English Oral Communication Skills for Chemical Engineering Students at Hadhramout University

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that English oral communication skills are essential in engineering education so as to maintain relevance with the global environment of the new millennium. However, prior research found out that many engineering students often lacked communications skills that are necessary in their target educational and occupational fields. Therefore, this paper reports findings from an exploratory study on how chemical engineering students perceived their English oral communication skills needs. The sample consisted of 55 fourth and fifth year chemical engineering undergraduates at Hadhramout University in the academic year 2024/2025. Generally, the results averred that chemical engineering students should be equipped with specific oral communication skills so as to enable them function effectively in their academic and job domains.

Keywords: Oral Communication Skills, Needs Analysis (NA), English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Introduction:

English communication skills are central in engineering education as Riemer (2005) acknowledges, "communication skills are essential for an engineer who aspires to carry out his/her professional practice on the global scene" (p.1). This is also supported by Tenopir and Donald (2004), "engineers now communicate through a growing array of ways to an increasing range of audiences" (p.99).

However, many researchers such as Almehaini (2018); Al-Tamimi (2010); Dulevičius and Naginevičiene (2005); Neelambaram (2018); Poedjiastutie and Rifah (2019); Riemer (2002) and Zeigler (2007) found out that EFL engineering students face a lot of difficulties when using oral communication skills. This may hold true in the Yemeni EFL context as preliminary interviews with engineering graduates and subject teachers at the Faculty of Petroleum Engineering at Hadhrmout University revealed that chemical engineering students at the completion of their graduation end up having excellent technical skills, however, lacking in effective English communication skills. This view is also supported by studies done by Al-Tamimi and Munir Shuib (2008) and Al-Tamimi (2010) which indicated that engineering students at Hadhrmout University faced many problems in using English, although they were required to improve their skills in the English language as a necessary condition for employment after graduation.

Given this, the present paper reports findings from an exploratory study about how engineering students at Hadhrmout University perceived their English oral communication skills needs.

Literature Review

Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing (Wahba, 1998 & Rababah, 2003). For instance, Rababah (2003) clearly stated that another important area of difficulty that Arab learners of English have is communication. Arab learners find it difficult to communicate in the target language. Regarding the Yemeni EFL context, many researchers (Al-Fattah, 2003; Al-Quyadi, 2000; Al-Sohbani, 2013; Al-Tamimi, 2010, 2016; Sahu, 1999; Zuheer, 2008) posit that the bulk of Yemeni EFL students are found to have inadequate competence in English even in the university level.

As far as engineering field of study is concerned, Dlaska (1999) asserts that studies show that a good general competence in the foreign language will not necessarily enable engineering students to cope with subject-specific

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communications in the workplace or during a course of study abroad. And being only technically competent is not enough for engineers as Dulevičius and Naginevičiene (2005) argued, "engineers may be technically competent; however, they often lack good communications skills that are necessary in order to transfer information and reasons" (p. 19). This situation makes excellent technical skills superfluous. It is obvious that communication skills are critical tools for success. In the same vein, Beder (2000) noted that graduates are leaving universities without essential skills that are not only demanded by employers but also crucial for good citizenship and social responsibility. The problem is particularly acute for engineering graduates.

A number of studies have been carried out in the Arab world on learners' needs. For example, in Jordan, there was an old study conducted by Zoghoul and Hussein (1985) on the language needs of undergraduate students from different disciplines i.e. from six natural sciences, engineering, medical sciences, economics, administrative sciences, and arts and humanities. The study examined the perceptions of both students and staff members. In Kuwait, Basturkmen (1998) reported that a needs analysis (hereafter NA) research was carried out in 1996 in the College of Petroleum and Engineering at Kuwait University. The study identified the students' needs in seven departments, i.e. petroleum, chemical, electronic, computer, mechanic, industrial and civil engineering. The major objective of that study was to assess the students' language requirements in target academic situations in relation to their present situation, i.e., a deficiency analysis. Another study, conducted by Abu-Rizaizah (2005), aimed at designing an ESP writing course for engineers in a Saudi company.

With regard to the Yemeni EFL context, the main focus of the reported NA studies was either medical students (Abdullah, 1999; 2005; Al-Fadly, 2004; Bin-Tayeh, 1996) or English majors (Al-Haddad & Munir Shuib, 2005; Al-Muslimi, 2004; Farae, 2005). Moreover, in the Faculty of Petroleum Engineering attached to Hadhramout University, the only NA study was carried out by Al-Tamimi (2010) among petroleum engineering students. However, chemical engineering students have been out of the scope of any NA research. Therefore, the researcher was motivated to carry out the present study to fill in this gap.

Theoretical Framework:

The current study is guided by Hutchinson and Waters's (1987) Target Needs framework. The term "target needs" is broken down into necessities (the learner's target linguistic features), lacks (the learner's target linguistic features minus what he/she already knows) and wants (what the learner feels he/she wants and needs). Consequently, by looking at the learner's necessities one can identify "the demands of the target situation, that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 55). It is then, the learner's lacks should be looked at as to understand the gap between the learner's target and existing proficiency.

Given this, the present investigation aims to identify the English communication skills needs of the chemical students at Hadhramout University by:

- Finding out how frequently the English oral communication skills are used by chemical engineering undergraduates at Hadhramout University.
- Identifying the lacks that chemical engineering undergraduates have when using English oral communication skills.

Research Design:

The primary method of inquiry used in this study was a questionnaire (Please see Appendix A). It consisted of three sections: A, B and C. Section A was used to obtain data regarding the students' demographic background. Sections **B** and **C** are developed to obtain information concerning the chemical engineering students' **frequency** in using 14 English communication skills and their **ability** in

using these skills respectively. The list of English communication skills is adopted from onestopenglish.com and was validated using the jury method. It is worth indicating that an Arabic version of the questionnaire was administered to the participants to ease understanding of the questionnaire items.

Population and Sample:

The target students' population in this study was all the students who studied in the academic year 2024-2025 in the Department of Chemical Engineering at Hadhramout University,Yemen. The total number of the students was *206* (162 males and 44 females).

A non-probability judgment sampling technique was employed by the researcher to select a representative sampling of the subjects in this study. Choosing the subjects using the judgment (purposive) sampling is based on the researcher's own judgment (Milroy, 1987). Given this, only *55* fourth and fifth year chemical engineering students, aged from 22 to 26 years old, were selected as a sample to fill in the questionnaire.

Results and Discussions:

The section is divided into two sub-sections. Firstly, data related to the frequent use of communication skills by chemical engineering students are presented. Then, ratings regarding the students' ability in performing English communication skills are given.

Result on the Chemical Engineering Students' Frequency of English Communication Skills Use

This sub-section presents the questionnaire results on how frequent the chemical engineering students are using the various English oral communication skills. A five-point Likert scale (1=never and 5=always) was used. The perceptions of the students in terms of means are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Mean scores of the students' frequent use of communication skills

English Communication sub-skills	Means	Standard Deviation
1) Presentation skills for academic seminars	2.9818	1.09698
2) Discussing academic issues with peers in pairs	2.8545	1.00771
3) Explaining information, ideas, opinions	2.8364	1.06742
4) Using diplomacy and politeness	2.6364	1.16052
5) Negotiating effectively	2.7273	1.07934
6) Responding appropriately to questions	3.0727	.97856
7) Communicating with others in groups (team work)	2.8000	1.26784
8) Communicating with others individually	3.0364	1.10493
9) Expressing/discussing ideas and information with clarity and organisation	2.9091	1.12666
10) Discussing academic issues with university lecturers	2.7818	1.21245
11) Socialising	2.8727	1.24803
12) Making official telephone calls	2.4364	1.13470
13) Speaking to native English speakers	2.8545	1.31118
14) Speaking to non-native English speakers	3.1091	1.19680

Almost all the chemical engineering students' means were less than 3 which reveal that the majority of the communication skills were *sometimes* used. Interestingly enough, however, the students' results, as depicted in Table 1, indicate that *speaking to non-native English speakers* (mean=3.1091), *responding appropriately to questions* (mean=3.0727) and *communicating with*

others individually (mean=3.0364) were perceived to be often being used. This is not surprizing giving the fact that these engineering students may sometimes need to communicate in English with their lecturers at the Department of Chemical Engineering at Hadhramout University.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that some oral communication skills received less mean values and come next in order such as: *Presentation skills for academic seminars* (mean=2.9818), *expressing/discussing ideas and information with clarity and organisation* (mean=2.9091), *socialising* (mean=2.8727), *discussing academic issues with peers in pairs* (mean=2.8545), *speaking to native English speakers* (mean=2.8545), *explaining information, ideas and opinions* (mean=2.8364), and *communicating with others in groups (team work)* (mean=2.8000). This demonstrates that these skills were less frequently used by the current subjects.

In contrast, the least frequently used oral communication skills by the subjects were as following: *Discussing academic issues with university lecturers* (mean=2.7818), *negotiating effectively* (mean=2.7273), *using diplomacy and politeness* (mean=2.6364) and *making official telephone calls* (mean=2.4364). These findings appear to be in line with several studies that found that some English oral communication skills were not frequently used by EFL engineering students regardless of the importance of these skills for the students' success in their academic and job domains (See e.g. Almehaini, 2018; Al-Tamimi, 2010; Poedjiastutie & Rifah, 2019). For instance, Poedjiastutie and Rifah (2019) focused on analyzing the oral communication skills needs of 117 Indonesian civil engineering students at University of Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM). They reported that engineering students should develop and practice specific English communication skills such as those for oral presentation, negotiations, discussions, conversation, and professional functions. Another study was carried out by Almehaini (2018) among 47 Kuwaiti international engineering students in California State University. The results show that 58% Kuwaiti engineering students need to improve their English oral communication skills so as to help them perform better in their future jobs as engineers. In this regard, Vyas (2019) states that engineering students should frequently and effectively make use of English oral communication skills as being recognized as important elements in the education of the modern engineer. In the same vein, Rao and Lakshmi (2020) aver that with superior English communication skills, engineering students are triple-benefitted i.e. for academics, for securing a job for themselves and for their career advancement. In fact, there is a consensus among ESL/EFL researchers in general that English oral communication skills play a vital role to develop the future career of the ESL/EFL learners (Rao, 2019; Sada, Bulbula, & Bulti, 2023; Vukadinova, Terzieva, & Popov, 2021).

Results on the chemical engineering Students' Ability in Performing the English Communication Skills

In this sub-section, data to assess the students' ability in performing the English oral communication skills are presented. The respondents were given five choices to specify their ratings in which 1 refers to "*not efficient at all*", 2 *"not very efficient*", 3 *"somewhat efficient*", 4 "*efficient*", and 5 *"very efficient*". The chemical engineering students' self-ratings of their ability in performing the English communication skills are reported here with reference to their relative results as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Mean scores of the students' ability in using communication skills

English Communication sub-skills	Means	Standard Deviation
1) Presentation skills for academic seminars	3.4545	.89893
2) Discussing academic issues with peers in pairs	3.5818	.91674
3) Explaining information, ideas, opinions	3.7091	.89593
4) Using diplomacy and politeness	3.6000	1.04704
5) Negotiating effectively	3.6364	.98815
6) Responding appropriately to questions	3.7273	.82674
7) Communicating with others in groups (team work)	3.8364	1.04993
8) Communicating with others individually	3.8909	.97511
9) Expressing/discussing ideas and information with clarity and organisation	3.6364	.91010
10) Discussing academic issues with university lecturers	3.3091	.95980
11) Socialising	3.5273	1.03377
12) Making official telephone calls	3.3273	1.20269
13) Speaking to native English speakers	3.0000	1.05409
14) Speaking to non-native English speakers	3.3636	.98815

As seen, the students felt that they are somewhat efficient in using 5 out of 14 of these skills. This is evident from their respective mean scores in Table 2 as their means in these skills ranged between 3.5 and 3. Specifically, the results indicate that the majority perceived themselves as moderately efficient in handling the following English communication skills: *presentation skills for academic seminars* (mean=3.4545), *speaking to non-native English speakers* (mean=3.3636), *making official telephone calls* (mean=3.3273), *discussing academic issues with university lecturers* (mean=3.3091) and *speaking to native English speakers* (mean=3.0000).

On the other hand, many students felt that they are efficient enough to communicate with others individually (mean=3.8909) and in groups (team work) (mean=3.8364) as these skills received the highest mean scores. Moreover, the following oral communication skills have relatively high mean scores including; *responding appropriately to questions* (mean=3.7273), *explaining information, ideas, opinions* (mean=3.7091), *negotiating effectively* (mean=3.6364), *expressing/discussing ideas and information with clarity and organisation* (mean=3.6364), and *using diplomacy and politeness* (mean=3.6000). This demonstrates that the students appear to be quite confident in their ability in performing these skills.

All in all, the results presented above show that chemical engineering students lacked some communication skills which are necessary for them to acquire in order to become successful engineers. The findings indicated the urgent need for the students to develop their English oral communication skills in these skills. This confirms previous findings that proficiency in English oral communication skills is very crucial to enable engineers to function effectively in the workplace (Al-Tamimi, 2010; Beder, 2000; Davies, 1996; Dlaska, 1999; Dulevičius & Naginevičiene, 2005; Julie & Linda, 2003; Lee, 2003; Neelambaram, 2018; Patil & Riemer, 2004; Poedjiastutie & Rifah, 2019; Rahim, 2005; Rao, Manjula, & Lakshmi, 2020; Riemer, 2002, 2005; Tenopir & Donald, 2004; Vyas, 2019). Davies (1996) rightly argues that if engineers have problems in

communication, this "can create ambiguity, even cause disasters. At the very least it gives a bad impression: if people think you communicate badly, they won't trust you as an engineer" (p. 1).

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This is the first study of its kind among chemical engineering students at Hadhramout University. It helped to identify chemical engineering students' English communication skills needs in terms of their ability and frequent use of the English language skills. The results are summarized as follows:

- English communication skills were *sometimes* used by the chemical students at Hadhramout University.
- The chemical students faced a lot of difficulties in using specific English communication skills.

Guided by the current findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The chemical engineering students' performance in specific oral communication skills should be developed. The researcher concurs with Beder (2000) in that it is no longer sufficient, nor even practical, to attempt to cram students full of technical knowledge in the hope that it will enable them to do whatever engineering task is required of them throughout their careers.
- Specific oral communication skills should be fostered in the chemical students' English language course not just because they are qualities that employers look for but because they should be part of any tertiary education (Beder, 2000) and to reap substantial benefits.
- It is highly recommended to consider the specific communication skills needs of the current students when designing a new English language course. As meeting and satisfying learner's needs and interests would have an important influence on their motivation and therefore achievements. On this regard, Rayan (2007) states that meeting ESP learners' needs when designing their courses will enhance their interest and motivation level, foster their critical thinking skills, make them take part in various language activities enthusiastically and result in their effective learning. He goes on to emphasise that such a step would make teaching learning process enjoyable and pave the way for achieving the course objectives.
- It is found that the current students are competent enough in communicating with others individually and in groups. Therefore, ESP teachers may implement the ***Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*** approach in the students' English language classroom so as to help foster their language learning. This is relevant to Kitkauskienė's (2006) view who argues that as teaching ESP is determined by different professional/occupational, social and other- needs of the learner, therefore, ESP includes specialised programmes which are designed to develop the communicative use of English in a specialised field of science, work or technology. In the same vein, Raluca (2002) advised ESP teachers to improve engineering students' communication skills by using CLT approach as it seems to be not only a modern method, but also the most appropriate teaching theory for an ESP course.

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APPENDIX A

The Students' Questionnaire

Dear Participants:

The following questionnaire constitutes part of a research project that investigates the English communication skills needs of chemical engineering students at Hadhramout University.

The questionnaire is anonymous and all the data will be handled confidentially. Your accurate responses and the time spent in filling in the questionnaire are highly respected and appreciated.

Instructions: For the following items, please indicate your answer with a tick (√) in the boxes or spaces provided. Where a line is provided, please write your answer, if applicable.

A) Background Information

Please tick (√) in the appropriate box.

1. What is your age?
   - 21 years [ ]
   - 22 years [ ]
   - 23 years [ ]
   - 24 years [ ]
   - 25 years [ ]
   - Others (please specify) _____

2. What is your sex?
   - Male [ ]
   - Female [ ]

3. What is your level of study?
   - Fourth year [ ]
   - Fifth year [ ]

B) Frequency of English Language Skills Use

How *frequently* do you use the following *communication skills* in the English language?? Please tick (√) in the appropriate space.

Communicative events in English	**Always**	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Never**
1) Presentation skills for academic seminars					
2) Discussing academic issues with peers in pairs					
3) Explaining information, ideas, opinions					
4) Using diplomacy and politeness					
5) Negotiating effectively					
6) Responding appropriately to questions					
7) Communicating with others in groups (team work)					
8) Communicating with others individually					
9) Expressing/discussing ideas and information with clarity and organisation					
10) Discussing academic issues with university lecturers					
11) Socialising					
12) Making official telephone calls					
13) Speaking to native English speakers					
14) Speaking to non-native English speakers					
15) Others (please specify)					

C) Ability in Using English Communication Skills

How efficient would you be in using the following *communication skills* in the English language? Please tick (√) in the appropriate space.

Communicative events in English	Very efficient	Efficient	Somewhat efficient	Not very efficient	Not efficient at all
1) Presentation skills for academic seminars					
2) Discussing academic issues with peers in pairs					
3) Explaining information, ideas and opinions					
4) Using diplomacy and politeness					
5) Negotiating effectively					
6) Responding appropriately to questions					
7) Communicating with others in groups (team work)					
8) Communicating with others individually					
9) Expressing/discussing ideas and information with clarity and organisation					
10) Discussing academic issues with university lecturers					
11) Socialising					
12) Making official telephone calls					
13) Speaking to native English speakers					
14) Speaking to non-native English speakers					
15) Others (please specify)					

مهارات الاتصال الشفهية باللغة الإنجليزية لطلاب الهندسة الكيميائية في جامعة حضرموت

عاطف صالح التميمي

الملخص

إنه لمن المتفق عليه بشكل عام أن مهارات الإتصال الشفهية باللغة الإنجليزية مهمة في التعليم الهندسي للحفاظ على مواكبة البيئة العالمية في الألفية الجديدة. بالرغم من ذلك، فقد وجدت الدراسات السابقة أن العديد من طلاب الهندسة غالبا ما يفتقرون إلى مهارات الإتصال الضرورية في المجال التعليمي والمهني. لذلك تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية نتائج دراسة إستكشافية حول إنطباعات طلاب الهندسة الكيميائية بجامعة عن إحتياجاتهم لمهارات الإتصال باللغة الإنجليزية . شملت عينة الدراسة 55 من طلاب المستويين الرابع والخامس في قسم الهندسة الكيميائية بجامعة حضرموت في العام الجامعي 2024–2025. وقد أكدت النتائج بشكل عام على ضرورة تزويد طلاب الهندسة الكيميائية بعدد من مهارات الإتصال والتي ستسهم في تمكينهم من العمل بفعالية في مجالاتهم الأكاديمية والوظيفية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارات الإتصال الشفهية، تحليل الإحتياجات، اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض تخصصية