

English-Majored Students' Perceptions of Business English Speaking for Future Employment: A Case Study at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking

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ABSTRACT

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Both English language proficiency and business communication skills are increasingly valued in many countries, and Vietnam is no exception. While some universities focus primarily on general English instruction, business-specialized institutions offer EFL programs that integrate foundational business knowledge alongside English language learning. This study investigated how English-majored students perceived the importance of Business English speaking for their future employment. Twelve third-year students participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The research applies a qualitative method with thematic analysis. The findings indicated that all participants recognized Business English speaking as an essential skill for their professional futures. Participants also offered practical suggestions for improving Business English instruction, particularly through activities that simulate real workplace communication.

Introduction

English is recognized as the international language because it provides access to many career opportunities, academic interests, and promising future pathways. According to the International Center for Language Studies (ICLS, 2024), English has approximately 1.5 billion users worldwide, with 75% of them being non-native speakers. As global demand for English continues to grow, the language has been increasingly differentiated into specialized branches designed to meet specific learner needs. One particular example is English for Specific Purposes (ESP), broadly defined as an approach to language instruction tailored to the communicative requirements of particular occupational or academic contexts (Farmati et al., 2022). Business English, a branch of ESP under English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), has attracted growing attention due to its direct relevance to workplace communication and graduate employability. Business English is formally defined as the teaching and use of English in business contexts and professional organizations (Zhang, 2005).

Within Business English, speaking is widely recognized as one of the most critical skills for

professional contexts. Effective oral communication enables individuals to perform essential workplace functions such as negotiation, client interactions, and team collaboration, contexts in which spoken fluency and professional vocabulary intersect in ways that general English instruction does not always address (Qasim, 2021). Despite this, research suggests that EFL learners frequently identify speaking as their most challenging skill to develop, due to factors such as limited confidence, fear of making errors, and insufficient opportunities for authentic practice (Putri et al., 2020). This tension between the perceived importance of Business English speaking and the challenges learners face in developing it raises meaningful questions about how students themselves perceive its role in their futures.

At some business-specialized universities in Vietnam, where EFL programs blend general English with foundational business knowledge, students occupy a distinctive position: they are simultaneously developing language skills and business awareness, yet their perceptions of how these combine to shape their employment prospects remain underexplored. This study aims to investigate how English-majored students at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB) perceive the importance of Business English speaking for their future employment. HUB represents a relevant and specific context for this inquiry, as its English Studies program integrates both general English instruction and business-oriented language courses throughout the curriculum. By focusing on students' perceptions, this study seeks to contribute a learner perspective to the existing literature on Business English education in Vietnam, and to offer insights that may be of practical value to lecturers seeking to align their instruction more closely with students' expectations and the course objectives.

Literature Review

The role of English speaking

Speaking is one of the four fundamental language skills, along with writing, reading, and listening. Speaking is also one of the two productive skills, besides writing. According to several foreign learners, regardless of age, speaking is often considered the most challenging skill to master due to certain factors such as the fear of making mistakes, incorrect pronunciation, and low confidence (Putri et al., 2020). Several EFL learners might perceive that learning speaking skills would consume an enormous amount of time. Despite years of practicing, some learners are still unable to speak English fluently (Houn & Em, 2022; Ork et al., 2024). This might result in the idea that speaking should be the least prioritized. In fact, speaking is believed to be the most important skill because it is used far more frequently than the other three skills, namely writing, listening, and reading. People speak daily, anytime, and anywhere, from ordinary conversations to school, work, and so on. Speaking occurs everywhere, whether in formal or informal contexts (Rahayu, 2015). Having good oral communication skills would be beneficial in terms of building personal confidence and professional relationships (Zanola, 2015). In the current era of ever-increasing globalization, trade, and commerce, the importance of obtaining effective communication skills is more crucial than ever in fostering international collaboration, thereby contributing to the growth of organizations (My & Thao, 2025). In response to this, a new model of English has been

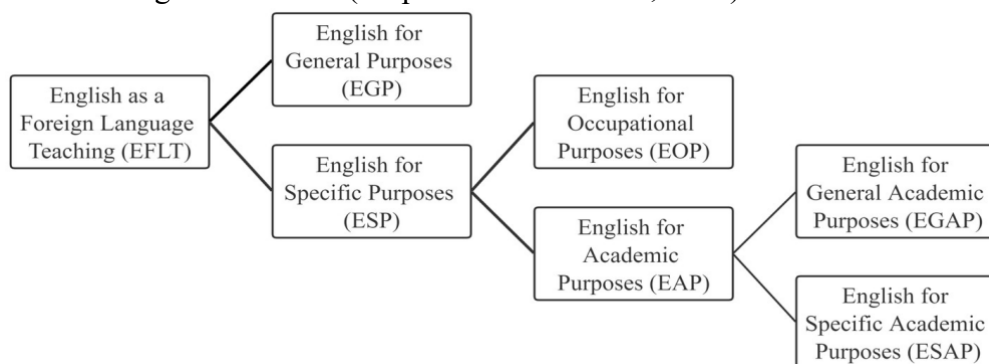
introduced for teaching, known as “Business English”.

The development and significance of Business English

Business English has been around for a long time, with an estimated duration of more than 50 years. Even so, the first emergence of Business English was considered late. Kutateladze (2014) mentions that Business English emerged after its two brothers, English for Academic Purposes and English for Science and Technology. This late emergence of Business English was attributed by Kutateladze to the growing popularity of technology and science around the mid-19th century. Kutateladze also suggests that Business English is a part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Regarding ESP, this is a more specific approach to using English to meet learners’ needs in the workplace, where English is tailored to include topic-related vocabulary and skills (Wulandari, 2023). Previous studies have shown that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) had already drawn considerable attention in the late 1960s; some people briefly defined ESP as using English in realistic situations (Lamri, 2016; Rahman, 2015; Garcia García Laborda & Litzler, 2015), as the classification of English branches is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.

Classification of English branches (adapted from Liu et al., 2023).



English is categorized into distinct sections, with the two most noticeable aspects being English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for General Purposes (EGP). While ESP represents the use of English in organizational settings, EGP refers to learning English to enhance students’ overall efficiency in schools or universities (Huang & Tsai, 2024). Business English, a branch of ESP, is classified into English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), along with some related fields such as English for Medical Purposes and English for Media Purposes. Individuals who use Business English as their primary means of communication at work are likely to work in fields such as banking, finance, investing, or trading (Sharma, 2020). Business English, integrated with explicit communication skills, is experiencing high demand from companies and offers a range of opportunities. Therefore, it is crucial that universities invest in Business English speaking courses to ensure students have opportunities to work in various business-related fields, such as banking, marketing, and others (Xi, 2018). Vietnamese universities are no exception, specifically business-specialized universities, where an emphasis on business communication is growing.

Business English in Vietnamese higher education

There are Vietnamese universities that offer non-English majors Business English courses

ranging from basic to advanced levels. For English-majored students at business-specialized universities, their English skill courses are a blend of business and English learning. There are several coursebooks to choose from; the two most popular for Business English among English-majored students are *Market Leader* and *Business Advantage* (Pham, 2015). The two commonly used coursebooks for Business English instruction at HUB are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.

Supplementary coursebooks used for English language and Business English instruction (*Market Leader* and *Business Advantage*).



Source: Course syllabus of English Major, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB); images retrieved from Google Images.

These materials help build a solid foundation by providing an introduction to the vocabulary used in organizations. Beyond the courses' learning materials, students' engagement with the subject is extremely important to ensure an effective lesson. To enhance this aspect, activities such as role-plays, presentations, and other teamwork-based activities are used (Landa, 2010; Razali & Ismail, 2017). The same approaches can also be integrated into Business English learning; English-majored students will be exposed to situations where they are in meetings, delivering speeches on company growth and statistics. These teamwork activities, even though they last only minutes, significantly improve learners' communication skills (Ishak & Aziz, 2022). Notably, speaking is the skill that receives the most attention and emphasis. In practice, activities such as teamwork on a presentation are essential and widely used in many courses (Thuy, 2025). Subjects such as reading, writing, and listening are no exception; presentations appear in most courses, which indirectly helps foster speaking skills. Therefore, in terms of communication skills, it is clear that the students are equipped with the main speaking courses and, to some extent, from other subjects' presentation activities.

Previous studies on Business English

Several studies have explored learners' and stakeholders' perceptions of Business English and its relationship to employability. Wu (2012) examined the views of students and employers on Business English instruction and found that listening and speaking were the two skills most in need of further development. The study also highlighted the importance of incorporating tasks

that reflect real workplace situations, so that learners can apply their knowledge more effectively in professional contexts. Furthermore, Zainuddin et al. (2019) found that English proficiency, particularly oral communication, is a key factor driving graduate employability. Both employees and students in their study agreed that candidates with strong English-speaking skills are viewed more favorably by employers, particularly in roles that involve meetings, negotiations, and international collaboration.

Similarly, Chan (2014) and Thomas et al. (2016) examined employer perspectives on communication skills in Hong Kong and Bahrain, respectively, finding consistent agreement that effective business communication, beyond general fluency, is a valued and increasingly expected professional attribute. At the learner level, Ratnaningsih (2024) investigated entrepreneurship students and found that their attitudes toward English speaking improved as they recognized its practical relevance to business contexts. Tipmontree and Tasanameelarp (2018) similarly found that among 45 Thai EFL university students, the majority viewed Business English as more directly linked to employment prospects than general English, though some noted a need for more scaffolded instruction to keep pace with course content. This further suggests that Business English plays such a vital role that no learner can ignore it, but must follow it carefully.

Research gaps

Several studies have examined the necessity of English proficiency for students, especially EFL learners (Rao, 2019). Recently, in Vietnam, Le and Le (2022) explored university students' awareness of the role of English. The paper demonstrates that Vietnamese students recognize that English is an indispensable tool that provides benefits for foreign learners. So far, there have been positive views of English as a crucial package for EFL learners in many countries, not just Vietnam. However, studies that specifically examine Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of Business English speaking in a business-specialized university context remain comparatively limited. Moreover, most existing studies tend to rely on quantitative approaches or focus on general attitudes toward English, rather than exploring learners' qualitative perceptions of a specific skill within a professional employability framework. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how English-majored students at HUB perceive the role of Business English speaking in their future employment.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do English-majored students perceive the importance of Business English speaking skills?
2. To what extent do students believe Business English speaking contributes to their future employability?

Methods

Participants

This study employed a qualitative approach involving twelve third-year English-majored

students at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking (HUB). Participants were selected through convenience sampling with purposive criteria; specifically, all participants were required to have completed the Business English speaking courses offered within the English Studies program. This criterion was considered appropriate because students who had completed these courses would have sufficient first-hand experience to reflect meaningfully on the role of Business English speaking in their future employment. Hammarberg et al. (2016) note that qualitative methods are well suited to perception-based studies, as they prioritize individual insights and allow participants to express their thoughts in depth. The twelve participants were aged 20 to 22. Even though all of them claimed to have been learning English for more than 10 years, their English proficiency levels varied widely. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), participants' English proficiency ranged from B1 (intermediate) to C1 (advanced). This self-assessment was based on their scores in English subjects, and one participant obtained an IELTS band score of 7.0, equivalent to level C1 (Advanced).

Data collection

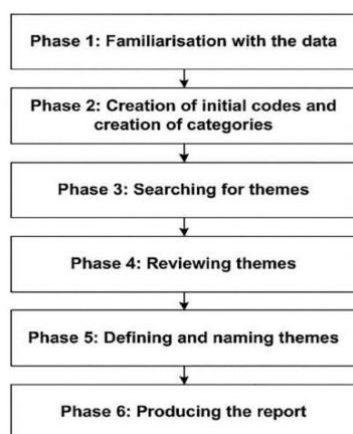
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, chosen because this format allows flexibility while maintaining focus on the research questions (Fylan, 2005). Each interview consisted of 10 questions, including 3 closed-ended warm-up questions to gather background information and 7 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perceptions of Business English speaking and its relevance to future employment. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants to express their thoughts comfortably and in full, without the added pressure of responding in English. Interviews were recorded with verbal informed consent obtained from each participant prior to recording. Participants were also given time to prepare before their interviews to ensure thoughtful responses.

Data analysis

This study applies a thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) analysis framework, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis.



The process involves: (1) analyzing the answers, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) naming and explaining each theme, and (6) producing the report. The answers were gathered via a recording. Initially, they were fully translated from the source language, Vietnamese, into the target language, English. Besides, the translation process ensured trustworthiness and maintained an unbiased spirit among all participants. Each extract was concisely translated into English to avoid distorting the respondents' original meanings. The translated excerpts were subsequently reviewed by the authors to verify accuracy and minimize the risk of meaning distortion. To further strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the coding process, regularly revisiting the data to ensure that emerging themes were grounded in participants' responses rather than in the researcher's assumptions. Codes were reviewed iteratively until no new themes emerged from the data.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. All participants provided verbal informed consent prior to their involvement and were assured of confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no institutional ethical approval was formally required for this study, as it involved no sensitive personal data and posed no risk to participants. The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Results

This section presents the background information of the twelve participants involved in the study. As shown in Figures 4 and 5 below, the group consisted of an equal number of male and female students, with varying levels of English proficiency ranging from B1 to C1 based on the CEFR framework

Figure 4.

Background information of the participants

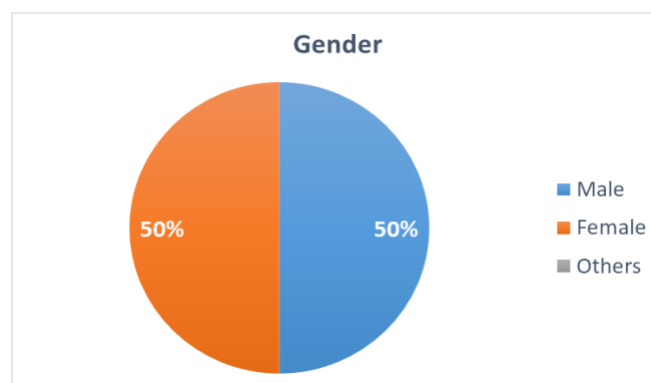
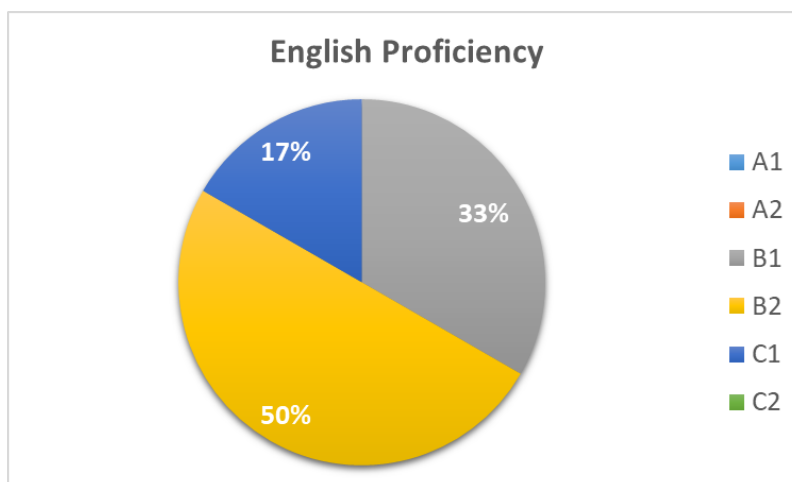


Figure 5.

English proficiency of the participants



The students' English proficiency is categorized according to the CEFR levels, ranging from A1, which is basic, to C2, which denotes an expert user. Half of the participants said that their proficiency is B2, which means upper-intermediate. At this level, they can use English for basic communication and decent writing with minimal difficulty. 33% claimed their level is B1, which is intermediate. This level indicates that users can use decent English, but with rather basic, low-accuracy language. The remaining 17% reported being at the C1 level (advanced), meaning they can communicate fluently and understand most reading and listening materials in English.

Results from thematic analysis

Through the thematic analysis process of the twelve interviews, the findings display five major themes: (1) Perceived importance of Business English speaking, (2) Limited practice opportunities in current courses, (3) Business English speaking and employability, (4) Motivation and factors affecting learning, and (5) Suggested improvements for Business English courses.

Theme 1: Perceived importance of Business English speaking

All twelve participants consistently identified speaking as the most critical skill in Business English, particularly for future employment. Their responses centered on two interconnected ideas: that effective speaking creates immediate professional impressions, and that it directly enables core workplace functions such as negotiations, meetings, and client communication.

"In my opinion, speaking skill is the most important in Business English because most of the communication in business is usually interactive through conversations, meetings or negotiations....., it helps to show confidence and create an impression in the working environment for me later. So I am trying to develop this skill as much as possible." (P7, translated)

“.....for students majoring in business English, speaking is very important in communicating and negotiating with employers.....knowing about the principles and terminology in business helps us to apply and brainstorm new ideas and get promoted.” (P1, translated)

“In my opinion, speaking skills are the most important, because communication plays a key role in the working environment. Speaking well helps to convey ideas clearly and create a professional impression.” (P10, translated)

These responses suggest that participants do not view Business English speaking as an isolated language skill, but rather as a practical tool for employability, one that shapes how they are perceived in professional contexts before any other qualification is considered. The unanimity of this view among all twelve participants, regardless of their proficiency level, indicates that this perception is shaped not by individual language ability alone but by a shared awareness of what the job market demands.

Theme 2: Limited practice opportunities in current courses

Despite having completed all required speaking courses, including Advanced Speaking and the Business English course, participants consistently noted a gap between what they had learned in class and what they felt was needed for real workplace communication. Two recurring concerns emerged: the theoretical nature of course content, and the lack of authentic, context-based practice opportunities.

“Courses at school also equip students with many things, such as vocabulary and business sentences, but practically it is hard to visualize because there are lots of new words and only theory.” (P2, translated)

While P2 found the content difficult due to its complexity, others felt the opposite, that lessons were quite basic to be practically useful. P9 acknowledged that current courses provide a foundational understanding of workplace communication but noted they fall short of reflecting real situations. P1 similarly characterized the courses as introductory, useful as preparation but insufficient for in-depth professional application.

“Not enough because we are just skimming and memorizing, also not understanding much about commerce and how it works.” (P3, translated)

“Just at the basic level because as I said, we learn basic knowledge so that we can prepare better so that we can study in depth about the field we want to work in the future, but it would not be easy.” (P1, translated)

Overall, these responses point to a shared perception that current Business English courses, while providing useful foundational knowledge, do not adequately prepare students for the communicative demands of actual workplace environments. This perceived gap between classroom learning and professional reality appears to heighten participants' awareness of what

they still need to develop before entering the job market.

Theme 3: Business English speaking and employability

All twelve participants agreed that Business English speaking skills would meaningfully improve their employment prospects after graduation. Their responses consistently framed speaking proficiency not merely as a language skill, but as a competitive advantage in the job market.

“Being able to speak English well is a big advantage, it can help communicate with business partners, which can open up more development opportunities.” (P8, translated)

“Good communication in the commercial field will help me connect with many international businesses, opening up many great opportunities.” (P9, translated)

“Interviews are easier, easier to impress because I know business terms, and if I am fluent, my chances of getting accepted will be significantly higher.” (P5, translated)

A common thread across all responses was the belief that fluency in Business English speaking, combined with solid business knowledge, significantly increases the likelihood of being hired by international organizations and larger companies. P4 further acknowledged the importance of continued self-directed practice, recognizing that professional-level speaking requires ongoing exposure beyond what courses currently provide. This suggests that participants view Business English speaking not as an academic requirement, but as a direct investment in their professional futures.

Theme 4: Motivation and factors affecting learning

While employability emerged as a primary motivator, participants identified a range of additional factors that sustained their effort to develop Business English speaking skills. Two factors appeared most frequently: lecturers' roles and the learning environment's influence.

“I would say career demands, learning environment, confidence in speaking English and teacher teaching style.” (P12, translated)

“It’s the teaching method from the teacher. Because this subject has a lot of difficult specialized vocabulary, the teacher needs to point out which words should be learned and explain further for students to understand.” (P7, translated)

More than half of the participants (N=8) indicated that their lecturers were among the most significant sources of motivation. Several others (N=5) pointed to the peer environment as equally motivating; being surrounded by confident and ambitious classmates encouraged them to push themselves further.

“I think the first thing is the learning environment. If everyone around me is good, I will also have the motivation to learn, and I think the most important thing is that I myself

must try to study well for my future.” (P4, translated)

These findings suggest that motivation to develop Business English speaking skills is shaped by both external factors, particularly teacher quality and peer influence, and internal drive linked to future career goals. The interplay between these factors points to the importance of both classroom dynamics and individual agency in sustaining long-term language development.

Theme 5: Suggested improvements for Business English courses

Participants offered concrete suggestions for improving Business English speaking instruction, with the majority (N=7) emphasizing the need for more authentic, simulation-based activities that reflect real workplace scenarios.

“Teachers should create more situations in the business environment for students to get used to. Moreover, they can consider inviting business experts or foreign speakers to share so that students have the opportunity to learn more.” (P2, translated)

“I think we should let students practice real-life situations like simulations for businesses so that students can understand and get used to the professional environment, like playing roleplay to see how they handle situations.” (P4, translated)

Role-playing activities were the most frequently mentioned suggestion, with participants describing them as an effective way to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. P9 called for increased time dedicated to practical speaking practice, including role-plays and talks with real business professionals. P6 suggested incorporating more business-related activities into the curriculum to help students become familiar with real-world operating models and industry-specific terminology.

“I hope the school can increase the time for practical speaking practice, such as role-playing work situations or organizing talks with real businesspeople. This will help students learn more naturally and confidently.” (P9, translated)

These suggestions reflect participants' broader awareness that the current curriculum, while providing a useful foundation, needs greater emphasis on experiential learning to better prepare them for professional communication in real-world business environments.

Table 1.

Summary of themes identified from the thematic analysis

The five themes identified from the thematic analysis are summarized in Table 1 below.

Main Theme	Description	Participants Supporting (N)	Illustrative Quote
1. Perceived importance of Business English speaking	Students viewed speaking as the key to employability and confidence in business contexts.	12	“Speaking skill is the most important... it helps to show confidence.” (P7)
2. Limited practice opportunities in current courses	Lessons focus on theory rather than authentic practice.	12	“We are just memorizing... not understanding much about commerce.” (P3)
3. Business English speaking and employability	Speaking skills enhance job prospects and professional image.	12	“Good communication helps me connect with international businesses.” (P9)
4. Motivation and factors affecting learning	Motivation arises from teachers and the environment.	8	“Teacher’s method and learning environment motivate me.” (P4)
5. Suggested improvements for Business English courses	Students propose role-plays and inviting business experts to enhance practice.	7	“Teachers should create real-life business situations.” (P2)

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on Business English and employability (Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2018; Ratnaningsih, 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2019), which have similarly confirmed that speaking in Business English plays an important role in helping graduates access better job opportunities. Most prior studies focused on young entrepreneurs or students from non-language majors, whereas this study examines EFL students whose curricula already blend general English with foundational business knowledge, a context that has received limited attention in the literature.

All twelve participants expressed that they value what they have learned through their Business English courses at HUB. They recognized that their program, which integrates both general English and business-oriented language instruction, provided them with preparation that EFL programs without a business focus typically do not offer. As several participants noted, general English proficiency alone would not be sufficient to meet the demands of the job market after graduation; the additional specialized language that Business English provides was seen as genuinely valuable. This awareness likely explains why their responses were detailed and thoughtful, and why they were willing to suggest improvements not just for their own benefit but for the university as a whole.

It is also worth noting that while participants were positive about the role of Business English speaking in their future careers, they were equally aware of the gap between their current level and what the workplace actually demands. They acknowledged that their courses have given them a useful foundation, but felt that more practice in realistic, job-related situations would help them feel more prepared and confident. This suggests that for Business English speaking to truly contribute to employability, it is not enough to teach vocabulary and communication theory alone; students also need opportunities to use the language in ways that reflect real professional demands, such as through role-plays, mock negotiations, or interactions with working professionals (Rojas & Villafuerte, 2018; Krebt, 2017).

This study contributes to research on Business English education in Vietnam by offering a learner-centered view from a group that has not been widely studied: English-majored students at a business-specialized university. The findings highlight that these students are not passive learners; they actively reflect on how their language skills relate to their career prospects and have clear ideas about what they need. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus. The findings represent the views of 12 students at HUB and cannot be generalized beyond that group. It is encouraged that future research involving larger samples across different universities, or using experimental methods to test the actual impact of Business English speaking instruction on employment outcomes, would help build a more complete understanding of this relationship.

Conclusion

This study explored how twelve English-majored students at Ho Chi Minh University of Banking perceive the role of Business English speaking in their future employment. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the findings indicate that participants consistently viewed Business English speaking as a skill that would directly benefit their career prospects, helping them perform better in job interviews, communicate more professionally at work, and connect with international business partners.

These findings contribute a learner-centered perspective to the existing literature on Business English education in Vietnam, particularly from students at a business-specialized university, a group that has not been widely studied. The study is limited in scope, and the voices of 12 participants from a single institution cannot be generalized broadly. Future research with larger samples and experimental designs would help build a stronger evidence base, and both students and educators may benefit from keeping employability at the center of how Business English speaking is taught, not just as a language skill, but as a genuine professional tool.

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