Towards Designing an Effective Business Communication Course: An Empirical Study

Sreenivasulu Yadamala, Jayanth Kasyap

Abstract: *The Present Paper focuses on the critical evaluation of Business Communication course components (Course Contents, Teaching-Learning Methodology and Assessment Patterns prescribed for the participants of MBA (Masters in Business Administration) programme offered by Andhra University, India. A survey questionnaire is designed on the selected components and feedback is obtained from the major stakeholders i.e. Students, Faculty and the Human Resource personnel of various Multi-National Companies. The gathered opinions are processed through Frequency Distribution method. Further, an endeavor is made to analyze the results and forward viable suggestions for the strengthening of teaching-learning and assessment practices pertaining to Business Communication course.*

Index Terms: *Business Communication, Course Evaluation, Course Components, English for Business Purposes, English for Specific Purposes*

I. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes is a branch of ELT which has evolved to meet the growing needs of students who take up higher education in the fields such as Engineering, Medicine, Law and Business Administration etc. (Wang, 1997). These professional courses place unique demands on the learners in terms of linguistic capabilities to be achieved by them. Accordingly, ESP has branched out into three domains and has come up with specified courses to cater to the specific needs of the learners, such as Business English, English for Engineers and English for Medicine and so on. (Pickett, 1989; Robinson, 1991; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; St. John & Johnson, 1996; Wang, 1997; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Feng, 1999; Huang, 2000; Ellis & Johnson, 2002.

II. NEED OF ASSESSING THE SELECTED COMPONENTS

To achieve the desired employment in various government and private sectors such as Retail Marketing, Telecom, Banking, Finance and Pharmaceutical etc., the emerging candidates are supposed to give presentations to clients, draft the written reports and memos, correspond through e-mails and faxes and participate in Business meetings etc., as a part of workplace communication. To work and fulfill every responsibility confidently, one has to be proficient in English language communication skills besides inter/intra personal skills.

Sreenivasulu Yadamala, Department of E & FL, Madanapalle Institute of Technology and Science, Andhra Pradesh, India

Jayanth Kasyap, Department of English, Yogi Vemana University, Andhra Pradesh, India

Further, according to the recent survey on the employability rate of management education by Association of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASOCHAM), only seven percent of MBA graduates from Indian Business Schools (excluding those from top 20 schools) get jobs straight after completing their course. It also reported that:

Even the quality of IIM/IIT (Indian Institute of Management/Indian Institute of Technology) students coming out now compared to last five years has come down due to the quality of school education. The faculty and outdated curriculum, routine teaching-learning strategies and poor evaluation practices are the major problems. As a few people enter the teaching profession due to low salaries and the entire eco-system needs to be revamped. (India Skill Report, 2015, p.20)

Therefore, it is considered that the course components of Business Communication have gained significance in developing the participants' communication skills, workplace abilities and English proficiency etc.

III. RESEARCH PROCESS

The present study uses a survey research design for conducting an explanatory analysis of responses to the research questions. The advantage of such kind of research is that substantial amount of information can be collected in a relatively short time (Brown, 1988). For this purpose, a structured questionnaire is designed for the purpose of collecting data from the students of Andhra University, faculty who are handling the Business Communication course in various professional colleges or universities of Andhra Pradesh and HR personnel of the companies who frequently visit the university to recruit the graduates.

A four-point Likert scale is adopted to gather the feedback from the major stakeholders. However, the traditional intervals of Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree) were modified as 'Yes', 'To the most extent', 'To the least extent' and 'No' to tag an open ended question to obtain descriptive feedback from the participants..

With respect to the data collected from students and faculty, the main type of statistical or quantitative analysis used for the present study is Descriptive Analysis. According to Burns and Bush (1995), Descriptive Analyses are used by researchers "to describe the simple data in such a way as to portray the typical respondent and to reveal the general pattern of responses". It includes the concepts such as Mean, Average, Mode, Frequency Distribution and Standard Deviation.

IV. STUDENT PROFILES & DEMOGRAPHICS

In the present section, the general profile of students is discussed according to the model Communication Needs Processor suggested by Munby (1978). The information presented deals with the present situation of students and their learning needs. The profile refers to the students of Andhra University, Visakhapatnam which is established urban area of Andhra Pradesh.

Table.1. Demographic Information (Andhra University)

S. No.	Demographic Parameter	Name of the Institute	
		Andhra University (%)	
1	Gender	Male	66.7
		Female	33.3
2	Medium of Study at School Level	Vernacular	45.1
		English	54.9
3	Course Studied at UG Level	B.Com	78.4
		B. Sc.	11.8
		B. Tech.	2
		BBM	7.9
4	Native	Urban	41.1
		Semi-Urban	11.7
		Rural	49
5	Average age Group (in years)		21

V. PRESENT SITUATION ANALYSIS (LEARNERS RESPONSES)

The present section analyzes the frequency distribution results of the selected course components of Business Communication prescribed for MBA programme at Andhra University, Visakhapatnam. As the perspectives vary from one researcher to another researcher varied tools are applied for analysis. An attempt is made to objectively discuss each component based on the responses received from learners. The Department of Commerce and Management Studies in Andhra University was started in 1934 and holds the rare distinction of launching B.Com (Hons) in south India. The university is popularly known as Oxford of the East. Further, the department introduced full-time, part-time, evening and distance mode MBA programmes in different specializations with an aim of producing talented executives to occupy coveted positions in national and international industries. Almost in all the specializations, Business Communication course was introduced with an objective to enhance their communicative abilities and employability skills. The responses provided by the learners of Andhra University about the course components are as follows:

Table. 2. Frequency for Business Communication Course Contents (Sample Size: 51)

S. No.	Variable	Frequency (51)				Percentage			
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1	Do you find the contents of the course inter-disciplinary?	22	8	11	8	45	16	22	16
2	Are you confident of improving your employment potential and job skills through the current course contents?	28	13	8	1	56	26	16	2
3	Are the course contents activity based / practice oriented?	24	11	9	5	49	22	18	10
4	Are the course contents redundant and monotonous?	6	9	17	13	13	20	38	29
5	Do the course contents reinforce grammatical and lexical competencies?	18	8	13	10	37	16	27	20
6	Do the course contents provide scope to improve your domain-specific vocabulary?	27	12	7	3	55	25	14	6.1
7	Do the course contents cover the following important Business Communication Skills?								
	Telephone Etiquette	15	10	12	13	30	20	26	24
	Presentations	32	16	1	1	64	32	2	2
	Taking Part in Meetings	23	12	9	5	47	25	18	10
	Correspondence and Report writing	13	19	7	9	28	40	15	19
8	Do the course contents provide opportunities to enhance following Business Writing Skills?								
	Note-taking	11	4	21	13	22	8.2	43	27
	Note – making	12	4	21	14	24	7.8	41	28
	Letter writing	31	18	1	0	62	36	2	0
	Drafting notices	12	12	18	4	26	26	39	8.7
	Creative Writing	7	2	15	26	14	4	30	52

Frequencies coded as: 1=Yes, 2= To the most extent, 3= To the least extent, 4= No

The Frequency Distribution results of the second section i.e. Course Contents are shown in Table.2 given above. The present section of the questionnaire has eight variables that are aimed at collecting the information regarding the prescribed course contents and its efficacy. Accordingly, the first variable is employed to know inter-disciplinary elements in the course contents. In response, 61 % of the learners have chosen option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) and the rest of them (39%) have opined that there are no interdisciplinary shades in prescribed course contents.

The second variable is intended to gauge the learners' confidence levels in getting employability prospects with the present course contents. Majority of the responses are optimistic as 82% has expressed their confidence by choosing option 1 and 2 (to the most extent).

The third variable is incorporated in the questionnaire with the specific objective of gathering feedback on activity based and participatory learning. Around 73% of them have chosen option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent). It indicates that the course contents are designed for activity based teaching and learning. The fourth variable, i.e. "are the course contents redundant and monotonous" received mixed responses from the participants. Nearly 66% of them have chosen option 3 and 4 (to the least extent and No). The remaining participants (34%) selected option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) and found no redundancy and monotony in the case of course contents. The fifth variable, which is aimed at seeking the opinion on reinforcement of grammatical and lexical competencies, received mixed opinions from the respondents. 52% of the participants opted for 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) and the remaining (42%) have selected option3 and 4 (to the least extent and No).

The subsequent variable elicits the responses about the scope of domain specific vocabulary in the prescribed contents. The majority responses (80%) are in favor of option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent). It shows that the contents are loaded with business related vocabulary. The seventh variable of the above section is aimed to know whether the course contents include the core business communication skills such as Telephone Etiquette, Presentations, Taking Part in Meetings, Correspondence and Report writing. Among the four skills, 80% of learners find Presentation skills in the syllabus by choosing option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) 71% of them find Taking Part in Meetings, 67% of them find Correspondence and Report writing and 50% of them find Telephone etiquette.

In the following variable, the feedback is obtained on writing skills such as note-taking, note-making, letter writing, drafting notices and creative writing which provide opportunity to enhance their writing skills, the majority respondents have chosen option 3 and 4 (to the least extent and No). Nearly 70% of them find no opportunity to enhance writing skills through note-taking, note-making (68%), and creative writing (82%). At the same time, respondents have chosen option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) and find chances to improve their writing skills through Letter Writing (92%) and Drafting Notices (52%). The results that the participants evince key interest in Letter Writing and Drafting Notices to enhance their writing abilities.

The Frequency Distribution results of the fourth section i.e. Teaching and Learning Methodology are presented in Table.3 given above. The present part of the survey is intended to obtain the learners' perceptions on the teaching and learning methods of Business Communication course. The first variable of the section elicits the responses about the utility and efficacy of the Business Communication course. In response, 94% of the respondents are preferred option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) which means the course is fully useful to the participants. And the rest of them have different opinion in this regard. The second variable of the section, "does the teacher encourage interactive mode of learning" has received maximum number of positive opinions. Nearly 94% of them are indicated option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) by suggesting that learners'

initiative and encouragement towards interactive and participatory learning is a healthy trend which fosters meaningful transactions in the classroom.

Table 3.Frequency for Business Communication Teaching and Learning Methodology

S. No.	Variable	Frequency (51)				Percentage			
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1	Do you find the imparting of Business Communication Skills useful and effective?	37	11	2	1	73	22	3.9	2
2	Does the teacher encourage interactive mode of learning?	37	11	0	3	73	22	0	5.9
3	Does your teacher use mother tongue in Business Communication class?	7	0	25	19	14	0	49	37
4	Does the teaching/learning provide you opportunity for self-expression and original thinking?	31	12	2	4	36	25	4.1	8.2
5	Do you find the classroom instructions learner-friendly and stimulating?	33	8	4	6	65	16	7.8	12
6	Do you treat Business Communication and other core subjects equally and attach equal importance.	19	12	4	15	38	24	8	30

Frequencies coded as: 1=Yes, 2= To the most extent, 3= To the least extent, 4= No

The third variable addresses the use of mother tongue in classroom. As per the results, 86% of the respondents opted 3 and 4 (To the least extent and No) and only 14% of them chosen options 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent). The response highlights the use of target language and also learners' zeal and enthusiasm to receive optimum exposure of English. In the subsequent variable, learners are asked whether the pedagogy provides an opportunity for self-expression and original thinking. In response to this variable, 88% of them selected option 1 and 2 (Yes and To the most extent) which indicates the enhancement of learners' creative abilities through teaching and learning of Business Communication.

It also suggests that denial of such opportunities for the learner will in no way pave way for bettering their language skills and fluency.

The frequency distribution results of the fifth variable i.e. "are the classroom interactions learner-friendly and stimulating" reveal the spread of responses on positive side. The majority of the learners (80%) selected option 1 and 2 which confirms learner-friendly and stimulating the instructions. At the same time, with respect to the sixth variable, the respondents have diverse opinions on treating the Business Communication course equally with other subjects. Welcoming observation is that around 62% of the respondents treat Business Communication course at par with the core courses. And on the contrary, 38% of the respondents have not expressed similar opinion about the course.

Table.4. Frequency for Business Communication Assessment Patterns

S. No.	Variable	Frequency (51)				Percentage			
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1	Does the periodical assessment help you in improving your English language skills?	18	23	3	0	41	52	6.8	0
2	Do your teachers use the following patterns for evaluation?								
	Paper - Pencil tests	9	13	22	-	21	30	50	-
	Oral Tests	35	7	5	-	75	15	11	-
	Learner's Participation in daily activities	38	10	1	-	78	20	2	-
	Objective type tests	7	10	27	-	16	23	61	-
	Essay type Exam	17	12	18	-	36	26	38	-
	Tests that require memorization of facts	16	12	13	-	39	29	32	-
	Tests that require the use of learner's analytical skills	22	15	8	-	49	33	18	-
	Online Tests	0	0	45	-	0	0	100	-

Frequencies coded as: 1=Yes, 2= To the most extent, 3= To the least extent, 4= No Frequencies for S. No. 2 coded as: 1=Yes, 2= Often, 3= No

The Frequency Distribution results of the fifth section i.e. *Assessment Patterns* is shown in Table.4 given above. The present section of the questionnaire aimed to gather the feedback with regard to the assessment patterns followed in and during the course. The first variable elicits the reactions with respect to the improvement of communication skills through periodical assessment. The variable received overwhelming positive results i.e. 93% for which participants selected option 1 and 2. It indicates that the learners believed in periodical assessment to enhance English language skills. The second variable of the section is aimed to know the various patterns of evaluation. According to the frequency distribution results, the learners who have chosen option 1 and 2 (Yes and Often) and the tests that are regularly / frequently used in the course are Oral tests (89%),

Participation in daily activities (98%) and Tests that require memorization of facts (91%). On the other side, the other patterns of testing which are not used or very rarely used in the course (option 2 and 3) are Paper-Pencil tests (80%), Objective type tests (84%) and Essay type tests (62%). Besides, for online tests, all the participants (100%) selected only option 3 (No) which shows that they have not been exposed to online tests.

A. Analysis of the Responses Obtained from Human Resource Personnel

The present section descriptively analyzes the opinions obtained from *Human Resource Personnel* of five reputed companies TCS (Bangalore), TCS (HYD), EPAM Solutions Ltd., First America and GOOGLE (Hyderabad) who examines the communicative abilities of MBA graduates and provide employment in their respective specialized domains. The respondents are senior and experienced HR Personnel between the age group of 28 to 46 qualified MBA/Charted Account enough service and designated in their respective companies as HR Managers/Project Managers/ HR Consultants. Their work experience as HR Managers ranges. Having the above demographics of HR Personnel, summery of their responses is as follows.

- Consideration of communication skills as crucial component in their process of selection.
- Most of the MBA graduates who are screened by the above companies are up to the mark and able to satisfy the HR Managers during the recruitment process.
- Though the course is nurturing the participants, it is required to modify according to the latest demands of the corporate companies.
- HR personnel do not verify the course components but interact with the faculty members/placement officers of a particular institute.
- Suggestion/feedback with respect to the communicative abilities of the participants will be provided in the end of the drive.
- The recruiters believe that the candidates' clear expression of thoughts, good command on language, appropriate body language etc., will increase the chances of getting campus selection.
- Skill oriented curriculum, effective teaching-learning practices, fostering innovative and original thinking will boost the confidence of the students and prepares them adequately for campus interviews.
- Companies prefer the written test and examine the candidates' writing skills before testing their oral skills.
- All the companies organize a pre training programme on communication skills for freshly recruited employees.
- The company is considering both inter and intra communication skills as key aspects apart from the general language skills.
- Most of the HR managers wanted the course in two semesters at least and would be better to be in more than two semesters.

VI. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY RESULTS

- In view of the results analyzed in the previous section, the Business Communication course offered for the students of MBA at Andhra University is in tune with the contemporary needs and it is reasonably competent.

- It is found that majority of the learners are aware of the *course objectives*, but they lack sufficient orientation about the objectives and their relevance. The objectives are well formulated by duly taking into account the future prospects of the learners and also the contemporaneity of the topics which focus on the needs of the industry.

- With respect to the *course contents*, they are inter-disciplinary in nature with sufficient focus on employability skills. Further, they are found to be activity based and stimulating participatory learning. It also covers all the business communication skill besides including domain-specific vocabulary. However, the course contents seem monotonous and provide a little opportunity to enhance business writing skills.

- The participants have the availability and accessibility of the prescribed/suggested *course materials* in a sufficient manner. Though they cover all the prescribed concepts in the syllabus, they are not fully customized and learner friendly. A welcoming results is that majority of the students disagree on the notion of a single text.

- With regard to the *pedagogical* component, the course encourages interactive mode of learning through the target language as a medium of instruction. The classroom interactions are learner-friendly and stimulating. They provide opportunities to enhance the learners' self-expression and original thinking. However, the majority of the participants are not so inclined to treat Business Communication course equally with the other core subjects.

The evaluation patterns of the course are mostly summative though learners believed that the formative assessment would improve their communication abilities in English language. The curriculum designers can examine the possibility of introducing online testing pattern in near future.

VII. RECOMMENDED SAMPLE COURSE STRUCTURE

Besides identifying certain strengths and shortcomings of the Business Communication course in the selected universities, the significance and need of the communication and basic language skills for management students in the state of Andhra Pradesh has also been recognized through the course of present research. It is also understood that, both the communication skills and linguistic knowledge have become important criterion for success of young managers at all levels and in all fields and functions.

In view of the above, it is felt that the Business Communication course must be prescribed in three semesters by separating the basic language skills, laboratory component and communication aspects. The proposed course in the first semester should deal and train the participants purely in English language skills, in the second semester it is proposed to prescribe the laboratory component and in the third semester it is advised to prescribe the course which deals with business communication skills. Considering the above, a draft syllabus with holistic perspective is presented for the perusal of the decision makers.

Table.5 English Grammar and Language Skills Course
(Blueprint)

Semester	Suggested Title of the Course	Unit No	Structure of the Content
Semester – I	English Grammar and Language Skills	1	Grammatical Competence, (Grammar, Lexis, Articulation etc.)
		2	Productive Skills & Body Language (Conversations, Negotiations, Taking part in Meetings, Telephoning etc.)
		3	Receptive Skills (Reading Comprehension and Writing Correspondence, Book Reviews)
		4	Vocabulary Skills (contents with regard to the enhancement of domain-specific vocabulary)
		5	Introduction to the Concept of Communication
			(Definition, Characteristics, Process, Principles, Types etc.)

Table.6 English Language and Communication Skills Laboratory Course (Blueprint)

Semester	Suggested Title of the Course	Unit No	Structure of the Content
Semester – I or II	ELCS Laboratory	1	Pronunciation Skills (Phonetics, Stress and Intonation)
		2	Oral Skills – 1 (Role-Plays, Telephone Skills, JAM etc.)
		3	Oral Skills – 2& Listening Skills (Oral Presentations, GD, Interview Techniques etc.)
		4	Non-Verbal Communication (Facial Expressions, Eye Contact etc.)
		5	Writing Skills (Resume Preparation, Cover Letters, Business Reports, and E-mails etc.)

Table.7 Business Communication Course (Blueprint)

Semester	Suggested Title of the Course	Unit No	Structure of the Content
Semester – II or III	Business Communication (OR) Managerial Communication (OR) Professional Communication	1	Leadership/Team Communication
		2	Managing Organizational Communication
		3	Business Writing Skills (Advanced)
		4	Communication Strategies and Workplace Communication
		5	Cross Cultural Communication

A. Suggestions and Recommendations

Taking into account the findings drawn from the stakeholders, an attempt is made to suggest and recommend certain measures that provide a proper perspective on the reappraisal of Business Communication course components i.e. course contents, teaching-learning methodologies and other relevant components. Therefore, the present section humbly puts forth the following viable suggestions.

Course Contents

In the light of the above empirical investigation with regard to the selection of contents, the contents of the Business Communication course must include the following key aspects.

- Inter-disciplinary in nature (for professional courses)
- Domain-specific, learner-friendly, enriching creativity, critical and analytical thinking
- A judicious mixture of theory and practice
- A combination of linguistic, phonetic and communicative skills
- Imbibing domain-specific vocabulary
- Promoting technical knowledge and language learning
- Fostering original thinking and self-expression (by encouraging the learners to write book reviews and reports.

Teaching-Learning Methodology

- Encourage the interactive and participatory learning.
- Provide opportunity to self-expression and creative / original thinking.
- Learner-friendly and stimulating.
- Take place in target language only without undermining the importance of native language.
- Enhance the participants communicative competence
- Go beyond the text.
- Deliver the course materials successfully.

Assessment Patterns

The teachers or curriculum developers must take into account the various aspects pertaining to the assessment patterns such as:

- The appropriateness of the assessment methods that includes the assessment of knowledge, skills and attitudes of the learners.
- The reliability and validity of the assessment patterns.
- Scope to achieve minimum and maximum standards of performance set in the curriculum.
- The degree of assessment i.e. sufficient assessment or over-assessment.
- The appropriateness and consistency in the regulations governing assessment procedures.
- Inclusion and possible implementation of all traditional methods of testing such as diagnostic tests, proficiency test, achievement test and placement test.
- Inclusion of various test formats such as Oral Tests, Objective Type Tests, Learners' Participation in daily activities, Essay type Exam, Tests that require memorization of facts, Tests that require the use of learner's analytical skills, Online Tests.

REFERENCES

1. ASSOCHAM. (2015) *English Skills Report*. Retrieved from https://wheebox.com/logo/India%20Skills%20Report2015.pdf
2. Bargiela-Chiappini, F., & Harris, S. J. (1997). Managing language: The discourse of corporate meetings. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
3. Bright, J.A. and Mc Gregor, G.P. (1970) *Teaching English as a Second Language- Theory and Techniques for the Secondary Stage*. London: Longman
4. Brown, H.D. (1987). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New Jersey Prentice-Hall
5. Burns, A. C. and Bush, R. F. (1995). *Marketing Research*. New York: Pearson.
6. Crystal, David. (2003). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Donna, Sylvie. (2000). *Teach Business English.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, M. J. (1998). Developments in ESP. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Ellis, M., & Johnson, C. (2002). Teaching Business English. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
10. Feng, J. D. (1999). Shang Wu Ying Yu Chu Tan/A preliminary study of Business English. In T. H. Lin (Ed.), Guo Ji Shang Wu Ying Yu Zai Zhong Guo/Studies on International Business English in China. Xiamen: Xiamen University Press.
11. Huang, W. X. (2000). Shang Wu Ying Yu De Yu Yan Xue Di Wei/On the linguistic status of Business English. Modern Foreign Languages (Supplementary Edition).
12. Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Pickett, D. (1989). The sleeping giant: Investigations in Business English. Language International, 1, 5–11.
14. Robinson, P. (1991). ESP today: A practitioner's guide. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall.
15. St. John, M. J., & Johnson, C. (1996). Why this volume. English for Specific Purposes, 15, 1–2.
16. Syllabus Copy. (2017) *Business Communication*. Retrieved from http://ghbs.in/admissions/mba/mba-programme/businesscommunication/syllabus