judgment.

2.2. Scaffolding and Collaborative Learning

Addressing the cognitive gap for novices requires robust scaffolding strategies. Khoudri [15] suggests that scaffolding speaking activities helps students manage anxiety by reducing the cognitive load at the beginning of a task. This support is particularly vital when teaching complex business concepts to first-year students. Güneş and Girgin [16] demonstrate that when silence fails to produce a response, teachers must employ active scaffolding practices such as “question broadening” or “hinting” to mobilize student participation. These techniques allow the teacher to co-construct knowledge with the student rather than demanding immediate, independent performance.

Collaborative learning extends this support system to peer interactions. Burhan et al. [17] highlight that collaborative environments satisfy learners' psychological needs for relatedness and competence. By working in groups on “Mini-projects,” students can practice language in a lower-stakes environment before public performance. However, the effectiveness of this collaboration is not guaranteed without structural support. While Burhan et al. [17] view collaboration as a driver of engagement, Smith and King [13] note that Vietnamese students often possess passive learning styles derived from traditional teaching methods. This passivity can persist even in groups if the fear of losing face remains high. Therefore, scaffolding must be designed not just to simplify content, but to structurally enforce participation through specific roles or outputs.

2.3. Gamification and Extrinsic Motivation

Gamification serves as a strategic intervention to operationalize extrinsic motivation for reticent learners. Waer [19] states that gamification elements like leaderboards and points meet students' satisfaction needs and foster engagement in non-traditional learning environments. Burhan et al. [17] found that gamified platforms significantly enhance behavioral and emotional engagement compared to conventional instruction. These mechanisms are particularly relevant for the “bonus point economy” observed in the survey results.

For shy or reticent students, extrinsic motivation provides a necessary initial push to communicate. Dewi [14] argues that extrinsic motivation, such as the desire for grades or rewards, plays a significant role in reducing speaking anxiety by giving students a practical reason to speak that outweighs their fear. This is consistent with findings by Nguyen and Habók [20], who note that non-English majors often demonstrate moderate levels of external motivation related to academic requirements. While Waer [19] emphasizes the “fun” and “challenging” nature of gamification as a primary benefit, Dewi [14] cautions that intrinsic motivation is generally more sustainable in the long term. However, for first-year students paralyzed by the Affective Filter, the immediate, tangible reward of bonus points serves as a crucial bridge. It lowers the social cost of speaking by reframing the act as a transaction for academic gain rather than a test of personal competence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to evaluate student perceptions of a practice-based General Business English course. The study was conducted in a naturalistic classroom setting, focusing on the immediate application of a pedagogical framework that integrates affective support, instructional scaffolding, and gamified retrieval practice. The primary objective was to capture both the quantitative satisfaction levels and the qualitative lived experiences of first-year learners as they navigated the transition to Business English.

3.2 Context and Participants

Participants were first-year undergraduate students majoring in business at a business university in Vietnam (N=55). As part of the institutional curriculum, students are required to

complete four sequential General Business English courses before progressing to discipline-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses related to their majors. These courses are officially aligned with proficiency levels from B1 to B2+.

Although participants belonged to the same academic cohort and were of similar age, their actual English proficiency varied considerably, ranging approximately from A1 to B1. This variation informed the instructional design of the course, particularly the emphasis on affective support, scaffolding, and collaborative learning.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through an anonymous end-of-course exit survey administered immediately upon the conclusion of the course. The survey instrument consisted of two distinct sections:

Quantitative Evaluation: Students rated the course using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Poor, 5 = Excellent) across three dimensions: Instructional Clarity, Helpfulness of Teaching Activities, and Overall Course Usefulness. Additionally, students were asked to select which specific linguistic skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary, Critical Thinking) they felt had improved the most.

Qualitative Reflection: Open-ended questions invited students to provide detailed feedback on their learning experience. Prompts included inquiries into “most preferred” and “least preferred” activities, specific suggestions for improvement, and general reflections on their psychological comfort in the class.

Students were also invited to comment on factors that supported their confidence and participation in class.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study utilized a concurrent data analysis approach. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency and mean) to establish a baseline of student satisfaction and perceived skill development.

Simultaneously, the qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis. Student comments were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring patterns. Codes were generated inductively from the data (e.g., “teacher patience,” “bonus points,” “group work”) and then grouped into broader themes regarding instructional support, engagement mechanisms, and affective states. These qualitative themes were used to explain and contextualize the high satisfaction rates observed in the quantitative data.

4. Results

The survey received valid responses from 55 students. Analysis of the data revealed a high degree of convergence between quantitative satisfaction scores and qualitative thematic feedback.

4.1 Quantitative Overview and Skill Perception

Quantitative results indicated overwhelming satisfaction with the pedagogical framework.

Crucially, the data reveals a shift in perceived skill acquisition. When asked to identify which skills improved the most, the majority of the 55 respondents prioritized communicative competence over passive skills. Speaking and Listening were selected significantly more frequently than Reading or Writing. This pattern suggests that students experienced the course primarily as a communicative learning environment, with perceived gains concentrated in speaking and listening rather than in reading and writing. Speaking and Listening were selected most frequently, whereas Reading and Writing were reported less often. This suggests that students perceived greater gains in communicative skills than in receptive or literacy-oriented skills.

4.2. Affective Scaffolding and Psychological Safety

Qualitative responses identified the instructor's affective support as the foundational element of the course. Students frequently contrasted their initial anxiety (due to low proficiency) with the safety they felt in the classroom.

The data suggests this safety was created not just through general kindness, but through specific pedagogical behaviors - notably "wait time" and "decoding." Students reported that the instructor's willingness to listen to broken or "messy" English without immediate correction encouraged them to speak. One student (Participant 13) articulated this precisely:

"She tries to listen to all the ideas we want to say even if it is hard to hear, messy ideas. [She says] 'It's okay,' 'almost there, keep going' when we have difficulty expressing our ideas."

This feedback indicates that for A1-B1 learners, the teacher's function as a sympathetic "decoder" of imperfect input is more valued than their function as a "corrector" of errors.

4.3 Bridging Theory and Practice through Mini-Projects

Collaborative "mini-projects" were the most frequently cited "favorite activity" in the open-ended responses. Students valued these projects because they provided a low-stakes environment to apply abstract business concepts.

The feedback highlights two dimensions of engagement here: peer learning and identity formation. Students noted that group work allowed them to leverage peer strengths ("Group work helps me learn from friends"), while the projects themselves allowed them to "perform"

the role of business students. By working on “real-life related projects” (Participant 7), students felt a sense of professional relevance that textbook exercises alone did not provide.

4.4. Gamification and the "Bonus Point Economy"

While game-based review activities (e.g., Quizizz) were universally praised, the qualitative data reveals that engagement was driven heavily by extrinsic motivation - specifically, a “bonus point economy.”

Approximately 40% of the open-ended comments explicitly referenced “points,” “bonus,” or “sales” (referring to “bonus point sales”). Students described themselves as active participants in a competitive market for grades. Comments such as “*hunting for points*” or asking for a “*bonus point sale*” suggest that the gamification elements did more than just review vocabulary; they provided a tangible, short-term reward system that incentivized reticent students to break their silence. This suggests that for first-year students who may lack intrinsic motivation or confidence in English, a gamified, extrinsic reward structure serves as a necessary scaffold to stimulate initial participation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that for first-year business students, the transition from General English to Business English is not merely a linguistic shift, but a psychological one. The high satisfaction rates and perceived skill improvements observed in this study may be associated with the alignment between the pedagogical framework and the learners' immediate needs.

5.1 Reducing the Affective Filter through "Decoding"

The strong correlation between the instructor’s “listening patience” and student confidence supports Krashen’s Affective Filter hypothesis. In many Vietnamese high school contexts, English instruction often prioritizes accuracy and grammatical correctness, which can heighten anxiety for lower-proficiency learners. By adopting a “decoding” stance - focusing on meaning-making rather than immediate error correction - students' comments are consistent with the principles of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. One possible interpretation is that the supportive classroom environment contributed to students’ confidence in speaking activities. When students felt their “messy ideas” were valued, the risk cost of participation decreased, allowing communicative competence to emerge.

5.2 Gamification as a Culturally Responsive Scaffold

The data regarding the “bonus point economy” offers a nuanced view of student motivation. While educational theory often champions intrinsic motivation, the findings here suggest that for first-year students facing a difficult new subject (Business English), extrinsic rewards serve as a critical “kick-starter.” In a culture where “saving face” can inhibit public speaking, the gamified environment - driven by the hunt for bonus points - provided a socially acceptable reason to participate. The competition shifted the focus from “fear of being wrong”

to “desire to win.” Thus, the “bonus point economy” should not be viewed merely as a behaviorist reward system, but as a pragmatic scaffold that helps reticent students bridge the gap between silence and active engagement.

5.3 Bridging Identity Gaps via Mini-Projects

Finally, the preference for collaborative mini-projects indicates that students are eager to assume their new professional identities. First-year students often struggle to see themselves as “business professionals.” The mini-projects provided a simulated environment where they could “try on” this identity in a low-stakes setting. By applying vocabulary to real-life related projects, students moved from being passive recipients of language to active users of business discourse, fulfilling the ultimate goal of ESP instruction.

6. Conclusion

Several pedagogical implications for tertiary General Business English instruction emerge from this study:

Prioritize “Decoding” over “Correcting”: Instructors working with first-year cohorts should explicitly signal patience. Allocating extended wait time and validating the *intent* of a message before correcting its *form* is essential for building the confidence required for Business English.

Strategic Use of Extrinsic Rewards: Teachers should not shy away from using “bonus points” or competitive games. For novice learners, these extrinsic motivators are effective tools to break the “silence barrier” and should be used strategically to build momentum before transitioning to more intrinsic motivators later in the curriculum.

Early Introduction of Project-Based Learning: Even at lower proficiency levels (A1-B1), students benefit from collaborative projects. These should not be reserved for advanced classes; rather, they should be highly scaffolded (e.g., with templates and clear guidelines) to allow first-year students to experience early success in professional contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.Q.T.; Methodology, N.Q.T.; Investigation, N.Q.T.; Data collection, N.Q.T.; Formal analysis, N.Q.T.; Writing original draft preparation, N.Q.T.; Writing review and editing, N.Q.T.; Supervision, N.Q.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval and permission were obtained from the Department of Foreign Languages and the relevant course lecturers by 25 July 2026

Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation.

Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality restrictions but be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with permission from the data owner.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely to assist with language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript. The authors reviewed, edited, and verified all content and took full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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