

Investigating Language Function Needs of Learners in Business English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study examined learners' effectiveness in using language functions during oral English communication (OEC) in a Business English (BE) classroom at the State Polytechnic of Ujung Pandang, Indonesia. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire assessing the perceived importance of language functions and the difficulty of performing them. Descriptive statistics revealed that learners' overall effectiveness was moderate ($M = 2.28$), achieving only 50% of the expected proficiency level. The lowest effectiveness was found in argumentative, persuasive, and negotiation-related language functions, which learners rated as highly important yet highly difficult, indicating critical performance gaps. The findings imply the need for explicit instruction, scaffolded practice, and technology-enhanced speaking tasks to strengthen high-demand functional expressions in BE contexts. The study is limited by its self-reported data and single-site setting. Future research should apply mixed-methods designs, include performance-based assessments, and evaluate instructional interventions to enhance learners' functional language proficiency.

Keywords: *Language Functions, Oral English Communication, Business English, Effectiveness.*

1) INTRODUCTION

In Business English (BE) instruction, the ability to perform language functions effectively such as requesting, persuading, negotiating, clarifying, and presenting arguments is essential for successful oral communication in academic and professional contexts. As vocational and higher education institutions increasingly emphasize workplace readiness, the development of functional oral English competence has become a core instructional objective. Despite this centrality, empirical evidence remains limited regarding how effective learners perceive themselves to be in performing these language functions during classroom communication, particularly within Indonesian vocational ESP settings.

Needs analysis research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) traditionally highlights the skills, genres, and communicative tasks required in target situations (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Munby, 1978). However, many studies have focused primarily on the importance or frequency of communicative demands, while paying less attention to the difficulty

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learners experience or the extent to which they feel capable of meeting these demands (Iwai et al., 1999; West, 1994). This creates a persistent gap: a function may be deemed essential, yet if learners perceive themselves as ineffective in performing it, instructional efforts may fail to yield meaningful competence.

Recent evidence suggests that the perception of difficulty in using language functions directly affects learners' confidence, performance, and engagement during oral English communication (Jihan, 2024). Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory further underscores that learners' judgments about their own communicative abilities strongly shape their actual performance, learning behavior, and willingness to participate. In the BE classroom where persuasive, argumentative, and negotiation-related functions are central understanding learners' perceived effectiveness becomes critical for curriculum design and pedagogical decision-making.

Building on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) needs analysis model, this study evaluates learners' wants, necessities, and particularly their lacks by examining their self-assessed ability to use key language functions required in the Business English curriculum. Previous ESP research (Kaewpet, 2009; Nor Aslah Adzmi et al., 2009; Sattar et al., 2011) has consistently identified misalignments between learners' existing oral communication skills and workplace expectations. However, little empirical research has explicitly quantified the effectiveness level of learners' use of language functions nor identified which functions they perceive as the most challenging within vocational BE classroom interactions. Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a quantitative descriptive design to investigate two central objectives:

- To determine the level of learners' perceived effectiveness in using language functions during oral English communication (OEC) in the Business English classroom.
- To identify the specific language functions that contribute most to learners' perceived ineffectiveness, particularly within persuasive and negotiation-based communicative tasks.

To frame this investigation, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model integrating needs analysis theory (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). The model positions perceived importance and perceived difficulty as key independent variables influencing learners' perceived effectiveness the dependent variable reflecting how well learners believe they can perform essential language functions during BE oral tasks. This framework guided the questionnaire

construction and analytical procedures, enabling a systematic examination of the relationship between learners' perceptions and their functional language performance.

By focusing on learners' perceived effectiveness and the functions they struggle with most, this study offers actionable insights for enhancing BE instruction in vocational higher education. The findings are expected to inform curriculum refinement, targeted intervention design, and pedagogical strategies aimed at strengthening learners' communicative readiness for professional contexts.

Literature Review

In the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), oral English communication (OEC) has long been recognized as a central component of learners' communicative competence, particularly in Business English (BE) contexts where interactional tasks such as negotiating, persuading, clarifying, and problem-solving are fundamental to professional performance. Scholars argue that effective OEC extends beyond grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge; it requires the functional ability to accomplish communicative purposes within specific sociocultural and professional settings (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007). This function-oriented perspective has become increasingly relevant in vocational education, where learners must demonstrate readiness for authentic workplace communication. However, existing research indicates that learners frequently perceive themselves as only moderately effective in performing these functional tasks, suggesting a persistent gap between pedagogical expectations and actual communicative abilities.

A growing body of ESP literature has documented the challenges learners encounter in using essential language functions during oral communication. Studies conducted in Asian and ASEAN contexts consistently show that learners struggle with higher-order interactional functions—particularly those requiring persuasion, negotiation, disagreement management, and argumentation (Kaewpet, 2009; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Evans, 2013). These functions demand a combination of linguistic precision, pragmatic awareness, and strategic competence, making them substantially more difficult than basic transactional exchanges. Research involving Indonesian EFL learners echoes this trend, revealing limited confidence, low interactional fluency, and significant hesitation when performing functions that involve expressing opinions, defending viewpoints, proposing alternatives, or responding tactfully in real-time conversations (Paramudia, 2023; Jihan, 2024). These limitations

directly influence learners' perceived communicative effectiveness, often leading to reduced participation and avoidance of complex oral tasks.

The literature further suggests that learners' difficulties stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from challenges related to pragmatic and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence involves selecting expressions appropriate to context, purpose, and interlocutor, while sociopragmatic competence encompasses the broader social norms and cultural expectations governing interaction. Taguchi (2011) and Ishihara and Cohen (2010) observe that EFL learners often lack experience with professional communicative norms, making it difficult for them to interpret implicit meanings, manage politeness strategies, or negotiate disagreements without sounding abrupt or indirect. Such pragmatic gaps diminish their ability to perform language functions successfully, particularly in business scenarios where precision, tact, and persuasive influence are essential. Consequently, even when learners understand the linguistic forms associated with a function, they may still perceive themselves as ineffective due to inadequate pragmatic knowledge or limited exposure to authentic communicative situations.

The distinction between the perceived importance and difficulty of language functions has emerged as a particularly relevant theme in contemporary ESP research. Several studies highlight that learners often recognize the importance of advanced business communication functions but simultaneously view them as difficult to perform (Nor Aslah Adzmi et al., 2009; Sattar et al., 2011). This misalignment creates what Long (2005) describes as "functional competence gaps," where learners' awareness of communicative demands outpaces their actual performance abilities. In pedagogical terms, such gaps are significant predictors of perceived effectiveness: learners who rate a function as highly important but difficult tend to report low self-efficacy and lower overall communicative confidence. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory supports this interpretation, noting that learners' judgments about their capability to perform a task strongly influence their actual performance, willingness to participate, and persistence in learning.

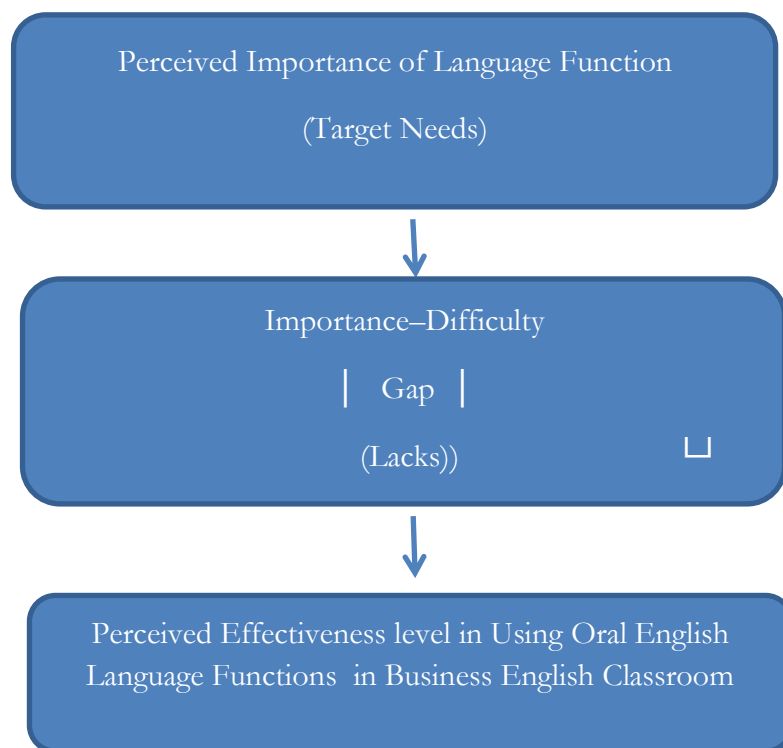
Despite the extensive literature on ESP needs and communicative demands, relatively few studies have examined learners' perceived effectiveness in using language functions through quantitative measures. Much of the existing research emphasizes workplace communication needs, yet classroom-based evaluations of functional competence remain limited, especially in Indonesian vocational contexts. Moreover, studies rarely integrate the dual dimensions of importance and difficulty in

assessing language functions, even though this approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of learners' communicative readiness and instructional needs. This gap highlights the need for research that identifies not only which functions are valued but also which ones learners struggle with most and how these challenges shape their perceived effectiveness in oral English communication.

In sum, the literature demonstrates that learners' effectiveness in OEC is closely tied to their ability to perform specific language functions. Difficulty with persuasive, negotiation-related, and argumentative functions consistently emerges as a major obstacle, reducing communicative confidence and limiting performance in both academic and professional contexts. These findings underscore the importance of investigating the perceived effectiveness of language function use within BE classrooms and identifying the functions that most significantly contribute to learners' communicative challenges. The present study responds to this need by systematically measuring the perceived importance and difficulty of BE language functions and examining how these factors influence learners' perceived effectiveness during oral communication tasks.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study situates learners' perceived effectiveness in using oral language functions within an integrated model of needs analysis (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), communicative competence theory (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007), Business English communicative demands (Ellis & Johnson, 1994), and academic discourse development (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996). These perspectives collectively illuminate how learners evaluate the importance of language functions, experience difficulty in performing them, and ultimately judge their own effectiveness in Business English communication tasks.



Picture 1: *Explanation of Conceptual Framework (Diagram 1)*

Investigating Oral English Communication Language Functions in the Business English Classroom

Conceptual Framework Diagram 1 illustrates the theoretical and analytical model guiding the investigation of learners' perceived effectiveness in using oral English language functions during Business English (BE) communication tasks. The framework integrates three key perceptual variables: perceived importance, perceived difficulty, and perceived effectiveness, and explains how their interaction reveals learners' communicative readiness and instructional needs in a vocational ESP context.

At the core of this framework is the assumption, grounded in Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) needs analysis model, that effective BE instruction depends on identifying and addressing learners' target needs, learning needs, and lacks. In this study, these needs are operationalized through measurable constructs that reflect how learners perceive and experience the use of language functions in oral communication.

1. Perceived Importance (Target Needs)

The first component, Perceived Importance, represents learners' judgments about how essential specific language functions are for achieving successful communication in business contexts. Functions such as persuading, negotiating, clarifying, summarizing, agreeing, or disagreeing are widely recognized in ESP and BE literature as foundational to professional discourse (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Nickerson, 2015). High perceived importance indicates that learners understand the communicative demands of business interactions and value the functions required to meet them. In the conceptual framework, this variable reflects target needs what learners believe they must be able to do to perform effectively in workplace communication.

2. Perceived Difficulty (Learning Needs)

The second component, Perceived Difficulty, captures learners' perceptions of how challenging it is to perform each language function during oral tasks. This difficulty may stem from limited linguistic resources, insufficient pragmatic awareness, lack of strategic competence, or unfamiliarity with professional communicative norms (Taguchi, 2011; Celce-Murcia, 2007). Functions involving persuasion, negotiation, and complex reasoning typically require higher levels of strategic and sociopragmatic competence, causing learners to perceive them as particularly demanding. This construct reflects learning needs the support, instruction, and practice learners require to acquire the skills necessary for communicative success.

3. Importance–Difficulty Gap (Learners' Lacks)

The conceptual framework positions the Importance–Difficulty Gap as the mediating construct that reveals learners' Lacks—the gap between where they currently are and where they need to be. When a language function is rated as highly important but also highly difficult, the gap becomes large, indicating a significant lack in learners' functional readiness. This gap is crucial because it highlights the functions that contribute most to perceived ineffectiveness, helping instructors identify priority areas for pedagogical intervention. Large gaps typically occur in functions requiring advanced interactional competence, such as negotiating or persuading, which aligns with previous studies showing that these functions are among the most challenging in BE classrooms (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Evans, 2013).

4. Perceived Effectiveness (Outcome Variable)

The final component of the framework is Perceived Effectiveness, which represents learners' self-assessed ability to use language functions appropriately, confidently, and successfully during oral English communication tasks. This construct serves as the primary outcome variable in the study. Perceived effectiveness is influenced by both: Learners' awareness of communicative demands (importance), and their perceived ability to meet those demands (difficulty). This relationship is theoretically grounded in Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals' beliefs about their capability to perform tasks strongly shape their actual performance, motivation, and anxiety levels during communication. In the BE context, low perceived effectiveness may lead to lower participation, avoidance of complex functional tasks, and weaker communicative performance.

5. Overall Logic of the Framework

The conceptual framework proposes a sequential logic:

- a. Learners first identify which language functions are important for business communication.
- b. They then evaluate how difficult these functions are to perform during oral tasks.
- c. The gap between importance and difficulty reflects their functional lacks, revealing which functions they feel least competent performing.

These lacks ultimately determine their perceived effectiveness, shaping their confidence and readiness for real-world BE interaction.

2) METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to systematically measure learners' perceptions of their effectiveness in using oral English language functions in the Business English (BE) classroom. A quantitative approach was chosen because the primary objectives of the study were:

- a. To determine the level of learners' perceived effectiveness in performing key language functions required for oral English communication (OEC); and
- b. To identify which language functions contribute most strongly to perceived ineffectiveness, based on the importance–difficulty gap.

These objectives require measurable, numerical data that reflect learners' evaluations of multiple functional areas. As highlighted in the literature (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Evans, 2013; Kassim &

Ali, 2010), learners' perceived importance, difficulty, and communicative effectiveness can be quantitatively assessed to reveal target needs, learning needs, and functional lacks. The quantitative design therefore aligns with ESP needs analysis principles and allows for systematic comparison across language function categories.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study comprised fourth-semester students enrolled in the English for Business course at the State Polytechnic of Ujung Pandang (PNUP) during the 2024–2025 academic year. This group is pedagogically relevant because they have completed foundational English coursework and actively engage in OEC tasks that represent both academic and professional communication demands.

A simple random sampling technique was used to provide each student an equal chance of participation and to ensure representative distribution of perceptions across the cohort. This sampling approach is consistent with quantitative principles of objectivity and generalizability.

Instrument

Questionnaire Design

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to measure learners' perceptions along two key dimensions derived from the conceptual framework:

- a. Perceived Importance of 25 Business English language functions → representing target needs
- b. Perceived Difficulty / Effectiveness in performing these functions → representing learning needs and perceived capability

Each language function (e.g., persuading, negotiating, summarizing, clarifying, apologizing, agreeing/disagreeing, presenting arguments) was represented by one questionnaire item. The 25 items were adapted and modified from validated instruments used in previous ESP and BE studies [5], [6], [7].

Likert Scale Format

A 5-point Likert scale was used for both dimensions:

Importance Scale:

5 = Very important → 1 = Not important

Difficulty/Effectiveness Scale:

5 = Very easy → 1 = Very difficult

This dual-scale structure is commonly used in ESP needs analysis research to quantify learners' perceptions (Iwai et al., 1999; Long, 2005) and enables the computation of importance–difficulty gaps, which are central to understanding learners' functional lacks.

Validity, Reliability, and Administration Procedures

To reduce interpretation bias and ensure comprehension, the questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Indonesia. A pilot test was then conducted with a small group of similar learners to check linguistic clarity and item functionality. Based on the pilot results, minor adjustments were made to wording.

The internal consistency of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding:

$\alpha = 0.811$, indicating a high reliability appropriate for quantitative analysis.

The questionnaire was administered during regular class sessions, and responses were collected under researcher supervision to ensure full participation and data integrity.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 17. The analysis consisted of three stages:

1. Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and percentage distributions were calculated for:

Perceived Importance

Perceived Difficulty / Effectiveness

This provides an overview of which language functions are valued most and which are perceived as most challenging.

2. Gap Score Calculation

A quantitative gap score was computed for each of the 25 language functions:

Gap Score = Importance Mean – Difficulty Mean
$$\text{Gap Score} = \text{Importance Mean} - \text{Difficulty Mean}$$

A higher gap score indicates greater learner lack, suggesting that the function is important but difficult, thereby lowering perceived effectiveness.

3. Categorization and Ranking

To interpret the magnitude of perceptions, the study adopted Oxford's (1990) three-level classification:

Importance and Frequency Levels

1.00–2.49: Low

2.50–3.49: Moderate

3.50–5.00: High

Difficulty/Effectiveness Levels

(modified to align with the study's operational needs)

1.00–2.49: High difficulty

2.50–3.49: Moderate difficulty

3.50–5.00: Low difficulty

Functions were ranked based on their gap scores to identify which linguistic and pragmatic areas contribute most to low perceived effectiveness, as emphasized in the literature review on learners' struggles with persuasive, negotiation, and argumentative functions (Evans & Green, 2019; Jihan, 2024; Kassim & Ali, 2010).

Link to Literature and Conceptual Framework

The entire methodological process is directly aligned with:

- a. Needs Analysis Theory (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987): quantifying target needs, learning needs, and lacks
- b. Business English Pragmatic Demands (Ellis & Johnson, 1994): identifying functional gaps in persuasion, negotiation, clarification
- c. Academic and Professional Discourse Competence (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996): evaluating functional readiness along the academic–professional spectrum
- d. Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997): operationalizing perceived effectiveness through learners' judgments

Thus, the quantitative design supports the study's goal of mapping learners' perceived communicative competence and identifying high-priority instructional needs in the BE classroom.

3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: *Order of Importance of Using Language Functions in the Business English (BE) Classroom*

No.	Item of Questionnaire	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1	Presenting arguments	4.7375	0.44277	80
2	Asking questions	4.7375	0.44277	80
3	Agreeing or disagreeing	4.8375	0.37124	80
4	Clarifying	4.7375	0.44277	80
5	Summarizing ideas	4.7375	0.44277	80
6	Making conclusions	4.8125	0.39277	80
7	Defining	4.8000	0.40252	80
8	Exemplifying	4.8000	0.40252	80
9	Comparing	4.8500	0.35932	80
10	Contrasting	4.8500	0.35932	80
11	Signaling transitions	4.8250	0.38236	80
12	Negotiating (building relationships)	4.1875	0.39277	80
13	Persuading (getting something done)	4.8500	0.35932	80
14	Interrupting	4.0875	0.28435	80
15	Turn-taking	4.1125	0.31797	80
16	Confirming	4.0875	0.28435	80
17	Networking	4.0875	0.28435	80
18	Explaining causes and effects	4.7375	0.44277	80
19	Making hypothetical suggestions	4.7375	0.44277	80
20	Interrupting politely	4.8375	0.37124	80
21	Opening a meeting	4.7375	0.44277	80

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No.	Item of Questionnaire	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
22	Closing a meeting	4.7375	0.44277	80
23	Inviting	4.8125	0.39277	80
24	Apologizing	4.8000	0.40252	80
25	Expressing problem-solving	4.8000	0.40252	80
Overall Mean		4.596		

Table 1 presents learners' perceptions of the importance of 25 language functions used during oral English communication tasks in the Business English (BE) classroom. The results show a consistently high level of perceived importance across all items, with an overall mean score of 4.596, falling within the "high importance" range (3.50–5.00). This indicates that learners view nearly all language functions as essential components of effective Business English communication. The consistency of high ratings reflects their awareness of the communicative demands of academic presentations, professional interactions, and workplace-related tasks.

The highest-ranked language functions include agreeing or disagreeing ($M = 4.8375$), comparing ($M = 4.8500$), contrasting ($M = 4.8500$), persuading ($M = 4.8500$), and interrupting politely ($M = 4.8375$). These functions are central to professional interactions where participants must negotiate meaning, express positions, and engage in collaborative decision-making. Their high importance aligns with Business English research emphasizing the crucial role of pragmatic and interactional competence in workplace communication (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Nickerson, 2015; Evans, 2013). Learners' strong awareness of these functions suggests that they understand the expectations of professional discourse even if they may not yet perform these functions confidently.

Academic communication-oriented functions such as presenting arguments, summarizing ideas, clarifying, defining, exemplifying, and explaining cause and effect (all $M \approx 4.73$ – 4.80) were also rated as highly important. This pattern reinforces findings by Flowerdew and Miller (1996), who argue that academic discourse competence supports professional communicative effectiveness, especially in contexts where students must explain concepts, justify decisions, and synthesize information. The

high importance scores indicate that learners recognize these functions as vital for classroom activities such as presentations, discussions, and project reporting.

Structuring functions such as signaling transitions ($M = 4.8250$), opening a meeting ($M = 4.7375$), and closing a meeting ($M = 4.7375$) were similarly rated highly, demonstrating that learners understand the value of organizing discourse effectively. These findings echo previous ESP research highlighting the importance of discourse management in accomplishing communicative goals (Bhatia, 2008; Candlin, 2002).

In contrast, interactional management functions—such as interrupting ($M = 4.0875$), confirming ($M = 4.0875$), networking ($M = 4.0875$), and turn-taking ($M = 4.1125$)—received slightly lower, though still high, ratings. Their lower means may indicate that learners perceive these functions as less central to academic tasks, although they remain crucial in authentic workplace interactions. This corresponds to findings in Kaewpet (2009) and Kassim and Ali (2010), which show that learners often undervalue interactive skills until they enter real professional contexts where spontaneous communication is required.

Overall, the high scores across all functions suggest that learners possess a strong conceptual understanding of what effective Business English communication requires. The data also indicate a clear recognition of both academic discourse functions and professional interactional functions as essential for communicative success. These findings justify the focus of this study on examining perceived difficulty and the importance–difficulty gap, as learners may acknowledge that these functions are important while still feeling ineffective or challenged when performing them.

Table 2: *Order of Difficulty of Using Language Functions in the Business English (BE) Classroom*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1. Presenting Argument	2.0125	.19446	80
2. Asking Question	2.8875	.35556	80
3. Agreeing or disagreeing	3.9000	.30189	80
4 Clarifying	2.0500	.27096	
5. Summarizing Ideas	2.0125	.11180	80
6. Making Conclusion	2.0625	.24359	80
7. Defining	2.8750	.33281	80

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8. Exemplifying,	2.0625	.24359	80
9. Comparing	2.0625	.24359	80
10. Contrasting	2.0875	.32584	80
11. Signaling Transition	2.9250	.26505	80
12.Negotiating (Building Relationship)	2.0625	.24359	80
13. Persuading (Getting something done)	2.8750	.33281	80
14.Interrupting)	2.8750	.33281	80
15.Turn-taking	2.0625	.24359	80
16 Confirming	2.9750	.15711	80
17. Networking	3.0000	.22502	80
18. Explaining Cause and effects	2.1125	.31797	80
19. Making Hypothetical suggestion	2.9875	.19446	80
20 Interrupting Politely	2.8750	.33281	80
21 Opening a Meeting	2.9750	.15711	80
22. Closing a Meeting	3.0125	.19446	80
23.Inviting	3.0875	.32584	80
24. Apologizing	3.1000	.34126	80
25 Expressing Problem Saving	2.0875	.28435	80
Overall Mean	2.013		

Table 2 presents learners' perceptions of the difficulty level of 25 language functions used in the Business English (BE) classroom. The results show a wide spread of difficulty ratings, with an overall mean of 2.013, which falls within the high difficulty category (1.00–2.49). This suggests that, despite the high importance assigned to these functions (Table 1), learners generally find them difficult to perform, reflecting substantial gaps in their functional oral English competence. This finding is central to the study's objective of identifying the functions that most contribute to low perceived effectiveness in oral English communication.

1. Highest-Difficulty (Most Challenging) Functions: Core Problem Areas

The language functions with the lowest means indicating the highest difficulty include:

Presenting arguments (M = 2.0125)

Summarizing ideas (M = 2.0125)

Clarifying meaning (M = 2.0500)

Making conclusions (M = 2.0625)

Exemplifying, comparing, negotiating, and turn-taking (all M = 2.0625)

These functions require learners to organize information, use precise language, present reasoning, and engage in real-time interaction, which aligns with the advanced cognitive and pragmatic demands described in the literature (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Evans, 2013). Their high difficulty scores demonstrate that learners struggle most with higher-order and interactional OEC skills, which are essential for academic presentations, discussions, and professional communication. Importantly, these same functions were rated as highly important in Table 1, indicating a strong importance and difficulty mismatch, which directly contributes to low perceived effectiveness a core focus of this research.

2. Moderately Difficult Functions: Emerging Challenges in Interactional Skills

A second group of functions falls into the moderate difficulty range, including:

Asking questions (M = 2.8875)

Defining (M = 2.8750)

Persuading (M = 2.8750)

Interrupting, both polite and impolite (M = 2.8750)

Signaling transitions (M = 2.9250)

These functions are cognitively and socially demanding but less complex than argumentative or problem-solving functions. Their moderate difficulty reflects learners' partial competence in managing professional discourse patterns but continued struggle with pragmatic appropriateness, social hierarchy, and politeness strategies as highlighted in sociopragmatic research (Taguchi, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Particularly, notable is the difficulty in persuading, a core business skill emphasizing

influence and decision-making. Its moderate difficulty score, combined with high importance in Table 1, indicates that learners perceive persuasion as important yet challenging further reinforcing findings in global ESP research (Kassim & Ali, 2010).

3. Lowest Difficulty (Least Challenging) Functions: Basic Communicative Skills

The language functions with the highest means indicating lower difficulty include:

Agreeing or disagreeing (M = 3.9000)

Networking (M = 3.0000)

Closing a meeting (M = 3.0125)

Making hypothetical suggestions (M = 2.9875)

Confirming information (M = 2.9750)

Opening a meeting (M = 2.9750)

Although still not rated as “easy,” these functions reflect more manageable communicative tasks requiring shorter responses, familiar expressions, or predictable routines. Their relatively higher ratings suggest that learners feel somewhat more comfortable during structured or formulaic interactions than during open-ended persuasive or argumentative tasks. However, even these functions do not exceed the 3.50 threshold for “low difficulty,” indicating that no language function is perceived as easy a crucial finding underscoring the overall challenge learners face in Business English communication.

Table 3: *Combined Ranking of Business English (BE) Language Function Needs Based on Importance and Difficulty*

Rank	Language Function	Item No.	Mean (Importance)	Mean (Difficulty)	Gap (Importance – Difficulty)	Priority Level
1	Persuading (Getting Something Done)	13	4.8500	2.8750	+1.975	High
2	Interrupting Politely	20	4.8375	2.8750	+1.963	High
3	Signaling Transitions	11	4.8250	2.9250	+1.900	High

Rank	Language Function	Item No.	Mean (Importance)	Mean (Difficulty)	Gap (Importance – Difficulty)	Priority Level
4	Negotiating Relationships (Building)	12	4.1875	2.0625	+2.125	High
5	Agreeing/Disagreeing	3	4.8375	3.9000	+0.938	High
6	Making Conclusions	6	4.8125	2.0625	+2.750	High
7	Expressing Problem-Solving	25	4.8000	2.0875	+2.713	High
8	Making Hypothetical Suggestions	19	4.7375	2.9875	+1.750	Moderate–High
9	Apologizing	24	4.8000	3.1000	+1.700	Moderate–High
10	Inviting	23	4.8125	3.0875	+1.725	Moderate–High
11	Closing a Meeting	22	4.7375	3.0125	+1.725	Moderate
12	Networking	17	4.0875	3.0000	+1.088	Moderate
13	Explaining Causes and Effects	18	4.7375	2.1125	+2.625	Moderate
14	Presenting Arguments	1	4.7375	2.0125	+2.725	Moderate
15	Summarizing Ideas	5	4.7375	2.0125	+2.725	Moderate
16	Clarifying	4	4.7375	2.0500	+2.687	Moderate
17	Defining	7	4.8000	2.8750	+1.925	Moderate
18	Comparing	9	4.8500	2.0625	+2.788	Moderate
19	Contrasting	10	4.8500	2.0875	+2.763	Moderate
20	Opening a Meeting	21	4.7375	2.9750	+1.763	Moderate
21	Turn-Taking	15	4.1125	2.0625	+2.050	Low–Moderate
22	Exemplifying	8	4.8000	2.0625	+2.738	Low–Moderate
23	Confirming	16	4.0875	2.9750	+1.113	Low–Moderate
24	Interrupting (Informal)	14	4.0875	2.8750	+1.213	Low–Moderate

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Rank	Language Function	Item No.	Mean (Importance)	Mean (Difficulty)	Gap (Importance – Difficulty)	Priority Level
25	Summarizing/Clarifying Combined					

Research Question 1: What is the overall level of learners' effectiveness in OEC?

The results in Table 3 indicate that learners' overall effectiveness in using oral English language functions is moderate to low, as evidenced by the consistently large positive gap scores across nearly all functions. Although Table 1 shows that learners perceive all language functions as highly important (overall mean importance = 4.596), Table 2 reveals that they experience substantial difficulty performing these functions (overall mean difficulty $\approx$ 2.013).

When these dimensions are combined in Table 3, the majority of gap scores fall between +1.7 and +2.8, which demonstrates that learners generally feel unable to perform many of the essential language functions with confidence, accuracy, or fluency. This wide gap signals systematic communicative ineffectiveness, particularly in higher-order BE tasks involving persuasion, negotiation, argumentation, and analytical reasoning.

Thus, Table 3 provides strong evidence that the overall perceived effectiveness of learners in oral English communication is low. Learners understand what BE communication demands but struggle significantly to meet those demands in practice.

Research Question 2: Which types of lacks mostly contribute to low effectiveness?

The second research question investigates the specific types of language function lacks that most reduce learners' effectiveness. These lacks are represented by the functions with the highest importance–difficulty gaps, indicating urgent needs.

1. Argumentation and Analytical Discourse Lacks

The largest gaps appear in functions requiring higher-order thinking, analytical structuring, and argumentative reasoning, such as:

Comparing (+2.788)

Contrasting (+2.763)

Presenting arguments (+2.725)

Summarizing ideas (+2.725)

Clarifying (+2.687)

Explaining cause and effect (+2.625)

These functions are cognitively demanding and require sustained fluency, accuracy, and reasoning. Learners' lack of ability in these areas demonstrates significant difficulty managing academic-professional discourse, which heavily impacts OEC effectiveness.

This finding is strongly supported by BE/ESP literature showing that EFL learners commonly struggle with persuasion, reasoning, and logical structuring in spoken communication (Evans & Green, 2019; Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Kaewpet, 2009).

2. Interactional and Negotiation Lacks

The next cluster of lacks relates to interactional competence, particularly functions that require managing professional relationships or influencing others:

Negotiating (building relationships) (+2.125)

Persuading (getting something done) (+1.975)

Interrupting politely (+1.963)

Signaling transitions (+1.900)

These functions require sociopragmatic awareness, tact, politeness strategies, and quick decision-making all core elements of successful business interaction. The large gaps indicate that learners struggle to maintain control of conversations, manage turn-taking smoothly, and engage effectively in negotiation or persuasion. Consistent with studies by Kassim & Ali (2010) and Taguchi (2011), learners' lack of pragmatic competence directly contributes to low participation, weak influence in discussions, and communication breakdowns.

3. Professional Communication Routine Lacks

Moderate gaps were also found in discourse structuring and meeting management, including:

Opening a meeting (+1.763)

Closing a meeting (+1.725)

Inviting and apologizing (+1.700–1.725)

Although less severe than argumentative/interactional lacks, these functions still contribute to diminished communicative effectiveness because they require confidence, formulaic accuracy, and understanding of business etiquette.

4. Smaller Lacks: Basic Interactional Functions

A few functions show smaller yet still meaningful gaps:

Confirming information (+1.113)

Networking (+1.088)

Informal interrupting (+1.213)

These smaller gaps suggest that learners feel slightly more confident with routine, shorter, or less cognitively demanding exchanges. However, the presence of no near-zero gaps confirms that every language function contributes to lower perceived effectiveness to varying degrees.

Integrated Interpretation: How the Lacks Reduce Overall Effectiveness

When viewed collectively, the results indicate that the learners' low overall effectiveness is largely driven by the following types of lacks:

1. Cognitive-Analytical Lacks

Difficulties in argumentation, summarization, clarification, problem-solving, and cause–effect explanation severely limit learners' ability to engage in academic and professional discourse.

2. Pragmatic-Interactional Lacks

Struggles with persuasion, negotiation, turn-taking, politeness, and conversational signaling reduce fluency and confidence in interactive situations.

3. Discourse Management Lacks

Challenges in structuring meetings, transitioning between ideas, and managing professional routines weaken learners' ability to participate in business communication contexts.

These combined lacks confirm that the learners' perceived effectiveness in OEC is limited not by vocabulary or grammar alone but by underdeveloped functional, pragmatic, and strategic communication skills, as highlighted in the literature.

Summary

In conclusion, Table 3 reveals that:

Learners' overall perceived effectiveness in oral English communication is low due to consistently large importance difficulty gaps.

The **most influential lacks** come from argumentation, analytical reasoning, persuasion, negotiation, and discourse management functions essential to Business English communication.

These findings directly answer both research questions and provide a strong empirical basis for targeted pedagogical intervention in BE courses.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine learners' perceived effectiveness in using oral English language functions in the Business English (BE) classroom and to identify the specific functional areas that contribute most to communicative ineffectiveness. The combined analysis of importance, difficulty, and importance–difficulty gaps (Table 3) reveals a complex profile of learners' communicative competence in which they recognize the centrality of language functions for academic and professional communication but experience significant difficulty performing them. The findings demonstrate that learners' perceived effectiveness is shaped primarily by their struggles with higher-order discourse functions, pragmatic-interactional tasks, and discourse management skills—patterns that resonate strongly with existing ESP literature.

1. Learners' Perceived Effectiveness and the Importance–Difficulty Mismatch

The findings indicate that learners consider almost all 25 language functions to be highly important for Business English communication (overall $M = 4.596$). This perception aligns with previous studies emphasizing that BE learners are aware of workplace communicative demands, particularly functions related to persuasion, negotiation, argumentation, and problem-solving (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Nickerson, 2015; Kassim & Ali, 2010). However, the difficulty data (overall $M \approx 2.013$) demonstrate that learners simultaneously struggle to perform these functions efficiently, suggesting that their perceived effectiveness remains low to moderate.

This importance difficulty mismatch, reflected in consistently large gap scores (+1.7 to +2.8), supports Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory: learners perceive BE communication tasks as vital but doubt their ability to perform them, reducing their communicative confidence and performance. Similar patterns have been reported in vocational and higher education ESP contexts, where students understand the relevance of oral communication but demonstrate limited proficiency in executing the required functions (Kaewpet, 2009; Nor Aslah Adzmi et al., 2009; Jihan, 2024). The present study extends this line of evidence by showing precisely which functional areas produce the greatest perceived inability, thereby offering more targeted insights into learners' communicative challenges.

2. Difficulty With Higher-Order Cognitive and Analytical Functions

The most significant finding involves the cluster of high-difficulty, high-importance functions requiring advanced cognitive and discourse processing. Functions such as presenting arguments, summarizing, clarifying, comparing, contrasting, making conclusions, and explaining cause–effect relationships exhibited some of the largest gap scores (+2.6 to +2.8). These tasks demand complex reasoning, idea structuring, synthesis of information, and the use of precise academic language key components of both academic and workplace communication.

These findings are consistent with Flowerdew and Miller (1996), who argue that academic discourse competence underpins learners' ability to engage in professional communication. Similarly, Evans and Green (2019) report that Hong Kong and mainland Chinese students face challenges with argumentative oral discourse due to limited exposure to critical reasoning tasks. In Indonesian contexts, Paramudia (2023) and Jihan (2024) also found that limited mastery of language functions such as summarizing, clarifying, and arguing restricts learners' ability to participate meaningfully in classroom discussions and business simulations.

The present study reinforces these observations by demonstrating that analytic and argumentative functions represent the **core lacks** underlying learners' low perceived effectiveness. These functions go beyond basic fluency or pronunciation; they require learners to mobilize both linguistic resources and higher-order thinking skills that many EFL learners struggle to develop due to limited opportunities for authentic, cognitively demanding communication tasks.

3. Pragmatic and Sociopragmatic Challenges in Interactional Functions

The second critical set of lacks concerns pragmatic and interactional competence, which is central to professional communication in BE settings. High-priority items such as persuading (+1.975), negotiating (+2.125), interrupting politely (+1.963), and signaling transitions (+1.900) demonstrate that learners face significant difficulties managing social relationships, maintaining politeness, and guiding conversations smoothly.

These results echo findings from Taguchi (2011) and Ishihara & Cohen (2010), who emphasize that sociopragmatic competence understanding social norms, roles, power relations, and politeness expectations is one of the most difficult aspects of L2 communication. Similarly, Kassim & Ali (2010) found that Malaysian engineers, though competent in grammar, struggled with negotiation and

persuasive tasks due to insufficient pragmatic training during their studies. The present study confirms these trends in the Indonesian vocational context: learners view persuasion and negotiation as essential but difficult, indicating insufficient exposure to authentic BE interaction scenarios where these functions are practiced and modeled.

This finding highlights the need for explicit teaching of pragmatic strategies such as hedging, turn-taking, polite disagreement, mitigation, and discourse markers. Without such skills, learners may appear abrupt, passive, or overly direct behaviors that undermine communicative effectiveness in multicultural business environments.

4. Discourse Management and Professional Routine Functions

A third pattern involves moderate gaps in functions requiring the management of professional discourse, such as opening and closing meetings, inviting, apologizing, and making hypothetical suggestions. While learners rated these functions as highly important, they reported moderate difficulty performing them. This suggests that learners may be familiar with formulaic expressions used in meetings or professional routines but lack flexibility and fluency when applying them spontaneously in real-time communication.

This aligns with research indicating that meeting management and professional routines demand not only formulaic language but also situational awareness and the ability to adjust language according to audience, purpose, and workplace norms (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). Despite learners' exposure to scripted or textbook-based role-plays, the current findings suggest that they need more authentic practice in real-time, unpredictable discourse settings.

5. Implications for Needs Analysis and BE Pedagogy

The findings underscore the importance of adopting a **dual-lens needs analysis approach**, integrating both importance and difficulty dimensions. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue, needs analysis must consider **target needs**, **learning needs**, and **lacks**. In this study, learners clearly understand their target needs (importance) but experience substantial lacks linked to their learning needs (difficulty). The large gap scores demonstrate that learners' current proficiency does not match their perceived communicative demands, indicating a need for systematic instructional intervention.

Furthermore, the results support **Long's (2005)** call for authentic, task-based needs analysis. By mapping learners' functional lacks to actual business communication tasks, the study identifies instructional priorities such as:

- explicit teaching of argumentative and persuasive discourse structures
- scaffolding for summarization, clarification, and reasoning
- controlled-to-free practice in negotiation and interactive teamwork
- role-plays and simulations involving meeting discourse and transitions
- integration of pragmatic instruction focusing on politeness, interrupting, and social strategies

These recommendations reflect contemporary ESP thinking, which emphasizes task authenticity, discourse skills, and context-sensitive communication over traditional grammar-focused instruction.

6. The Broader Significance for Indonesian Vocational ESP Contexts

This study contributes to the limited body of empirical research on vocational English education in Indonesia. Consistent with findings by paramudia (2023), Jihan (2024), and Sari et al. (2022), the results reveal persistent gaps in learners' ability to use functional language expressions effectively. Indonesian vocational learners often receive limited exposure to real-world business interaction scenarios, resulting in high importance difficulty gaps and low self-efficacy in oral communication.

The present study provides highly specific empirical evidence identifying the **exact functions** that vocational BE instructors must prioritize. Given the alignment between learners' perceived lacks and global patterns in BE communication, curriculum developers must incorporate functional-pragmatic training early in the program, ensuring that prerequisite courses explicitly build the foundation for argumentation, negotiation, and discourse management.

4) CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that learners' overall perceived effectiveness in using oral English language functions in the Business English classroom is low, despite perceiving these functions as highly important. The large importance–difficulty gaps reveal that learners struggle most with higher-order cognitive functions (e.g., presenting arguments, summarizing, clarifying) and pragmatic-interactional functions (e.g., persuading, negotiating, interrupting politely). These lacks are the primary contributors

to low communicative effectiveness, directly answering the two research questions. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for function-focused, task-based instruction that prioritizes real-world communication tasks, explicit pragmatic training, and scaffolded practice in analytical and negotiation-based discourse. Strengthening these areas is essential for improving learners' readiness for professional communication. The study is limited by its reliance on self-reported perceptions and its focus on a single institutional context. Future research should incorporate performance-based assessments, mixed-methods approaches, and larger, more diverse samples to validate and extend these findings. Overall, the results underscore the importance of systematically investigating learners' fundamental oral English communication needs, ensuring that BE instruction directly addresses the functional demands of contemporary workplace and academic communication.

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