



A NEED ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES AMONG VOCATIONAL ENGLISH STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the English workplace communication competencies required by students in the English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Lampung. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, data were collected from 45 students through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and open-ended responses. Descriptive and thematic analyses revealed that interactive communication competencies received the highest ratings, while digital communication competencies ranked lower. Students prioritized public speaking and business presentation skills. These findings provide practical guidance for designing a curriculum that better aligns English workplace communication training with students' professional needs.

Keywords: *English Workplace Communication, English For Specific Purposes, Needs Analysis, Vocational Education*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of globalization, massive digital transformation, and increasing cross-border labor mobility have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of competencies required of higher education graduates. The 21st-century workforce, particularly in the Industry 4.0 era, no longer demands only the mastery of technical competencies but also positions effective communication skills at the core of employability (Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025). Among various soft skills, English communication has transformed from a mere added value into a crucial competency, given that English functions as the primary lingua franca in the global business and professional ecosystem (Nickerson, 2022). The ability to use English effectively enables graduates to participate actively in cross-cultural communication, collaborate within multinational teams, and adapt to increasingly complex and digitally integrated work environments.



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In various modern work situations, professionals are required to convey ideas clearly and persuasively, deliver business presentations, participate actively in meetings, write professional business correspondence, negotiate with clients, handle customer complaints (Kassim & Ali, 2010; So-mui & Mead, 2000), and collaborate effectively using digital platforms (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams) as well as utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for communication efficiency (Batsila & Shrestha, 2022). Therefore, English language learning in higher education, particularly in vocational institutions, can no longer be general in nature (General English), but must be oriented toward developing specific, contextual communication competencies that are highly relevant to real-world needs (English for Specific Purposes/ESP) (Xie, 2016).

As a higher education institution oriented toward work readiness, vocational education bears a strategic responsibility to produce human resources whose competencies align with industry expectations. One of the most fundamental and widely recognized approaches in ESP curriculum development is needs analysis (Rachmawati, 2020). According to ESP theoretical frameworks, needs analysis is a systematic process for identifying the gap between the competencies currently possessed by learners and the competencies demanded by the target situation (Warti, 2020). Needs analysis for this case is not merely an administrative formality but a crucial step to ensure that the learning process can bridge the gap between the classroom and the demands of the professional world.

Although needs analysis has been widely applied in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum development, two important gaps remain. First, previous studies have primarily examined English language needs from external stakeholders' perspectives, such as employers, graduates, and lecturers, while students' perspectives have received less attention, particularly in newly established vocational study programs in Indonesia (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025). Second, most studies have focused on general language skills rather than specific workplace communication competencies required in contemporary professional contexts, including digital communication and cross-cultural interaction (Ekayati et al., 2020; Larasati et al., 2022; Ninsisana & Nawa, 2019; Nurhasana et al., 2021; Suningsih & Putri, 2022). Addressing these gaps, this study identifies students' perceived priorities for English workplace

communication competencies in a newly established vocational program, providing empirical evidence to support curriculum development that is responsive to current workplace demands.

The English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Lampung is a new study program officially established in 2025. The existence of this study program carries a strategic mission to address the need for skilled workers in the field of business communication. However, as a program still in its early stages of development, it faces the challenge of designing an appropriate curriculum without falling into assumptions or adopting outdated curriculum models. Therefore, mapping the English communication competency needs considered important and prioritized by students becomes an urgent and foundational step.

Based on the above description, this study was designed to answer the following two research questions: (1) What English workplace communication competencies are considered important by students of the English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Lampung? (2) Which English workplace communication competencies are prioritized by students in preparing themselves to enter the workforce? In line with these research questions, this study aims to analyze students' needs regarding English workplace communication competencies in the English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program at Politeknik Negeri Lampung. This study contributes to English Language Teaching (ELT) by providing empirical evidence on students' perceived English workplace communication competency needs in a vocational higher education context. It also contributes to ESP curriculum development by identifying priority competencies that can inform the design of learning outcomes, course content, instructional materials, and learning activities aligned with contemporary workplace communication demands.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design to comprehensively understand English workplace communication competency needs in a newly established study program. The first stage involved collecting and analyzing

quantitative data via a structured questionnaire, followed by qualitative data from an open-ended question to reinforce and explain the quantitative findings. Participants were 45 active students from the English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program, Politeknik Negeri Lampung—the program's initial cohort since its establishment in 2025, comprising 22 students from Class A and 23 from Class B. A total sampling technique was used, including all eligible students from both classes to maximize representativeness and minimize bias within this small, newly formed population.

The main instrument was an online questionnaire developed from the ESP needs analysis framework and relevant literature on professional communication competencies. It consisted of two parts: (1) 30 indicators of English workplace communication competency, covering business presentations, negotiation, customer service, digital communication/online meetings, and AI tool use—rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all, 5 = very important), and (2) an open-ended question asking respondents to identify and justify the competencies they most wanted to improve (e.g., “Which English communication competencies would you like to improve the most?”). Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was validated by an ESP/English Language Teaching expert, who assessed the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of each indicator; several items were revised accordingly. A pilot test was then conducted with 10 respondents of similar characteristics (excluded from the main study) to check item clarity, response format, and completion time before administration to the 45 main respondents.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) to determine and rank the importance of each competency. Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition/naming, and reporting with representative excerpts. Trustworthiness was enhanced through iterative, cross-checked coding and a maintained audit trail. Consistent with the explanatory sequential design, integration occurred at two stages: during instrument design, where the open-ended question was built around the quantitative domains to let students elaborate on their ratings; and during interpretation, where quantitative rankings (identifying *which* competencies

mattered most) were triangulated with qualitative themes (explaining *why*) in the discussion, forming the empirical basis for the study's curriculum development recommendations.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the research findings regarding English workplace communication competency needs from the students' perspective. The data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design, in which the quantitative results are presented first to map the level of importance, followed by the qualitative findings to reveal improvement priorities, and concluded with an integrative discussion linking the findings to the context of the Study Program that was newly established in 2025.

Quantitative Results: Competency Importance Ranking

Based on the descriptive statistical analysis of 45 respondents, all 30 indicators of English workplace communication competency were rated in the “Important” to “Very Important” category (mean range 3.40–4.58). This indicates that students generally have a high level of awareness regarding the relevance of all these competencies to their professional careers. However, there were significant priority differences among the indicators. Table 1 presents the top ten competencies considered most important, as well as the three lowest-ranked competencies.

Table 1. Ranking of Importance Level of English Workplace Communication Competencies

Rank	Competency Indicator	Mean	Category
1	Handling customer complaints	4.58	Very Important
2	Explaining ideas clearly	4.56	Very Important
3	Problem-solving discussions	4.53	Very Important
4	Introducing yourself professionally	4.51	Very Important
5	Expressing opinions politely	4.49	Very Important
6	Asking and answering questions professionally	4.47	Very Important
7	Replying to business emails	4.44	Very Important
8	Giving and receiving feedback professionally	4.42	Very Important
9	Team discussion	4.40	Very Important
10	Networking professionally	4.38	Very Important
(Other indicators ranged between mean 3.85 - 4.36)			
28	Communicating through Zoom or Microsoft Teams	3.65	Important
29	Creating professional social media content	3.52	Important
30	Using AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) for workplace communication	3.40	Important

Overall, Table 1 shows that competencies focusing on interpersonal interaction, problem-solving, and customer service (handling customer complaints, problem-solving discussions, explaining ideas clearly) dominate the top rankings (Kassim & Ali, 2010). In contrast, competencies related to digital technology and artificial intelligence (using AI tools, communicating through Zoom/Teams) occupy the lowest rankings.

Qualitative Results: Competency Improvement Priorities

To answer the second research question, data from the open-ended question (“Which English communication competencies would you like to improve the most?”) were analyzed using thematic analysis. Although students could select more than one option, frequency analysis revealed a pattern of dominant themes representing the areas in which students felt they most needed to improve their competencies. The five most frequently emerging main themes were:

1. Public Speaking & Business Presentations (Selected by 82% of respondents): Students overwhelmingly placed public speaking and business presentation skills as their top priority for mastery.
2. Professional Writing & Business Emails (Selected by 71% of respondents): Formal writing skills, including composing business emails and professional messages, were considered an area requiring significant improvement.
3. Customer Service & Problem Solving (Selected by 64% of respondents): The ability to handle customers and engage in problem-solving discussions in English.
4. Digital Workplace & Cross-Cultural Communication (Selected by 55% of respondents): The desire to become more proficient in communicating within digital work environments and interacting with cross-cultural clients.
5. Job Interviews & Professional Networking (Selected by 48% of respondents): Specific skills for facing job interviews and building professional networks.

Discussion

This section elaborates on the research findings in an integrated and comprehensive manner to answer the two research questions that have been formulated. Through a mixed-methods approach, this discussion not only presents the statistical data and qualitative responses separately but also integrates both to provide a holistic understanding of the

dynamics of English workplace communication competency needs. Through the lens of applied linguistics and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy, particularly speaking instruction, this discussion interprets the findings within the specific context of the English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program that was newly established in 2025.

Competencies Considered Important in the Workplace

The first research question aimed to identify the English workplace communication competencies considered important by students. Based on the quantitative findings, the answer to this question is very clear and consistent: students place interactive, pragmatic, and problem-solving-oriented competencies as their highest priority. The top three competencies rated as most crucial are handling customer complaints with a mean score of 4.58, explaining ideas clearly with a score of 4.56, and problem-solving discussions with a score of 4.53. The top five rankings also include introducing yourself professionally (4.51) and expressing opinions politely (4.49). All of these indicators fall within the “Very Important” category, indicating a very high level of student awareness of the realities of professional demands (Chan, 2019b; Evans, 2010)

From the perspective of applied linguistics and ESP speaking pedagogy, these findings provide highly significant empirical answers. They indicate that the focus of competencies expected by students has shifted fundamentally from the mastery of pure linguistic structure toward the ability to communicate contextually, functionally, and pragmatically. Students realize that success in workplace communication is no longer measured by how perfect their grammar or phonological pronunciation is, but by how effectively they can solve problems, maintain good relationships with clients, and manage social interactions within a professional context (Chan, 2021).

The ability to handle customer complaints, for example, requires highly complex interactive speaking skills. A professional not only needs to understand business vocabulary but must also master politeness strategies, the use of mitigating language, verbal empathy to de-escalate client emotions, and the ability to offer spontaneous solutions in high-pressure situations. This is a pragmatic competency that requires a deep understanding of social context and interpersonal dynamics. Similarly, problem-solving discussions demand the

ability to negotiate meaning, manage turn-taking, collaborate on ideas spontaneously, and demonstrate cognitive resilience to think critically under time pressure. The dominance of these indicators at the top of the ranking is a strong signal that the speaking curriculum in vocational education must focus on simulating complex and unpredictable real-life interactions, rather than merely practicing rote memorization of rigid dialogues or grammar drills isolated from context (Asrifan et al., 2020; Badu et al., 2020; Ninsisana & Nawa, 2019).

On the other hand, these findings also highlight a particularly interesting position for digital and technological competencies. Indicators such as the use of AI tools with a score of 3.40, the creation of professional social media content (3.52), and communication through Zoom or Microsoft Teams (3.65) consistently occupied the bottom three positions in terms of importance level. At first glance, this appears to contradict the current narrative of digital transformation and the industrial revolution. Why do students not consider digital competencies a top priority? This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of “familiarity bias,” which is highly relevant to the characteristics of Generation Z students. They tend to consider the use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or AI as something they have already automatically mastered because they use these tools daily for social purposes, entertainment, or ordinary coursework. As a result, they do not regard them as “professional competencies” that need to be learned academically. They fail to distinguish between the use of digital platforms for social purposes and the demands of virtual oral communication in a far more complex professional context. In fact, using virtual collaboration platforms in a business context requires a specific set of virtual pragmatic competencies (Puspendari et al., 2025). For example, how to manage turn-taking when there is audio delay in a virtual meeting, how to use verbal markers to indicate attentiveness when body language is limited by the screen, how to interrupt politely, and how to ethically use AI to summarize meeting transcripts or draft emails. These are high-level skills that are highly demanded in the industry but are often not recognized by students because they are trapped in an illusion of digital competence. Although its quantitative importance ranking is lower, awareness of the complexity of face-to-face interaction remains regarded as a fundamental foundation that cannot be replaced by technology.

Improvement Priorities and Students’ Learning Gap

The second research question explored which competencies are students' top priorities for improvement in preparing to enter the workforce. This is where the most critical qualitative findings lie, revealing a significant learning gap. Although students rated direct interactions, such as handling complaints and discussing problems, as the most important in the workplace, when asked through an open-ended question what they most wanted to improve, the majority of students instead chose strikingly different competencies (Ekayati et al., 2020; Nurhasana et al., 2021).

The five main themes that appeared most frequently in the qualitative responses were Public Speaking & Business Presentations (selected by 82% of respondents), Professional Writing & Business Emails (71% of respondents), Customer Service & Problem Solving (64% of respondents), Digital Workplace & Cross-Cultural Communication (55% of respondents), and Job Interviews & Professional Networking (48% of respondents). These findings reveal that students overwhelmingly placed public speaking and business presentation skills as their top priority for mastery, even though this competency did not rank among the top five in terms of importance (Suryaningsih, 2021; Wulandari, 2023).

This phenomenon is quite natural and can be explained through the perspective of speaking pedagogy. Public speaking or business presentations are one-directional in nature. Although the message can be prepared in advance and the structure can be predicted, the speaker bears a very heavy mental and cognitive burden due to the pressure to appear professional in front of an audience, maintain a professional impression, and manage the anxiety arising from public evaluation. This often triggers intense language anxiety. Students feel anxious, lack confidence, and fear making mistakes during presentations, so they instinctively feel this is the most urgent area for them to improve. In contrast, interactions such as handling customer complaints or problem-solving discussions are two-directional and more fluid in nature. Although they require rapid real-time cognitive processing, these interactions occur in a more personal and collaborative context, so the level of anxiety students experience may be lower. Students feel more comfortable in dialogic situations because there is an opportunity to ask questions, clarify, and adjust responses spontaneously. As a result, although they realize that dialogic interaction is very important in the workplace,

they do not feel anxious in that area, so they do not prioritize it as an area requiring urgent improvement.

In addition, there is an interesting finding related to digital communication that reinforces this paradoxical analysis. In the qualitative data, 55% of students mentioned a desire to improve their Digital Workplace & Cross-Cultural Communication skills, yet in the quantitative data, the use of Zoom and AI ranked at the bottom. This shows that students actually want to become proficient in global and digital communication, but they underestimate the technical and professional complexity of these tools (Larasati et al., 2022; Muhammad & Utami, 2023). They desire the outcome of effective global communication but are unaware of the specific processes and competencies, such as virtual meeting etiquette and AI literacy, needed to achieve it.

As an answer to the research objectives and to provide strategic implications for the Study Program that was newly established in 2025, these findings offer a foundational roadmap that must be translated into an agile and responsive curriculum design (Mulyono, 2023). The curriculum designed must be able to balance and bridge three main dimensions.

First, to meet workforce needs, the curriculum must allocate the largest portion to simulating pragmatic dialogic interactions. This means increasing role-plays on handling customer complaints, business negotiations, and problem-solving discussions using a task-based approach. Students must become accustomed to thinking and responding spontaneously, with assessments that evaluate not only fluency but also pragmatic accuracy and communication strategy. Second, to address students' improvement priorities and alleviate language anxiety, the study program must provide a safe, structured, and supportive practice space for Public Speaking and Business Presentations. This can be achieved through experiential learning with repeated simulations and constructive peer feedback (Suningsih & Putri, 2022). The goal is to gradually build students' confidence and reduce language anxiety without them feeling intimidated by evaluation pressure. Third, to correct digital familiarity bias, the curriculum must explicitly incorporate modules on virtual communication ethics and AI literacy in a business context. Students should not be allowed to assume they are already proficient in using technology simply because they are active social media users. They must be taught how to use these tools ethically, accurately, and professionally.

Overall, this study successfully answered both research questions comprehensively. This study not only validates that students have a high awareness of the pragmatic demands of the workforce but also uncovers the psycholinguistic layers behind their learning priorities. Moreover, this study provides concrete recommendations for curriculum improvement, ensuring that graduates of this new study program are not only work-ready but also equipped with crucial future competencies in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped the English workplace communication competency needs of students in the English for Business and Professional Communication Study Program, Politeknik Negeri Lampung, to inform curriculum development for this newly established program. Analysis of data from 45 students yielded two key findings: interactive and problem-solving-oriented competencies (e.g., handling customer complaints, explaining ideas clearly) were rated most important, while digital competencies ranked lower despite students' Generation Z background; and a clear gap emerged between competencies rated as important and those students prioritized for improvement, with public speaking and business presentations identified as the most urgent needs.

These findings carry direct implications for curriculum developers and English lecturers in the study program. Curriculum design should prioritize three concrete actions: (1) integrating structured public speaking practice with a low-anxiety format, given its status as students' top improvement priority; (2) embedding pragmatic, dialogic simulations (e.g., complaint handling, negotiation) to align instruction with workplace demands; and (3) introducing explicit digital literacy modules to address students' underestimation of AI and virtual communication skills. For lecturers specifically, these results suggest reallocating classroom time toward performance-based speaking tasks and scenario-based interaction, rather than solely knowledge-based instruction.

This study is limited by its small sample (45 students) and single-institution scope, warranting caution in generalizing the findings. Future research should extend this needs analysis to similar vocational programs at other institutions and evaluate curriculum interventions based on these findings through longitudinal studies.

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