



Original Article

# Bridging the Gap: Aligning an English for Business Communication Syllabus with Workplace Demands through Professional Insights

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**Abstract:** This study seeks to address discrepancies between English for business communication curricula and industry requirements by soliciting recommendations from industry professionals to: i) Identify the communication skills that should be emphasized in an English for business communication syllabus tailored to teach business English at a university in Vietnam; and ii) Determine how the syllabus content should be revised to meet the actual workplace communication needs. The findings indicate that industry professionals emphasize the importance of communicative competence, which involves not only the mastery of specific communication skills but also the demonstration of appropriateness and effectiveness. Although the selected syllabus topics were deemed relevant to workplace needs, the specific functions outlined under each chapter were identified as problematic. They tended to prioritize safer, less challenging forms of communication and lacked a logical progression. The findings provide valuable insights aimed at enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of English for business communication curricula.

*Keywords:* English for business communication, syllabus design, needs analysis, mismatch.

## 1. Introduction

The complexity and multimodality of communication within the business environment have evolved significantly, yet academic programs have not adequately adjusted to these developments [1]. Existing literature has underscored the necessity to enhance the alignment between English for

business communication curricula and the dynamic demands of the professional workplace [2-8]. Contemporary requirements for English in the workplace transcend basic linguistic competence, encompassing socio-cultural knowledge, communication skills, flexibility in language use, and the capacity to adapt to diverse settings [9]. Effective business communication is characterized not only by grammatical precision but also by an adeptness in navigating the socially, culturally, and contextually driven aspects of language use [10, 11]. Nevertheless, English for business

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communication curricula have been criticized for inadequately addressing these workplace communication needs [1, 6].

Vietnam has witnessed significant economic growth in the last three and a half decades [12], which attracts a substantial number of visitors and businesses to the country [13]. As a result, English has been seen as the gatekeeper for employment opportunities, further reinforcing the status of this language in Vietnam. Limited proficiency in English may constrain access to employment in specific sectors, including government services, hospitality, and airline industries [14]. Nevertheless, the English for business communication curricula in Vietnam have been found to be irrelevant to the communication needs in the workplace [8, 12]. Despite the calls for collaboration with business professionals, research into their recommendations for revising English for business communication remains limited. This study aims to explore business professionals' suggestions to revise an English for business communication syllabus to better prepare university graduates to transition from novices to integral participants in their workplace.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Communication Needs in the Workplace and Curriculum Design

The prerequisite for designing an English for business communication curriculum that effectively addresses the nature of workplace communication is to conduct a needs analysis involving relevant stakeholders. Needs analysis is defined as:

“The systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” [15].

Attempts to identify such needs to provide implications for the English for business communication curricula have been documented. Evans [16] conducted a large-

scale study on the written and spoken communication needs of Hong Kong professionals. The study shed light on the most frequent spoken and written genres in the Hong Kong workplace, which can inform the design of the English for business communication courses by highlighting the areas of communication that need to be prioritized. The author found that internal and external email messages were the most frequently used written genres in the workplace while the same can be said about formal meetings and conferences regarding spoken genres. In a more recent account, C. S. C. Chan [5] explores the long-term communication needs of professionals as they climb the corporate ladders. The professionals found non-technical genres such as minutes of meetings, emails, and socializing challenging to handle, resulting from the need to adhere to the industry norms and corporate culture, the associated legal implications, and the spontaneous nature of relational conversations. Meanwhile, they also reached a consensus that the skill of being non-committal or vague is critical in both spoken and written communication. This stems from the fact that adjusting the tones to be less definite can render the message in a more positive light and help professionals avoid repercussions.

Other studies focus on the skills and abilities required in the business environment. Mancho-Barés and Llorca [17] conducted a three-fold needs analysis where business representatives engaged in a focus-group interview. The representatives' views on the English-related training needs and the important communication skills were elicited. It was found that strict adherence to native-like English was not as prioritized as oral fluency. In addition, knowledge of technical vocabulary played a key role in the success of workplace communication. Oliveri and McCulla [18] analyzed the data from O\*NET, which is an open database of occupational information that contains descriptors of roughly one thousand jobs in the US. The authors examined the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed in five different job zones in the US whose educational

requirements vary from less than high school diploma to bachelor's degree plus. It was found that speaking and active listening skills were seen as important in all the job zones. Whereas Zone 1 and 2 required the skills of reading step-by-step instructions and taking customers' orders, Zone 4 and 5 demanded a more advanced skill set which includes reading memos, answering inquiries, outlining new directives, and interviewing job applicants.

## *2.2. The Existing Discrepancies between the English for Business Communication Curricula and Workplace Communication Needs*

Research in the field of English for business communication has pointed out the gaps between what the educational system has to offer and the expectations of the workplace. For example, M. Chan [6] conducted a study to identify the communication needs of Hong Kong professionals and provide implications for the design of English for business communication courses. The study indicates that the English for business communication courses in higher education were inadequate as they failed to include the relevant course content, overemphasized the theoretical aspects of language, and were unable to meet the workplace communication needs of the students. It was found that the courses' primary focus was academic theories without the inclusion of relational aspects of communication, such as small talk. Therefore, the subjects expressed the need to cover informal talks in the English for business communication curricula to assist them in socializing with native speakers of English. This resonates with the study of Mancho-Barés and Llorca [17] in which business experts regard communicative cooperation, small talk, and rapport as valuable in maintaining relationships with clients. Despite the disputes over whether casual conversation fits into professional genres, Flowerdew [19] argues that this genre set should not be excluded since it is important to lubricate the flow of other professional genres.

In the context of Vietnam, Le [8] analyzed the emails, reports, communication policies,

and phone calls to identify the types of knowledge required for workplace communication in two petroleum companies in Vietnam. It was found that professionals in the workplace were required to have textual knowledge, participant knowledge, social-action knowledge, global, institutional, and organizational knowledge to function well in their respective communities of practice. Nevertheless, analysis of the teaching materials of the course English for Petroleum Engineering and classroom observations indicated some mismatches between the kinds of knowledge being taught at school and those required in real-life situations. While the latter encompassed both technical and contextual knowledge, the former only covered the technical side of communication, which included grammar and disciplinary vocabulary. Furthermore, the course content was insufficient since it covered three out of eleven communicative functions found in the workplace. Nguyen et al., [12] collected data from semi-structured interviews with professionals and the corpus of authentic email exchanges and transcripts of phone calls conducted in an import/export company. Comparison between linguistic features in the teaching materials of an English for business communication course and the data showed mismatches between the language used in the real-life business context and classroom materials. Neither the lexical nor grammatical structures found in the coursebooks were used in the authentic business interactions. It was also found that the professionals placed the emphasis on the flexibility in the language used when communicating with people from diverse cultures and conciseness rather than grammatical accuracy. Meanwhile, the coursebooks failed to provide students with cultural understanding and exposure to authentic interactions.

Previous studies have shown that the English for business curricula in the academic world has generally ignored the relational side, contextual, and cultural aspects of workplace communication while prioritizing technical

knowledge and formal interactions [6, 8, 12]. Meanwhile, Oliveri and Tannenbaum [11] caution that focusing too much on technical skills might divert our attention from a more comprehensive approach to language learning, which includes teaching how to communicate effectively with audiences from a wide range of cultural and organizational backgrounds. This concern arises because business communication has gone beyond national borders and is influenced by the organizational, cultural, and social contexts in which it is practiced [20]. Therefore, it would be problematic to base the English for business communication curricula on technical knowledge without much consideration of the contextual side of language. Bhatia and Bremner [1] asserted that the English for business communication syllabuses should be informed by contextual considerations and constraints, the skills and abilities needed to satisfy the workplace requirements, the activities, tasks, and the genres frequently found in the communities of practice. Failure to integrate the required elements into the English for business communication curricula might result from the lack of interplay between research and pedagogical practices [5], the lack of collaborations between academics and professionals [1], and the overemphasis on language learning when designing the English for business communication curricula [21].

Overall, the previous studies have pointed out some mismatches between the current English for business communication curricula and the demands of the workplace. However, there has been a scarcity of research on collaboration between academics and professionals to revise the English for business communication syllabus in higher education. Such an inquiry can help teachers and course developers not only identify the discrepancies in their programs but also receive immediate feedback from professionals to align the syllabus with real-life workplace communication needs.

### 2.3. Scope of the Study

Curriculum designers need to identify the areas of knowledge, skills, functions, or tasks that the learners need to master to effectively blend into their respective communities of practice [22]. Only by establishing close relationships with the people that students aspire to become can we understand the knowledge and skills that result in communicative competence [23]. However, since revising an entire curriculum can be a lengthy and extensive process, the researcher chose to concentrate specifically on an English for Business Communication syllabus used for teaching business English at a university in Vietnam.

### 2.4. Research Aims and Questions

The present study seeks to identify the communication skills that should be prioritized in an English for business curriculum at a university in Vietnam and explore how the syllabus should be revised to align with workplace requirements. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- i) Which communication skills should the syllabus emphasize to meet the communication needs in the workplace?
- ii) How should the syllabus content be revised to address communication needs in the workplace?

## 3. Research Methods

The main source of data for this study was collected from semi-structured interviews with five business professionals. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study because it allows room for discovery as conversations with the interviewees unfold [24]. Respondent validation was utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

The study's informants comprised five business professionals with experience working in English-speaking environments, both domestically and internationally. Each informant had accumulated at least five years of professional experience and was holding managerial positions and leadership roles at

their respective companies at the time of the study. To maintain confidentiality, the informants' names have been anonymized with pseudonyms. Table 1 provides detailed information on the professionals' positions, areas of expertise, years of experience, and highest educational qualifications at the time of the study.

The syllabus under examination was specifically designed for teaching English for business communication to English-major students at a university in Vietnam, with a particular focus on spoken communication. The content was organized into seven thematic chapters, which included topics such as networking, exchanging information, telephoning, meetings, presenting, entertaining visitors, and conducting interviews. The stated objectives of the course were to enable students to: i) Use persuasive and professional language in speech; ii) Demonstrate upper-intermediate interpersonal communication, business etiquette and relationship building skills; iii) Communicate effectively across cultures and to a range of different business audiences (managers, clients, customers, colleagues); and iv) Embed ethical considerations in all communication modes. To help students achieve such objectives, they are first familiarized with workplace language

through the elicitation of useful structures via various listening tasks. This is followed by a range of in-class activities, including role-playing, group discussions, and presentations. Students' progress is assessed with a formative test and a summative test. The former is designed to evaluate their listening skills through gap-filling and multiple-choice tasks, while the latter involves an oral test in which students perform paired role-playing activities based on randomly assigned topics.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure clarity and conciseness. The interview data were subsequently transcribed and translated into English for inclusion as quotations in the qualitative findings section. The qualitative data were analyzed using the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke [25]. Thematic analysis is defined as a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and providing insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset [25]. It is important to note that the analysis was not strictly linear. Instead, the analysis process was iterative, requiring the researcher to revisit and revise codes to ensure their relevance to the identified themes.

Table 1. Informants' information

No	Pseudonyms	Fields of work	Position	Years of experience	Highest education
1	Subject 1	Real estate investment	Associate director	10	Master's degree
2	Subject 2	Education	Quality training manager	7	Master's degree
3	Subject 3	Immigration agency	Documentation manager	5	Bachelor's degree
4	Subject 4	Information Technology	R&D team leader	10	Bachelor's degree
5	Subject 5	Information Technology	Project manager	5	Bachelor's degree

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Communication Skills Required in the Vietnamese Workplace

When asked about the necessary communication skills for the workplace environment, the professionals were interested

in the way communication should be carried out rather than specifying the exact skills for communicating. The most frequent terms mentioned by them were fluent, accurate, and concise, all of which will be discussed in the following sections.

#### 4.1.1. Fluency and Accuracy

There appeared to be a shared view among participants that fluency should be the focus of the syllabus rather than accuracy. Subject 3 explained that in spoken communication, time constraints and the need for brevity require interlocutors to think and respond promptly. Meanwhile, inaccuracy in grammar and pronunciation can be tolerated if communication is not disrupted. Subject 1, 4, and 5 believed that people from different countries might bring different English varieties to the table and such varieties might not conform to the standardized version of English. Thus, strict adherence to linguistic rules might not be the priority in business communication as long as mutual understanding is ensured. Subject 1 stated that:

“In the international business setting, individuals who have studied English in various countries may not always use concise grammar or choose the correct words. Effective communication is not about strictly adhering to what you have learned, but rather about finding a way to harmonize with other speakers, even if their language usage is not always perfect”.

Furthermore, Subject 3 also explained that fluency in communication can be the key to building a positive professional image in the workplace context while accuracy might be negotiated.

“Fluency is the key. Speaking without hesitation allows you to present yourself as trustworthy and professional. People tend to favor speakers who are smooth and self-assured. As long as your message is fairly concise, it will be effective”.

However, Subject 1 believed that even though the language used in workplace communication might deviate from the standardized grammatical rules, people need to be accurate with their word choices, especially when it comes to using disciplinary phrases. This also resonates with Subject 4, who stated that:

“I don’t care about grammar that much. However, it is important that you use the

right words, otherwise misunderstanding might occur”.

The professionals agreed that a focus on proper grammar usage was not as important as maintaining fluency while communicating. However, in certain contexts, prioritizing precision in word choice and avoiding substitutions with synonyms is crucial.

#### 4.1.2. Conciseness

Due to the fast-paced nature of the workplace, the professionals consistently emphasized the importance of conciseness. All of them asserted that, since work must be completed on time to maintain workflow, communication should also be as concise as possible. Conciseness was defined as using simple words rather than jargon to simplify the message and save time. Subject 1 reported that: “In school, you are often taught to use jargon, but in the workplace, you are expected to choose simple and concise language.” In the same vein, Subject 5 pointed out that using technical vocabulary might impede the flow of communication, as messages may need to be handled by individuals without technical expertise.

#### 4.1.3. The Skills Required for Effective Communication

Regarding the communication skills that the students need to master, Subject 1 asserted that the skill set includes universal skills and discipline-specific skills. While the former refers to the general skills that would ensure competence in everyday tasks and are generalizable to different domains, the latter are associated with the skills required to handle more technical genres.

“If someone’s role involves communicating with external parties, they need strong communication, relationship-building, and persuasion skills. However, for those in a, say content marketing team, in addition to presentation skills, it’s crucial to be adept at delivering information and soliciting feedback. Generally, I believe the most important and challenging skill is the ability to adapt your

language when interacting with different interlocutors”.

However, since the syllabus in question deals with the language and skills for spoken workplace communication in general, only the universal skills applicable to most tasks were analyzed in this study. The responses related to generic skills were grouped into three categories: prerequisites for communication, communication style, and oral communication skills.

With regard to the prerequisite for communication, Subjects 1, 2, 4, and 5 emphasized that for successful conversations, interlocutors must, first and foremost, practice active listening skills. This involves fully engaging with the conversation, understanding the verbal messages, and being attentive to the subliminal messages conveyed through nonverbal cues. This stems from the fact that people might have hidden intentions when they communicate, and successful interpretation of such cues might allow the interlocutors to leave a good impression on others. Therefore, they suggested that, before teaching the students oral communication skills, the syllabus should start with the training of interpreting verbal as well as nonverbal messages to ensure a smoother flow of other spoken genres. This is reflected in the comments of Subject 1:

“To be proficient in communication skills, one must actively understand what the other interlocutors are saying. Specifically, it is also important to consider their body language and tone of voice”.

The informants also contended that stylistic adjustments were essential when they held conversations in the workplace, especially with the participation of people of various positions and roles. Being aware of each individual's characteristics and changing the approach we take when speaking accordingly were seen as the most challenging skill by Subject 1. According to his experience, students are usually familiar with communication theory but lack the actual understanding of how the hierarchical system shapes the style of

communication people adopt, let alone using such skills when communicating in a foreign language. Subject 1 asserted that:

“You need to be aware of your interlocutors' personalities; some may be strict and challenging to work with, while others may be more talkative, and some may prefer to be succinct. Therefore, you should adjust your speaking style to suit each specific situation”.

Subject 2 shared the same ideas as she stressed that contexts shape the style of communication, the nature of the messages, and the choice of words to maintain good relationships with both managers and co-workers.

“You should maintain a friendly demeanor with your managers but avoid treating them as friends. Be mindful of your language and keep conversations light-hearted yet professional. However, with co-workers, you can consider them friends, which allows for more casual and intimate discussions”.

The professionals contended that adaptability skills also encompass the ability to adjust the way people communicate when they engage in interactions with people from different countries. Subject 1's quote reflects the essence of this aspect:

“If people from different countries feel that your communication style aligns with their cultural customs and values, they will likely have a positive impression of you and be more inclined to work with you”.

In terms of oral communication skills, the professionals stated that since businesses rely on established connections among stakeholders, employees should possess the ability to create and maintain relationships with both internal and external parties. Such skills were associated with the ability to build a trustworthy image and show respect when conversing with others. The former was mentioned in direct connection with the ability to respond in a concise and timely manner, which can be illustrated by the quote of Subject 3: “If you respond promptly and concisely to customer inquiries, you can build strong relationships with them”.

Meanwhile, demonstrating respect entails expressing appreciation for other interlocutors throughout the course of the conversation. Subject 3 indicated that: “Whatever you say, you have to show that you appreciate others, and you care for the interactions. This approach helps in establishing rapport with those around you”.

Another aspect that captured the professionals' attention was how speakers crafted their messages to elaborate their responses and persuade others. Subject 4 underscored the need to add further explanation and clarify one's opinions, stating that “Saying yes or no to a question doesn't help. You need to be specific with your opinions. Maybe you should go into more detail or else your ideas might not be understood”.

Persuasion skills were typically linked to understanding the needs of other interlocutors, recognizing one's own strengths, and leveraging these strengths to surpass competitors. For example, Subject 2 defined persuasion skills as:

“It's not merely about completing your assigned tasks; you must also understand what you are selling, the actions you are persuading people to take, your advantages over competitors, and the solutions you offer to the client's problems”.

In addition, the ability to convey information was also highly appreciated by the managers. Subject 1's quote reflects this aspect:

“After interacting with external parties, it's crucial to relay the information and issues back to the company. You must ensure that all relevant departments understand the situation and problem. For instance, the IT department needs to be informed about how to address technical issues, while the marketing department should be aware of how to deliver information in accordance with the contract”.

Meanwhile, Subject 2 and 3 stated that they would like to see the ability to ask for clarification being highlighted in the syllabus as effective workplace communication involves receiving, transmitting, and responding to information. Subject 2 indicates that: “I believe

learners should be trained to ask questions to gather more information, especially when they lack clarity about something.” This was reinforced by Subject 3's quote “I expect fresh graduates to know how to ask for clarification when they encounter something unclear. They should be able to rephrase what the other person has said and confirm whether their understanding aligns with the speaker's intention”.

#### *4.2. Suggestions for Revising the Syllabus Content*

Regarding the suggestions for aligning the syllabus content with the communication needs in the workplace, the professionals' responses follow two strands of logic, which include the recommendations for the selection of the communication functions embedded in each chapter and the sequence of such functions.

##### *4.2.1. Suggestions for the Selection of Communicative Functions in the Syllabus*

The managers generally concurred with the selection of the main topics for the chapters and noted that these topics effectively represent the needs of business communication. However, according to the managers, the selection of the functions in each chapter surfaced as problematic. For example, in Chapter 1: Networking, there was a consensus that the chapter should begin with the function “Making a good impression” as this function is essential for ensuring a smooth flow in other communication genres. Subject 2 indicated that “Making a good impression happens before everything else and it determines your later communication with people. So, if you want to teach networking, you include making a good impression in chapter 1”.

Regarding Chapter 2, titled “Exchanging Information,” it was noted that the selected communication functions were considered “too safe” and did not adequately capture the challenging or potentially hostile aspects of workplace interactions. This concern was echoed by industry professionals, with Subject

1 highlighting the importance of addressing more confrontational scenarios: “There are times when you need to exchange with difficult people. You need to include things like ‘Dealing with difficult people or challenging situations’ in this syllabus”. This feedback underscores the necessity of incorporating strategies for managing difficult conversations and adversarial situations to better prepare learners for the complexities of real-world business communication.

The function of “Solving workplace problems” was also highlighted by professionals since encountering problems and tackling them was inevitable in the workplace. Subject 1 explained that “In Chapter 2, it would be advantageous to include a section on solving work-related problems. For instance, when an employee faces a work issue, they might seek advice from a senior colleague, who would then provide guidance on how to address and resolve the problem.” Moreover, Subject 3 highlighted the importance of equipping learners with the skills necessary for proactive problem-solving and effective communication to foster a more productive work environment:

“In some instances of exchanging information, it's more effective to offer suggestions first rather than repeatedly asking for information. This approach saves time for both parties and facilitates obtaining the desired outcome more efficiently”.

Subject 4, on the other hand, suggested incorporating the function “Engaging in small talks” with co-workers. He further explained that the information exchange might occur within a more nuanced context encompassing both formal and informal settings.

In Chapter 3, titled “Telephoning”, professionals highlighted the need to emphasize new forms of communication, such as online conference calls with multiple participants, rather than focusing solely on traditional telephone calls. Subject 2 stressed the importance of this shift, stating, “In today's

world, with the rise of online conference calls involving multiple participants, it is essential to update the section to reflect these modern communication practices”.

Such a paradigm shift was also reflected in the comments of Subjects 4 and 5, which centered on the increasingly obsolete role of telephone in today's workplace. They highlighted the proliferation of online conferencing platforms and the growing support of artificial intelligence (AI) in virtual communication. This feedback points to the necessity of adapting the curriculum to address contemporary communication technologies and practices, ensuring that learners are equipped with relevant skills for the current business environment.

Moving on to the next chapter concentrating on meetings, the significance of informal meetings as an integral part of workplace communication was highlighted by the professionals. Subject 2 recalled that informal meetings among the interns were common in his workplace: “There are times when I assign tasks for the interns in my company. They have to hold a small meeting among themselves and elect a team leader to guide the discussion”. Meanwhile, Subject 2 noted that: “Including a section on informal meetings is essential. We have casual meetings with colleagues or individuals from other departments all the time”.

When asked to provide suggestions for Chapter 5, which focuses on presentations, professionals expressed concern about the absence of the function “Handling the Q and A section”. Subject 2 explained that: “Sometimes, I need to present the company's services and products to a group of customers. It's important to anticipate the types of questions that might arise so I can provide persuasive answers”. Subject 1 emphasized that: “How you answer the questions might be more important than the presentation itself”.

Chapter 6: Entertaining visitors is the most controversial as the selection of the functions in this chapter did not make sense to the

professionals. Such functions are too limited since they might only revolve around interactions in the office, but entertaining visitors, according to Subject 1, should be seen in a broader context and “extended to things like arranging year-end parties, stakeholders’ parties, showing gratitude to customers, arranging birthday celebrations”. Meanwhile, Subject 3 regarded the function “giving and receiving gifts” as not suitable under the premise that different cultures have different outlook on giving gifts, so teaching the basic commands for this function without cultural considerations would do more harm than good.

Regarding the last chapter: Interviewing, what seemed to be the main concern for the professionals was that the chapter was designed with simplistic assumptions about interviews. Subject 3 suggested that:

“Job seekers often go through multiple stages before receiving a job offer, including individual interviews, group interviews, and sometimes activities where shortlisted candidates collaborate to solve problems presented by the employers. Therefore, I would like to see topics such as participating in individual interviews, participating in group interviews, and similar activities included in the syllabus”.

On the other hand, the initial contacts with the human resources department were the primary concern of Subject 4, given the importance of first impressions in shaping one’s chance of securing an interview. According to him, students need to be instructed on how to manage conversations with recruiters, whose decisions might determine whether they pass the screening stage. Subject 5, however, focused more on handling the interview results, as she believed that maintaining professionalism regardless of negative outcomes may enhance one’s chances of securing future employment.

Furthermore, Subject 1 indicated that interviews should not be limited to the purpose of recruiting employees. In reality, interviews in the workplace might also refer to the annual

performance review in which employers provide employees with feedback and suggestions for enhancing their future work performance:

“You should include performance reviews in this chapter. While interviews provide an overall impression of candidates, their actual performance in the company is evaluated through performance reviews, typically conducted three or four months later.”

#### 4.2.2. Suggestion for the Sequencing of the Communicative Functions

Aside from the selection of the functions in each chapter, how they are sequenced was also a matter of concern for the professionals. The managers expressed their confusion over the organization of the functions within chapters. They believed that by aligning the sequence of functions with the natural flow of business interactions, students could develop a more cohesive and practical understanding of the communication skills required in various professional scenarios, as Subject 2 commented:

“One thing I notice about this syllabus is that the functions of each chapter are not arranged in an appropriate order. There should be a system or some kind of ordering so students can understand what they are learning”.

Comments regarding the sequence of the communicative functions can be approached from three lines of reasoning. The initial perspective focuses on arranging the functions in chronological order, the second emphasizes categorizing the functions based on the individuals involved, and the final viewpoint centers on the arrangement of the functions according to the scale of the events.

The professionals suggested that the functions in Chapters 1, 4, and 7 should be rearranged to reflect their sequence in real-life situations. For example, Subject 3 recommended that Chapter 1: Networking should be reordered to start with “Preparing for the networking process”, followed by

“Engaging in the networking process”, and concluding with “Following up on the networking process”.

Similarly, in Chapter 4: Meeting, the professionals asserted that meetings should be divided into three consecutive phases: preparing for the meeting, conducting the meeting, and following up after the meeting. Subject 2’s comments capture the essence of this approach:

“Sometimes, you need to prepare the presentation, the contract, and the technical equipment as part of the pre-meeting process. During the meeting, it is crucial to clarify the agenda, including greetings, introductions, discussing the deal, and negotiating. The final step is the post-meeting process, where you should focus on synthesizing the information, delegating tasks, and following up with those responsible for the assigned tasks”.

Similarly, the professionals agreed that the various stages of the interview process should be arranged sequentially to help students gain a thorough understanding of the authentic interview procedure. According to Subject 3, these stages include “individual interviews, group interviews, and additional activities where candidates collaborate to solve a problem”.

While Subject 3 preferred the functions under Chapter 1: Networking to be arranged according to the order in which they occur, Subject 2, on the other hand, focused on the distinction between internal and external communication. For example, he recommended that the functions should be categorized under “Networking with internal stakeholders” and “Networking with external stakeholders”. This stems from the fact that the aims of internal and external communication can be quite different, as Subject 2 elaborated:

“In external communication, it is important to emphasize conciseness, making a positive impression, and brevity. In contrast, internal communication should focus on maintaining and nurturing long-term relationships”.

In Chapter 3: Telephoning, Subject 2 argued that starting with the function of “Cold

calling” was inappropriate, as it involves interacting with complete strangers. Instead, it would be more suitable to first familiarize students with making phone calls to individuals within their own company, and then progress to handling calls with external contacts, which require more experience and skills.

The same applies to the functions in Chapter 6: Entertaining visitors. The professionals believe that interacting with different groups of interlocutors requires distinct skills. Therefore, categorizing the functions into “Entertaining Company Insiders” and “Entertaining company outsiders” would help students understand “which functions are intended for bonding team members, and which are meant for connecting with outsiders”, as noted by Subject 2.

Regarding Chapter 5: Presentation, the professionals emphasized the need to reorganize the functions based on the scale of the event. They suggested that smaller and larger presentations have different structures and therefore require distinct skills and functions. For example, Subject 1 noted that “small presentations with a client or even the CEO might necessitate the function of “persuading”, while larger events with hundreds of attendees may require a “wow factor”, including functions like “making an impressive introduction”. Reorganizing the functions in this way would help students understand the appropriate skills and functions needed for events of varying scales.

## **5. Discussion**

The current study seeks to bridge the gaps between English communication courses in higher education and workplace practices. It incorporates the recommendations of professionals experienced in English communication in the workplace to revise a syllabus for an English communication course tailored for English-majored students.

### 5.1. From Communication Skills to Communication Competence

The managers prioritized fluency over accuracy in communication, provided it did not compromise mutual understanding among speakers. It was noted that workplace interactions frequently involve individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds who may not adhere strictly to native language norms. Therefore, effective communicators in a business environment are those who adapt, seek clarification, and employ various communication strategies to collaboratively establish shared understanding, rather than adhering rigidly to standardized English [26]. Thus, shifting the focus from accuracy to fluency might be essential for equipping students to navigate a multicultural context effectively. Furthermore, the professionals underscored the necessity of conciseness due to the fast-paced nature of the workplace, where efficiency is paramount [27]. The absence of emphasis on conciseness and fluency in the existing syllabus indicates a misalignment between the skills valued in the workplace and those prioritized in the business communication curriculum.

Regarding the skills that should be emphasized, students need to be equipped with the ability to actively comprehend not only spoken messages, but also subliminal messages conveyed through nonverbal cues. Training in these skills ensures that the intended message from the speaker is effectively received by the listener, potentially enhancing productivity and job effectiveness [28]. Skills such as adaptability, persuasion, relationship-building, and clarification were also deemed essential for effective communication. Notably, the term 'appropriate' was most frequently highlighted by professionals, who valued the ability to adjust messages and nonverbal communication to align with the personality of the interlocutors. The skills described by the professionals align with the concept of competence, which involves mastering relevant

skills and demonstrating both appropriateness and effectiveness [7, 29]. This suggests that professionals are seeking a broader sense of competence in graduates, rather than just isolated skills. In this context, appropriateness in the syllabus pertains to selecting the right techniques and strategies for communication, rather than merely adjusting verbal and nonverbal messages to different situations.

### 5.2. Mismatches between the Syllabus Content and the Demands of the World of Work

While the selection of chapters in the syllabus appears satisfactory, the communicative functions included present several issues. The syllabus appears to lack functions that address the adversarial nature of business interactions, the transition to more advanced modes of communication, and the prevalence of informal communication. Workplace communication has been characterized as stressful, face-threatening, or condescending [29, 30], yet the syllabus does not incorporate elements designed to prepare students for these challenging scenarios. This omission creates a gap, limiting students' ability to navigate the complex communication demands of the modern business environment.

Moreover, the syllabus focuses exclusively on telephone communication, overlooking essential digital communication tools and platforms such as teleconferencing, instant messaging, and AI-assisted communication systems, which have become integral to professional interactions [31]. Although the shift to hybrid modes of working has permeated the global workplace, Vuchkovski et al., [32] found that digital transformation presents several challenges at both individual and organizational levels, due to the lack of communication training in the virtual setting. In the same vein, as working alongside AI has become the new normal, Van Quaquebeke [33] calls for employee training in AI copiloting, rather than allowing these tools to take the steering wheel. The syllabus's narrow focus might restrict students' exposure to the diverse

communication methods necessary in today's digital workplace, potentially diminishing their readiness to engage effectively in these settings.

The significance of informal communication in the workplace has been well-documented. Workplace communication is not only transactional but also relational, aimed at establishing and maintaining relationships [34]. Previous studies have highlighted that English for business communication graduates find social interactions challenging due to inadequate training in colloquial language [6]. The lack of emphasis on relational communication in the syllabus is evident, as informal meetings among team members are not included. Additionally, Chapter 6: Entertaining Visitors, which focuses solely on relational aspects within the office setting, was deemed irrelevant by most professionals. They argued that relational communication occurs in various contexts, such as year-end parties or stakeholder events, and should be better represented in the syllabus.

### *5.3. The Absence of a Logical Order in the Communicative Functions*

In addition to concerns about the selection of communicative functions, the professionals also criticized the way these functions are ordered within the syllabus. They recommended a more structured approach, organizing the functions in a logical sequence that reflects real-life business processes. Such an arrangement would help students understand the progression of communicative events and how these functions interrelate within a broader business context. Moreover, categorizing functions according to the specific group of interlocutors and the scale of the events would enhance students' flexibility in adapting their linguistic styles to different contexts.

However, the current syllabus does not adequately address these concerns, resulting in a fragmented learning experience that may impede students' ability to fully comprehend the complexities of business communication. The lack of attention to the logical ordering and

categorization of functions could lead to confusion, making it challenging for students to discern the connections between different communicative events and to adjust their language use effectively based on the audience and context.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study investigates the skills and content that should be emphasized in a business communication syllabus, drawing on the insights of industry professionals. The findings suggest a shift in focus towards enhancing communicative competence, emphasizing fluency, conciseness, the mastery of essential skills, appropriateness, and overall effectiveness. This implies that business communication curricula in higher education should not only impart fundamental skills necessary for effective performance but also cultivate students' ability to adapt and apply these skills flexibly across diverse contexts and audiences.

The study also highlights that workplace language use is not confined to standardized forms of English. Professionals prioritize fluency and the collaborative construction of meaning over rigid accuracy, as fluency is often associated with a more favorable professional image. Moreover, concerns were raised regarding both the selection and sequencing of communicative functions in the syllabus. The current curriculum does not fully represent the dynamics of workplace communication and features a sequencing of functions that appear illogical. This misalignment may indicate a potential disconnect between academic programs and actual workplace demands. Integrating professional feedback into curriculum development may be pivotal in aligning business communication education with the evolving needs of the professional environment.

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