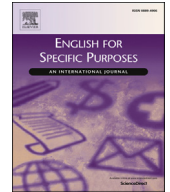


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Strengthening the interface between research and pedagogy in business English and beyond



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ABSTRACT

As part of the special issue “Business English: Research into Professional Practice”, this article aims to contribute to a major discussion in the field of business English concerning ways of strengthening the research–pedagogy interface. The article is a commentary on my previously published paper, “*Forging a link between research and pedagogy: A holistic framework for evaluating business English materials*” (2009). In this commentary, I discuss various aspects of the paper, including the significance of its proposed approach to connecting research with pedagogy, the influence of the paper on business English and other fields, and the application of its ideas by practitioners to business English materials evaluation and beyond. I also reflect on the paper’s influence on my subsequent work as both a researcher and a practitioner. I conclude by suggesting future directions that should help to bring research closer to pedagogical practice.

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1. Introduction

Back in the late 1990s, [Hewings and Nickerson \(1999\)](#) called for more linguistic research to inform the teaching of business English. In the next decade, while research on business discourse continued to grow, there were few proposals to specify how findings from such research could be used to inform the work of business English practitioners. Published ten years after Hewings and Nickerson’s call, the article “*Forging a link between research and pedagogy: A holistic framework for evaluating business English materials*” ([Chan, 2009a](#)) embodied my first proposal to bring research closer to pedagogy in a principled way. As the main title of the article indicates, my primary purpose was to strengthen the interface between research and pedagogy in business English. The way I did this was to propose a model for linking research and pedagogy, together with a holistic framework that incorporates research findings in the process of evaluating business English materials. To illustrate that the proposed research-informed approach to materials evaluation could be more than a theoretical possibility, the paper also demonstrates a practical application of the framework by devising a two-part checklist and using it to evaluate some textbook units on business meetings. The present article discusses the significance and influence of [Chan \(2009a\)](#) since its publication, and illustrates how it has contributed to a stronger interface between research and pedagogy in business English and beyond.

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2. Significance of the featured article

The significance of [Chan \(2009a\)](#) lies not only in its evaluating materials on business meetings found in contemporary business English textbooks, but also in its new approach to materials evaluation that highlights the value of research in informing business English pedagogy. With its focus on making use of research, the paper has been recognized as one of the rare attempts to make the field of business English more “research-led” ([Bargiela-Chiappini & Zhang, 2013](#), p. 207). It has also supported the discussion in the broader field of English Language Teaching on the need for teaching materials to be based more firmly on research ([Ur, 2017](#)). I discuss my approach in more detail below.

2.1. Towards a research-informed approach to evaluating materials

The study puts forward a general model, an evaluative framework and a research-informed checklist, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#) and elaborated below. This multi-faceted proposal provides a systematic way in which existing research can be used to inform pedagogy through a process of materials evaluation, adaptation and supplementation. Although the paper evaluates textbook materials, I envisaged that this approach could be applied in the evaluation of all kinds of pedagogical materials, including those produced in house by practitioners.

2.1.1. The model

In order to link research and pedagogy, the model lists a set of steps to be used in drawing on research in the process of materials evaluation, adaptation and supplementation ([Chan, 2009a](#), p. 127). The process involves using research findings from relevant studies to compile checklists and evaluate teaching materials (Steps 1–4), to identify gaps in the materials (Step 5) and to deal with these gaps through adaptation and supplementation (Step 6). Steps 1 to 5 are illustrated in [Chan \(2009a\)](#), while Step 6 is illustrated in [Chan \(2009b\)](#) using concrete examples of tasks and activities that are informed by [Chan \(2009a\)](#) and other key research findings cited there.

The significance of the model is that it views materials evaluation (Step 4) not as an end goal, but as a means of identifying gaps in the materials that are being evaluated, which can then be addressed through adaptation and supplementation (Steps 5 and 6). In all six steps, relevant research findings are used. This means that, when

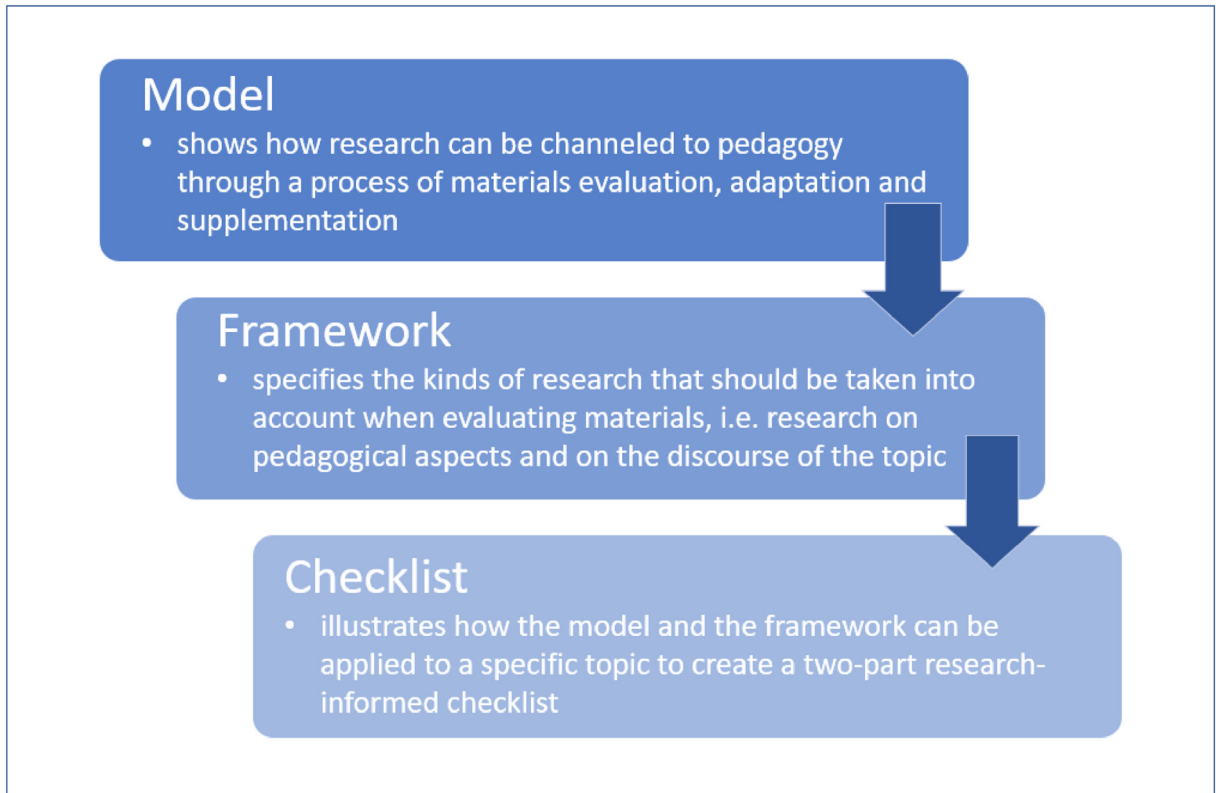


Figure 1. The multi-faceted proposal in [Chan \(2009a\)](#).

researchers and practitioners evaluate, adapt and supplement textbooks and other teaching materials, they can draw on insights from a wide range of relevant available research, without having to rely solely on their own knowledge and experience.

2.1.2. The framework

In acknowledging that different genres and communicative events involve different pedagogical considerations and exhibit different language features, the framework suggests that relevant research findings on both the pedagogical considerations and the discourse features of the topic of interest should be taken into account when evaluating materials (Chan, 2009a, p. 127). This was innovative for materials evaluation research at the time, as it was the first time that criteria related to both pedagogical concerns and discourse features had been brought together into a single evaluative framework. The inclusion of discourse-related research in the framework, which was an attempt to channel linguistic research into pedagogy, proved to be helpful in revealing the “gap between the findings of applied linguistics studies and textbook depictions of communicative events” (Starfield, 2016, p. 156).

By specifying a framework for the proposed type of checklist, the study makes the process of compiling research-informed checklists transparent and also provides researchers and practitioners alike with a conceptual tool to develop their own checklists and to adapt/update those developed by others. The flexibility and applicability of the framework have been recognized in the ESP field, for instance in Woodrow's (2018) book on ESP course design, where a slightly adapted version of the checklist is provided as “a checklist that can be used by course designers to evaluate ESP materials” (p. 174). The ways in which the framework can be applied to specific topics and types of material have also been discussed in the literature; for example, Bloch (2013) suggests that the framework can be applied to examine the use of email communication in business, while Fuertes-Olivera and Pérez Cabello de Alba (2012) highlight the relevance of the framework in evaluating online dictionaries.

2.1.3. The checklist

The research-informed checklist has two parts, one for pedagogical considerations and the other for discourse features, both of which are topic-specific. The topic-specific nature of the checklist was intended to overcome the shortcomings of “one-size-fits-all” checklists that tend to ask broad questions that apply to all topics, such as “Is the language that is being taught appropriate?” and “Are the learning tasks appropriate?”, which “lack the level of detail needed to help teachers, especially those with little or no business experience, to assess the suitability, authenticity and credibility of the materials” (Chan, 2009a, p. 126). The idea of a research-informed checklist was also intended to empower practitioners, by encouraging them to draw on research that they consider relevant to evaluate teaching materials and not to assume that the language in teaching materials necessarily reflects the way language is used in real-life business situations or that the language is necessarily being taught and practised in an effective way.

The sample checklist on business meetings illustrates how research findings identified from a literature review can be turned into evaluation criteria. Using the same approach, practitioners can develop similar research-informed checklists for other topics. Several practitioners have flexibly applied this approach and/or adapted the sample checklist for their own use. For instance, Li (2019) largely followed the steps outlined in the general model and formulated two checklists for evaluating materials on business interpreting textbooks. In addition, the projects undertaken by Simpson (2016, 2018) and Simpson and Mork (2021) illustrate how the proposed approach, including the framework and both parts of the checklist, can be applied with some adaptation to evaluate various types of teaching materials, including an ESP textbook (Simpson, 2016), an in-house course with a focus on business English as a lingua franca (Simpson, 2018) and a set of materials and tasks designed for a specialized banking English course (Simpson & Mork, 2021). These are discussed elsewhere in this Special Issue (Simpson, forthcoming).

2.2. The materials evaluation study

Unlike earlier articles on business English textbook evaluation which had aimed primarily to report the findings of materials evaluation projects (e.g. Flinders, 2005; Williams, 1988), Chan (2009a) proposed a way of using research to inform materials evaluation, alongside their adaptation and supplementation. Given this aim, the materials evaluation study which I outlined was mainly illustrative, to demonstrate how to put the proposed approach into practice. The study also helped to reveal some problems in the textbook units that I was evaluating, which traditional generic checklists would have missed, such as teaching over-explicit language or performatives (e.g. *I don't agree with you*) that might be seen as rude and confrontational; giving no attention to spoken grammar and interpersonal language/strategies; presenting language in the form of decontextualized lists of functions and exponents; and including tasks which were unrelated to business and which might not appeal to job-experienced learners. The key findings of the materials evaluation study were to provide evidence of the divide between the language taught in contemporary textbooks and that used in business situations. In the time since the study was published, it has continued to lend support to calls for greater authenticity in language teaching materials and a stronger interface between research and pedagogy in business English and in ESP (e.g. Angouri, 2018; Bremner, 2010; Darics, 2020; Marra, 2013; McDonough, 2010).

3. Influence of the paper: business English and beyond

3.1. Influence as shown in scholarly publications

The number of times an article has been cited is generally used in academia as a quantitative indicator of its influence. According to Google Scholar figures¹, Chan (2009a) has so far received over 100 citations. The citations show that the paper has been influential in business English, ESP, as well as other language- and communication-related fields. The citations have appeared in a range of journals, such as *English for Specific Purposes*, *ELT Journal*, *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, and *Translation and Interpreting Studies*. The paper has also been cited in a number of encyclopedias and handbooks, for example, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (Chapelle, 2020), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (Chapelle, 2023), *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes* (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013), *The Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning (Volume III)* (Hinkel, 2017), and *The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching* (Hall, 2016), as well as in a wide range of scholarly books and edited volumes on different topics, including business English, ESP, ELT materials, language awareness, workplace discourse and electronic lexicography (e.g. Angouri, 2018; Basturkmen, 2010; Darics, 2022; Granger & Paquot, 2012; Harwood, 2010; Ilie et al., 2019; Koester, 2010; Nickerson & Planken, 2016). The variety of academic journals and scholarly publications citing the study would suggest its relevance to business English and beyond.

3.2. Influence on pedagogical practice

A paper aiming to strengthen the link between research and pedagogy should have some influence on pedagogical practice. This influence, however, is not easy to gauge. One reason is that unless practitioners' accounts of their use of research have been published, others may not know what research informed their pedagogical practice. Despite the difficulties in accurately assessing the influence of research on practice, however, it is encouraging to note that a number of the citations that are captured by Google Scholar are those by practitioners or researcher-practitioners. These citations appear in teaching-related or practitioner-oriented conference proceedings (e.g. Platzer & Verdonk, 2018; Simpson, 2016), poster presentations (e.g. Simpson, 2018) and journal articles (e.g. García-Pinar, 2019; Simpson & Mork, 2021; Tenedero & Orias, 2016). Some of the practitioners also provide details of their adaptations of the model and checklist. Notable examples include Li (2019), who was "inspired" by the six-step model (p. 400) and adapted it to suit his specific context when evaluating business interpreting textbooks; and Simpson (2016, 2018), who adapted Chan's (2009a) two-part checklist to evaluate different business English materials and courses (see also Simpson and Mork (2021) and Simpson (forthcoming)).

3.3. Influence on my own research and practice

On reflection, I have found that the ideas and findings I put forward in Chan (2009a), in particular those related to authenticity in language teaching materials and the use of research to inform pedagogy, have influenced my work as a language teacher (Chan, 2009b, 2010a, 2011, 2014a, 2015), a materials writer (Chan, 2014b, 2017), a course developer (Chan, 2018) and a teacher trainer (Chan, 2010b). Some of my experience has been disseminated in practitioners' journals for ELT professionals and also in my co-edited book (Chan & Frendo, 2014), which I hoped would reach more language teachers and teacher trainers.

As a researcher, I have also been prompted by my experience of working on the study to conduct research to address some gaps that I had noticed in the literature, in particular those related to the pedagogical aspects of business English. For example, in Chan (2013), I investigated learners' perceptions of business English tasks to help practitioners see from the learner's perspective what makes a task motivating, useful and challenging. In Chan (2017), I examined the impact of using authentic transcripts of business talk in business English teaching as a way of introducing learners to authentic language, and in Chan (2018), I investigated the effectiveness of a business meeting module that I developed by taking into account findings from both relevant research and my own in-house needs analysis. My more recent research projects (e.g. Chan, 2019, 2021a, 2021b) have continued to focus on identifying learners' needs, to help ESP practitioners in similar teaching contexts to answer a fundamental pedagogical question when evaluating or designing teaching materials, i.e. "Does the material suit the target learners' needs?" (Chan, 2009a, p. 132).

4. Possible future directions

For this Special Issue, I would like to propose some future directions not only for materials evaluation but also for strengthening the link between research and practice in ESP.

As shown in some of the materials evaluation and course development projects cited above, in the hands of practitioners who are receptive to research-informed pedagogical ideas, my model, framework and checklist can all become useful

¹ Since one of the aims of this commentary is to investigate the influence of Chan (2009a) on practitioners, Google Scholar, which captures a wider range of publications when identifying citations, was used in preference to databases such as Scopus.

pedagogical tools. In using these tools, practitioners can develop an appreciation of the value of research for their work. Therefore, to help practitioners benefit from a wider range of research, it would be useful to develop evaluation criteria and checklists for more topics. Existing checklists could also be updated to incorporate recent insights from research. Moreover, since 2009, many linguistic and pedagogical research findings relevant to materials evaluation and development have emerged. Findings that can be usefully incorporated into business English pedagogy include those on BELF (Ehrenreich, 2016; Kankaanranta, 2023), intertextuality (Flowerdew, 2023; Warren, 2023), digital business discourse (Darics, 2015; Gimenez, 2023), relational language (Chan, 2019; Koester, 2010), learners' needs (Chan, 2018, 2019) and informal learning (Chan, 2021a, 2021b). The pedagogical implications of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools such as ChatGPT, which can support language teaching and learning in many ways (Barrot, 2023), could also be further explored by ESP researchers and practitioners in the course of evaluating and designing materials and methods.

Using research to inform materials evaluation is, however, only one way in which research can inform pedagogy; researchers and practitioners in business English and other ESP fields can also look for more ways to channel research to pedagogy. Although in this commentary I have for simplicity's sake referred to researchers and practitioners as two different groups of professionals, it should be noted that the line between them is not always clear; one group can sometimes wear the hat of the other (Chan, 2017). A useful point that Nickerson (2005) made in the last Special Issue on business English is that researcher-practitioners, or researchers who "are themselves also active as practitioners in teaching business English and/or communication" (p. 374), could help to bridge the gap between research and pedagogy by reporting their own research-informed practice. Yet few business English researcher-practitioners have so far reported their pedagogical practice (Chan, 2017). I suggest, therefore, that researchers, including those who also wear the practitioner's hat, could explore additional ways of using research in their areas of expertise to devise models, frameworks, checklists and/or teaching materials for practitioners' use, since many practitioners do see the value of these and can apply them to different teaching contexts.

While researcher-practitioners can be researchers who also teach, they can also be practitioners who conduct research. Practitioners, with their access to real-life teaching contexts, can make valuable contributions to research-informed practice by conducting pedagogically-oriented research (Chan, 2017). Therefore, apart from encouraging researchers who are also practitioners to share teaching ideas, practitioners should also be empowered to conduct research on pedagogical practice, for example, through teacher training programmes, degree programmes and professional development workshops that not only highlight the value of research-informed practice but also provide training in practitioner research and support dissemination of the findings from such research. Collaboration between researchers, practitioners and researcher-practitioners should also be encouraged, to develop a synergy that could inspire innovative approaches in the future.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Clarice S.C. Chan: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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