

DEVELOPING PRODUCTIVE TRANSFERABLE COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG ESP LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: *The demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is expanding with the continuing increase of international communication in various fields, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. ESP students need to be trained well to develop transferable oral and written communication skills in English. A proposed unit is designed by the researcher to develop transferable communication skills of a group of ESP learners at King Marriott Higher Institute for Computer Science, Alex., Egypt. Participants of the study sat for a pre-post oral/written communication skills test. Independent samples t-test proved that treatment was effective. The researcher comes to the conclusion that the training on transferable communication skills is ideal since it permits ESP learners to fundamentally enhance their oral and written communication skills as well as apply the content knowledge in the field of their professional practices.*

KEYWORDS: ESP, transferable skills, oral communication, written communication

INTRODUCTION

The office of career services at the University of Texas (2016) defines transferable skills as "areas of development that will transfer from one environment to another, such as home, school, work, or co-curricular activities". The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Job Outlook Survey (2016) orders the top transferable skills employers seek as follows: (1) leadership, (2) ability to work in a team, (3) written communication skills, (4) problem solving skills and (5) verbal communication skills. Productive transferable skills are operationally defined in this study as a set of oral and written non-job specific skills which ESP learners acquire and practice in different work environments.

Productive communication skills are as important as technical qualifications for ESP learners to get a brighter job. According to Crosling and Ward (2002), oral communication predominates at all levels of workplace activity. Diamond (1997) made a survey about how academic curricula should be reformed. Diamond reported that more than 1,000 representatives identified communication at the top of a list of basic competencies for every student graduating from US schools. Akpınar (2009) states that as a result of the urgent significance of communication in the information society the Higher Education Council of Turkey has included a one term course named as "Effective Communication Skills" to the curriculum since 2006.

Gogoi (2014) mentions that of every hundred interviews, only five are qualified; this is not because they lack technical skills but they lack communication skills. The results of the reviews of national policies for higher education in Egypt issued by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development

(2010), revealed that 50% of private sector organizations that were interviewed for the report indicated that there is a gap between the education system outcomes and the job market needs.

Productive transferable communication skills define ESP graduate's existence in the competitive world. Thus, it is expected from ESP graduates to have effective communication skills. ESP graduates need to maintain writing application letters and resumes, besides presenting themselves and communicating effectively during interviews. The way ESP graduates present themselves verbally and non-verbally gives them a sense of adequacy and certainty.

Background of the problem

Transferable skills are ones that aren't specific to a particular job. These skills can be applied in other situations in professional and personal life. Oral and written communication skills are of the most important transferable skills a person uses in work and life. ESP courses remained confined to acquiring some specialized vocabulary and knowledge with low interest of productive oral and written skills.

The present study addressed a research gap by giving attention to transferable communication skills. Ali (2014) mentions that in order to increase Egyptian learners' motivation, there is a need for ESP courses that adhere everyday activities of learners' future careers. Javid (2015) adds that ESP teaching should not be restricted to instructional setting, but other modes are needed such as self-access study, project work and cooperative learning. Highlighting some shortcomings of the English language instruction provided to Egyptian tourism and hospitality university students, Abdel Ghany and Abdel Latif's study (2012) suggests reshaping ESP instruction in a way that could optimally help learners to be well-prepared for meeting their future workplace requirements.

Out of his observations, the researcher realized that students at King Marriott Higher Institute for Computer were unable to communicate orally or in a written form. Thus, the researcher conducted a pilot study. Before starting the treatment, the researcher administered the productive communication skills test (appendix I) to a sample of 15 students. The mean scores was 21.7, indicating the low level of students in written and oral communication skills.

The problem of the study

Based on the literature, the researcher's observations and the results of the pilot study, the present study sought to find an answer to the following main question: How far can a proposed unit develop undergraduate ESP learners' productive transferable communication skills?

Questions of the study

The following questions were investigated throughout the study:

- What is the effectiveness of the proposed unit in developing written communication skills among ESP learners?
- What is the effectiveness of the proposed unit in developing oral communication skills among ESP learners?

Purposes of the study

The present study aimed at:

1. Proposing a unit for developing productive communication skills among ESP learners.

2. Designing a suitable assessment tool for productive communication skills in ESP courses.
3. Measuring the effectiveness of the proposed unit in enhancing productive communication skills among ESP learners.

Rationale of the study

Integrating transferable skills in curricula is a recent trend and request in education in general and in ESP courses in particular. ESP courses need samples of such integration. Thus, the present study is conducted for the following reasons:

- To adhere the recent trends in education which concentrate on developing transferable labor market skills.
- To face the problem of poor communication skills (oral and written) among graduates.
- To present an ESP model for designing, teaching and assessing productive transferable skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies all over the world emphasize the importance of developing oral communication skills as a priority for ESP learners since they are always in teamwork and collaboration with other English-speaking customers at their workplace. Frihat (2012) suggests that students of business college should be trained in this field through well designed programs and oral communication exercises. In his study, Frihat denounces that business graduate employees require more experience in the field of oral communication skills. Without adequate experience in this field, as Frihat adds, they will face many barriers in the working environment.

Kalantzis and Cope (2000) recommended special language programs to develop trainees interpersonal and group skills, their ability to defend oral and written reports their ability to write clear and correct emails regarding grammar, form and style of writing. As well, Warschauer (2001) assured the importance of email communication as it provides trainees with the opportunity to use the target language in real situations which in turns lead to improve cultural awareness, increase participation, fluency and language proficiency.

For developing communication skills, Jain (2013) identified the following communication framework:

Identify Audience - Define the characteristics of the target audience

Select Topic - Define the topic, purpose, and scope of the communication,

Identify objective and criteria- Identify suitable objectives to measure the outcomes and the effect of the communication,

Gather information - find sources and gather information for the communication,

Select medium - Decide what one will use to deliver the communication,

Develop structure of message - Create a message and determine how it will be best communicated,

Test and Revise - Practice, test, and revise communication, and

Deliver communication – start the process of communication.

The Practice also has a vital importance in developing communication skills among ESP learners. Thus, the results of Subramaniam and Harun's study (2013) suggested that trainees in the field of industrial training need more practice on public speaking. Moreover, Kovalyova, Soboleva and Kerimkulov (2016) concluded that project learning represents an ideal method in teaching engineering students as it enhances their oral and written skills significantly. As well,

Low, Chong and Ellis (2014) emphasized that the Singaporean student-teachers need additional language communication skills training as a result of their IELTS test scores.

Nevertheless, measuring ESP learners' communication skills is not an easy task. In his study, Nguyen (2012) analyzed the content of five tests that represents six grade students in five schools of various districts in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Nguyen aimed to find out if the tests help in measuring the students' real communicative competence. The analysis demonstrated the difficulty of measuring the students' real communicative competence and the possibility of measuring their language focus. Additionally, the constraints encountered by instructors while conducting communicative tests were highlighted by Gopal and Bin Embi (2014) in Malaysian secondary school.

Locally, ESP has attracted a lot of researchers in Egypt for conducting studies. Shawki (2005) proposed an ESP program to meet Hotel secondary school students' linguistic and communicative needs. The program focused on developing basic communication skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening) in addition to linguistic skills (grammatical structures, expressions, abbreviations, terminology, vocabulary and translation). Although it is difficult to develop all these skills in a limited period of treatment, the results of Shawki's study revealed that students could attain distinguished improvements in their communicative and linguistic skills. Ahmed (2012) proposed an ESP program to enhance students' writing and reading skills at the Faculty of Agriculture, Fayoum University. The results of Ahmad's study indicated the importance of designing directed programs to develop ESP students' reading and writing skills.

Mohamad (2007) investigated the effect of teacher-student conferences on ESP students' reading and writing performance. Results of Mohamad's study emphasized the importance of teacher-student conferences on reading performance, though it had a limited effect on their writing performance. For history department students, Ebedy (2008) designed ESP course in faculties of education. Results of Ebedy study revealed the students' need for reading English topics written in their field of specialization to develop language arts related to universal historical issues.

The main aim of the present study is to adhere recent trends in education which concentrate on transferable labor market skills. The present study proposed four sessions transferable skills unit for developing oral and written skills. Both oral and written skills were integrated together in each session following active learning principles, i.e. all activities engage students' active participations in various oral and written tasks.

METHOD

Participants and location

The study was accomplished at King Marriott Higher Institute for Computer Science, Alexandria, Egypt during the second semester of the academic year 2015-2016. 50 students aged between 17 to 18 years old participated in the study. The students were randomly divided into a control group (16 males and 9 females) and an experimental group (14 males and 11 females). The participants studied English language for not less than eight years. The participants joined the institute to study computer and administration sciences. Participants study ESP (English for Specific Purposes) for four hours per week.

To check the entry level of the participants, they sat for the productive communication skills test before the treatment. Mean scores of the control and the control group students were 21.32 and 21.56, "t" value was (0.118) and significant at 0.907, and "df" equaled 48 which means that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups in pre-testing. This indicates that both groups had the same entry level.

Instrument

Productive Communication Skills Test

The researcher designed the productive communication skills test to assess two productive skills; oral and written. The test was composed of two parts; the first evaluated oral proficiency. The test paper included two different interview situations. Each two students performed one of these interviews. Students were requested to conduct the interview as directed, then they shifted the roles, i.e. the interviewer became a candidate and the candidate became an interviewer (appendix I). Oral proficiency was evaluated according to the scoring rubric (appendix II). The second part of the test assessed writing proficiency. Students were asked to write an application letter for a job advertisement. Students' writings were evaluated according to the grading writing rubric (appendix III).

Test Reliability and Validity

Test Reliability

The productive communication skills test was examined for reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha (α) which was used to determine the internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha was 0.8 which indicates a high level of internal consistency.

- Inter-rater reliability

The researcher administered the test to a sample of 15 ESP learners (excluded from participants of the study) before starting the treatment. The researcher and another EFL PhD holder (Dr. Nagat Ali Radwan, King Mariott Higher Institutes) scored the tests using oral and writing rubrics. The scores of both raters were fed into the SPSS program for calculating inter-rater reliability. Results showed that the mean scores of the first and the second rater are very close; 22.06 and 21.73 with standard deviations are 7.37 and 7.39. Intraclass Correlation Coefficient is presented in table (1).

Table 1

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation ^b	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.974 ^a	.925	.991	76.586	14	14	.001
Average Measures	.987 ^c	.961	.996	76.586	14	14	.001

The single measures intraclass correlation is 0.974 and the average measures intraclass correlation is 0.987 and "F" value is significant at 0.001 which means that there is a high level of inter-rater reliability.

Test Validity

Face validity method was used to ensure the validity of the productive communication skills test. The test was submitted to a panel of EFL experts and was modified according to their comments.

Productive Communication Skills Unit

English course for first year students at King Marriott Higher Institute for Computer Science, Alexandria, Egypt main objectives are to develop oral and written communication skills. The regular course there (English first year) accomplishes these objectives through varied readings and examples of business letters. The same objectives are presented in the proposed unit in a new form regarding content, tasks and evaluation methods. The main objectives of the proposed unit are to develop ESP learners' productive communication skills, i.e. the skills that are needed in different labor market situations. Thus, the researcher concentrated on writing application letters, resumes, attending and engaging in interviews. The unit includes five sessions. The duration of each session is four hours. The first session is writing an application letter. Session two presents application letter expressions and suitability of style. Session three is about writing resumes. Session four deals with job interviews. Session five focuses on attending interviews (table 2).

Table 2

Transferable skills unit objectives

Content Area: ESP Course Name: Transferable skills unit Grade level: University/first year Duration: 20 hours (4 hours per session)	
Objectives	
Session one Writing an Application Letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write notes and talk about general rules for writing application letters - Specify the layout of the application letter - Engage in short talks about job advertisements - Write down how to refer back to an advertisement
Session two Application Letter expressions and Suitability of Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify the different paragraphs in an application letter - Write down examples for each paragraph - Correcting an application letter regarding style and expressions
Session three Writing Resumes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define a resume and its writing rules - Identify the template of a resume - Write down a comprehensive resume
Session four Job Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specify and mention expressions for interviews - Note down some advice for interviews - Mention different types of interview - Discuss appearance rules in interviews - Establish rapport with interviewing member/s
Session Five Attending interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare for the interview - Practice interview questions/answers - Talking about one's strengths/weaknesses - Carry out different interviews

Procedure of data collection

The present study followed the experimental design employing two groups. One group was the control group which received instruction through the traditional course (English First Year). The second group was the experimental group that received instruction through the proposed productive communication skills unit. A pre- post productive communication skills test was administered to both groups before and after the treatment. Data from the pre / post application of the productive communication skills test were fed into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 in order to verify the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Data analysis & Hypotheses

Independent samples t-test and paired samples t-test were used to test the study hypotheses:

- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students and that of the control group in the post application the productive written communication skills test in favor of the experimental group students.
- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students and that of the control group in the post application the productive oral communication skills test in favor of the experimental group students.
- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students in the pre-post application of the productive communication skills test in favor of the post application.

Results of the study

4.1. Hypothesis one

- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students and that of the control group in the post application the productive written communication skills test in favor of the experimental group students.

Independent samples t-test was used to verify the validity of this hypothesis. Table (3) shows the significance of difference between the mean scores of the control and the experimental group in written communication post-testing.

Table 3

Significance of difference between the mean scores of the experimental and the control group in written communication post- testing

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test		df	t	Sig.
Control	13.16	4.048	F	Sig.	48	2.506	.016
Experimental	16.28	4.73	.225	.638			

The data presented in table (3) reveals that Levene's Test "F" (equality of variances) equals 0.225 which is significant at 0.638, "t" value is (2.506) and significant at 0.016, and "df" equals 48 which means that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental group students in written communication post-testing.

Hypothesis two

- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students and that of the control group in the post application the productive oral communication skills test in favor of the experimental group students.

Independent samples t-test was used to verify the validity of this hypothesis. Table (4) shows the significance of difference between the mean scores of the control and the experimental group in post-testing.

Table 4

Significance of difference between the mean scores of the experimental and the control group in oral communication post- testing

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test		df	t	Sig.
Control	11.4	3.58	F	Sig.	46.33	2.73	.009
Experimental	14.48	4.34	1.74	.193			

The data presented in table (4) reveal that Levene's Test "F" (Equality of Variances) equals 1.74 which is significant at 0.193, "t" value is (2.73) and significant at 0.009, and "df" equals 46.3 which means that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental group in oral communication post-testing.

Hypothesis three

- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students in the pre-post application of the productive communication skills test in favor of the post application.

Paired-samples t-test was used to verify the validity of this hypothesis. Table (5) shows the significance of difference between the mean scores of the sample's pre-post outlining testing.

Table 5

Significance of difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students' pre-post testing

Testing	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig.
Pre-testing	21.56	7.35	24	9.33	0.001
Post-testing	17.28	7.87			

Close inspection of the data presented in table (5) reveals that "t" value is (9.33) and significant at 0.001, and "df" equals 24 which means that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental subjects in pre-post testing in favor of post testing.

DISCUSSION

The present study proposed a transferable communication skills unit for developing both oral and written productive skills among ESP learners. Implementing group interview technique, the participants' oral proficiency was assessed regarding vocabulary, grammar and syntax, comprehension, creativity and fluency. Participants were asked to write a job application letter for assessing their writing ability. To evaluate the writings of the participants a writing rubric was developed by the researcher. The writing rubric assessed syntax, word choice/use, writing mechanics and coherence.

The results of the empirical study lead to conclude that training ESP learners on transferable communication skills had a positive effect on the development of ESP learners' oral and writing proficiency. The mean scores of the experimental group students in the post oral and writing test are 16.28 and 14.48 while the mean scores of the control group students are 13.16 and 11.4 as shown on figure 1.

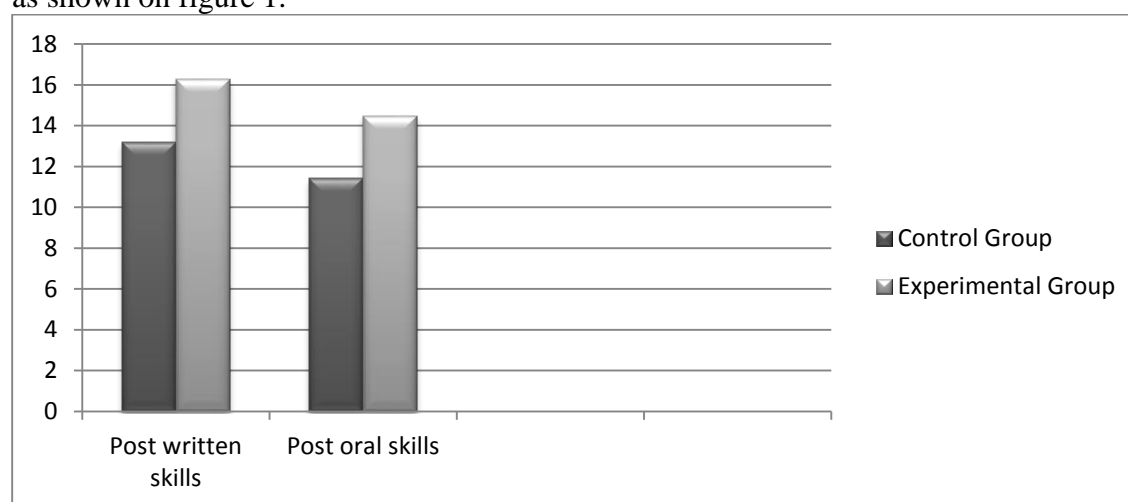


Figure 1 post written and oral skills mean scores

Previous results are supported by Kalantz and Cope (2000) who recommended the development of interpersonal skills and Warchaue's study (2001) which recommended e-mail writing communication. Also Arslan (2013) mentions that interactive communication course activities significantly improved his sample in basic elements of spoken communication. Due to mastering a variety of communication models, e.g. writing application letters, resumes and engaging in interviews, the participants' aspects of speaking and writing were largely improved, enabling them to perform oral and written communication effectively.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Depending on the results of the treatment the following implications are presented. First, communicative activities should be authentic and interesting to facilitate better communication, where among other issues, students learn to write, to say, to ask questions and interact in situations related to daily labor market activities. Second, oral and written tests have to prevail ESP courses. Third, varied activities should be handled to teach oral and written communication skills together in meaningful transferable contexts.

CONCLUSION

In a response to a recent call in education for training and developing transferable skills (NACE, 2016), the present study was conducted. The study proposed a transferable communication skills unit for a sample of ESP students from King Marriott Higher Institute for Computer Science, Alexandria, Egypt. The unit concentrated on oral and written transferable skills. Thus, the researcher concentrated on the skills of writing application letters, resumes and engaging in interviews. Results proved that the treatment was effective in developing ESP learners' transferable communication skills. The study concluded that training on transferable communication skills is essential for contacting labor market and of a high interest from ESP learners.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Productive Communication Skills Test*

Part One Interview (25 pts)

Directions

This test paper includes two different interview situations. Each two students perform *one* of these interviews. Students are requested to conduct the interview as directed, then they shift the roles, i.e. the interviewer becomes a candidate and the candidate becomes an interviewer. The main points to be considered in the interview situations are:

- introducing oneself
- evaluating the offered position
- one's weaknesses and strengths
- One's skills and ambitions
- one's plan to develop the offered position

Interview Situation One

Student 'B' will be the applicant for the position of assistant manager at a famous marketing company. Student 'A' is the manager of the company and will try to find out if 'B' will be the right assistant for him. Student 'A' will be requested to pose questions on the features of character which are considered the most important.

Student 'B' will be requested to answer the questions asked by student 'A'.

Interview Situation Two

Student 'A' is the chair of the manufacturing company. You have exactly five minutes to find out whether candidate 'B' you are interviewing is the right person for the job. Prepare questions about the candidate's experience, character and qualifications.

Student 'B' will be requested to answer the questions asked by student 'A'.

Part Two

Writing (25 pts)

Write an application letter for the following job advertisement.

Job Advertisement

Administrative Assistant

We require PC knowledge, excellent verbal and written English communication skills, flexibility and reliability. We can offer a pleasant non-smoking working environment. Salary depends upon experience and qualification. Responses including CV should be sent to us within 14 days.

* Developed by the researcher

Appendix II

Oral Communication Rubric* (25 pts)

vocabulary	grammar and syntax	comprehensibility	creativity	fluency
5- Rich variety of vocabulary 4- Appropriate vocabulary with good variety 3- Vocabulary is adequate to communicate main ideas 2- Vocabulary is repetitive and inappropriate, leads to misunderstandings 1- Very limited vocabulary,	5 - Highly accurate, no syntax and grammar errors 4- Occasional errors in grammar, but not significant 3- Grammatical errors exist, but do not dominate 2- Significant errors in grammar, interferes with understanding 1- poor sense of sentence structure	5- Message is very effectively communicated 4- Message clearly communicated 3- Message is generally communicated 2- Message communicated with difficulty 1- Very difficult to present a message	5- Content is of high interest, use of new ideas 4- Content is interesting 3- Content is predictable 2- Content is repetitious 1- Content is not consistent	5- Natural fluency and intonation 4- High fluency 3- Fluid with stops 2- Fragmented but continuous 1- Little sense of fluency

* Developed by the researcher

Appendix III Writing Rubric* (25 pts)

score	criteria
1 to 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consistent violations of English rules of grammar/usage ▪ Items are listed with little or no supporting detail ▪ Serious mistakes in structure, organization and coherence ▪ Poor writing mechanics ▪ Sentence structure and word choice that are highly limited and inappropriate.
6 to 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contains problems in the English rules of grammar/usage that do not hinder meaning ▪ Limited sentence structure and word choice or inappropriate ▪ Focuses, but may not display well-developed content ▪ Displays minimal organization; contains irrelevancies, or lacks logic ▪ Limited writing mechanics
11 to 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develops ideas with detail Adequately ▪ Variety of word choice sentence structures, but occasionally displays ineffective word use ▪ Satisfactory organization of ideas with adequate coherence and logic ▪ Minor errors in English grammar ▪ Writing mechanics that do not impede meaning
16 to 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ideas are developed in an effective and detailed manner ▪ Text is coherently organized ▪ Structures are appropriate ▪ Varied sentence structure and word choice ▪ A few errors in writing mechanics
21 to 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developed and sustained ideas ▪ Clear, logical, detailed, and coherent ideas ▪ Using correct appropriate English structures ▪ No errors in writing mechanics ▪ Effective use of multiple sentence structures and word choice

* Developed by the researcher