

A Systematic Review of Empirical Research on Business English in China (2013–2022)

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Abstract

This paper examines empirical studies conducted in both Chinese and English on Business English in Chinese higher education, covering the period from 2013 to 2022. By analyzing and synthesizing empirical data, this review significantly contributes to the area of BE in China. Empirical articles in both Chinese and English were included to provide a comprehensive overview for both domestic and global readers. All Chinese empirical articles were searched and selected in the Core Journals and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) indexed by China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and English empirical articles were selected from Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus databases. After eliminating all literature reviews, book reviews, theoretical studies, policy papers, and duplicates, 113 empirical articles were selected for thorough review. The comprehensive review found that the main themes of these empirical studies were teaching innovation, teacher professional development, student ability, and curriculum development in BE. The review concluded that there is inadequate empirical evidence on BE students' psychological states, BE teachers' voices on BE professional construction, and the implementation of communicative approaches. Recommendations and suggestions for future studies were provided based on the findings of the current review.

Keywords: Business English; Higher Education; Systematic Review; Empirical Research

1 Introduction

Business English (BE) has played an increasing role in diplomatic activities in China since its successful accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. In 2007, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China officially approved the establishment of an undergraduate major in BE. Approximately 425 higher education institutions have set up Business English majors for undergraduate students. The launch of “The Belt and Road Initiative” in 2013 has dramatically increased the international trade between China and 65 countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. This has put forward new directions for the development of BE. Since there is a very limited systematic review conducted to analyze the empirical research on BE in China, the current review concentrates on BE in higher education in mainland China to shed light on the research themes of BE in China in the past decade.

2 Literature Review

Previous reviews of BE in China highlighted the three main issues. First, the debates surrounding the BE research object have been well addressed in the literature (Weng & Weng, 2018; Weng & Weng, 2022). For example, in the study of Weng and Weng (2018), experts expressed their attitudes toward the research object of BE. Some experts claimed that the research object of BE is closely related to BE linguistics and BE education, while others believed that the research object of BE is business communication and international business. Second, most Chinese reviews of BE only included articles from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (Wang & Ren, 2021; Bao & Ding, 2022). Third, previous reviews acknowledged a scarcity of empirical BE research (Li & Hou, 2017; Jian, 2020). Ding (2019) found that 94.09% of Chinese publications were non-empirical studies, including descriptive studies (45.37%), theoretically oriented studies (39.93%), and personal experience-oriented studies (8.79%). In general, there is an imperative need for a comprehensive understanding of the empirical findings generated by previous BE research. Therefore, this study focuses on empirical BE research in China to assess the empirical studies undertaken since the Belt and Road Initiative was announced in 2013. The researchers intend to comprehensively evaluate and critically synthesize empirical evidence to better identify BE's opportunities and potential problems in Chinese higher education. To provide a more complete view of BE development in China, the present review focuses on both Chinese and English publications from 2013 to 2022 to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the development of BE in China. Based on the problems that have been highlighted in previous literature, the current review attempts to address research questions as follows:

1. What are the themes of empirical BE research in China?
2. What study procedures, methodologies, and research instruments were used in BE research carried out in China?

3 Methodology

Literature reviews are crucial in academic research because they help researchers obtain existing information and assess the current condition of a realm (Paul & Criado, 2020). The narrative literature review is the most commonly used by researchers among the different types of literature reviews. However, narrative review is frequently chastised for being slanted and randomly picking literature, and

it often needs more information for theory formulation (Linnenluecke et al., 2020; Kalkman et al., 2022). On the other hand, systematic reviews are intended to adhere to a strict and reasonable search and selection approach and provide a distinct and comprehensive analysis of the evidence available on a specific topic (Paul et al., 2021; Egger et al., 2022). To guarantee reliability and transparency, the current review adhered to the techniques of systematic review progress proposed by Mohamed Shaffril et al. (2021). To begin with, research questions were formulated, and search strategies were built by determining the databases, keywords, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. In addition, selected articles were screened and coded. Furthermore, the findings from quantitative and qualitative data were synthesized, the researcher presented the quantitative and qualitative separately to generate the research findings. Figure 1 shows the steps of the current review.

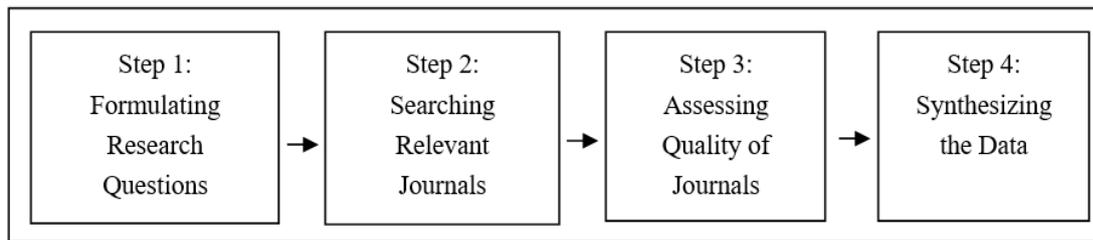


Figure 1. Steps of Conducting Systematic Review

3.1 Search Strategy

The objective of the current review was to assemble a collection of related and high-quality empirical research published in domestic and international databases. Accordingly, reliable databases were chosen as the starting point for the search. The databases in the current review are two international databases and one Chinese database. The international databases used were Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus. The reason to choose WOS is that it is the oldest, most popular, and most reliable database of scientific papers and references in the world (Birkle et al., 2020). The WOS Core Collection includes papers from various sources, including books, journals, conferences, etc. Scopus, developed by Elsevier and released in 2004, is a selected interdisciplinary database. WOS and Scopus are now two of the most used citation databases in the world (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The Chinese database used was CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), which is the largest and most extensive Chinese publication database (Tian et al., 2020), including journals, master's and doctoral theses, conference proceedings, newspapers, e-books, yearbooks, reference books, patents, standards, etc.

All databases were searched for the period between 2013 and 2022. The search was conducted on 14 March 2023. The search for English journals started in WOS Core Collection and Scopus with the topic 'business English' combined with 'China.' Language is available in English. The preliminary search yielded 812 English journals. A similar search was conducted in Core Journals, the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI), and the Chinese Science Citation Database (CSCD) in CNKI with the following search terms: *yingyu* (English) and *shangwu* (business), *guojiyingxiao* (international marketing), *guojimaoyi* (international trade) and *guojiwuliu* (international logistics). 746 Chinese journals were found in the initial search.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Strategy

Two stages of screening were performed in the current review. To begin with, titles and abstracts were reviewed. Then, the entire contents of the articles were screened to determine if the studies satisfied the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

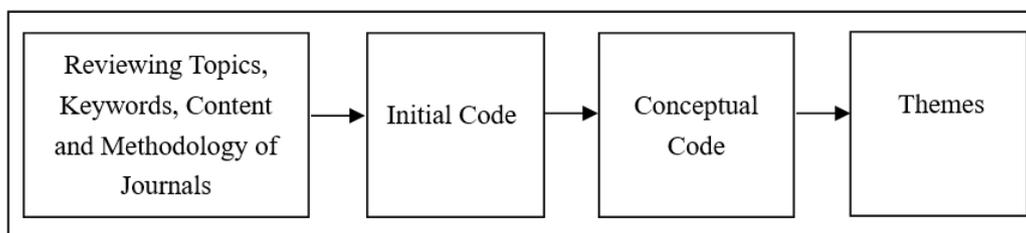
1. Research conducted in mainland China;
2. Research conducted at the higher education level;
3. Publication date between 1, Jan, 2013 to 31, Dec, 2022.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Literature reviews, book reviews, theoretical studies, policy papers;
2. Research is not relevant to BE.

After meticulous screening, 56 Chinese articles and 57 English articles were selected. Eventually, 113 empirical articles that concentrate on BE in higher education in the Chinese context were included in our final review. All journals were categorized by author, publisher, year of publication, topic, methodology, instrument, and sample. The comprehensive review of the articles began with initial coding with topics, keywords, content, and methodology. Then, the conceptual codes were decided according to the initial codes. Ultimately, the theme codes were generalized based on the conceptual codes. Figure 2 illustrates the coding strategy of the current review. To ensure the reliability of the code, the author repeated the coding process twice by closely reading the articles' content. Furthermore, the first author discussed the results of the code with the corresponding author.

Figure 2. Coding Strategy of the Current Review



Since the release of “The Belt and Road Initiative” in 2013, the number of studies on BE in China has exploded. However, the situation of BE development has not been empirically investigated to a significant degree. Until December 2022, merely 7.5% of the 746 BE-related articles in CNKI were

empirical research, while the vast studies were book reviews, literature reviews, theoretical studies, and policy papers. Similarly, only 7.1% of empirical English studies published in WOS and Scopus regarding BE in China simultaneously.

From the data shown in Figure 3 below, it can be seen that the publishing trend of Chinese articles in CNKI is generally decreasing over time. In 2013 and 2014, the number of publications reached its highest peak, with an average of 11 articles annually, which accounts for 41% of total empirical studies. The release of “The Belt and Road Initiative” may explain this upsurge in China. However, this number has sharply dropped to 7 since 2015, and this trend has been maintained for nearly four years until 2018. The number of publications continued decreasing to 2 in 2019 and 2020. Though the number increased to 4 in 2021, it reached its lowest level when only one empirical study was published in 2022. Contrarily, the publication trend of English articles in WOS and Scopus is increasing over time. The average number of publications was about five from 2013 to 2020, except in 2015, when only one empirical study was published. This number increased in 2021 and reached 14 in 2022. This indicates that international audiences have aroused the increasing attention of BE in China.

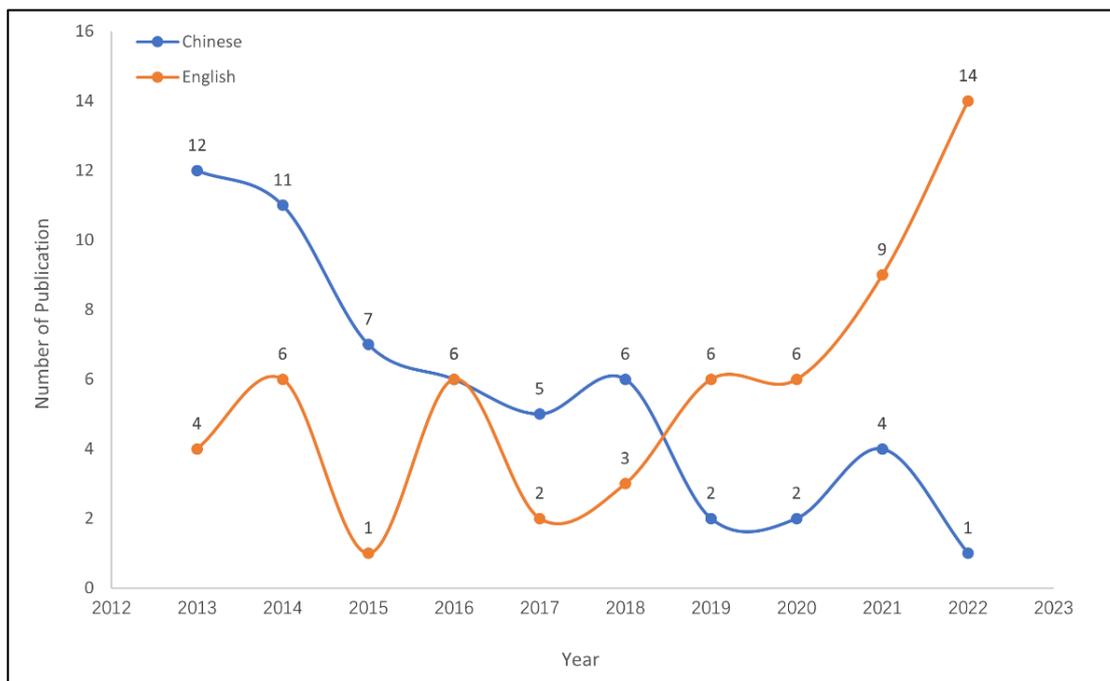


Figure 3. Number of Articles Address BE in China from 2013 to 2022

4 Findings

The comprehensive review of the empirical articles in the current study revealed seven key themes on which these studies focus: Teaching Innovation, Teacher Development, Student Ability, Curriculum Development, Talent Cultivation, Teaching Resources, and Students' Psychological State. As shown in Table 1, both Chinese and English research focus on teaching innovation most. In addition, a similar number of Chinese and English articles discussed BE teacher professional development and student ability. Furthermore, significant diversity can be found in Chinese and English research concentrating on curriculum development, talent cultivation, teaching resources, and students' psychological states. It

is clearly shown that only one Chinese article addressed the theme of students' psychological state, and one English article addressed the theme of talent cultivation.

Table 1: Themes Focus of Empirical Studies

| Themes Focus on BE in China | Number | Number of Chinese articles | Number of English articles |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Teaching Innovation | 50 | 20 | 30 |
| Teacher Professional Development | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| Student Ability | 15 | 7 | 8 |
| Curriculum Development | 12 | 9 | 3 |
| Talent Cultivation | 8 | 7 | 1 |
| Teaching Resources | 7 | 5 | 2 |
| Students' Psychological States | 6 | 1 | 5 |

4.1 Teaching Innovation

The majority of articles reviewed in this study underscored the importance of BE teaching innovation. Many previous studies argued that the internet and technology would be the trends in future educational innovation (Yunus, 2018; Fatimah et al., 2019; Luo et al., 2020). This trend is supported by the current review, as the internet and technology emerged as the most frequently mentioned methods and strategies for Business English teaching innovation in China in our database. Several reviewed empirical studies innovated BE teaching with internet-based technology, such as Network Platform (Li & Cao, 2013; Sun & Qiu, 2014; Tao et al., 2016; Zhu, 2016; Xiong & Hu, 2017), Qzone weblog (Gao et al., 2016), and Multimedia (Tong, 2014; Cheng & Liu, 2021). Most of these studies evaluated the function of internet-based technology by comparing the experimental class with the ordinary class. Another frequently appearing innovation with internet-based technology in BE classes is the flipped classroom (Yu & Wang, 2016; Han, 2017; Ji & Gu, 2018). Teachers can provide students a flexible BE learning environment by integrating traditional in-classroom teaching with the internet. Lin et al. (2018) applied a contextual educational game in BE writing course. Findings indicated that flipped classroom provides a realistic environment for students in which they can have a better comprehension of business trade and ultimately improve their writing performance.

One Chinese article and one English article introduced the immersion teaching method with virtual reality technology in BE courses (Mei & Zhu, 2019; Xu, 2022). In the study conducted by Mei and Zhu (2019), virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality technologies were combined and unitized in a BE interpretation course for 16 weeks. The finding revealed that immersion teaching could enhance students' interpreting abilities. Two English articles assessed the effectiveness of mobile technology in the context of BE courses (Zhang et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2022). For example, by comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of BE vocabulary, Zhang et al. (2014) found that mobile technology can better improve students' BE vocabulary learning than traditional paper materials. However, due to the limitations of mobile-based technology, Zhang and colleagues (2014) proposed combining mobile-based technology and print-based learning in BE vocabulary learning for students.

In this area, computer technology was also the subject of empirical investigations (Li, 2018; Lu & Guo, 2022; Sun & Fan, 2022). For example, Li (2018) applied a computer-aided instruction (CAI) model in BE writing course. A contrast experiment was conducted for one semester to assess the CAI model's effectiveness. Ninety-three students participated in the experiment, among whom 47 were taught by the CAI model and the rest, 46, were taught by the traditional method. A pre-test and post-test were carried out separately for both groups. Results indicated that CAI is more advantageous than the traditional teaching method. A questionnaire was distributed to the students in the experimental group, and it turned out that most students had a favorable attitude toward the CAI model.

Other than the above innovations with the internet and technology, many researches have applied different educational pedagogies and theories in BE classrooms like Data-Driven Learning (Shi, 2013), Project-based Teaching (Wang, 2013), Self-Regulated Strategy Development Mode (Hu, 2014), Content-based Instruction (Wang, 2015), Task-based Approach (Men & Meng, 2015), Case Study Approach (Xie, 2020), Multimodal Teaching (Xu & Xia, 2013), Presentation Method (Liu, 2016), Problem-based Approach (Xie, 2022), Scaffolding Instruction (Chen, 2018), Cognitive Theory (Jiang, 2018), Constructivism (Zhang, 2021), etc. The functions of these educational pedagogies and theories were deeply investigated and discussed by questionnaires, experiments, observations, and interviews in the accordingly research. Based on the findings of these studies, it can be concluded that the BE teaching innovation is somewhat successful.

Two studies assessed the effect of utilizing feedback techniques on BE courses in China. Xu et al. (2021) applied teacher feedback in BE oral presentations online. Xu and colleagues (2021) experimented with multiple approaches, such as transcriptions of teacher feedback, presentation assessments, questionnaires, and self-reflective journals. Their findings indicated that students with teacher feedback reported improved online oral presentation performance and favorable perceptions of teacher feedback. In another study, to test the function of peer feedback in BE writing, Wu et al. (2022) randomly divided participants into an experimental group that received peer feedback in written format at three different levels and a control group that revised their work by themselves. Participants' writing performances at different stages were compared. The findings revealed the positive impact of peer feedback, especially on students' genre awareness in BE writing.

As the primary direction of educational reform in China, Ideological and Political Theory has been applied in various curriculums in China, such as physical education (Tu & Li, 2022), biology (Chen et al., 2023), computer science (X. Li et al., 2022), and general English (Y. Li et al., 2022). Surprisingly, only two Chinese articles in our database applied the Ideological and Political Theory in BE teaching innovation. Li and Feng (2021) applied Multiliteracies Pedagogy in online and offline CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) Economics English courses to explore how to integrate Ideological and Political elements into the four teaching stages: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Their findings indicated that this new teaching style satisfied the "student-centered, output-oriented, and continuous improvement" educational philosophy and achieved the three-in-one talent goal: value formation, knowledge transmission, and skill development. In another study, Liu and Lin (2021) developed a theoretical framework and implementation path for Curriculum-based Political and Virtuous Awareness (CPVA) education in Business English. It turned out that students' fundamental and professional abilities had both improved. Both studies indicated that teachers'

ideological and political level, courage in pedagogy innovation, organization, and implementation abilities must be strengthened.

Overall, BE teaching innovation has drawn significant attention in China, and educators and researchers have applied various teaching approaches, theories, and technologies. However, scant empirical studies regarding Communicative Approaches and Ideological and Political Theory could be found. Furthermore, many of these studies were conducted in BE writing and translation classes, while BE listening and speaking classes were rare.

4.2 Teacher Professional Development

Being an English for specific purpose (ESP) teacher is quite challenging. It requires extra knowledge and abilities, such as analyzing students' needs and specialized discourse, designing particular teaching materials, and applying suitable teaching methods. In our review, five articles discussed BE teacher development from the perspective of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). For example, Wu and Yu (2017) analyzed data collected from observation, interview, and teaching materials to examine the progress of PCK development of three BE teachers in teacher collaboration. Findings indicated that BE teachers' PCK, such as knowledge of teaching techniques, was promoted by teacher collaboration. In another study, Jiang (2021) investigated 8 BE teachers' career and PCK development phases through interview and mind mapping. It turned out that BE teachers' career development consists of bafflement, integration, and improvement stages. In addition, BE teachers' self-consideration established social networking based on instructional demands, conversation, and introspection, ultimately forming the "individual-group-individual" PCK developing phase. All these articles emphasized the significant function and role of PCK in BE teacher development, echoed with the previous study conducted by Basturkmen (2019), who claimed that understanding subject content knowledge is crucial for ESP teachers.

Two studies discussed BE teacher development from the perspective of social needs. For example, Guo and Li (2015) explored 90 BE teachers' professional qualities through a questionnaire. Zhu and Deng (2015) conducted a case study at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies to investigate BE students' expectations of BE teachers. Both studies indicated that BE teachers' comprehensive capabilities, such as business knowledge, practical experience in the business context, and English linguistic proficiency, are needed to improve. Some research has deeply explored BE teachers' perceptions towards specific pedagogical theories and methods such as second language acquisition, ELF-informed teaching, and online assessment through questionnaires, interviews, and observation (Wang, 2013; Si, 2019; Wu & Wang, 2021). The findings of these studies would help Chinese BE teachers reflect and innovate their teachings and ultimately promote novice teachers to the senior level.

Teacher identity was addressed in one Chinese article and one English article. Ai et al. (2019) explored Chinese BE teachers' identity who transferred from teaching English for General Purpose (EGP) by applying a critical narrative method. In another study, Liu and Cai (2021) used questionnaires and interviews to investigate BE teachers' identity from career, major, personal, and situated aspects. Both studies showed a dissatisfactory situation regarding BE teachers' identity. Ai et al. (2019) identified multiple challenges and struggles in defining their new roles as BE teachers, while Liu and Cai (2021) found BE teachers' identity crisis in four aspects. Their findings indicated that both teachers and

universities should make efforts to help with the formation of BE teachers' identities. Besides, Zhang (2016) presented a case study of one teacher who teaches BE writing at a university in China. The author analyzed the data from multiple sources, such as the curriculum syllabus, comments on students' assignments, class observations, interviews, evaluations, etc. Findings revealed that BE teachers can demonstrate their teaching by concentrating on business knowledge and ability instead of the textual characteristics of business genres (Xiong & Zhou, 2020; Wang & Fan, 2021), to which many Chinese BE teachers are inclined. Guo and Niu (2016) conducted a questionnaire-based empirical investigation of autonomy among 120 Chinese BE teachers. Astonishingly, it turned out that BE teachers' autonomy was widely weak. The authors called for higher institutions to provide a more relaxed and policy-free environment.

4.3 Student Ability

The empirical research in the current review is mainly concerned with students' abilities. Five articles looked into students' linguistic ability at the micro-level, such as writing, reading, grammatical, and lexical competence, through questionnaires, interviews, and tests (Zhang, 2013a; Chen & Intaraprasert, 2014; Yan & Yang, 2016; Wang & Zhang, 2017; Wang & Fan, 2020). For example, Yan and Yang (2016) examined the situation of the mastery of BE vocabulary by conducting a vocabulary size test for 127 undergraduates across four grade levels at one university in Beijing. Results revealed a more excellent command of BE vocabulary at higher grade levels and a significant variance in their understanding of terms with diverse frequency levels. The findings indicated that Chinese students' linguistic ability is unsatisfactory, and corresponding coping strategies were proposed. Three articles discussed Chinese students' linguistic ability at the macro level (Li & Song, 2013; Xie, 2017; Xia & Xu, 2018). Xie (2017), for example, investigated the use of English among 128 undergraduates inside and outside the classroom through questionnaires and observation. Findings demonstrated an unsatisfactory fact that the use of English is insufficient in both in-classroom activities and daily communication outside the classroom due to various factors such as learning context, first language, poor English competence, characteristics, and insufficient resources.

Other five studies investigated students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) (Liu & Liu, 2014; Tang, 2015; Guo, 2017; Jiao et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2022). For example, Tang (2015) investigated Chinese students' ICC through questionnaires and interviews. Findings indicated that Chinese students possess positive ICC attitudes and basic knowledge, but the lack of intermediate and core ICC knowledge and skills led to inefficient ICC. In another study, Jiao et al. (2020) created a Business Communication Competence Scale (IBCCS) and proofed its construction, convergence, discriminant, content, criteria, and external validity through five stages of the experiment.

There are two studies addressed on students' employability. For example, Tong and Gao (2022) concentrate on student sustainable career development by conducting mixed-method research to explore students' employability. The research concluded that students' employability is a collection of skills with ten diverse aspects and that developing a wide range of skills should be prioritized in Chinese universities. The dramatic growth in the number of students enrolling in China's higher education in the previous two decades has ultimately led to excess college graduates. The outbreak of COVID-19 has imposed an unanticipated burden on China's labor markets, which were already competitive (Ma & Bennett, 2021; Zhang, 2022). Given the importance of employability, it is crucial to identify and enhance

Chinese students' employability in Chinese higher education (Mok et al., 2016).

4.4 Curriculum Development

Developing a curriculum appears to be a complicated human activity diagram, with many participants playing essential roles but having different perspectives and expectations (Maswana & Tajino, 2019). As a branch of ESP, understanding the needs of various stakeholders is a critical aspect of BE curriculum development (Macalister & Nation, 2019). This view of the point has been deeply testified by reviewing the articles in our database. A substantial part of articles in our database discussed BE curriculum development from the perspective of needs analysis. For example, Xu (2013) examined BE students' expectations of BE practical teaching. Yu (2014) investigated BE students' felt needs for BE courses. Xie and Chen (2019) explored the communication and learning needs of 99 Master of Business Administration (MBA) students. In another study, Zhao (2013) investigated 139 foreign-related enterprises to understand their talent needs. These studies mostly applied the questionnaire method, revealed the increasing desire to improve oral communication abilities and business knowledge among Chinese BE students, and identified the gap between social needs and the current BE talent cultivation situation in China.

Selecting a suitable philosophy and evaluating the curriculum are also crucial in curriculum development (Conde, 2017). Several studies applied various theories to developing and optimizing the BE curriculum. For example, Luo (2013) distributed questionnaires to multiple participants to understand their perceptions of a modular BE curriculum that integrated language, business, intercultural communication, and occupational comprehensive quality. Zhao and Wang (2015) employed constructivism in BE curriculum design. Their findings showed positive perceptions and feedback from teachers, students, and employers. One Chinese study conducted by Wang (2018) exhaustively identified the curriculum design of three higher institutions and summarized the BE curriculum from the viewpoints of profession orientation, curriculum goals, instructional materials, and classroom practice.

Teachers are seen as essential individuals in the curriculum development process (Fithriani et al., 2021). The effect of teacher role and voice in curriculum development has been explored in other contexts such as the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Netherlands, and Zambia (Huizinga et al., 2014; Shower, 2017; Wallace & Priestley, 2017; Mulenga & Mwanza, 2019). However, there seems to be a lack of empirical research addressing teachers' needs in BE curriculum development in China. Accordingly, empirical studies on the voices of diverse stakeholders are required to accelerate and upswing BE curriculum development in the context of China. These voices are frequently identified as crucial to the success of curriculum development (Jawabreh & Gündüz, 2021).

4.5 Talent Cultivation

The ultimate objective of BE talent cultivation is to effectively improve the level of BE program construction (Liu & Liu, 2020; Wang & Song, 2021). In our database, one English and eight Chinese studies focus on BE talent cultivation to accomplish this objective. Most studies investigated the situation of BE talent cultivation by using questionnaires from the perspectives of business corporations (Wei & Gong, 2014) and students (Chi & Zhang, 2018). The findings of these studies seem to be controversial. For example, Shu (2014) and Feng (2022) found that business enterprises and students

tremendously valued practical abilities rather than business knowledge and English proficiency in recruiting. Contrarily, Wei and Gong (2014) indicated that students' oral communication ability was most highlighted by business operations. In another study, Wang et al. (2014) showed a significant divergence in the importance of business knowledge among students and business enterprises.

Obviously, teachers' voices were severely neglected on this theme. Two Chinese studies employed in-depth interviews with BE teachers to understand their perceptions and attitudes toward BE talent cultivation (Shao, 2018; Chen & Yan, 2020). However, both studies only have one participant. Accordingly, this call for more teachers involves empirical studies in BE talent cultivation.

4.6 Teaching Resource

The development of teaching resources for ESP courses aims to provide instructional materials tailored to the specific interests and requirements of students (Marjanovikj-Apostolovski, 2019). One English and three Chinese studies evaluated and challenged the quality of current BE textbooks, which are the most frequently used teaching resources in BE courses in China. Guo (2013) reported 780 BE students' perceptions toward the BE textbook. Gu (2014) critically reported the mistranslations in a widely acknowledged BE textbook, *Business English Translation*. Hu (2014) identified apparent errors in *International Trade Practice* that deviated from the principles and techniques of BE textbook development. Jiang (2022) found insufficient scaffolding to improve students' critical thinking abilities among five BE textbooks. Contrarily, Sun and Wang (2013) reported an internal evaluation of *Business English: An Integrated Course* through the corpus method to assess the metaphor used in the textbook. Results indicated that this BE textbook satisfies students' learning needs by offering sufficient linguistic input to develop learners' metaphorical thinking skills and ICC.

Besides BE textbooks, two other studies discussed the development of teaching resources from different viewpoints (Wang, 2013; Xie, 2019). For example, Xie (2019) reported students' increasing preference for electronic resources over traditional teaching textbooks. However, students' negative perceptions of the existing online BE teaching resources imply an excellent potential for BE teaching resource development (Wang, 2013).

4.7 Students' Psychological State

Only six articles explored Chinese BE students' psychological states. Among these, three articles investigated students' learning motivation in BE classes. Yuan and Ji (2017) identified students' language competence, instructional materials, teacher's tone, and cell phones as the key factors that influenced students' learning motivation. Xu and Peng (2022) investigated the relationship between learning motivation and peer feedback. The findings showed a positive effect of learning motivation on the study, showing that BE students with higher learning motivation were more likely to offer timely and detailed feedback. However, research conducted by Xie and Curle (2022) found that there was no correlation between learning motivation and academic accomplishment.

Zhang (2013b) explored BE students' multiple identities and their functions in BE learning through in-depth interviews with five students. Similarly, Zhao and Zheng (2014) investigated the contextual character of BE students' epistemological views, notions of cooperation, and strategy usage in BE

classes. They examined the relationships between these factors and academic achievement. Their findings indicated that students' psychological state, such as belief and self-identity, are essential to their successful learning. Li (2020) examined students' anxiety in BE learning in another study. Six hundred ninety students participated in a questionnaire survey. The data showed that language proficiency, exams, and assessment were the three significant types of anxiousness influenced mainly by students, instructors, and classmates.

Generally, the function and advantage highlighted by most articles is the positive impact of students' psychological states on their academic achievement, consistent with previous research findings (Liu & Flick, 2019; Liu et al., 2020). However, this apparent absence of empirical research on students' psychological states is worrisome. More empirical studies are needed to understand Chinese BE students' psychological state as it is the key to effective reform in higher education (Qi, 2020; Ban et al., 2021).

4.8 Research Approaches, Methodologies, and Instruments Used in BE Research in China

There seems to be an imbalance in the research methodology used in BE empirical studies. Fifty studies employed quantitative methods, 45 utilized mixed methods, and only 18 applied qualitative methods. Among all 95 quantitative and mixed-method studies, 74 used questionnaires to collect data regarding stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes towards specific teaching methods or theories, their particular learning or recruitment needs, and their unique abilities (Liu & Liu, 2014; Xie et al., 2016; Xie, 2021). The sample size of participants in these studies varied from 5 to 926, and their scope spanned from one single university to nine universities (Guo, 2013; Zhao, 2014; Tang, 2015; Tong & Gao, 2022). Besides, 40 studies applied tests and experiments. Numerous studies statistically investigated the influence of teaching methods and theories by comparing the academic achievement of experiments and control classes (Huang, 2016; Mei & Zhu, 2019; Sun & Fan, 2022). Only a few studies used the pretest-posttest method (Li & Cao, 2013; Cheng & Liu, 2021).

One obvious limitation of the quantitative studies is that they often used convenience sampling and did not utilize strictly controlled and randomized experimental designs. Furthermore, longitudinal studies in our database are scant. Acquiring a foreign language is an intricate and time-consuming process (Gass, 2017). Hence, conducting longitudinal studies to observe the outcomes of BE learning among students is essential. Unfortunately, most quantitative studies in our database last for only one semester, with only a few extending beyond this period (Tong, 2014; Liu et al., 2015). Researchers in our database called for more longitudinal studies to investigate BE education in China (Jiang, 2018; Cheng & Liu, 2021).

Most qualitative and mixed-method studies used semi-structured interviews with single participants or focus groups to collect data (Yuan & Ji, 2017; Chen & Yan, 2020). The semi-structured interview is seen as one of the most common and widely used methods for collecting qualitative data due to its flexibility and systematic aspects (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Belina, 2022). Most interviews were conducted in Mandarin in both Chinese and English studies. Another frequently used method in qualitative and mixed-method studies in our database is the case study. Using case studies allows researchers to gain a more comprehensive awareness of complicated phenomena (Heale & Twycross, 2018). The design of reviewed multiple-case or single-case studies mainly focused on particular universities, BE courses,

curriculum, textbooks, teachers, and students by collecting data from resources such as interviews (Zhao & Wang, 2015), observations (Wu & Yu, 2017), and documents (Gu, 2014). Altogether twelve studies employed classroom observations to analyze teachers' instructional practices, classroom activities, students' learning behaviors, and participation (Tong, 2014; Wang, 2015), and the observation period varied from a single class (45 minutes) to four semesters. Previous research highlighted the functions of linguistic analysis in understanding the use of the target language, the development of teaching materials, and the innovation of teaching approaches and curriculum (He, 2019; Hu & Hu, 2022; Wei et al., 2022; Winstone et al., 2022). Unfortunately, only a handful of studies addressed this topic among the reviewed empirical studies (Xie, 2017; Jiang, 2022).

5 Discussion

This systematic review attempted to clarify the present status of empirical studies on BE in the Chinese higher education setting. Seven themes on BE in Chinese higher education were identified based on 113 empirical studies. The current review revealed several findings. First, there is a preponderance of non-empirical studies in the literature, and empirical studies on BE in Chinese higher education are scarce. The amount of English empirical studies that target international readers is increasing chronologically, and a contrary result can be found in the number of publications for domestic audiences. Most empirical studies concentrated on BE teaching innovation, while some BE themes, such as teaching resources and students' psychological states, were obviously ignored. Second, despite applying various pedagogies and theories in BE teaching innovation, there seems to be a lack of empirical evidence of implementing communicative approaches in BE teaching classrooms. BE speaking and listening classes are rarely discussed in teaching innovation. Third, despite the frequently reported significance of teachers' PCK, minimal emphasis has been placed on teachers' self-identity regarding BE teacher development. Fourth, evidence regarding the BE students' ability standard seems controversial, and Chinese students' employability was also unclear. Fifth, the quality of current BE teaching resources, such as traditional textbooks and online resources, is highly unsatisfactory in meeting the needs of BE courses in the Chinese context. Furthermore, the BE students' psychological state is highly unexplored. Lastly, questionnaires and interviews are frequently used methods in empirical studies. However, observation and linguistic analysis are rarely applied, and there is a lack of longitudinal studies to assess the effect of BE teaching innovation and patterns of language use inside and outside the classroom among students and teachers.

6 Limitation

This review has a significant limitation in that it merely focused on the empirical studies in Chinese and English from three databases. In addition, as the publication time was limited to the end of 2022, the empirical articles published after this period were also not included in our review. Furthermore, this study did not include books, conference proceedings, and dissertations. Accordingly, there could be some articles overlooked in the current review.

7 Conclusion and Recommendation

In the past decade, a considerable stride has been made in BE education and development in China. The

current review deeply and systematically analyzed 113 Chinese and English empirical studies published in CNKI, WOS, and Scopus from 2013 to 2022. Altogether, seven themes were concluded: teaching innovation, teacher development, student ability, curriculum development, talent cultivation, teaching resources, and students' psychological states. Though a certain number of studies have addressed the development of BE from various perspectives within the Chinese context since the launch of "The Belt and Road Initiative" in 2013, several BE-related questions still need to be answered. Based on the findings of the current review, some directions for future studies are recommended. To begin with, more empirical evidence is needed to understand BE development in China, especially in areas such as BE talent cultivation, teaching resource development, and students' psychological states.

Furthermore, to improve students' communicative competence, communicative language teaching (CLT) is widely used in EFL classes in many Asian countries. Accordingly, future empirical studies can be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of CLT and teachers' and students' perceptions of CLT in BE context. In addition, it is significant to explore the BE teachers' viewpoints on BE professional construction. Future empirical studies need to determine what abilities and skills students and teachers need from the BE teachers' perspective to improve BE talent cultivation, curriculum development, and teaching resource development. Besides, future empirical studies need to longitudinally investigate English linguistic aspects, such as using English in and out of the BE classroom. With the iterative reform and constant development in educational theory and social needs, BE researchers should empirically emphasize more on teaching theory construction, BE talent cultivation, and ultimately promoting the development of BE in China.

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