

## **Bridging the English Communication Skills Gap between the EFL Classroom and the Workplace**

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### **Abstract**

Education and experience may make one land a job, but for one to be able to thrive and survive in the world of work, he or she has to exhibit employability skills, such as, among other things, teamwork, collaboration, and leadership; life-long learning; research, scholarship, and enquiry; employability and career development; global citizenship; communication and information literacy; ethical, social and professional understanding; and personal and intellectual autonomy. This study, which focused on one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, communication, examined whether students' and graduates' professional needs are being met by current English courses and programmes at the university. The respondents, composed of the university alumni, practicum, and working students, were classified according to sex, type, and sector of their work affiliation. This descriptive research utilized an adapted Communication Skills in the Workplace questionnaire by Koncz (2012). Mean, rank, t-test, and ANOVA were used in the treatment of data gathered using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Results showed that the top significant workplace communication skills as perceived by the AMAIUB alumni, practicum, and working students are as follows: demonstrating ability to listen effectively; comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers; speaking English clearly, fluently and accurately; reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures; and completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes. Moreover, there were no significant differences between the perceived workplace communication skills when respondents were classified according to sex and type of their company/institution/organization. However, a significant difference was noted between the perceived workplace communication skills of the alumni and practicum or working students when classified according to company/ institution / organization type. Hence, it was recommended that these perceived significant workplace communications skills should be integrated in the topics of English language courses.

**Keywords:** English skills, workplace communication, employability skills, EFL

## Introduction

Countries all over the world today have considered education to be fundamental in economies and societies. Knowledge, through education, has replaced other assets as the focal agent of economic development; education has gradually become the groundwork for personal productivity, societal breakthrough, and nation building.

Correspondingly, the Kingdom of Bahrain unceasingly strengthens its human resources to make the switch from oil to human assets, as indicated in its Vision 2030. As one of the leading higher education institutions in Bahrain, AMA International University-Bahrain (AMAIUB) adheres to the Kingdom's directions in providing graduates who form part of the country's foremost wealth, the human capital or knowledge assets. The university, which believes that its students and alumni are its contribution to Bahrain's socio-economic development, has been "re-missioning" its policies, procedures, and standards to answer some of the challenging realities of youth employment in the labor market, shift in career paths, and inculcation of core skills needed by the industry.

Aware of global challenges in higher education, AMAIUB emphasizes employability of its graduates. To outsource probable opportunities, the university integrates employability skills across its curricula, assists in mapping students' career directions, introduces them to various programs and options available in different establishments, prepares them holistically to be the employees of choice, and links them with employers in the job market.

The survey conducted by the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) and the Employment Research Institute (ERI) of Edinburgh Napier University in Scotland, in cooperation with Tamkeen, reported emerging trends in Bahrain's Labour Market Intelligence Project. The survey, which gathered feedback from industry on the graduates' employability skills, revealed that graduates' skills needed by the industry comprised the ability to communicate, to participate in a team, to use their initiative, to solve problems, and to think critically. Moreover, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education highlighted the following 21<sup>st</sup> century graduate attributes: teamwork, collaboration, and leadership; life-long learning; research, scholarship, and enquiry; employability and career development; global citizenship; communication and information literacy; ethical, social and professional understanding; and personal and intellectual autonomy (Employability Skills Seminar, 2012).

A study by Robles (2012) revealed that the top ten most important soft skills perceived by business executives are integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethics.

It is an inevitable fact that communication, or English oral and written communication skills, are on top of the list of 21<sup>st</sup> century employees.

Aspiring Minds, a leading employability company of India, reported that 47% of students and graduates do not have sufficient English language skills necessary in the knowledge economy (Erling, 2003).

Cognizant of communicative-linguistic competence as one of the most important trends at present, educational institutions have reflected on whether they have provided adequate communication skills for their students and graduates to carry on day-to-day tasks in their respective working environments (Narzoles, 2015).

Apparently, it is imperative to determine the language skills and abilities students and graduates need in the workplace and to examine if their professional needs are being met by current English courses and programmes at the university. This is one of the many ways to bridge the English communication skills gap between the EFL classroom and the workplace.

### Research Questions

This study aimed to determine the communication skills needed in the workplace as perceived by students undergoing practicum/on-the-job training and the AMAIUB alumni. Specifically, it aimed to shed light on the following questions:

1. What are the significant communication skills needed in the workplace as perceived by the practicum/working students and the alumni?
2. Are there significant differences on the significant communication skills in the workplace when practicum/working students and the alumni are classified as to their sex (male or female), programme (BSBI, BSIS, BSME, BSIE, and BSCS), and the type (education, IT, business, engineering, and medical) and sector (private or public) of company/organization/institution where they have their practicum or employment?

### Hypothesis

Based on the aforementioned problems, the following null hypothesis was advanced:

There are no significant differences on the significant communication skills in the workplace when practicum/working students and the alumni are classified as to their sex (male or female), programme (BSBI, BSIS, BSME, BSIE, and BSCS), type (education, IT, business, engineering, and medical), and sector (private or public) of company/organization/institution where they are currently having their practicum or employment.

Figure 1 exhibits the paradigm of the study.

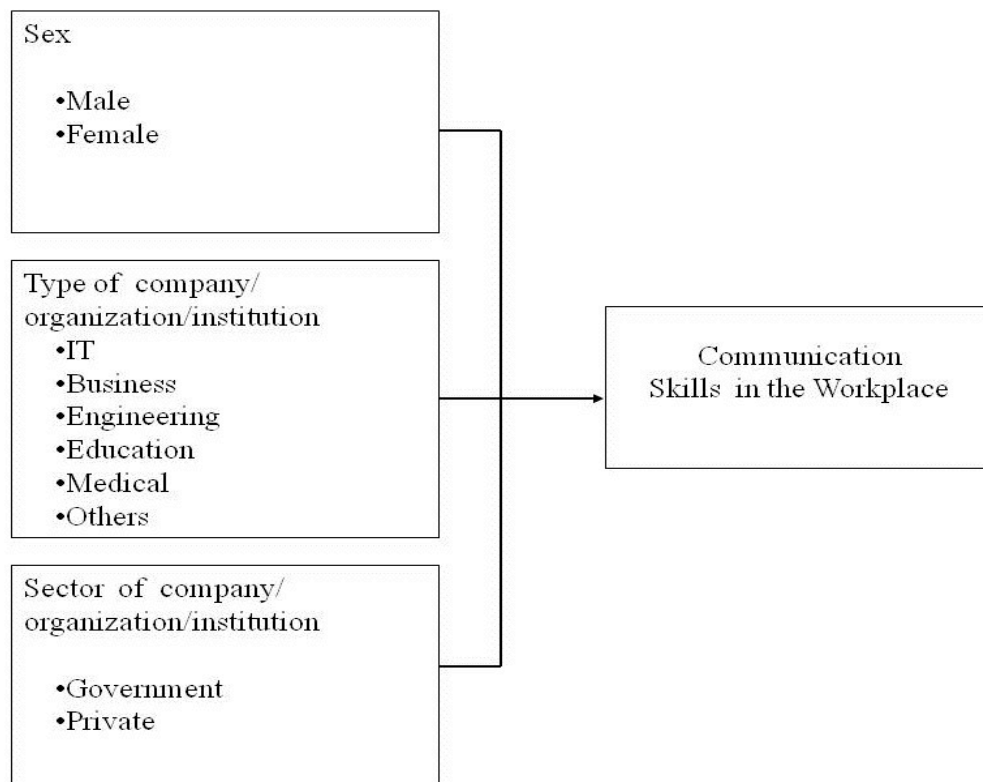


Figure 1. The Research Paradigm

## Literature Review

Individuals can only reach their full potential if they are armed with education. Education has a number of benefits: it reduces poverty directly, enhances social unity in general, creates greater community engagement, and results in better plans about maternal and child health and improving health generally (Burnett, 2014; Bird & Higgins, 2011).

Educational institutions should teach skills relevant to the world of work and thus satisfactorily prepare the youth for the workplace. The Development Institute noted that employers are keen with three focal types of skills: cognitive, non-cognitive, and technical. While technical and vital cognitive skills are still essential to work, transferrable and non-cognitive skills such as problem-solving, flexibility, punctuality, and communication are regarded as key skills (Jayaram, 2014).

Concurrently, economies demand human assets that can meet the demands of the 21st century. Governments all throughout the world have embarked on extensive initiatives to bridge the skills gap.

There has actually been a struggle for educational institutions at all levels to provide young people, who are the workforce of tomorrow, with necessary skills required in both the public and private sectors. It is, thus, indispensable that there should be a deeper understanding of the function that English plays and will play, acknowledging the fact that English communication skills are one of the basic skills along with computer literacy.

A number of studies have identified the significant communication skills in the workplace.

According to Lin, Wu, and Huang (2013), English language skills in completing spoken tasks, comprehending instructions, having interaction strategies, and writing basic business errands are crucial to the government, hospitality and tourism industries, and academic institutions.

In Thailand, English skills are mandatory for healthcare employees. Speaking and listening skills are considered two of the most important abilities, while grammatical errors, accents, and pronunciation mistakes are seen as the chief communication skill problems (Pandey & Sinhaneti, 2013).

On the other hand, Javid and Umer (2013) revealed that speaking and reading skills are the most important for medical undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia.

Mehra and Virgandham (2013), soliciting the most important communication skills as perceived by engineers from India, revealed that oral and written communication skills, effective listening skills, and confidence in expressing thoughts and ideas in front of the audience are regarded vital in their work.

Among Malaysian employees working in the tourism sector, speaking is the most important skill, followed by listening, reading and writing. Moreover, viewed as the three most important skills are providing information, extending services, and offering help. On the other hand, said employees lack ability to utilize correct words and expressions, possess insufficient vocabulary, and have grammar difficulties (Prachanan, 2012).

Several studies have also corroborated the fact that there have been gaps between communication skills taught in the university and demand for these skills in the workplace.

Among Egyptian tourism and hospitality university students, Abdel-Ghany and Abdel-Latif (2012) noted inadequacies in English language training provided by universities; they, thus, recommended English curricula that could assist the students to be well-prepared to meet their future workplace necessities.

These results were corroborated by Lan, Khaun, and Singh (2011) when, in their survey of Malaysian employees regarding English communication skills learned from their respective universities, the respondents remarked that English skills taught in schools and universities did not prepare them for the language of the workplace. Moreover, the employees had a lot of difficulties in accomplishing tasks, such as participating in meetings, giving

presentations, and preparing reports. A majority of the students also lacked confidence in using the language.

In view of the above-mentioned studies that point to communication skills gap between the university and the workplace, indispensable measures to bridge the gap need to be planned and implemented.

### Methods of Research

#### The Participants

The participants of this research were the AMAIUB alumni and students who are working or having their practicum/ on-the-job-training (OJT).

Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of AMAIUB alumni and practicum or working students according to their sex.

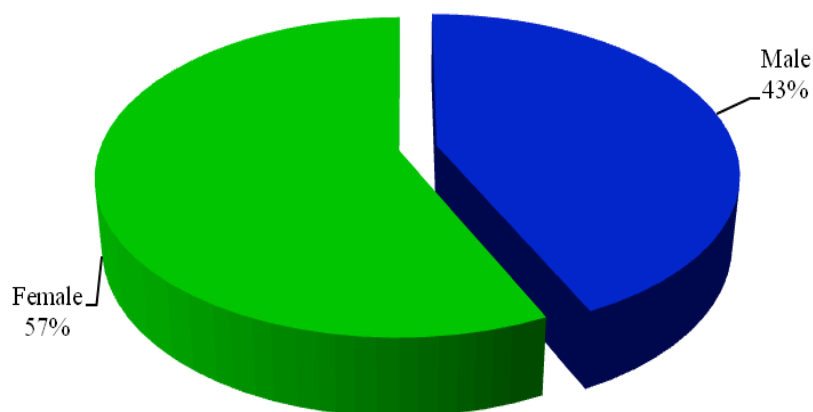


Figure 2. Frequency Distribution of Alumni and Practicum or Working Students According to Sex

Figure 3 shows the frequency distribution of the type of company/institution/ organization where AMAIUB alumni and students are working or having their practicum.

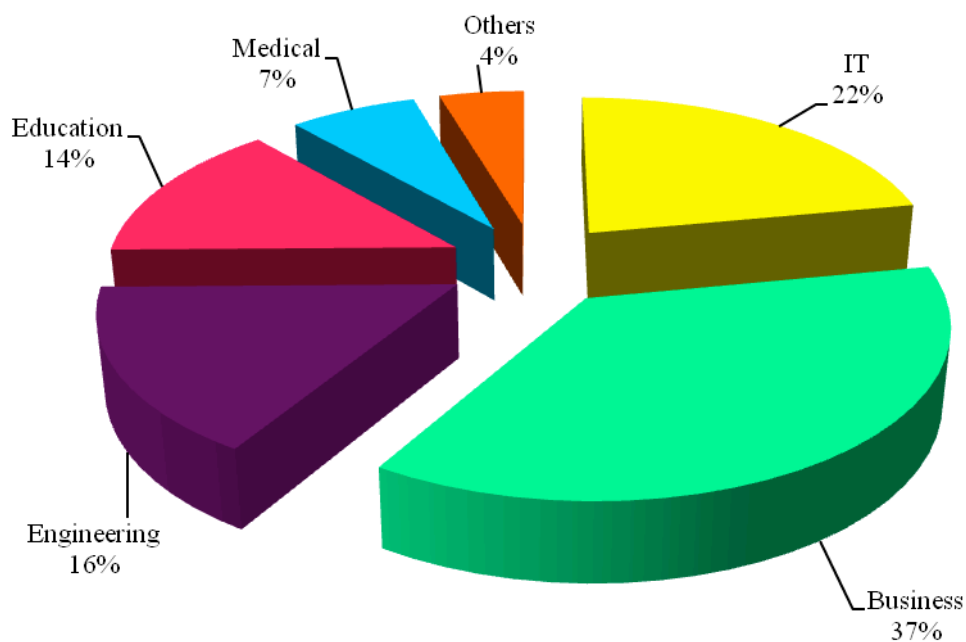


Figure 3. Frequency Distribution of the Type of Company/ Institution/ Organization where AMAIUB Alumni and Students are Working or Having their Practicum

Figure 4 presents the frequency distribution of the sector of company/ institution/ organization where AMAIUB alumni and students are working or having their practicum.

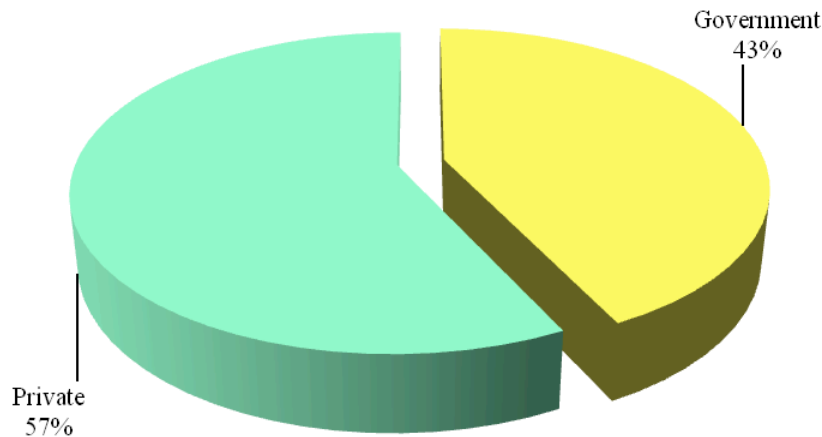


Figure 4. Frequency Distribution of the Sector of Company/ Institution/ Organization where AMAIUB Alumni and Students are Working or Having their Practicum

#### Data Analysis

This descriptive research utilized an adapted Communication Skills in the Workplace questionnaire by Koncz (2012).

Upon retrieval of the accomplished instruments, the data were processed, analyzed and interpreted according to the requirements of the problems and hypothesis.

The data gathered for the study were computer-processed for statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program. The descriptive statistics employed were mean and standard deviation. For inferential statistics, t-Test and Analysis of Variance (One-Way ANOVA) were utilized.

The results of inferential analysis were interpreted using .05 level of significance.

#### Results

Table 1 depicts the significant workplace communication skills as perceived by the AMAIUB alumni and students who are working or having their practicum. As an entire group, the alumni and practicum/working students considered the following skills to be the most significant: (1) demonstrating ability to listen effectively ( $M=4.42$ ); (2) comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers ( $M=4.34$ ); (3) speaking English clearly, fluently and accurately ( $M=4.29$ ); (4) reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures ( $M=4.28$ ); and (5) completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes ( $M=4.24$ ).

The results were confirmed by Lin et. al. (2013) and Pandey and Sinhaneti (2013) who stated that English language skills in completing spoken tasks, comprehending instructions, having interaction strategies, and writing basic business errands are crucial to the government, hospitality and tourism industries, and academic institutions. Speaking and listening skills were two of the most important abilities.

In the same vein, Javid and Umer (2013) revealed that speaking and reading skills are the most important communication skills, while Mehra and Virgandham (2013) reported that oral and written communication skills, effective listening skills, and confidence in expressing thoughts and ideas in front of the audience were regarded as vital in the workplace.

Communication Skill	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures	4.28	.68	<b>4</b>
2. Completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes	4.24	.72	<b>5</b>
3. Comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers	4.34	.63	<b>2</b>
4. Demonstrating skills in the use of language, grammar, and punctuation	4.16	.92	7
5. Organizing and presenting ideas effectively for both formal and spontaneous speeches	4.08	.88	8
6. Demonstrating ability to listen effectively	4.42	.77	<b>1</b>
7. Participating in meetings and using interviewing skills to gather information or feedback	3.92	.83	12
8. Utilizing proper gestures and facial expressions when communicating orally	3.80	.97	14
9. Understanding business, computing, medical or engineering lingo used in the workplace	3.86	.95	13
10. Writing appropriate forms of business communication such as letter, memorandum, report, minutes of the meeting, plans, etc.	4.00	.93	10
11. Conducting research by gathering presenting the results	3.95	.84	11
12. Making use of pictures, diagrams, tables, charts, and other visual aids in reports	4.02	.75	9
13. Entertaining queries and concerns of clients and customers regarding the products and services provided by the company	4.20	.98	6
14. Speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately	4.29	.87	<b>3</b>

Table 1. Potent Communication Skills in the Workplace as Perceived by the Entire Group

Table 2 depicts the workplace communication skills as perceived according to sex by the AMAIUB alumni and students who are working or having their practicum. The male alumni and practicum/working students considered the following skills to be the most significant: (1) comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.40); (2) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.38); and (3) completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes (M=4.36)

On the other hand, the female alumni and practicum/working students considered these workplace communication skills to be important: (1) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.40); (2) comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.36); and (3) speaking English clearly, fluently and accurately (M=4.32).

Communication Skill	Male		Female	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
1. Reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures	4.26	5	4.25	4
2. Completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes	4.36	3	4.18	5
3. Comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers	4.40	1	4.36	2
4. Demonstrating skills in the use of language, grammar, and punctuation	4.24	6	4.08	8
5. Organizing and presenting ideas effectively for both formal and spontaneous speeches	4.08	9		
6. Demonstrating ability to listen effectively	4.38	2	4.40	1
7. Participating in meetings and using interviewing skills to gather information or feedback	3.80	14	3.76	13
8. Utilizing proper gestures and facial expressions when communicating orally	3.85	13	3.68	14
9. Understanding business, computing, medical or engineering lingo used in the workplace	3.96	12	3.85	11
10. Writing appropriate forms of business communication such as letter, memorandum, report, minutes of the meeting, plans, etc.	4.02	11	3.98	9
11. Conducting research by gathering presenting the results	4.05	10	3.80	12
12. Making use of pictures, diagrams, tables, charts, and other visual aids in reports	4.10	8	4.12	6
13. Entertaining queries and concerns of clients and customers regarding the products and services provided by the company	4.18	7	4.10	7
14. Speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately	4.30	4	4.32	3

Table 2. Workplace Communication Skills as Perceived by the AMAIUB Alumni and Practicum or Working Students According to Sex



Table 3 shows the significant workplace communication skills according to the type of company/institution/organization where AMAIUB alumni and students are working or having their practicum/OJT.

Alumni and students who are working or having their practicum in *IT companies* ranked the following to be the most needed communication skills in the workplace: (1) reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures (M=4.80); (2) making use of pictures, diagrams, tables, charts, and other visual aids in reports (M=4.48); and (3) speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately (M=4.43).

Alumni and students who are working or having their practicum in *business companies* regarded the following to be the top workplace communication: (1) entertaining queries and concerns of clients and customers regarding the products and services provided by the company (M=4.56); (2) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.50); and (3) reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures (M=4.32).

Alumni and students who are working or having their practicum in *engineering companies* deemed these workplace communication skills to be significant: (1) reading and comprehending letters and notices, electronic data, and emails (M=4.60); (2) comprehending verbal work instructions from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.58); and (3) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.55).

Alumni and students who are working or having their practicum in *education institutions* considered these communication skills to be pertinent: (1) speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately (M=4.80); (2) comprehending letters and notices, electronic data, and emails; and utilizing proper gestures and facial expressions when communicating orally (M=4.70); and (3) completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes (M=4.70).

Alumni and students from *medical companies and institutions* considered the following workplace communication skills important: (1) reading and comprehending letters and notices, electronic data, and emails (M=4.78); (2) comprehending verbal work instructions from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.55); and (3) demonstrating the ability to listen effectively (M=4.50).

Respondents who do not belong with any of the above-mentioned types of companies, institutions, and organizations regarded the following communication skills to be important: (1) understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures (M=4.81); (2) comprehending verbal work instructions from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.31); and (3) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.27).

Communication Skill	IT		Business		Engineering		Education		Medicine		Others	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
1. Reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures	4.80	1	4.32	3	4.60	1	4.25	6	4.78	1	4.81	1
2. Completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes	4.43	4	4.28	4	4.45	5	4.65	3	4.43	6	4.03	7
3. Comprehending verbal work instructions from supervisors and co-workers	4.22	6	3.96	9	4.58	2	4.70	2	4.55	2	4.31	2
4. Demonstrating skills in the use of language, grammar, and punctuation	4.08	11	4.02	8	4.38	7	4.60	7	4.17	8	3.92	11
5. Organizing and presenting ideas effectively for both formal and spontaneous speeches	4.00	13	3.56	14	4.14	9	3.50	13	4.02	10	3.93	8
6. Demonstrating ability to listen effectively	4.38	5	4.50	2	4.55	3	4.40	5	4.50	3	4.27	3
7. Participating in meetings and using interviewing skills to gather information or feedback	3.90	14	3.76	11	3.60	13	3.90	11	3.87	11	3.67	13
8. Utilizing proper gestures and facial expressions when communicating orally	4.02	12	3.58	13	3.98	11	3.60	12	3.40	14	3.55	14
9. Understanding business, computing, medical or engineering lingo used in the workplace	4.14	9	3.60	12	4.00	10	4.24	9	4.12	9	3.87	9
10. Writing appropriate forms of business communication such as letter, memorandum, report, minutes of the meeting, plans, etc.	4.10	10	3.86	10	3.70	12	4.20	10	3.70	12	3.85	10
11. Conducting research by gathering information, interpreting data, and presenting the results	4.15	8	4.06	7	4.25	8	3.49	14	3.60	13	3.85	12
12. Making use of pictures, diagrams, tables charts, and other visual aids in reports	4.48	2	4.18	6	3.52	14	4.62	4	4.31	7	4.16	4
13. Entertaining queries and concerns of clients and customers regarding the products and services provided by the company	4.18	7	4.56	1	4.42	6	4.40	8	4.40	4	4.04	6
14. Speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately	4.43	3	4.23	5	4.50	4	4.80	1	4.37	5	4.10	5

Table 3. Workplace Communication Skills as Perceived--According to Type of Company/ Institution/ Organization by AMAIUB Alumni and Students who are Working or Having their Practicum

Table 4 shows the perceived workplace communication skills according to the sector of company/institution/organization where AMAIUB alumni and students are working or having their practicum. The communication skills which were regarded by those in *government institutions* to be significant are as follows: (1) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.88); (2) reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures (M=4.86); and (3) comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.70).

On the other hand, those from *private companies* regarded the following communication skills to be highly significant: (1) comprehending oral and written instructions

from supervisors and co-workers (M=4.86); (2) speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately (M=4.54); and (3) demonstrating ability to listen effectively (M=4.50).

Communication Skill	Government		Private	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
1. Reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures	4.86	2	4.28	5
2. Completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes	4.56	4	4.18	7
3. Comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers	4.70	3	4.86	1
4. Demonstrating skills in the use of language, grammar, and punctuation	4.20	7	4.38	4
5. Organizing and presenting ideas effectively for both formal and spontaneous speeches	4.28	6	3.84	11
6. Demonstrating ability to listen effectively	4.88	1	4.50	3
7. Participating in meetings and using interviewing skills to gather information or feedback	3.20	14	3.66	12
8. Utilizing proper gestures and facial expressions when communicating orally	3.35	13	3.48	14
9. Understanding business, computing, medical or engineering lingo used in the workplace	3.56	12	3.95	10
10. Writing appropriate forms of business communication such as letter, memorandum, report, minutes of the meeting, plans, etc.	3.82	9	4.08	8
11. Conducting research by gathering presenting the results	3.65	11	3.50	13
12. Making use of pictures, diagrams, tables, charts, and other visual aids in reports	4.00	8	4.02	9
13. Entertaining queries and concerns of clients and customers regarding the products and services provided by the company	4.48	5	4.22	6
14. Speaking English clearly, fluently, and accurately	3.70	10	4.52	2

Table 4. Workplace Communication Skills as Perceived--According to the Sector of Company/Institution/ Organization--by AMAIUB Alumni and Students who are Working or Having their Practicum

Table 5 shows that there is no significance difference between the perceived significant communication skills in the workplace when AMAIUB alumni and practicum or working students are grouped according to sex.

Category	N	Mean	df	F	Sig.
Male	94	4.14	58	5.149	.449
Female	124	4.06			

Table 5. Differences on the Significant Communication Skills in the Workplace According to Sex as Perceived by Alumni and Practicum or Working Students

Table 6 depicts that there is no significant difference on potent workplace communication skills as perceived by the AMAIUB alumni and practicum or working students, when classified according to company/institution/ organization type.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	18	4.09	60	15.15	.320
Within Groups	200	4.10			
Total	218				

Table 6. Differences on the Significant Communication Skills when AMAIUB Alumni, and Practicum or Working Students are Classified According to Company/Institution/ Organization Type

Table 7 depicts that there is a significant difference on the perceived significant communication skills in the workplace AMAIUB alumni, practicum or working students are classified according to the sector of their company/institution/ organization. This reveals that the alumni, practicum or working students in government and private companies/institutions/ organizations showed differences in the perceived significant communication skills in their respective workplaces.

Category	N	Mean	df	F	Sig.
Government	93	4.09	60	5.159	.04*
Private	125	4.10			

\*p< .05

Table7. Differences on the Significant Communication Skills when AMAIUB Alumni, Practicum or Working Students are Classified According to the Sector of their Company/Institution/ Organization

## Conclusion

The top significant workplace communication skills are as follows: demonstrating ability to listen effectively; comprehending oral and written instructions from supervisors and co-workers; speaking English clearly, fluently and accurately; reading and understanding work instructions and standard operating procedures; and completing pertinent office forms, report sheets, tender documentation, work plans and specifications, incident report forms and notes.

There are no significance differences between the perceived significant workplace communication skills of the alumni and practicum or working students when classified as to their sex and the type of their company/institution/organization.

There is a significant difference between the perceived significant workplace communication skills of the alumni and practicum or working students when classified as to company/institution/organization type.

Results of this research imply that English communication skills, which include the core skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, are used extensively in the IT, education, medicine, and engineering sectors, among others. The same skills play a significant role among the employees in the conduct of their day-to-day activities in their respective workplaces.

Ergo, the criteria to identify English courses for the various programmes at AMAIUB should be pegged on the target communicative skills needed in the workplace rather than the traditional and formal linguistic training.

Integration of all the potent communication skills in all the courses would help students have a grasp of the communicative needs in the real world of work. Situating English language courses within actual business, IT, and engineering contexts, and incorporating authentic workplace materials in such courses will make English communication skills learned more relevant to the students' respective fields of specialization.

Intensive research may be conducted on the required English language skills in a specific field of specialization.

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