

Sports English for Those Who Want a Career in Sports: An English Needs Analysis of Students at a Sports University in Taiwan

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Abstract

As sports economy becomes globalized, it provides students who want a career in sports a diverse range of opportunities in both domestic and international job markets. Given the dominance of English in the world, it is important that students who want a career in sports equip themselves with professional English needed in the field to benefit from having choices and free movement in the global job market. The study investigated views of students concerning their professional English needs. This included the English abilities that are essential to their specific field in the sports industry as well as the proficiency level required for those English abilities. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were administered to students in a sports university in central Taiwan. Results showed that regardless of the majors, having knowledge of vocabulary, especially sports jargon and body parts, was considered fundamental. In addition, oral communicative abilities such as the abilities to understand foreign umpires and English training prescriptions, to converse with coaches and players, and to express oneself when participating in a game were relatively more important for student-athletes. For non-student-athletes, while oral communicative abilities were indispensable, other communicative abilities such as reading and writing English emails, notices, and sports-related news were equally important. As to the proficiency level required for these abilities, it was found that for most students, all that is required is the ability to grasp the main idea with a few important details, a level which is achievable with some training even for students with basic commands of English. The study is concluded that to provide student-athletes and non-student-athletes with professional English needed for careers in the sports industry, course designers and English instructors should consider adjusting the focus of their course to students' specific field in sports, incorporating authentic materials and activities in their classroom, and working on developing communicative competencies in their students.

Keywords

Career Planning for Athletes, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Professional English, Student-Athletes, Globalized Sports Economy, Language Requirements

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1. Introduction

Sport is big business. How big is it? According to Wladimir Andreff, a globalized sports economy can be seen in the growth of sports mega-events, the TV broadcasting of sporting events, the globalization of sport sponsorship, the trade and production of sports goods, and the growing

international mobility of talented athletes [1]. What this globalized sports economy means for students interested in having a career in sports is a diverse range of career prospects and opportunities in both domestic and international job markets.

These opportunities are not limited to athletes; there are also plenty of positions in the field for non-athletes. These jobs

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support the globalized sports industry in many aspects. For instance, sports commentators, sports writers and broadcast journalists work behind the scenes to deliver sports news or broadcast sporting events to the world. Exercise physiologists, sports physical therapists, sports nutritionists, and applied sports psychologists provide mental and physical health services to athletes. General Managers handle all business matters and speak at press conferences for sports teams. High school coaches coach teams, college sports coaches recruit student players to build a successful team, and professional sports coaches organize, direct and motivate a team. Account coordinators, event coordinators, public relations assistants in sports marketing create marketing strategies to manage corporate sponsorships, to organize sporting events to bring income to local business, and to help sports teams maintain media contacts and coordinate events. Fitness program coordinators plan fitness activities in gyms, hotels and corporations to help people stay healthy [2].

To benefit from having choices and free movement in a global job market, it is essential that athletes and non-athletes have the ability to communicate in English or other foreign languages. For athletes, having a good grasp of English enables them to communicate better with their coaches, teammates, sponsors and fans [3-6]. For student-athletes who decide not to continue a professional career in their sport, or for athletes who retire from their sport, having sufficient English skills will make it easier for them to transfer to other career fields in the global job market. On average, less than 4.08 percent of student-athletes continued a professional career in their sport [7]; and for elite athletes who make it to Olympics, the average retirement age is around 30. This means that they will still be in the job market for another 40 years [8]. Given the indisputable dominance of English language in the world, athletes and non-athletes alike must not only be good at the sports they do – “adding good English to their repertoire may not increase the level of their athletic performance. But the English language will certainly add to their reputation, fame, salability to the public and the satisfaction of their fans who want to know them better” [5].

Given the importance of English to athletes and non-athletes wanting to have a career in sports, it is worth investigating what are the things that should be included in sports English classes, or to be precise, what are the English abilities students should have in order to work in sports industry. However, there are very few studies addressing student-athletes’ English needs, not to mention their needs for professional English. Lin and Liu surveyed the general English needs of college student-athletes in Taiwan. Their findings suggest that travelling English, social English and professional English are most needed by student-athletes, and in terms of language skills, listening and speaking skills are most helpful to

student-athletes [9]. Kai explored the effect of tailored teaching materials on student-athletes’ motivation for learning English. It was found that students’ motivation for learning English could be increased when teaching materials were adapted to meet their particular needs [10]. To gain a better understanding of the types of English skills that are essential to the sports industry, and to make learning English more effective for students, it is thus the purpose of the study to find out what students’ professional English needs are. The research questions that the study intended to address are:

- (1) What are students’ perceptions of the English language abilities that are essential to their specific field in the sports industry?
- (2) What is the proficiency level required for students to benefit from having these English language abilities?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The main participants in the study were 286 students majoring in Physical Education (N = 45), Sports Performance (N = 30), Combat Sports (N = 44), Ball Sports (N = 44), Recreational Sports (N = 29), Exercise Health Science (N = 25), Sports Management (N = 44), and Sports Information and Communications (N = 25) at a sports university in central Taiwan.

Since it was considered insufficient to consult only freshman and sophomore who may not yet have a clear idea of the kind of tasks they will be required to perform in their specific fields or the kind of English abilities that will be helpful to them, the study consulted mostly junior and senior students, who together made up 96.1% of the total participants. Out of the total number of 286 students surveyed, 121 (42.3%) were females and 165 (57.7%) were males. Their average age was 21.2 years.

2.2. Procedure

Given the varied professional fields involved in the study, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. A more ‘open’ procedure, a semi-structured interview with coaches and students was arranged before the more ‘closed’ procedure, a questionnaire designed for eight different majors of respondents. Findings from the questionnaire were then triangulated with another semi-structured interview with students to make sure that the data obtained can truly reflect students’ professional English needs.

The first semi-structured interviews offered a list of English language abilities, based on which the questionnaire was compiled. Before the questionnaire was distributed, an expert review was conducted to assess the quality of the

questionnaire, i.e. the necessity and adequacy for the inclusion of items as well as the clarity and readability of the items. After that a pilot study was administered to a convenience sample of 57 students who were not included in the formal study. Based on the results of the pilot study, the final questionnaire was modified and distributed to 286 students. Finally, to triangulate the data from the questionnaire [11], a follow-up interview was given to 10 students asking them to elaborate on their responses to the questionnaire and to talk about their experiences attending professional English class.

2.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section gathered demographic information about the respondents. The second section, comprised of 18 items, asked respondents to rate the necessity of having certain language ability in their field on a five-point Likert scale with value 1 representing “not necessary at all”, and value 5 representing “must have”. The 18 items covered different aspects of language skills: listening (items 1-5), speaking (items 6-11), reading and writing (items 12-14), vocabulary (items 15-18). The third section focused on the level of proficiency required for the language abilities to be helpful for the respondents. Again, the respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on a five-level Likert scale ranging from “knowing only the basic vocabulary” (value 1), “understanding meanings of vocabulary and sentences” (value 2), “understanding the main idea” (value 3), “understanding the main idea and some details” (value 4), and “understanding the main idea, details, and extended discussion of the topic” (value 5). The same language abilities in section two were included in this section except for items 15-18 which were about having knowledge of different

categories of vocabulary. All the items in the questionnaire were written in Chinese to avoid any misunderstanding by the students. To assess the consistency of the items, the Cronbach’s alpha analyses were conducted, and a reliability index of .97 was found in the final version of the questionnaire.

2.4. Interviews

The follow-up interviews with students contained two main questions and were administered in a one-on-one, conversation style to elicit additional feedback [11]. A total of 10 students from 7 different majors were interviewed, and the interviews lasted for an average of 12 minutes.

3. Results

The purposes of the study were to find out the professional English needs of sports related majors and the proficiency level required for those English abilities. The results are presented in the following two subsections.

3.1. Students’ Perceptions of the English Language Abilities Needed for Their Fields

Table 1 shows the mean values for all the 18 English abilities surveyed with the top 6 highest mean values for each major highlighted. All of the language abilities surveyed received a mean value over 3, indicating that they could all answer to students’ professional English needs. As one can see, the importance of the language abilities could vary from major to major; however, regardless of the majors, having knowledge of certain types of vocabulary was considered indispensable, especially the knowledge of sports jargon and body parts.

Table 1. Students’ perceptions of the English language abilities needed for their fields.

	PE	SP	BS	CS	RS	EHS	SM	SI&C
1. L_broadcast	3.42	3.57	3.45	3.50	3.38	3.64	3.68	3.80
2. L_news/issues	3.33	3.47	3.23	3.32	3.41	3.64	3.64	3.84
3. L_training	3.36	3.87	3.73	3.70	3.45	4.24	3.55	3.36
4. L_conversations	3.40	3.77	3.66	3.70	3.48	3.96	3.59	3.84
5. L_umpires	3.40	3.97	3.86	4.07	3.79	3.96	3.82	3.84
6. S_describing rules	3.18	3.63	3.41	3.48	3.55	4.00	3.68	3.60
7. S_thoughts	3.42	3.77	3.34	3.55	3.37	4.08	3.75	3.80
8. S_in games	3.38	3.83	3.86	3.82	3.59	4.12	3.89	3.64
9. S_physi&mental	3.24	3.67	3.32	3.66	3.62	3.92	3.80	3.64
10. S_equipment	3.27	3.53	3.27	3.45	3.41	4.24	3.70	3.08
11. S_results	3.11	3.47	3.11	3.48	3.17	3.52	3.57	3.80
12. R_notices	3.18	3.62	3.36	3.41	3.28	3.84	3.91	4.32
13. R_news	3.20	3.6	3.25	3.43	3.34	3.80	3.84	4.12
14. R&W_mails	3.07	3.57	3.20	3.41	3.31	4.00	3.68	3.92
15. V_jargon	3.62	3.77	3.84	3.80	3.69	4.20	3.93	3.88
16. V_training	3.64	3.93	3.61	3.66	3.72	4.48	3.84	3.76
17. V_bodyparts	3.60	3.90	3.70	3.68	3.62	4.32	3.86	3.56
18. V_olympics	3.50	3.83	3.41	3.61	3.41	3.64	3.84	4.20

PE = Physical Education (N = 45), SP = Sports Performance (N = 30), BS = Ball Sports (N = 44), CS = Combat Sports (N = 44), RS = Recreational Sports (N = 29), EHS = Exercise Health Science (N = 25), SM = Sports Management (N = 44), SI&C = Sports Information and Communications (N = 25)

Moreover, despite the varied importance of the language abilities, the differences seem to reflect the characteristics of different majors. For example, reading and writing English emails, notices, and sports-related news were rather important for those majored in Exercise, Health and Science, Sports Management, and Sports Information and Communications, the majors that support the sports industry by providing services. This could be attributed to their need to gather information through reading materials, and to organize events and deal with administrative work through correspondence.

With regard to listening and speaking, for the three majors that are directly involved in sports competition, that is, Sports Performance, Ball Sports, and Combat Sports, oral communicative abilities such as the abilities to understand foreign umpires and English training prescriptions, to converse with coaches and players, and to express oneself when participating in a game were relatively more important. For Recreational Sports majors, oral communication is needed for taking part in sporting event as well as expressing one's own physical and mental condition. For Exercise, Health, Science majors, the ability to understand foreign coaches' training prescription and to explain how to use certain training equipment in English were given higher ratings. For Sports Information and Communications majors who are usually involved in broadcasting sports events, the abilities to understand issues in the news, umpires, and conversations between coaches and players were prioritized. For Sports Management majors, oral skills are in demand for organizing and participating in sporting events. Finally, for Physical Education majors, it was more about understanding broadcasting of sports events and expressing one's thoughts about particular sports.

To see if the differences in the importance of the language abilities were statistically significant, the majors were categorized into four groups: the sports competition group, i.e. the majors that are directly involved in sports competition (e.g. Sports Performance, Ball Sports, and Combat Sports); the sports industry group, i.e. the majors that support the sports industry (e.g. Exercise, Health, and Science, Sports Management, Sports Information and Communications); the PE teacher group, the major that prepares students to be PE teachers (Physical Education); and the recreational sports group, the major that focuses more on activities that are fun and can help improve physical fitness and social involvement (Recreational Sports). A one-way ANOVA was used to analyse the difference in the mean values of listening (items

1-5), speaking (items 6-11), reading and writing (items 12-14), and vocabulary (items 15-18) among these four groups. The results revealed that there were significant differences in the need for speaking abilities between the sports industry group and the PE teacher group, $F(3, 280) = 3.979, p < .05$. A post-hoc test using Scheffe comparisons showed that the sports industry group was more likely to give higher ratings ($M = 3.76$; $SD = .793$) to speaking abilities than the PE teacher group did ($M = 3.26$; $SD = .753$). This suggests that the importance of speaking abilities to PE teachers is less than it is to those who provide athletes mental and physical health services, in charge of sports sales and marketing revenue, and those responsible for sports media content. Another significant difference was found in the need for reading and writing abilities between the sports industry group and the other three groups, $F(3, 281) = 10.677, p < .05$. Again, a post-hoc test using Scheffe comparisons showed that the sports industry group tend to give higher ratings ($M = 3.91$; $SD = .816$) to reading and writing abilities than the PE teacher group ($M = 3.14$; $SD = .767$), the sports competition group ($M = 3.40$; $SD = .940$), and the recreational sports group ($M = 3.31$; $SD = .717$). This shows that the demand for reading and writing abilities is greater for the majors that provide services to support the sports industry than it is for PE teachers, athletes, and those who are involved in recreational sports.

3.2. Students' Perceptions of the Levels of Proficiency Required for the English Language Abilities Needed in Their Fields

After students had identified the English language abilities most needed for their fields, they were asked to indicate the levels of proficiency they think should be required in order for these abilities to be beneficial to them. The results are presented in Table 2 with mean values less than 3 underlined and mean values over 3.5 indicated in bold. As shown in Table 2, except for few abilities, most of the 14 abilities received a rating over 3 from students across most majors, meaning that for these abilities to be useful to them, students thought that they should at least be able to get the main idea when listening or reading something, and when communicating in speaking or writing. For ratings over 3.5, they were mainly given by students from Exercise, Health and Science, and Sports Information and Communications; while ratings less than 3 were mostly given by students from Ball Sports.

Table 2. Students' perceptions of the levels of proficiency required for the English language abilities needed in their fields.

	PE	SP	BS	CS	RS	EHS	SM	SI&C
1. L_broadcast	3.02	3.13	2.95	3.02	3.15	3.24	3.29	3.72
2. L_news/issues	2.96	3.10	2.75	2.84	3.00	3.12	3.35	3.80
3. L_training	3.02	3.33	3.20	3.30	3.00	4.08	3.28	3.40
4. L_conversations	2.93	3.27	3.05	3.32	3.30	3.68	3.37	3.56

	PE	SP	BS	CS	RS	EHS	SM	SI&C
5. L_umpires	3.27	3.40	3.07	3.45	3.69	3.68	3.28	3.56
6. S_describing rules	3.04	3.23	2.91	3.07	3.26	3.76	3.33	3.60
7. S_thoughts	3.11	3.37	2.89	2.98	3.30	3.80	3.70	3.64
8. S_in games	3.24	3.43	3.07	3.20	3.30	3.88	3.72	3.88
9. S_physi&mental	2.93	3.50	2.77	3.11	3.27	3.84	3.44	3.50
10. S_equitment	3.09	3.40	2.61	3.02	3.19	4.24	3.28	3.20
11. S_results	2.98	3.23	2.77	3.14	3.11	3.64	3.35	3.84
12. R_notices	3.00	3.33	2.84	3.11	3.15	3.68	3.65	3.84
13. R_news	3.02	3.33	2.73	3.11	3.07	3.68	3.60	4.00
14. R&W mails	3.00	3.20	2.48	3.07	2.85	3.80	3.86	3.84

PE = Physical Education (N = 45), SP = Sports Performance (N = 30), BS = Ball Sports (N = 43), CS = Combat Sports (N = 44), RS = Recreational Sports (N = 25), EHS = Exercise, Health and Science (N = 25), SM = Sports Management (N = 41), SI&C = Sports Information and Communications (N = 24)

To find out if there was any significant difference in the ratings given, a one-way ANOVA was used to analyse the ratings given by the four groups of students. The results showed that there were significant differences among the four groups in the desired proficiency for listening $F(3, 277) = 2.794, p < .05$, for speaking $F(3, 277) = 5.844, p < .05$, and for reading and writing $F(3, 277) = 12.009, p < .05$. A post-hoc test using Dunnett C comparisons showed that the sports industry group ($M = 3.46$; $SD = .868$) tend to give a higher rating to listening abilities than the PE teacher group did ($M = 3.04$; $SD = .805$); with speaking, likewise, the sports industry group ($M = 3.60$; $SD = .836$) tend to give a higher rating than both the PE teacher group ($M = 3.06$; $SD = .810$) and the sports competition group ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.174$); finally, with reading and writing, the sports industry group ($M = 3.77$; $SD = .880$) gave a higher rating than all the other three groups: the PE group ($M = 3.00$; $SD = .845$), the sports competition group ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 1.196$), and the recreational sports group ($M = 3.02$; $SD = .895$). Altogether, this shows that the majors that provide services to support the sports industry do not only need speaking, reading and writing abilities, but they also need to master the skills better than PE teachers, athletes, and those involved in recreational sports.

3.3. Interviews

Following the questionnaire, further interviews were conducted with ten students, including one Physical Education major, two Ball Sports majors, one Combat Sports major, one Recreational Sports major, two Exercise, Health, and Science majors, one Sports Management major, and two Sports Information and Communications majors. The results are summarized below.

The semi-structured interviews asked students two main questions. The first one got students to talk about the English language abilities that they thought they should be equipped with; the second one probed their experiences attending sports English course. With regard to the first question, most students' answers were consistent with findings from the questionnaire, i.e. they want to have the language abilities to explain things to

teammates from other countries, to communicate with foreign players, coaches, and umpires, to describe and explain rules of the games, and to teach other people how to play their sports in English. A student from Exercise, Health and Science department mentioned the ability to read English news or get information about performance-enhancing drugs. He explained that though the use of drugs to enhance performance is prohibited by most sports organizations, doping in sports is still an issue that is often covered in the news, and it concerns not only athletes but also others who are involved in the sports industry. Therefore, the subject should be included in the course content of sports English. The student from Recreational Sports described the need for her to know more about extreme sports. Since these sports are getting young people's attention all over the world and are often related to adventure tourism, she thought it's worth learning more about these sports in English.

In addition, students had also brought up something that was not specified in the questionnaire. A student from Sports Information and Communications pointed out that the ability to give and take interviews in English should not be taken lightly. For those who want to be professional athletes, they should learn to talk about their performance in an interview; for coaches, they should be able to comment on their players' performance; and for sports journalists, they need to know how to pronounce foreign athletes' names, and should learn how to ask questions in English. Finally, it was interesting to learn from a Sports Management major and a Physical Education major about the need to get better scores at standardized language proficiency tests. Though this need has nothing to do with the professional English in their field, the two students considered it important for although knowing the professional English in their field will help them to be competent at work, it is the ability to get better scores at English proficiency test that can get them a good job in the first place. For non-athletes having a career in sports, this is true; for student-athletes, this is even more important - being able to put certified English skills on the CV could be very helpful to their career prospects.

Moving on to students' experiences attending Sports English

course, except for the student from Recreational Sports department who said that there were no professional English courses such as sports English in her department, all of the other nine students had had sports English course. Out of the nine students, only one student reported that the course was too easy for him; two students thought the course was too difficult; and the rest of the students said that the course was right for their level of English. Except for the one who thought the course was too easy, all of the other students found Sports English course helpful. However, when asked about whether the way the course was conducted could motivate them to learn more, only five students gave positive answers. Lastly, in respect to the length of the course, most students believed that for the course to effectively improve their professional English ability, it should be run for at least one year.

4. Discussion

This study investigated students' views on the English abilities that are essential to those involved in the sports industry, and the level of proficiency required for those English abilities. Students' responses showed that regardless of their majors, most students thought that having knowledge of vocabulary such as sports jargon, body parts, and terms used in training sessions is important. Undoubtedly, vocabulary is fundamental to all kinds of communication. Nevertheless, this may pose a challenge to English instructors teaching professional English courses to students in sports related fields. For despite the umbrella term of sports English, English abilities required in sports related fields may vary from sport to sport and from major to major, English instructors may not all have knowledge of the terms and sports jargon used in these fields. To meet students' needs, ideally it would be great if English instructors could work together with coaches, trainers, or practitioners of the field; but practically this may not be possible. An alternative solution to this challenge is to use authentic materials in professional English courses. Velescu reported how the use of authentic materials facilitated the teaching of French in the field of veterinary medicine [12]. By using authentic materials, students get to learn phrases, terminology, and discourse that are used in their specific fields. Moreover, authentic materials such as sports event guides, brochures, leaflets, excerpts from interviews or TV news, and broadcasts of sporting events etc. can also help students to contextualize the vocabulary they learn [13, 14].

Apart from the importance of vocabulary, results of the study have also identified the language abilities that were relatively more important to students of different majors. These abilities were mostly about communication, be it oral or non-oral. The implication of this to professional English courses such as Sports English is that unlike conventional English classes

where linguistic competence is emphasized, the goal should be on making sure that students can communicate effectively, in other words, it is students' communicative competence that needs to be focused on. To address the issue, not just authentic materials but also authentic activities can be adopted in the classroom. As Velescu suggested, though authentic materials are not really designed for language learning, their educational use is mainly to meet the communicative purpose of language learning, to provide the socio-cultural knowledge of language to learners [12]. Gilmore [15] conducted a 10-month classroom-based study on the potential of using authentic materials to develop Japanese learners' English communicative competence. It was found that authentic materials with their associated tasks and activities provided language learners a wide variety of linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and discourse information, and as a result, were better able to develop a range of communicative competencies in learners [15]. Authentic activities can make classroom learning more meaningful, motivate students, and maximize students' engagement in the classroom [13]. In the field of sports, these activities could include role playing interviewing famous athletes, teaching people how to use training equipment or how to play a sport, filling out the required paperwork for participating in a sporting event, designing a poster for a sporting event, writing e-mails to ask for information about a game etc.

In connection with the level of proficiency that need to be achieved in order for students to be able to gain benefits from it. Responses from the students showed that for most of them, all that is required is the ability to get the main idea across when making communication. This seems to explain why across all majors most students thought it was important to have knowledge of vocabulary. Without the right set of vocabulary it would be difficult to make basic communication, not to mention getting important details. Pedagogically, this would require English instructors to teach based on students' proficiency level. As interview findings suggested, it is preferable to have at least a year long's professional English course because with most student-athletes, who possess only basic level of English [9], it may be hard to achieve the level of proficiency desired in one semester with only two hours of class time a week.

Finally, as much as it is the purpose of the study to distinguish English abilities that are important to different fields of the sports industry, it is also the purpose of the study to find common ground in it. After all, after students finish with their education, a Physical Education major may get a job commentating on sports competitions, a Recreational Sports major may become a PE teacher, and a student-athlete may decide to organize fitness programs for his/her community, English instructors should bear this in mind so that they can

teach their students to be well-rounded English language users in the field of sports.

5. Conclusions

The study here has presented students' perceptions of their professional English needs. The English abilities that are considered important to those who aspire to have a career in sports were identified, the relative importance of these English abilities to different majors and the level of proficiency required were also indicated. Due to the lack of such studies, it is hoped that findings of this study can help bridge the gap as well as assist textbook writers and English instructors to better design teaching materials and plan their course for athletes and non-athletes in the field. To this end, sports English course designers and English instructors should consider adjusting the focus of their course to students' specific field in sports, incorporating authentic materials and activities in their classroom, and working on developing communicative competencies in their students. Finally, findings of the study can also be used by sports universities to set minimum English language graduation requirements to ensure students acquire sufficient English language abilities before entering the job market. Corporations in the sports industry can also provide on-the-job language training to their employees based on the English abilities specified in the study.

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