

Necessary English Competencies in Oral Communication for Business Administration Graduates to Work Effectively: A Workplace Reflection

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Abstract: The issue that Vietnamese business administration (BA) graduates' competences in oral communication in English are inadequate to meet the real workplace requirements has been increasingly urgent to be considered especially since Vietnam's accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This emphasizes the necessity of exploring necessary English competencies in oral communication that BA graduates need to work effectively in the demanding market. In the present research, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in a mixed methods study, in which various sources of participants including BA graduates from Foreign Trade University, Vietnam University of Commerce and National Economics University, and their employers at workplace involved.

Keywords: Oral communication in English, business administration, competences.

1. Introduction

In the world of globalization era, English has increasingly become the medium in every domain of communication, both in local and global contexts. Specifically, "over 80% of business today is conducted in English, whether it be between native speakers and a foreigner, or between foreigners who use English as their common language" [1: 4]. This tendency leads to the fact that teaching and learning English is crucial for communicative purposes to meet the demands of global economics and to cope with the growing local, national and international

demands for English skills. As a result, Vietnamese learners who major in business administration (BA) require effective language competencies in this area if they want to be successful in either the increasingly dynamic and demanding job market. However, the issue of discrepancies between university English language curriculum and English requirements at the workplace has resulted in a number of incompetent BA graduates. Therefore, the rationale for choosing to investigate this issue lies in the importance of exploring workplace requirements from perspectives of BA graduates and their employers. It is hoped that this study will be able to fill a few gaps and lead to further research in the area. The research

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questions that the present study seeks to answer are: *To what extent were BA graduates' EOC competences satisfactory in their workplace? What are necessary competences in oral communication in English for BA graduates to work effectively after graduation?*



To answer these research questions, the study focuses on exploring the satisfaction of employers and BA graduates on the graduates' performance in English oral communication (EOC) situations; and necessary competences that BA graduates need to meet workplace requirements. Survey questionnaires and follow-up interviews for more in-depth answers were conducted to investigate the participants' satisfaction with BA graduates' EOC competencies and the most necessary ones for them to work effectively. Before research methodology is described; the findings, discussion and conclusion are presented, the next sections briefly explain the concept of competency and EOC in business, which are the main focus of the study.

2. Competency

[2:159] define competencies as “a description of the essential skills, knowledge and attitude required for effective performance

of particular tasks and activities”. The latest approach to the competence theory regards competence as an ideal of education and an analytical category admitting that competence is “an individual combination of abilities and experience” [3]. Thus, the structure of competence is formed by experience that includes knowledge, skills and attitude, and abilities, which determine an individual's readiness for activity.

In terms of assessing language competencies, two well-known frameworks of language testing are used: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE). These two internationally recognized frameworks describe language ability in a scale that ranges from A1 for beginners to C2 for those who have mastered a language. The levels are described by a series of can-do statements. “Competencies” in this study will be described as “can do” statements.

3. English oral communication in business

Regarding English oral communication (EOC), [4] have done a systematic summary of core performance areas in published materials in business field. [4] note that the EOC is defined primarily in relation to core business performance areas such as taking part in meetings, telephoning, giving presentations, socializing and negotiating. Each of the core areas is classified in detail with its relevant competences. Specifically, the competences covered in socializing include greeting business partners when they pay visit to one's countries and office, developing a more personal conversation, and exchanging information about company products and services. The related competences in telephoning refer to handling a phone conversation appropriately, making and changing appointments based on a business schedule, making and confirming bookings, handling complaint calls. The key competences related to presentations are

various, for example, giving a clear and prepared presentation, accounting for own opinions by providing relevant explanations and comments, presenting visual aids to describe products or processes, and analyzing business trends in a presentation, taking a series of follow up questions with a degree of fluency and spontaneity. The specific competences in meeting category relates to developing a clear argument with subsidiary points and relevant examples in a business meeting, intervening appropriately with a range of expressions, following the discussion on matters related to one's field, and giving clear and detailed descriptions on subjects related to the field of interest. Finally, the competence sequence in negotiation area is developing ideas in mutual problem through alternative positions or approaches of negotiating, identifying points of agreement and disagreement to build common ground, addressing conflicts constructively to stay focused on the task, facilitating agreement to settle a negotiation by seeking a win-win solution through a give and take process that recognizes each party's core needs and rejecting an offer appropriately using alternative responses. This summary provided a systematic list of competences for the survey questionnaire.

4. Research methodology

The research design used in the present study is an embedded mixed-method study, in which the researcher combines the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data within a traditional quantitative or qualitative research design [5]. The embedded design fits the purpose of the study which is to add a qualitative strand within a quantitative design. Besides, the design can be used because the researcher does not have sufficient time or resources to commit to extensive quantitative and qualitative data collection because one data type is given less priority than the other [5]. In the present study, the researcher collected two

types of data concurrently; but prioritized quantitative data to examine the extent of the importance of EOC competences for BA graduates, and participants' satisfaction with BA graduates' performance in EOC performance areas; and collected qualitative data for in-depth answers to have a more complete understanding of the quantitative results.

In this part, participants and sampling, data collection instruments, data collection procedure and analysis procedure will be discussed in detail.

5. Participants and sampling

The participants were thirty-six employers and BA graduates from three top-ranking universities in BA major in Hanoi namely Foreign Trade University (FTU), Vietnam University of Commerce (VUC) and National Economics University (NEU). They were selected based on purposive sampling and required to satisfy a number of criteria. Selected BA graduates needed to have more than two years of working experience in three different fields including commerce, travel and international manufacturing in which they could have more chances of speaking English in Business situations on regular basis. Employers of BA graduates who were at executive and managerial level were required to be selected from the companies of the same fields to triangulate the data. They needed to have some experience employing BA entry-level personnel and have over ten years of working experience.

As a result of the sampling process, eighteen BA graduates and eighteen employers were selected for the study. Among eighteen graduates with two from each university (FTU, NEU and VUC), six were sales personnel, six were manager assistants and six were sales administrators in the field of commerce, travel, real estate and manufacturing. In terms of working experience, eight have two to three year experience, and ten had above three years.

All of these graduates used EOC frequently in communicating orally with their foreign clients, colleagues or managers. The selected employers worked in different kinds of organizations: Four employers came from limited companies, five from state-owned companies, four from companies of foreign capital and five from non-government organizations. Their organizations were also in the same field with the interviewed graduates including commerce, travel and manufacturing. All of them had BA graduates as employees for above one year. Those employers' organizations were located in three provinces and cities with big groups and the majority of industrial zones, namely Hanoi, Hai Duong, and Bac Ninh.

6. Data collection instruments

Data collection instruments used in the present study consist of survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the same group of participants. The survey questionnaire included two main parts. In the first part, participants were asked to rate the list of the EOC competencies [4] according to its necessity and their satisfaction with BA graduates' performance of these competences in workplace. According to the Likert-type scales, the following criteria were used to classify the subjects' opinions: For the importance of EOC competences: unnecessary, slightly unnecessary, unsure, slightly necessary, and necessary; For the satisfaction of BA graduates' EOC competences: dissatisfied, slightly dissatisfied, neutral, slightly satisfied, satisfied, and not applicable (NA). NA indicates that a BA graduate has never performed this competence before or an employer has never had BA graduates as his/her employees perform it. Next part was an open-ended section for suggestions on the competencies the subjects need. If there were other competencies used apart from those provided in the questionnaire, the subjects could suggest in this section.

Each semi-structured interview with guiding questions focused on eliciting participants in-depth questions to justify for their selection in the most necessary competences, the most and least satisfied competences, as well as suggestions on improvement of BA graduates' EOC competences and their difficulties in implementing those competences.

7. Data collection procedure

At first, document analysis was used to construct survey questionnaires and follow-up interviews with the participants. Both survey questionnaire and follow-up interview were conducted in Vietnamese and in a meeting with each participant so that interviewees can express themselves freely without language boundaries. Before each meeting, participants were sent the survey questionnaire and interview questions to have time to read those and prepare for more valid answers. In each meeting, they were first given the survey questionnaire required to tick and answer. In the follow-up interviews, the participants were asked to elicit for more explanations in the answers in questionnaires. The interviews were also audio-taped with the participants' permission for later analysis. During an interview, the researcher also took a note of the main ideas of the answers to keep fresh main ideas. In accordance with the suggestions of a number of researchers, probing questions which may exert additional cognitive load on the learners and thus possibly interfere with recall, such as "Why did you say that?" were totally avoided [6], [7]. Instead, questions such as "Could you explain a bit further?" or "Could you tell me a bit more about that?" were asked to encourage them to provide more information on the topic. Also, back-channeling such as "Um", "Go on", "I see", or "OK" was used in response to the learners' reports instead of concrete feedback as it was realized that the latter could affect the nature of the learners' reports or even mislead them.

8. Data analysis procedure

The questionnaire data of five point Likert-scale were computer-analyzed using percentage and mean while the in-depth answers were analyzed using categories of theme and coding. The transcripts were translated into English for the purpose of report. Thematic analysis and grouping of the answers from different interviewees to the same or similar questions were employed for the analysis of interviews. Answers from different interviewees to common questions or perspectives on central issues were categorized under themes. Then all the common ideas were coded. The analysis was done according to issues with quotes. Qualitative results were used to enhance understanding of quantitative strand. The

findings will be discussed in the following sections.

9. Findings

In this section, findings will be reported to answer the research questions:

Research question 1: To what extent were BA graduates' EOC competences satisfactory in their workplace?

The quantitative results from questionnaires and qualitative results from follow-up interviews showed that most of employers and BA graduates were slightly dissatisfied with BA graduates' EOC competences in workplace. Quantitative data are reported for competences in each performance area in the below table with percentage and mean.

Table 1. Satisfaction with BA graduates' performance in EOC competences

	Percentage						Mean
	Dissatisfied	Slightly dissatisfied	Neutral	Slightly satisfied	Satisfied	NA	
Meeting competences	13.89	38.89	13.89	8.33	5.56	19.44	2.41
Telephoning competences	8.33	41.67	25	8.33	5.56	11.11	2.56
Presentation competences	5.56	33.33	36.11	5.56	2.78	16.67	2.6
Socializing competences	16.67	19.44	50	13.89	0	0	2.61
Negotiating competences	22.22	36.11	19.44	5.56	0	16.67	2.1

As it can be seen from the table, a significant percentage of participants rated BA graduates' performance as "slightly dissatisfied", especially 41.67% in telephoning, 38.89% in meeting and 36.61% in negotiating competences. Also, a remarkably low percentage of the participants (approximately over 10%) reported to be "satisfied" and "slightly satisfied" in each performance area. In meeting, presentation and negotiating competences, a considerable percentage of participants (19.44%, 16.67% and 16.67% respectively) choose "NA" because BA

graduates did not have to implement these tasks for their job. The relatively low level of participants' satisfaction in general (with mean ranging from 2.1 to 2.61) was clarified later through in-depth answers in interviews. BA graduates' weakness in EOC competences were various, such as their lack of "language structures", "correct pronunciation", "abilities of listening to different accents such as English by Indian, Korean and Swedish", "tactfulness and strategies in general in socializing situation", "flexibility" in handling BE situations, and understanding of

“communication culture” in each situation at work. One employer gave very positive comments on his employees as BA graduates in undertaking EOC responsibilities. However, he also explained that those were the best ones his company selected from series of interviews in which many of other BA candidates failed to meet their requirements in oral communication competences in English. Most of BA graduates (12 out of 18) explained that the low level of their self-assessment of satisfaction resulted from the fact that they did not have an EOC course specifically for BA majors. In fact, they had only general English communication courses at university in which they studied “everyday situations” namely introducing each other, asking about the time and talking about food within 2 periods (VUC) to 3 periods (FTU and NEU) per week during 1.5 years (NEU), 3 years (VUC) or 3.5 years (FTU); and only in FTU, three ESP courses with focus on reading and translating ESP materials, writing business

emails and contracts were provided in semester 5, 6 and 7. Up to the date of the research, no course with focus on EOC has been provided for BA undergraduates in those universities.

Research question 2: What are necessary competences in oral communication in English for BA undergraduates to work effectively after graduation?

The results of necessary EOC competences for BA graduates to work effectively in workplace are separated into two parts. The first part presents the common competences found in published business English speaking materials so it requires the quantitative data analysis. The second section shows additional competences recommended by the subjects.

The necessity of all five main business performance areas namely meeting, presentation, telephoning, socializing and negotiating are presented in a table below.

Table 2. Importance of EOC competences

	Percentage					Mean
	Unnecessary	Slightly unnecessary	Unsure	Slightly Necessary	Necessary	
Meeting competences	0	33.33	47.22	13.89	5.56	2.92
Telephoning competences	0	2.78	22.22	52.78	22.22	3.94
Presentation competences	0	38.89	13.89	38.89	8.33	3.17
Socializing competences	0	0	0	66.67	33.33	4.33
Negotiating competences	0	27.78	47.22	16.67	8.33	3.06

As clearly seen from the table, no competence was rated as “unnecessary” and socializing competences were regarded to be enormously important because 100% of the participants chose “slightly necessary” and “necessary” for this performance area. Next was telephoning in English with more than half of participants (52.78%) rating “slightly necessary”. Presentation competences were also considered to be relatively important because participants who rated “slightly necessary” and “necessary” outnumbered those who rated

“slightly unnecessary” with the difference of 8.33%. In contrast, competences which were rated as “slightly unnecessary” with considerably high percentage of participants were meeting and negotiating (33.33% and 38.89% respectively).

Later, in follow-up interviews, the participants gave insightful explanations for their choice. 5 out of 36 participants asserted that socializing competences in English were “very important” because BA graduates needed them to “work effectively at any positions in

any fields in business". An employer commented that "in any business communication situations in English, socializing competences can be used to build up relationship with foreign business partners or strengthen teamwork with other colleagues from other countries so these competences can be considered to be indispensable for workplace". Regarding the high rate for the importance of telephoning, 9 out of 36 participants (4 graduates and 5 employers) explained that many of their foreign clients could not come to Vietnam so their employees often communicate with them "on the phone or through emails". A graduate added that "talking on the phone is the fastest way to communicate with others because we are too busy to meet each other face-to-face every time we need to discuss something". In terms of meeting and negotiating competences, most of employers (12 out of 18) explained that these competences were specifically for "employees at higher level such as managers and sales administrators", which were only for a few BA graduates with remarkable qualifications and adequate years of experience, not new graduates.

The subjects also recommended some additional EOC competences that were necessary for BA graduates' work. Those competences were summarized in percentage. Competence "can express opinions with employers clearly" was recommended by the highest number of the subjects (19.44%). Subsequently, "can persuade listeners well", "can deal with complaints effectively", and "can discuss to make a decision" were recommended by 11.11%, 8.33% and 5.56% of the subjects respectively. Finally, "can compromise appropriately", and "can give constructive feedback to co-workers" shared the same number of subjects recommending (2.78%). In sum, all of these competences were recommended with quite low percentages of the subjects so they were not included in the most necessary competences.

10. Discussion

The researcher comes across two practical concerns. The first discussion is about a mismatch between current curriculum and demand; the second discussion is about the issue of making connection. The authors also propose some suggestions for each problem.

10.1. Mismatch between university preparation and workplace requirements

Through survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, the importance of EOC competences for BA graduates and the satisfaction towards BA graduates' performance in these competences were reported with frequency and in-depth answers. According to the results, it seemed that all the listed competences were considerably necessary for BA graduates to work effectively for real workplace while the satisfaction towards BA graduates' performance was relatively low. As indicated from the findings of the interviews, only general integrated English courses (in FTU, NEU, and VUC) and ESP courses with focus on reading and writing (only in FTU) were provided for BA majors, which means none of their English courses in the universities had a focus on EOC. The poor investment in EOC is likely to influence BA undergraduates' awareness of a more thorough preparation in EOC for the future workplace. Moreover, traditional method, which focuses on linguistic phenomena rather than on comprehension and communication, are still popular, little attention paid to speaking. This is likely to happen not only at a single school in Vietnam, but across the whole spectrum [8]. These factors hinder the development of communicative competences, thus possibly resulting in failure in achieving communicative efficiency of English courses, which can be seen clearly in the low level of satisfaction of both BA graduates and employers in the findings of the first research questions. Consequently, although competences of oral communication in English were important for BA graduates to work

effectively as indicated in the findings of the second research questions; their performance was hardly satisfied enough to meet the increasing demands of international organizations. Hence, graduates face a lot of difficulties with EOC in general such as bad pronunciation, weak listening skills, serious lack of language structures and slow reaction in EOC situations. This calls for a revision of the curriculum.

It can be more effective and practical if all English courses offered in universities have a focus relevant and supplemental to each profession related to the students' program major. Many recent studies in Asia [9-11] show positive evidence to support this notion. This means that general English courses should be completed at the high school level, so undergraduates can begin their English courses with a more specific focus on preparation for their future pursuit. As the undergraduates are required to take up to four English courses, this means that time is too limited to waste on something irrelevant. According to the interview findings, the graduates pointed to lack of practice as the most problematic factor affecting their English competencies. Therefore, starting ESP courses early, at the beginning of the university level, will help them practice the competencies needed. Furthermore, it is in line with many scholars' opinions [12-15] that ESP courses based on the needed competencies will help increase students' motivation in learning as the courses aim at real future needs.

10.2. Issue of making links

From the findings of the semi-structured interviews, it can be seen that employers are those who can probably know well the strengths and weakness of their employees who graduate from universities in meeting the requirements of real workplace. However, it is common practice that ESP teachers are likely to be the only ones to be in charge of designing and implementing ESP courses. Without support from and cooperation with the business sector

(the working BA professionals), it is hardly possible for ESP teachers to succeed in carrying out the tasks by themselves. Issues of time and experts' cooperation have been discussed in the ESP community because these factors highly affect the success and failure of a course. For example, [16] discusses the impact of employer's collaboration on the success of a design of a workplace English course in a printing company and comments that collaborative efforts between instructors and employers in a workplace course are necessary in all steps of course development, especially to ensure relevance and accuracy of course content and materials.

Making connection among different universities and stakeholders can create partnership, which is mentioned by [17] as the concept of "borderless higher education", a movement in higher education geared toward greater responsiveness to customer needs and the needs of business. Hence, establishing partnerships, links, and alliances are emphasized in borderless education among universities and colleges. This concept can also be applied to develop English language education. At institutional levels, universities might consider establishing a strong research community to help and support one another in doing research and creating courses. Between academic and job market sectors, universities need to seek for a partnership with the professionals and the corporate sector.

11. Conclusion

This article has provided information on the competencies needed for oral communication in English among BA graduates. The findings reveal that socializing, telephoning and presenting in English were the most important competencies for BA graduates to work effectively in real workplace. The findings also raise several significant issues concerning satisfaction of their EOC performance in the workplace regarding the preparation of current curriculum. The major recommendations for

course design emerging from the investigation are that all English course need to be ESP and it is quite essential to build a bridge between the academic world and the business world to deliver education to serve real needs. Nevertheless, there is room for further research. Ethnographic and discourse analyses of the English language used in the BA workplace would be innovative. Besides, more investigation could be done on the English competencies needed for other professions such as journalism, advertising, and marketing to help expand ESP to cover as many specialist subject areas and professions as possible.

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Các năng lực tiếng Anh cần thiết trong giao tiếp nói mà sinh viên tốt nghiệp Quản trị kinh doanh cần để làm việc hiệu quả: Sự phản ánh từ thực tế nơi làm việc

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Tóm tắt: Sự thiếu hụt về năng lực tiếng Anh trong giao tiếp nói của sinh viên tốt nghiệp ngành Quản trị kinh doanh của Việt Nam trong việc đáp ứng nhu cầu thực tế ở nơi làm việc cần phải được quan tâm một cách cấp bách, đặc biệt là sau khi Việt Nam tham gia vào tổ chức Thương mại Thế giới (WTO) và Hiệp định Đối tác Thương mại xuyên Thái Bình Dương (TPP). Điều này nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc tìm ra các năng lực tiếng Anh cần thiết trong giao tiếp nói mà những sinh viên tốt nghiệp ngành này cần phải có để có thể làm việc một cách hiệu quả trong một thị trường lao động đòi hỏi cao. Trong bài nghiên cứu này, cả dữ liệu định tính và định lượng đều được thu thập với sự tham gia của sinh viên tốt nghiệp từ Đại học Ngoại thương, Đại học Thương mại, Đại học Kinh tế Quốc dân, và các nhà tuyển dụng của họ.

Từ khóa: Giao tiếp nói trong tiếng Anh, năng lực, Quản trị kinh doanh.