

An Empirical Study on the Foreign-Related Communication Competence of Non-English Major Undergraduates Under the Background of Hebei Enterprises' "Going Global" Strategy

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Abstract

With the acceleration of the "Going Global" strategy in Hebei Province, this study aimed to examine the foreign-related communication competence of non-English major undergraduates and its alignment with local enterprise demands. A total of 308 undergraduates from a local application-oriented university in Hebei Province were investigated using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, with data analyzed via SPSS 26.0. Results showed that participants' overall competence was moderately low, with workplace English reading and writing as the core shortcoming, and structural mismatch with job requirements in equipment manufacturing, infrastructure and new energy industries. Self-rated English proficiency, gender and CET performance significantly affected the competence, while exam-oriented learning contributed little to intercultural literacy. Students had strong improvement motivation but cognitive misperception of job demands and heavy reliance on translation tools. This study provides empirical evidence for optimizing college English teaching to cultivate talents for Hebei's internationalized enterprises.

Keywords: Non-English major undergraduates, foreign-related communication competence, "Going Global" strategy, workplace English, intercultural literacy, college English teaching, talent cultivation, empirical study.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As China continues to advance high-standard opening-up and deepen the Belt and Road Initiative, Hebei Province, capitalizing on the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, is vigorously driving its competitive industries to go global. The 14th Five-Year Plan for the Opening-up of Hebei Province explicitly states the need to cultivate comprehensive, internationally oriented talents that adapt to the international development of enterprises (People's Government of Hebei Province, 2022), which is also clearly required in the national College English Teaching Guide (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). Non-English major undergraduates are the core supply group for such posts.

At present, Hebei-based enterprises under the "Going Global" strategy are mainly concentrated in three pillar competitive sectors, including equipment manufacturing, infrastructure construction, and new energy. Their overseas projects put forward

comprehensive requirements for talents, including both professional skills and cross-cultural communication competence (Lang, 2024), and the demand characteristics are highly consistent with the regional foreign-related talent demand under the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development (Zhang & Zhao, 2023). Workplace English competence is a core multidimensional indicator for evaluating such talents (Evans, 2023). Accordingly, the cultivation of internationally oriented compound talents has become an important way to serve national strategies, and foreign-related communication competence has also become a core literacy affecting the employment competitiveness and career development of non-English major undergraduates.

Currently, college English teaching in local universities of Hebei Province remains largely exam-oriented, with a focus on general English and a lack of targeted training aligned with real scenarios of local foreign-facing posts, resulting in a prominent theory-practice gap students have basic English knowledge but

cannot complete foreign-related communication tasks in workplace scenarios. This problem not only restricts the high-quality employment of college graduates in Hebei Province, but also becomes an important bottleneck affecting the stable supply of international talents for local enterprises.

However, most studies focus on the optimization of training strategies at the macro level, and some findings have confirmed the common problem of insufficient language practice ability among non-English major undergraduates. Cai (2021) argued that college English teaching should transform toward the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) paradigm to meet workplace communication demands. Nevertheless, obvious gaps remain in existing research: large-sample empirical studies targeting local universities in Hebei Province and closely aligned with the actual needs of local enterprises' "Going Global" strategy are relatively scarce. Few studies have accurately depicted the actual level, core weaknesses and group differences of non-English majors' foreign-related communication competence in Hebei Province through quantitative data, nor have they systematically sorted out students' real learning needs, making it difficult to provide implementable empirical support for local college English teaching reform, let alone accurately respond to the talent demand of Hebei enterprises' "Going Global" strategy.

Based on this, this study took non-English major undergraduates from local universities in Hebei Province as the research object, and carried out a systematic empirical investigation, focusing on three core research objectives: First, to determine the overall level and core weaknesses of foreign-related communication competence among non-English major students in local universities in Hebei Province, as well as its alignment with the foreign-related job requirements of local enterprises. Second, to identify significant group differences in such competence and the key influencing factors. Third, to reveal students' improvement needs and learning behavior characteristics, and to propose empirically grounded pathways for optimizing college English teaching to meet the talent demands of Hebei enterprises' "Going Global" initiative. The findings provide both empirical reference for college English teaching reform in local universities in Hebei Province and theoretical support for cultivating foreign-related skilled talents and formulating university-enterprise collaborative education policies in the province.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Participants

This study focused on full-time non-English major undergraduates from a local application-oriented university in Hebei Province. A cluster sampling method was adopted to carry out the questionnaire survey. A total of 321 questionnaires were distributed, and 308 valid questionnaires were finally obtained after excluding

invalid ones with incomplete filling or straight-lining responses, with an effective recovery rate of 95.95%.

The sample covered multiple disciplines including engineering, management, economics, arts, education and medicine. Among them, engineering students accounted for 34.09%, which was highly matched with the talent demand of the core fields of Hebei enterprises' "Going Global" initiatives. In terms of gender distribution, there were 109 males (35.39%) and 199 females (64.61%). In terms of English proficiency, 139 participants (45.13%) had not passed CET-4, 32 participants (10.39%) had passed CET-4 but not CET-6, 6 participants (1.95%) had passed CET-6, and 131 participants (42.53%) had never taken CET-4 or CET-6. The sample structure conformed to the overall characteristics of non-English major students in local undergraduate colleges. Meanwhile, 8 students with different English proficiency levels and from different majors were selected from the valid questionnaire respondents by purposive stratified sampling method to participate in semi-structured interviews, so as to explore the underlying reasons behind the quantitative data. All research participants provided informed consent, and all data collected in this study were anonymized and only used for the statistical analysis of this study.

2.2 Research Instruments

This study adopted two core research instruments: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview outline. The questionnaire was designed around the real scenarios of foreign-related workplace communication, with reference to mature domestic and international workplace English proficiency scales and intercultural communication competence scales, combined with the post-competence requirements of Hebei enterprises' "Going Global" initiatives. It included 15 core evaluation items across 5 key dimensions: listening comprehension, oral expression, reading comprehension, written expression, and intercultural literacy. Three supplementary modules were also set up, covering basic demographic information, learning needs, and coping strategies for communication behaviors. The questionnaire adopted a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger corresponding competence. The questionnaire was reviewed and revised by three associate professors with more than 10 years of experience in college English teaching, with good content validity. The semi-structured interview outline was designed around the core dimensions of the questionnaire, with key questions including students' self-assessed ability weaknesses, practical difficulties in foreign-related communication, needs and suggestions for college English teaching, etc.

2.3 Data Processing and Analysis

The quantitative data of this study were processed by SPSS 26.0 statistical software, and the core analysis methods included reliability and validity tests, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis and

one-way ANOVA. The qualitative interview data were coded and analyzed by thematic analysis, with two researchers coding independently and cross-checking to reach a consensus, to achieve triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data.

The reliability test results showed that the overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.954, which was much higher than the critical value of 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire had excellent internal consistency and strong data reliability. The validity test results showed that the KMO value of the questionnaire was 0.918, the Bartlett's test of sphericity was 4559.270, the degree of freedom $df=105$, $p<0.001$, reaching a statistically significant level, indicating that the questionnaire data were suitable for factor analysis. Through the Varimax orthogonal rotation method, a total of 3 common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted in this study, with a cumulative explained variance of 77.07%. These factors corresponded to three

dimensions: workplace English reading and writing ability, daily English listening and speaking ability, and intercultural communication literacy, which fully covered the 5 evaluation modules designed in the questionnaire, indicating that the questionnaire had good structural validity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Overall Level of Foreign-related Communication Competence of Non-English Major Students

The descriptive statistical results showed that the average scores of the 5 dimensions of students' foreign-related communication competence were all between 2 and 3 on the 5-point Likert scale, indicating a moderately low level, which is consistent with the conceptual dimensions of workplace English competence in existing academic research (Qin & Dai, 2024). The scores of each dimension are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Foreign-related Communication Competence Dimensions (N=308)

Competence Dimension	Mean	SD
Oral Proficiency	2.93	0.92
Listening Proficiency	2.92	0.95
Intercultural Communication Competence	2.89	0.97
Written Proficiency	2.83	0.99
Reading Proficiency	2.76	1.01
Overall Competence	2.87	0.93

Note. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely unable, 5 = completely able). Higher scores indicate higher levels of proficiency.

As can be seen from Table 1, the five dimensions rank in descending order as oral expression, listening comprehension, intercultural literacy, written expression, and reading comprehension. Among them, workplace English reading and writing are the core ability weaknesses of students, especially the reading of English business instructions and job description texts and English written expression of work-related matters, which ranked lowest among all items.

This result exhibits an obvious mismatch with the talent demands of Hebei's three pillar overseas sectors. The interview data showed that students generally reported that "the general English content learned in the classroom cannot adapt to the needs of workplace scenarios". The finding is consistent with and supported by the quantitative data, and also verifies the core problem of the current disjunction between college English teaching and local industry demand. Exam-oriented general English teaching cannot meet students' real ability needs for adapting to foreign-related posts. This result is consistent with the survey results of Pei (2023) on manufacturing enterprises in the Yangtze River Delta, indicating that workplace English reading and writing ability is a common weakness of non-English major students nationwide.

3.2 Difference Analysis of Foreign-related Communication Competence Across Different Groups

The results of Pearson correlation analysis showed that students' self-rated English proficiency (average score 2.68) was significantly positively correlated with all 5 dimensions of foreign-related communication competence ($p<0.01$), but the correlation coefficients had obvious heterogeneity. Among them, self-rated English proficiency had the strongest correlation with reading comprehension and written expression dimensions, with correlation coefficients of 0.54 and 0.53 respectively; the correlation with listening comprehension and oral expression dimensions was the second, with correlation coefficients of 0.48 and 0.49 respectively; the correlation with intercultural literacy dimension was the weakest, with a correlation coefficient of only 0.44. This result indicates that exam-oriented English learning only exerts a significant positive effect on students' basic reading and writing proficiency, with negligible benefits for the development of intercultural communication literacy. However, intercultural competence is precisely one of the core requirements for talents in the overseas operation of Hebei enterprises, which is also the key demand of Chinese outbound enterprises (Liu & Jackson, 2024). The integration of intercultural competence training into college English teaching has been widely recognized in academic

research (Sun, 2022), and it is also a core blind spot in the current college English teaching in Hebei Province.

The results of one-way ANOVA showed that there were significant differences in the total scores of

foreign-related communication competence among students of different genders ($F=9.361$, $p=0.002$). The specific scores are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Overall Foreign-related Communication Competence(N=308)

Gender	n	Mean	SD	F	p
Male	109	2.83	0.98	9.361	.002
Female	199	3.16	0.88		

Note. $p < .01$, indicating a statistically significant difference between male and female students.

As can be seen from Table 2, the average competence score of female students is significantly higher than that of male students. When considered alongside Hebei's industrial characteristics, this finding exposes a core pain point in foreign-related talent supply. Male engineering students, who account for over 70% of the 34.09% engineering student sample and constitute the main workforce for enterprises' overseas projects, have significantly lower foreign-related communication

competence, failing to match the demands of overseas operations.

At the same time, there were also significant differences in the total scores of foreign-related communication competence among students with different CET-4 and CET-6 levels ($F=4.558$, $p=0.004$). The specific scores are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Differences in Overall Foreign-related Communication Competence by CET Performance (N=308)

CET Performance	n	Mean	SD	F	p
Failed CET-4	139	2.82	0.82	4.558	.004
Passed CET-4 only	32	3.41	0.87		
Passed CET-6	6	3.17	1.17		
Never taken CET-4/CET-6	131	3.01	0.84		

Note. $p < .01$, indicating a statistically significant difference across groups. CET = College English Test, the standardized English proficiency examination for undergraduate students in mainland China.

Post-hoc multiple comparison results showed that students who had passed CET-4 had significantly higher competence scores than those who had not passed CET-4 or had never taken CET-4 or CET-6 ($p<0.05$); however, there was no statistically significant difference in scores between students who had passed CET-6 and those who had passed CET-4. This result indicates that the exam-oriented CET has a certain positive impact on students' workplace foreign-related communication competence, but the marginal effect diminishes significantly: relying only on exam-oriented learning cannot achieve the continuous improvement of students' workplace application ability. In the recruitment of foreign-related posts in most Hebei enterprises, employers pay more attention to students' actual communication ability rather than CET certificates, which means the current exam-oriented teaching model cannot accurately match the actual employment standards of enterprises.

3.3 Students' Learning Needs and Communication Behavior Characteristics

The survey results showed that 91.23% of students believed that English ability was of great help to job hunting competitiveness, and 66.56% of students believed that it was necessary to improve their intercultural communication ability, indicating that students had a clear understanding of the importance of

foreign-related communication competence and a strong willingness to improve their ability. However, from the perspective of demand structure, students' subjective improvement needs were concentrated on daily general abilities such as listening (88.64%) and oral expression (86.04%), forming cognitive mismatch with the objective ability weakness (the weakest workplace reading and writing ability). The root cause of this misperception is that students lack an accurate understanding of the actual competence requirements for foreign-related positions. They prioritize intuitive daily communication skills, while overlooking the professional workplace reading and writing competence that constitutes enterprises' core requirement — a gap that should be a key focus of targeted teaching guidance.

From the perspective of communication behavior characteristics, 90.26% of students will give priority to using translation software for assistance when encountering obstacles in foreign-related communication, and only 52.92% of students will take the initiative to communicate and adjust with the other party, asking the other party to simplify their expression. The interview data showed that students generally reported that "translation software can only solve literal translation and cannot adapt to the context and norms of workplace communication", and over-reliance on AI translation tools will significantly weaken learners'

independent English application ability and communication strategies (Wang & Wang, 2023; Li & Zhang, 2025). This result is directly related to the employment concerns of Hebei enterprises. In formal business communication and negotiations for enterprises' overseas projects, they cannot completely rely on translation software. The lack of students' independent communication and situational adaptability will directly affect their post adaptability. However, there is almost no relevant communication strategy training in current teaching, which cannot meet the two-way needs of students and enterprises.

In addition, 78.9% of students hoped to add simulated training of real workplace dialogues in English classes, 65.58% hoped to add workplace English writing training, and 63.96% hoped to add industry English material reading training, indicating students' strong demand for scenario-based and application-oriented teaching content, while the current exam-oriented general English teaching can no longer meet their employment needs for adapting to foreign-related posts in Hebei enterprises.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the local development needs of Hebei enterprises' "Going Global" initiatives, this study took 308 non-English major undergraduates from local universities in the province as the research object, and carried out a systematic empirical study through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, drawing the following core conclusions.

First, the overall foreign-related communication competence of non-English major students in local universities of Hebei Province is at a moderately low level, with workplace English reading and writing ability as the core weakness. There is an obvious structural mismatch between students' ability structure and the foreign-related post demand of the province's "Going Global" enterprises, and the disjunction between academic learning and practical application in college English teaching is prominent. Second, students' self-rated English proficiency, gender, and CET-4 and CET-6 passing status all have significant impacts on their foreign-related communication competence. Male engineering students, who are the main employment group of overseas projects of Hebei enterprises, have significantly lower foreign-related communication competence. Exam-oriented CET-4 and CET-6 learning has a very limited effect on improving students' intercultural communication literacy and independent communication ability, which cannot adapt to the actual employment standards of enterprises. Third, non-English major students have a strong willingness to improve their foreign-related communication competence, but have an obvious cognitive mismatch with the real demand of foreign-related posts in enterprises in the province, have a high degree of dependence on translation tools, and

have an urgent demand for scenario-based and application-oriented teaching content in the workplace.

Based on the above conclusions, college English teaching in local universities should completely move away from the exam-oriented educational model, closely focus on the real employment needs of Hebei enterprises' "Going Global" initiatives, and optimize from the following three aspects.

First, reframe the curriculum content framework. Integrate targeted modules on English technical document reading and cross-border business correspondence tailored to Hebei's three pillar outbound industries, and replace a portion of generic general English content with authentic teaching materials from real business scenarios of local enterprises, to fundamentally resolve the disjunction between classroom learning and workplace application. Second, optimize the scenario-based teaching model. Adopt task-driven and scenario simulation teaching methods, design authentic communication scenarios from the overseas projects of Hebei's enterprises, and add targeted communication strategy training, to reduce students' over-reliance on translation tools and improve their independent communication and situational adaptability. Third, deepen the university-industry collaborative talent development mechanism. Co-construct a teaching resource library with local Hebei enterprises participating in the "Going Global" strategy, and invite senior professionals from enterprises' foreign-related business departments to deliver special lectures, to achieve a precise alignment between talent cultivation and industry demands.

The sample of this study is limited to a local applied university in Hebei Province, so the generalizability of the findings needs further verification. Future research can expand the sample to cover different types and levels of universities in the province, and supplement the survey on talent demands of Hebei's "Going Global" enterprises, to improve the research system and enhance the applicability of the conclusions.

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