

# Evaluation of Business English Writing Course-book Based on the Needs Analysis Model – Taking A Basic Course for Business English Writing as An Example

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## Abstract

Business English (BE) writing course is one of the core courses in the module of English knowledge and skills for BE undergraduate program. As one of the important elements of BE writing course, the course-books greatly influence the teaching and the improvement of students' BE writing skills. Although there are more than 354 BE writing course-books have been published, few researches have been done to evaluate these textbooks. This paper aims to evaluate one of the BE writing course-books used by Guizhou University, namely, *A Basic Course for Business English Writing* to identify whether this set of course-books meets the learning needs of students and to improve them based on students' needs. Targeting on the students majoring in Business English, the paper adopted the needs analysis model proposed by Hutchinson and Waters as well as the present situation analysis model raised by Richterich and Chancerel to design the questionnaire, which was used to identify students' needs for business English writing. Based on the results of the questionnaire survey and the course-book evaluation criteria created by McDonough and Shaw, we identified the problems with the course-books and proposed some suggestions for modifications and further improvement.

**Keywords:** needs analysis, course-book evaluation, business English writing course-books

## 1. Introduction

Since business English (BE) was ratified as an undergraduate major in China by the Ministry of Education in 2007, domestic research on it has been mushrooming. The majority of domestic studies focus on BE curriculum design and cultivation pattern (Chen & Wang, 2009; Wang, 2012; Wang et al. 2014), and BE teaching (Zhu, 2010; Shi & Liu, 2012) including writing teaching and other aspects of teaching. According to the *National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate Business English Major in Higher Education*, BE writing course is one of the core courses in the module of English knowledge and skills for BE undergraduate program. It not only helps students accumulate basic concepts of business activities, BE writing skills and cultural background knowledge, but also lays a solid foundation for students to learn advanced professional courses as well as to work in companies after graduation as employers pay much attention to English output skills such as speaking and writing (Shi & Cheng 2019). Most of the studies on BE writing are about teaching methods (Zhu, 2007; Wang, 2010; Xu & Xia, 2013) and writing genres (Chen, 2006; Hao & Ma, 2007). Few of them explore BE writing course-books, one of the important elements of BE writing course. It is found from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) that there are only 33 papers on BE writing course-books.

Although there is a wide variety of BE writing course-books, the majority of publishers of these course-books are centered in more developed areas like Beijing and Shanghai, and fewer are in western region (Zhang 2015). There is no research focusing on BE writing course-books used in universities in western China. Consequently, the set of course-books, *A Basic Course for Business English Writing* used by BE major in Guizhou University, a university in Project 211 in western China, is selected as the evaluation object in this paper on grounds that the English proficiency of the students of BE major in western China is not as good as that of those students in central or eastern China and therefore BE writing course-books should be designed in line with students' English language level. Simultaneously, (Project 211 is the national priority to develop higher education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in China, involving 112 universities nowadays.)

Many scholars (Mo & Sun 2010; Zhou et al. 2014; Tao, 2017) pointed out that an important problem in the construction of domestic BE writing course-books was that there was no needs analysis before course-book compilation. For the sake of solving this problem, the framework of needs analysis is applied as the guidance to design the questionnaire, investigating the needs of students involving sophomores, junior students and senior students in Guizhou University on BE writing course-books. All the respondents have learned the set of course-books, *A Basic Course for Business English Writing*. (Freshmen do not learn this course.) Based on the survey results, it is assessed whether this set of course-books could meet the learning needs of students and the improvement suggestions are proposed.

**2. Research Method**

*2.1 Research Questions*

This paper aims to explore the following two questions:

- (1) What are the needs of BE students from sophomores to seniors in Guizhou University for BE writing course-books?
- (2) Do the course-books, *A Basic Course for Business English Writing*, meet the needs of the research objects? If not, what can be done for course-book improvement?

*2.2 Research Methods*

This study combines qualitative research methods with quantitative research methods.

Qualitative analysis involves the semi-structured interview, structured interview and course-book evaluation. Two semi-structured interviewees, students, are randomly selected from sophomores, juniors and seniors in business English major in Guizhou University. The interviews are open and questions only serve as guidance. On the contrary, the structured interviewee is a teacher who teaches BE writing at Guizhou University. The questions of structured interview are designed in advance.

Quantitative analysis includes questionnaires and SPSS reliability analysis based on the results of questionnaires. Questions in the questionnaires are designed under the guidance of needs analysis framework proposed by Hutchinson and Waters, supplemented by present situation analysis model of Richterich and Chancerel which is perceived as the supplement of the former. As a result, questionnaires are divided into three parts: target situation analysis, learning situation analysis and present situation analysis, and there are 15 questions in each questionnaire. Because students in the first grade do not learn this course, the questionnaires are distributed to 60 students from the second grade to the forth grade in BE major in Guizhou University. They are also randomly selected from 115 students according to their student numbers. Odd numbers are the targets. (The total number of sophomore, junior students and senior students in BE major in Guizhou University is 115.) 58 questionnaires, finally, are collected in this study among which 51 are valid questionnaires. The return rate is 96.7%.

The results of questionnaires are typed in SPSS for reliability analysis, a total of 30 items. If the Cronbach’s Alpha is between 0.8 and 0.9, the questionnaire results are very reliable. If the Cronbach’s Alpha is between 0.7 and 0.8, items should be adjusted slightly and the irrelevant items should be removed. Albeit, the results are still reliable and can be used for research. From Table 1, Cronbach’s Alpha and Cronbach’s Alpha based on standardized items are 0.741 and 0.774 respectively, both between 0.7 and 0.8. Therefore, items in the questionnaires are adjusted slightly.

Table 1. Results of SPSS reliability analysis

Cronbach’s Alpha	Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.741	0.774	30

The same method, interview, is used to investigate different sources of information, students and the teacher. Simultaneously, different methods, interview and questionnaire, are applied to probe into the needs of the same source of information, students. Different sources are investigated via the same method, and different methods are used to consult the same source. Findings from distinct sources and methods are triangulated, increasing the reliability of research and survey.

2.3 Research Process

The study begins with a semi-structured interview with students. Questions and options in the questionnaire are designed in accordance with the framework of needs analysis and interview results. When questionnaires are distributed, a structured interview is conducted simultaneously. The interviewee is a teacher, teaching BE writing at Guizhou University. The needs of BE writing course-book are, therefore, concluded on the basis of the results of questionnaires and structured interview.

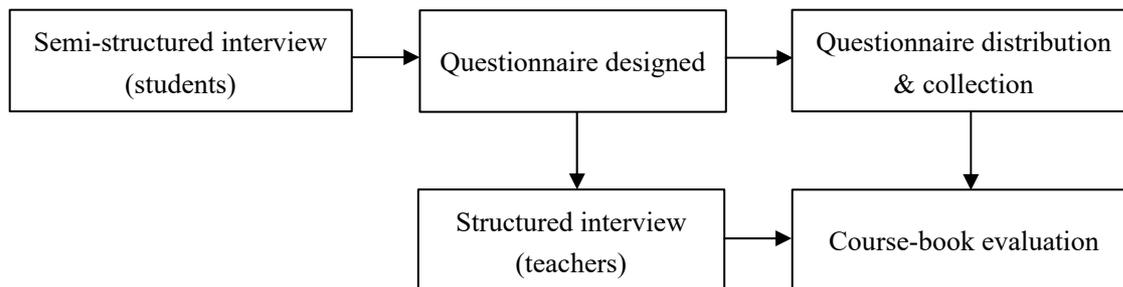


Figure 1. Research process flowchart

In light of the needs concluded above, McDonough and Shaw’s course-book evaluation theory is applied to evaluate A Basic Course for Business English Writing so as to identify whether the course-books could meet the needs.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Needs analysis model

Richterich (1972) first proposed applying needs analysis to foreign language teaching. Needs analysis is a process of getting to know a problem before solving the problem. It can identify students’ needs for BE writing teaching and discover problems in teaching and course-books (Cohen et al. 2000:390).

3.1.1 Hutchinson and Waters’s Needs Analysis Model

In 1987, Hutchinson and Waters proposed a learn-centered needs analysis model that consists of two parts: target situation analysis and learning situation analysis.

Target situation analysis refers to what the learners want to do in the target context. It attaches importance to the usage of language and acts as a compass in the learning process to guide learners to the final destination. Hutchinson and Waters (2000:55) believed that target situation analysis encompasses ‘necessities’ and ‘wants’. ‘Necessities’ means the knowledge and skills learners must master in order to use the language in the target situation. Meanwhile, ‘wants’ refers to learners’ subjective understanding of their needs.

Learning situation analysis accentuates what learners should learn to achieve targets, which helps learners find out the most effective learning way and focuses on language learning. It mainly studies learner’s learning motivation, learning strategies and learning environment.

Hutchinson and Waters’ needs analysis model focuses on the learning and application of language, but it does not pay much attention to learners’ existing knowledge and skills as well as their lacks. Therefore, Richterich and Chancerel’s present situation analysis model is introduced.

3.1.2 Richterich and Chancerel’s Present Situation Analysis Model

Richterich and Chancerel established the present situation analysis model in 1977 to investigate the status quo of students before having foreign language courses and their strengths and lacks in language learning. The questionnaire is designed in line with Hutchinson and Waters’ needs analysis model in conjunction with Richterich and Chancerel’s present situation analysis model.

3.2 McDonough and Shaw’s Course-Book Evaluation Criteria

Since McDonough and Shaw’s course-book evaluation criteria were developed by teachers and scholars, by the same token, not taking learners’ feedback into account, the author has applied needs analysis model mentioned in 3.1 to identify learners’ needs, which are matched with course-book evaluation criteria. Ultimately, this paper studies whether the target course-books are suitable for students majoring in BE at Guizhou University.

McDonough and Shaw thought that course-book evaluation should be carried out from three perspectives: external evaluation, internal evaluation and overall evaluation (1993: 66-79). External evaluation includes the following aspects: intended audience, the proficiency level, the content and presentation of language items, whether the course-books are core materials or supplementary ones, the role and availability of a teacher’s book, the inclusion of a vocabulary list/ index, the clarity of contents, the use of visual and presentation, the provision of audio/ video material and inclusion of test. On the basis of the results of external evaluation, it is possible to initially determine whether the set of course-books is appropriate. If not, choose other similar course-book; if appropriate, further evaluate them.

The internal evaluation involves the treatment and presentation of skills, the sequencing and grading of materials, the type of reading, listening, speaking and writing materials contained in the course-books, appropriateness of tests and exercises, self-study provision and teacher-learner balance in the use of the course-books.

Finally, the course-books are evaluated from the overall four aspects as follows. Firstly, usability is intended to assess whether the target course-books are consistent with the syllabus or course objectives. Secondly, generalizability indicates that whether the course-books are commonly used and applicable to most regions. Thirdly, adaptability aims to check whether the course-books can be adjusted according to distinct teaching environment. Lastly, flexibility refers to whether the teacher can flexibly adjust the sequence of materials in the course-books while teaching.

**4. Results and Discussion**

*4.1 Analysis of Questionnaire Results*

4.1.1 Present Situation Analysis

Present situation analysis contains two questions, English proficiency of students and their lacks in learning BE writing. On grounds that it is impossible to test respondents and sophomores still do not know their TEM-4 (Test for English Majors Band 4) scores, CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET-6 (College English Test Band 6) scores are adopted for references.

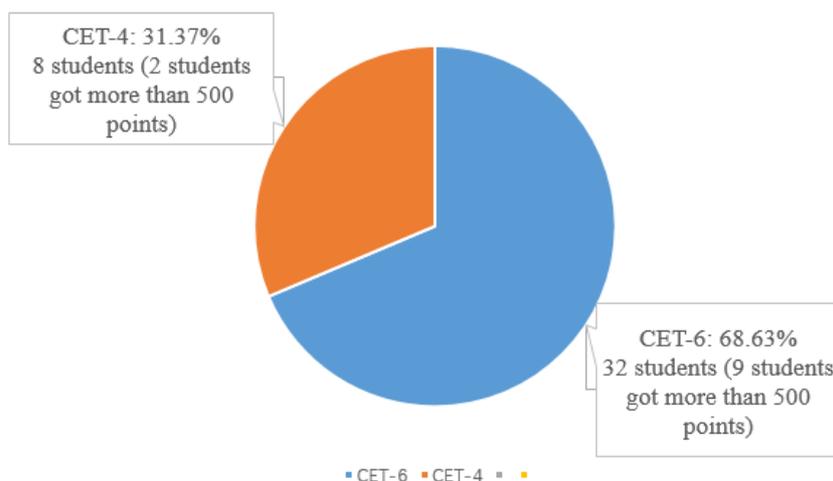


Figure 2. English proficiency of respondents

In accordance with questionnaire results, 40 of the 51 respondents pass CET 4 and CET 6. Nevertheless, the majority of their scores are relatively low, demonstrating that language proficiency of university students in BE major in western China still needs to be improved.

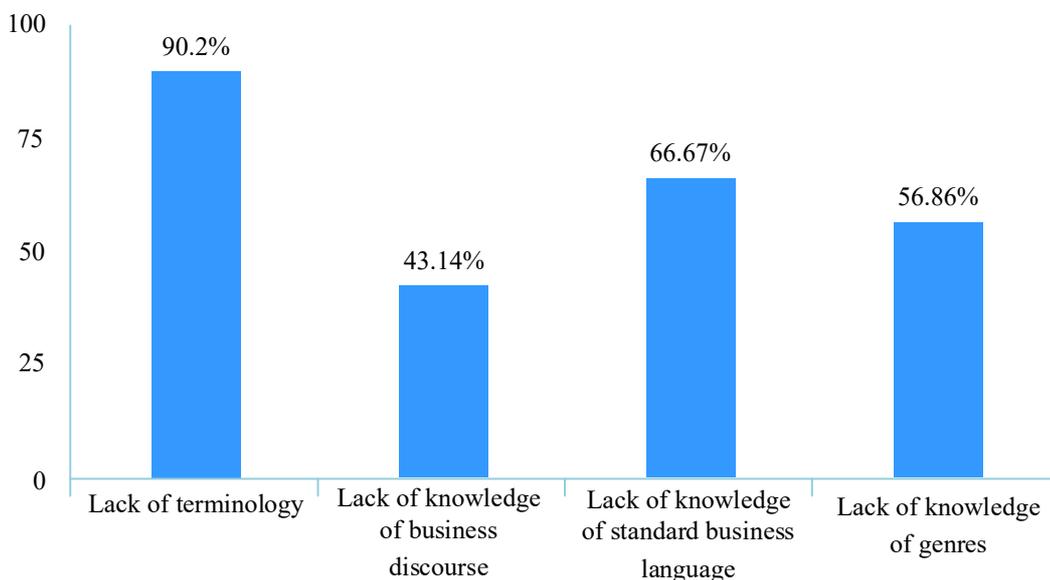


Figure 3. Lacks of respondents in BE writing

Respondents, students, believe that the biggest challenge they encounter in BE writing is the lack of terminology, followed by the inconsistency with standard business language and the lack of knowledge of genres of business discourse.

#### 4.1.2 Target Situation Analysis

In view of ‘necessities’ and ‘wants’ in the target situation analysis model, two questions are designed: (1) what knowledge and skills can be learned from BE writing course, investigating students’ learning goals; (2) what are the knowledge and skills they mainly want to acquire based on their learning goals. BE writing skills rank the first.

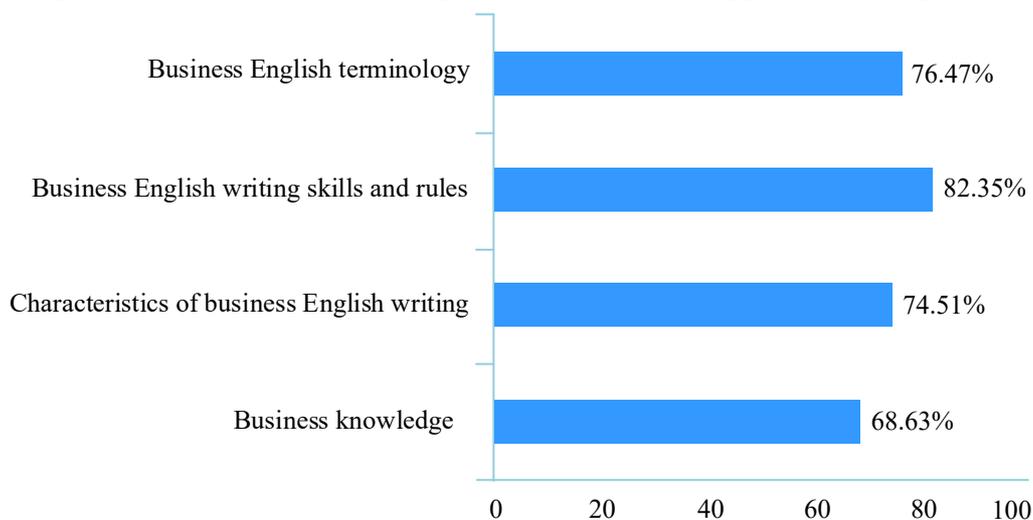


Figure 4. Knowledge and skills respondents want to acquire

#### 4.1.3 Learning Situation Analysis

Questions in this part are designed in light of both learning situation analysis model and McDonough and Shaw’s course-book evaluation criteria so as to explore students’ needs and further help course-book evaluation. The results show that more than 80% of students perceive that the set of course-books, *A Basic Course for Business English Writing*, is moderately easy, and the course-books should be compiled on the basis of BE writing genres, encompassing business correspondence, business minutes, business reports, resumes, proposals, memos, etc.

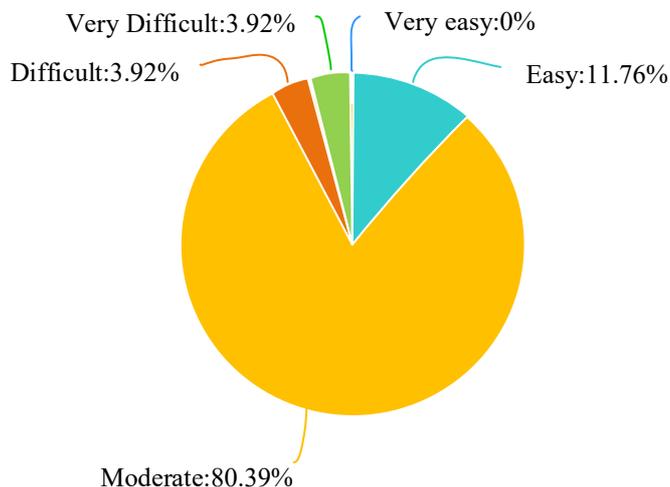


Figure 5. Respondents' understanding of the difficulty of course-books

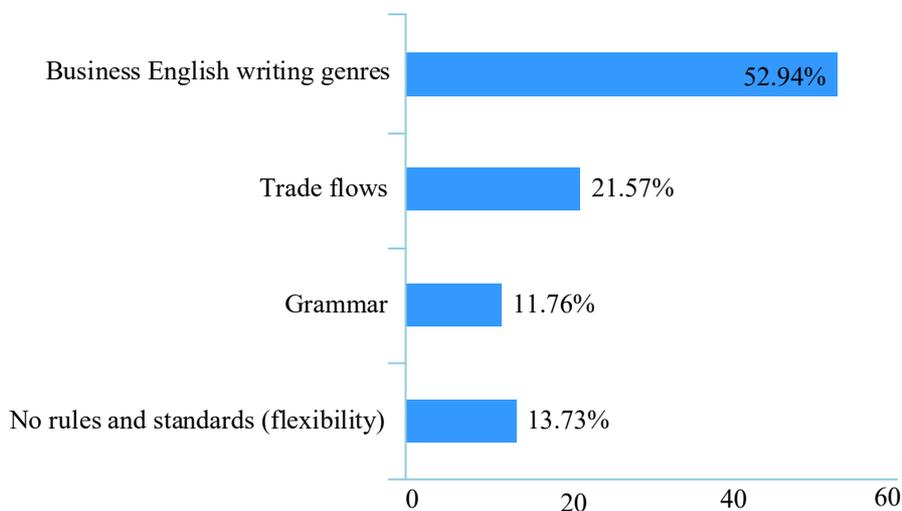


Figure 6. Respondents' needs for the compilation of BE writing course-books

Table 2. Respondents' needs for BE writing genres

Option	Subtotal	Percentage
Business correspondence	47	92.16%
Memos	37	72.55%
Business minutes	45	88.24%
Business reports	45	88.24%
Resumes	44	86.27%
Business proposals	38	74.51%
Others	5	9.80%
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100%</b>

More than 60% of the respondents believe that the total number of chapters and the length of each chapter are moderate. Each chapter should focus on BE writing skills and practical exercises, including examples of business discourse, business cultural knowledge, BE writing skills, etc. Examples of business discourse should derive from real business activities.

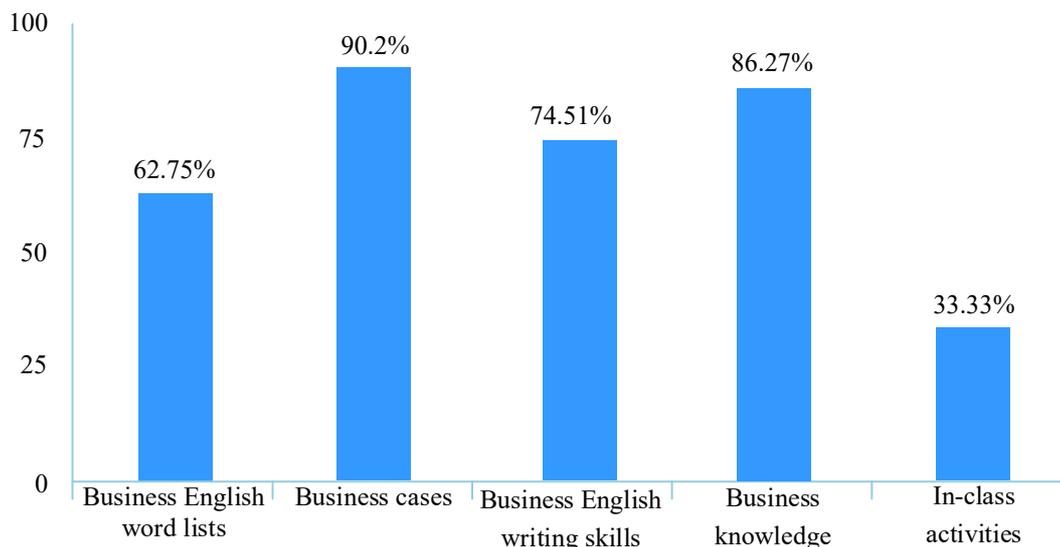


Figure 7. Respondents' needs for the content in BE writing course-books

4.2 Course-Book Evaluation Results

The author slightly adjusts McDonough and Shaw’s course-book evaluation criteria according to the target course-books. There are 20 criteria after adjustment and each criterion is scored 0-5 based on the matching degree of the target course-books and needs of students and the teacher. With a total score of 100, the score 0 represents complete inconsistency and in contrast, 5 means that the course-books match needs. After evaluation, the target course-books get 64 points.

4.2.1 External Evaluation

Table 3. External evaluation criteria and scores

	Criteria	Scores
External evaluation criteria	The intended audience	5
	The proficiency level	5
	The context of language items	2.5
	The number of chapters	4
	The length of chapters	4
	Core or supplementary materials	5
	The role and availability of a teacher’s book	0
	The inclusion of a vocabulary list/ index	5
	The clarity of the contents	2
	The use of visual and presentation	3.5
	The provision of audio/ video material	0
	Total scores	36

The intended audiences are sophomores majoring in BE in western areas. In line with interviews with students, the set of course-books, the first volume and the second volume, is used for sophomores in the first and second semesters respectively. Based on the questionnaire results, more than 80% students think that the set of course-books is moderately easy, so that it matches the proficiency level of students. The name of the course-books are A Basic Course for Business English Writing, which should be suitable for BE majors instead of general English (GE) learners. Albeit, there are few business content and BE writing genres. The majority are GE writing skills and principles, so it can be concluded that it is more applicable to GE learners and this score is relatively low. The questionnaire results illustrate that more than 60% students think that the number and length of chapters in these course-books are appropriate.

According to the structured interview with the teacher, this set of course-books is the core material in BE writing class, supplemented by materials related to BE. There is no teacher’s book, so the score is 0. The vocabularies, BE terminology, are listed at the end of each chapter. The respondents hope BE writing course-books are compiled in line with BE writing genres rather than GE writing skills which are the compilation concept of this set of course-books. Thus, the content of the course-books does not meet the needs of learners. There are few charts and tables that are conducive to the students’ understanding of the content and mostly are in black and white. The entire set of course-books does not provide visual aids, audio and video, learning websites, etc, so the score is 0. Finally, it gets 36 points from the perspective of external evaluation.

4.2.2 Internal Evaluation

Table 4. Internal evaluation criteria and scores

	Criteria	Scores
Internal evaluation criteria	The content of the course-books	2
	The presentation of business writing skills	2
	The sequencing and grading of the content	5
	The examples of business discourse	1
	The appropriateness of tests and exercises	5
	Total scores	15

The questionnaire results indicate that students want to learn BE writing skills and principles, BE terminology, BE writing genres and characteristics and business knowledge from BE writing course. Meanwhile, they discover that they do not master sufficient BE terminology, standard business language and knowledge of genres of business discourse. The ‘wants’ and ‘lacks’ above should be solved by BE writing course-books, but this set of course-books selected only involves BE vocabularies as well as little intercultural background knowledge, and there is almost no business-related content. Consequently, the score of the content of the course-books is 2, relatively low. Likewise, BE writing skills are the same. On account of the moderate number and length of chapters and acceptable difficulty, items, the sequencing and grading of the content as well as the appropriateness of tests and exercises, both get 5 points. Most examples chosen in the course-books are not business-related and are not from real business activities. They are more suitable for GE learners. In total, the score of internal evaluation is 15.

4.2.3 Overall Evaluation

Table 5. Overall evaluation criteria and scores

	Criteria	Scores
Overall evaluation criteria	The usability factor	3
	The generalizability factor	3
	The adaptability factor	5
	The flexibility factor	3
	Total scores	13

The overall evaluation of the course-books is divided into four parts. In terms of usability, this set of course-books is compiled for BE writing course and the intended users are BE majors, but the major content is not related to BE according to internal evaluation results, which is inconsistent with the syllabus and objectives of BE writing course.

With regard to generalizability of the books, they are in line with the English proficiency of university students majoring in BE in western China as more than half believe they are not difficult. Due to the differences in students between the east and the west, these course-books may not be applicable to university students in eastern areas. They cannot be used nationwide.

Concerning the adaptability factor, the interviewee, the teacher teaching BE writing course in Guizhou University, says that she combines the course-books with supplementary materials which are business-related in class, so they are highly adaptable.

In addition to the first and the second chapters about business cultural differences and writing principles in the first volume of this set, other chapters are compiled according to the logic of English writing and GE writing genres which are not readily adjusted. Thus, the score for flexibility is 3. The total scores of overall evaluation is 13.

*4.3 Existing Problems and Suggestions for Improvement*

*4.3.1 Lack of BE Writing Content*

The biggest problem is the lack of relevant content of BE writing such as BE writing skills and principles, BE writing genres and characteristics and business knowledge. The proportion of GE writing in the whole set is much more than that of BE writing. The intended users cannot acquire the knowledge and skills they want through the study of these course-books (see 4.1.2).

The author suggests the target audience of the course-books be clarified and more content related to BE writing be added as well in order to satisfy students’ needs for BE writing knowledge and skills.

*4.3.2 Lack of Needs Analysis before Course-Book Compilation*

BE writing materials, to a large extent, are compiled as a result of the intuition and experience of teachers and course-book editors (Nelson 2000: 30). Few course-books are compiled in accordance with the learning needs and target needs identified via needs analysis including teaching content, tasks, arrangement, etc. (Mo & Sun 2010). This set of course-books also lacks needs analysis before compilation because it does not detect needs of intended users in time (they are more incline to BE writing genres).

Before compilation, conducting needs analysis is recommended. As for the target course-books of this study, the compilation system should be changed into BE writing genres instead of those of GE writing.

*4.3.3 Lack of Authenticity in Materials*

Authenticity is a significant feature of BE course-books, which not only stimulates learners’ motivation, but also enhances their writing skills in real business situations. In light of the questionnaire results, students believe that materials of BE writing course-books should come from real business activities. However, these course-books rarely select cases in real business situations as examples, instead, choosing GE cases.

Authentic business discourse should be selected as examples of the course-books so as to create a more realistic language environment for students. It is worth noticing that authentic business discourse may have grammatical or other problems. Editors could maintain the balance between authenticity and usability, for example, choosing cases from real business activities but correcting grammatical mistakes. Otherwise, applying real business cases to exercises is another way to increase authenticity of BE course-books.

Table 6. Respondents’ needs for the authenticity of course-book materials

Option	Subtotal	Percentage
Authentic business texts	8	15.69%
Simulated cases adapted for teaching purpose	20	39.22%
Balanced number of real cases and simulated cases	20	39.22%
Any cases in business activities	3	5.88%
Total	51	100%

*4.3.4 Lack of Comprehensive Course-Book Construction*

Problems in comprehensive construction of the course-books are as follows (see 4.2.1). This set lacks a teacher’s book; although BE vocabulary lists are displayed at the end of each chapter, these vocabularies are irrelevant to cases and the course-books do not provide the actual usage and context of these vocabularies for intended learners; the charts and tables are insufficient; and there is no provision of audio or video materials. Abundant audio or video materials and self-learning websites could help students simulate real business activities and apply the knowledge and skills of BE writing they have learned to these activities. As a result, students could really get the hang of BE writing skills.

Suggestions to the improvement of course-book construction involve the following aspects: offering a teacher's book; selecting examples from real business activities and drawing BE terminology from examples above; providing target learners with supplementary materials such as audio or videos, PPT, self-learning websites, etc., which to most extent build authentic business environment and promote learning independently.

## 5. Conclusion

There is a wide variety of BE writing course-books published but few studies on them are conducted, especially those on BE writing course-books used in universities in western China. Therefore, this paper focuses on the set of course-books, A Basic Course for Business English Writing, chosen by Guizhou University. Questionnaires are designed according to needs analysis model to identify needs of target learners. Simultaneously, McDonough and Shaw's course-book evaluation criteria are applied in order to evaluate this set of course-books and identify whether they can cater for students' needs. It reveals the following problems: (1) lack of BE writing content; (2) lack of needs analysis before course-book compilation; (3) lack of authenticity in materials; (4) lack of comprehensive course-book construction. Corresponding suggestions are proposed to help improve the mentioned course-books.

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