

Gaining in-demand skills in the ESP classroom: a case study in Oman

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Abstract – The most recent trends in education emphasize the importance of its strong focus on the learner’s job-readiness, a convergence of education with the world of work, and its adaptation to the needs of the learner and the employer. Ascribable to its far-reaching partnership with 21st-century educational thinking, demand-driven education and planning for the future, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom is no exception to this, seeing modifications and adaptations in its search for a deeper understanding of the reliable skill set introduction and development. While debating current global and local issues, changes, and challenges in the broad area of ESP, this paper focuses on Omani tertiary education students’ understanding of in-demand 21st-century skills and their development in the dimensions of these skills. The discussion is anchored in the personal feedback of students enrolled in English for Business course offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. In terms of future employability, students were asked to rate twenty-three skill areas and how these skill areas were covered in the course in bilingual English and Arabic questionnaire administered online. The results demonstrate students’ understanding of the importance of 21st-century skills for future employability. They also show that effective in-demand skill instruction requires teacher initiative in the enhanced incorporation of learner-centred teaching approaches and more language learning activities and tasks with a focus on interactive and experiential instruction. This involves a synthesis of best practices in integrated language skills with special focus on speaking, the application of different innovative tools and techniques of teaching, and enhancement of positive attitudes toward aligning skill areas, with an emphasis on idea development, content knowledge, critical and creative thinking.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), 21st century skills, employability skills, learner centred teaching

1. Introduction

In recent years, globalization as a “central driving force behind the rapid social, political, and economic changes” (Held et al 1999: 7) has had profound effects on societies and economies worldwide. While globalization’s net benefits on standards of living are numerous, there have also been cautionary developments. For example, the education sector’s policy and programs have been enriched with a powerful discourse involving the concepts of innovation, information age, knowledge-based economy, life-long learning, learning for workplace flexibility, 21st-century teaching, and learning, and demand-driven education among others whereas the development of an “educated and skilled population to create, share and use knowledge” (Robertson, et al, 2007: 117) has been identified as one of the pillars of modern knowledge-based economies facing a knowledge and skills gap. Such an imbalance between the abilities possessed by young people entering the workforce versus the abilities that companies are seeking (Moore & Morton, 2017) is occurring all over the world, and the Middle East is included in this human resources and workforce trend. In fact, a report by the International Labor Organization noted that global youth unemployment has risen from 9.3 percent in 1991 to 12.8 percent in 2018 (World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2019, 2019). However, the rate for the Middle East is approximately 26 percent, which is double the global average (Khamis, 2020).

The increasing pace of automation will only add more pressure to these numbers. To illustrate, in a 2018 report entitled *The future of jobs in the Middle East* prepared in collaboration with McKinsey Group, Moore, Chandran, and Schubert predict that 45 percent of jobs in the workforce today in the six Middle Eastern countries of Oman, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, can be replaced with automation. Furthermore, an executive opinion survey (Khamis, 2020) revealed a stark contrast between skills sought by companies and skills possessed by graduates. When asked “In your country, to what extent do university graduates possess the skills needed by businesses?”, the answers ranged from 1 to 7, with 7 indicating “to a great extent.” Worryingly, Oman scored 4.8, which was among the lowest in the countries surveyed (Khamis, 2020), and “this skills gap poses a genuine threat to economic growth” (Benayoune, 2018: 153) of the country. However, Moore et al (2018) contend that a knowledge and skills gap does not imply that the absolute number of jobs available will permanently decline, but rather that the knowledge and skills needed are shifting from tasks requiring lower-level repetitious information processing to tasks that involve social and emotional skills as well as logical reasoning. Indeed, companies are giving greater value to recent graduates who can demonstrate command of soft skills, such as reasoning, problem-solving and idea generation (Khamis, 2020).

In other words, firms are giving increasing prominence to the idea of hiring people based on their intellectual flexibility and ability to learn new things, especially when it is self-directed. Accordingly, institutions of higher learning must transition from a teaching philosophy of “knowledge transmission” to one of the fostering of cognitive skill development, such as adaptation, improvisation, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. Some theorists have characterized these skills as “employability skills”. The hallmark of employability skills is their transferability,

and include the ability to “solve complex, multidisciplinary problems, work successfully in teams, exhibit effective oral and written communication skills, and practice good interpersonal skills” (Schmidt, 1999, cited in Gomez & Peter, 2017: 94). In addition to interpersonal capabilities, specific knowledge, and skills that are required in the world of work include complex thinking (Deegan & Martin, 2018). Lifelong learning, adaptability, and flexibility are also components of employability skills since rapid technological changes have the potential to render an employee redundant in the long term if he or she cannot successfully embrace change. In recent years and going forward, employers see a degree or diploma as signifying that the individual graduate only possesses the bare minimum in terms of content knowledge; they are seeking individuals who possess critical thinking, problem-solving and soft skills necessary to effectively maximize the firm’s resources in an ever-changing competitive business environment (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018).

According to Deegan and Martin (2018: 7), “as the future of work unfolds, what makes us human is what will make us employable”. In their view, education that is driven by demand “takes account of the emerging global economy - technology-infused, gig-oriented, industry-driven – while also striving to ensure that new graduates and lifelong learners alike have the skills required to flourish” (p. 7), and emphasize the development and measurement of the most in-demand skills as a requirement for bringing these practices to scale. Recent research seems to corroborate this view while supporting it with evidence from different fields of education including the teaching of English for Specific Purposes that adapts to new practices and perspectives.

It has been suggested that the theorizing and teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) evolved due to three broad trends in recent decades: (1) increased globalization, resulting in changing demands in the working world; (2) advances in the field of linguistics; and (3) a renewed focus on the learner, differing from the “one-size-fits-all” teaching of general English (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, cited in Laborda & Litzler, 2015). This was especially true for language learners in the fields of science, technology, and business. Precise definitions of ESP have been difficult to pin down. Laborda and Litzler (2015: 40) state that ESP differs from the teaching of general English in that the former applies in cases characterized by “immediate professional or academic demands and applicable situations”. The conceptualization of specificity is even more pronounced in Belcher’s (2006) characterization of ESP as he states that ESP must involve tailor-made instruction for specific students in specific situations (cited in Poedjiastutie, 2017). Furthermore, ESP theorists have opined that the needs of the learners take prominence.

Richards and Schmidt (2010, cited in Laborda & Litzler, 2015: 40) suggest that both the contents and aims of any ESP course are determined by the “specific needs of a particular group of learners”. Dudley-Evans (1998) aims for a more comprehensive definition of ESP by detailing both absolute and variable characteristics of any ESP course. The absolute characteristics that apply to ESP are that “ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines that it serves. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre” (p. 6). In terms of learner characteristics, Dudley-

Evans (1998) proposes that most ESP learners are probably at least at an intermediate proficiency level, having a working knowledge of English, and are likely adult or near-adult students. Finally, there are five essential roles that ESP instructors take on (Dudley-Evans, 1998, cited in Otilia, 2015): teacher, course designer, collaborator, researcher, and evaluator. In terms of teaching, the ESP practitioner endeavors to foster opportunities for learning by generating authentic communicative tasks. As a course designer, tailored materials should be created that mimic, as far as possible, similar materials that are encountered in the workplace. Collaboration refers to the practice of working with subject specialists, as the ESP practitioner typically is not an expert in the field in terms of content. As a researcher, ideally, the ESP practitioner furthers his or her own study of the discipline, while also considering the needs and goals of the learners. Evaluation refers to the process of first evaluating students' needs, followed by an assessment of the effectiveness of student responses to the teaching methods on the course, ending in an appraisal of student learning outcomes.

The expectations and demands made on the role of tertiary educational institutions have changed dramatically in recent years. Pointing out rapid changes in the world of work, Robertson et al (2007) assert that “the future of work will require a more flexible, dynamic, and equitable system of preparation. A map of this system may look less like a highway and more like the iconic web of circles and intersections of the London Underground”. Consequently, moving beyond the traditional model of transmitting information and knowledge to learners, educators everywhere are now grappling with the daunting challenge of how to make their courses relevant and useful to prospective graduates and employers alike. Moving beyond discipline-specific course material is increasingly seen as necessary. According to a joint survey of Fortune 500 CEOs by the Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, there was broad agreement that 75% of the factors that account for getting and maintaining a job successfully, depends on a person's “soft skills” and only 25% on a person's technical or discipline-specific knowledge (Malhi, 2009, cited in Singh et al 2014). This was echoed in a study by the German Chamber of Commerce that indicated 8 out of the 10 most sought-after skills by employers were soft skills: team-player skills, self-management, dedication, communication, sense of responsibility, decision making, resilience and success-orientation (Pennington, 2013). Furthermore, a 2017 study by Google that analyzed 20 years' worth of data regarding hiring, firing, performance appraisals, and promotions revealed that STEM expertise was actually the least important of the parameters looked at. Indeed, the highest-performing employees mastered the following attributes: communicating and listening well, being an effective coach, demonstrating empathy toward coworkers, and the ability to engage in problem-solving and critical thinking (MacLachlan, 2019).

In recent years, theorists and practitioners have been engaged in the formulation of various frameworks that endeavour to define those skills that are most valued by today's dynamic workforce. Among the frameworks that have appeared in the literature, and have applicability to ESP courses at tertiary institutions are the following: 21st-century skills, soft skills, and employability skills. Being relevant to most aspects of contemporary life in a complex world, most 21st century skills “focus on similar types of complex thinking, learning, and communication skills, and all are more demanding to teach and learn than rote skills. These abilities are also commonly

referred to as higher-order thinking skills, deeper learning outcomes, and complex thinking and communication skills” (Rosefsky & Opfer, 2012: 8). With regard to these skills, the Partnership for 21st Century Learning along with the OECD have identified the “4Cs” deemed critical for success in the 21st-century world of work: critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (Bedir, 2019). Turning now into soft skills, the literature currently shows a multiplicity of definitions of the concept of “soft skills”; however, there is a wide degree of overlap among them. For example, Hurrell et al. (2012, cited in Tikhonova et al, 2018) state that soft skills are non-technical skills that involve interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate competent performance in particular social contexts.

Another framework posits that soft skills encompass communication skills (including oral, written, and presentation), social skills (teamwork, leadership, responsibility), cognitive skills (critical thinking, problem-solving), and emotional intelligence (Tikhonova et al, 2018). The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia has specified seven soft skills that are to be embedded in the curriculum: communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, lifelong learning, and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethic, and professional moral skills, and leadership skills (Ngang et al, 2015). Finally, the concept of employability skills has existed for decades. They describe the competencies that have always been necessary for one’s full and successful participation in the world of employment. What is a more current development, however, is their renewed emphasis in the educational sphere (Gomez & Peter, 2017). Jackson and Chapman (2012, cited in Jackson, 2015) have developed a thorough framework that elucidates all of the requisite components of employability skills. They include: (1) working effectively with others; (2) communicating effectively; (3) self-awareness; (4) thinking critically; (5) analyzing data and using technology; (6) problem solving; (7) developing initiative and enterprise; (8) self-management; (9) social responsibility and accountability; and (10) developing professionalism.

In their study Gap analysis of business students’ skills in the 21st century: A case study of Qatar (2018), Alshare and Sewailem focus attention on the importance of embedding 21st-century skills into educational systems and student learning of these skills in response to the demands affected by the trends and challenges of the business environment and current highly competitive workplace. As they have elucidated, 21st-century skills encompass knowledge, skills, work habits, and character traits that are critically important to success in today’s world, and business graduates need these skills as members of the 21st-century workforce and global economy of the world. Alshare and Sewailem (2018) identify two main groups of skills, namely soft skills and hard skills. According to them, soft skills can be further classified as people-related skills that include interpersonal skills, communication, and collaboration/teamwork, and personal skills that contain adaptability and flexibility, leadership, professionalism, work ethics, voluntarism, and social responsibility. As for hard skills, they are subdivided into three sub-groups: basic/fundamental skills, which include technical skills and knowledge in specialized areas; conceptual/thinking skills, which include critical thinking/problem solving, analytical thinking, planning and organizing, decision making and IT related skills, and business skills, which comprise dealing with real-world problems, creative

thinking (innovation), global business and multicultural awareness. The distinctions between these two groups of skills incorporate, as explained by Alshare and Sewailem (2018), such features as (1) the degree to which the skills can be generalized or transferred to other contexts, job types, employment levels or settings; (2) difficulty level of learning; and (3) opportunities in the workplace. They believe, for example, that soft skills involve employee characteristics and qualifications that are not job-specific and can cover all job types. Therefore, if graduates have well-developed soft skills, they have more chances to find better jobs. Similarly, Rao (2014) believes that well-developed soft skills, or, as the researcher describes them “people skills” (p. 42), are the reason for the major portion of an employees’ job success. However, soft skills are both difficult to teach and acquire: these are two serious problems that the teachers and students faced (Alshare & Sewailem, 2018). For example, Alshare and Sewailem (2018) argue that soft skills “mainly grow through experience in a collaborative business environment” (n.p.).

However, since enhancing employability is a major challenge, a focus on the development of in-demand skills is evolving as one of the common educational goals across a variety of educational contexts and subject areas. This educational goal, of course, gives special importance and value to the process of learning and the critical role of teaching (Bondarevskaya, 2001). It also gives prominence to ‘student voice’. As shown in the study by Mitra (2004), increasing ‘student voice’ leads to gains in their development. Students, for example, gain a stronger sense of their skills, articulate how they learn best, and help educators to tailor the curriculum to meet their academic and professional needs (Mitra, 2004). Hence, the discussion of gaining in-demand skills in the ESP classroom that follows is anchored in the personal feedback of the students. In particular, it focuses on Omani tertiary education students’ understanding of in-demand 21st-century skills and their development in the dimensions of these skills and involves students enrolled in English for Business course offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.

2. Method

The study was concerned with students’ views and perceptions about 21st-century skills and whether they develop them with greater exposure in the English for Business classroom. It aimed at identifying English for Business students’ perspectives on the most important skills that they need to tackle 21st-century economic realities and their level of satisfaction with how these skills are taught in the classroom. The hypothesis was that these perceptions are likely to influence students’ motivation and add an advantage in getting a job after graduation. It was also fruitful to identify classroom activities that are supportive in skill development and hear students’ comments on course improvement in relation to in-demand 21st-century skills’ teaching and learning, and students’ development in the dimensions of these skills.

2.1 Research Design

The study involved students enrolled in English for Business III course at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Evidence suggests that self-reports of learning, or

perceived learning, can be a valid measure of learning (Pace, 1990). Similarly, according to Rovai and Barnum (2003), students' perceptions may be more important than reality, as decisions about learning are often based on perceptions. A mixed-method was adopted in the research design. In terms of future employability, students were asked to rate twenty-three skill areas and how these skill areas are covered in the course in bilingual English and Arabic questionnaire administered online via Google Forms. The survey was taken by the students based on their agreement to be part of the study sample on a voluntary basis. In total, 67 responses were collected; the overall data obtained from study participants were saved on one computer for examination, and further quantitative and qualitative analysis.

2.2 Participants

In order to ensure the representativeness of the sample and certain generalizability in the statistical analysis of the data, the sample size (n) was 67 students. The participants of the study were students who took the English for Business III course offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies as a compulsory degree plan component for all students registered in the College of Economics and Political Science at Sultan Qaboos University. According to CELP Curriculum Document (2013), the course “focuses on logical thinking and applying the topmost cognitive skills to prepare the students not only for their college courses but for lifelong learning for their future professional paths” (p. 48), while emphasizing the productive English skills of writing and speaking, as well as business vocabulary acquisition through case study readings. Course-related learning and teaching strategies involve classwork, individual essays, and presentations, small group problem-based activities, and tasks, interactions with Moodle online learning management platform as well as independent work of the students who explore a variety of business-related topics and themes.

The cross-sectional sample represented both male (n = 25) and female (n = 42) students aged between 19 and 23 from the following specialties: accounting (4.5%); information systems (3%); economics (7.5%); finance (7.5%); management (1.5%); marketing (1.5%); and “not yet decided” (74.5%). The age of the majority of the students who participated in the study was 19 years old (53.7%). Female study participants outnumbered male participants by 62.7% to 37.3%.

2.3 Data Collection

A survey instrument was designed in the English language to comprise questions about student demographic information, including age, gender, specialization; in-demand skills for future employability drawn from literature and contemporary research (Alshare & Sewailem, 2018) and student level of satisfaction in relation to how these skills are covered in the English for Business course. As for the skill list, it included such in-demand skills explored in a study by Alshare and Sewailem (2018) of existing gaps between business students' skills/competencies provided by colleges of business and the needs of the current job market in Qatar; the skill list included: critical thinking and problem solving, the knowledge required in specialization, work ethics, interpersonal skills, skills of analytical thinking, creative thinking, innovation, collaboration and teamwork, information technology, decision making, leadership, planning and organizing, global business awareness, technical skills, adaptability and flexibility, English oral and written communication skills, volunteerism, professionalism, multicultural awareness, social responsibility, information locating

and information gathering. In addition, the survey comprised a section that asked students to identify English for Business course components that were most useful for learning 21st-century skills, for example, in-class discussions, reading assignments with international settings in the textbook, writing assignments with international settings in the textbook, multiple-choice questions in the textbook, reflections on Moodle, videos on Moodle, vocabulary quizzes on Moodle, discussion forum assignments on Moodle, problem-based learning research, teamwork, presentations and reports, and lectures from instructors. The final section of the instrument was allocated for students' free texts comprising their comments, additional information, and suggestions for course improvements in relation to course teaching and learning.

The instrument was then translated into Arabic which is the students' mother tongue to allow for tailoring to students' accustomed and relevant linguistic experiences and needs, including using the Arabic language to comfortably express their views, opinions, and thoughts, and thus obtaining a more complete picture for further analysis. An online version of the survey instrument on the Google Forms platform was used for data collection. This survey was created and deployed in both the English and Arabic languages. The survey tool was administered in two languages from the first to last question, including an optional window for student comments and suggestions for course improvement. Students were given the link to the bilingual version of the instrument. The link was posted on the English for Business course page on the Moodle platform. Students' responses were seen and reviewed on the Google platform.

2.4 Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used. At first, data was stored in an online table on Google Drive and then auto-analyzed by Google Forms. The summary included a number of responses, percentages, and visuals. The visuals were represented by graphs and charts created in the summary of the responses section of Google Forms for all the data collected. Then the collected data on student free-text responses was reviewed to identify key passages, ideas, common themes, and categories, analyze and explain them. Each free text was manually coded with a letter S and a corresponding number, e.g. S1, S2, etc. As well, categories or themes that emerged from data were also coded using hierarchical frames that "capture a taxonomy of how the codes relate to one another" (Open-ended questions, 2018, n.p.) while making it possible to use a "different level of granularity during the coding and the analysis of the results" (ibid.). In addition, the free texts were analyzed using Text Analyzer [<https://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp>], a free software utility which allows finding the most frequent phrases and frequencies of words, while supporting both English and non-English language texts, counting the number of words, characters, sentences and syllables and calculating lexical density, namely the number of lexical words in the texts that give them their meaning and provide information regarding what they are about.

3. Results and Discussion

Student attitude to in-demand skills for future employability

In terms of future employability, students were asked to rate 23 skill areas on a five-point Likert scale from “very important” (score of 5) to “not important” (score of 1). Mean scores were used to rank skills’ perceived importance relative to each other. The results of this survey question can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Scale mean score for perceived importance of employability skills

No	Skills	Mean Score (Importance)
1	Work ethics	4.75
2	Critical thinking; problem solving	4.56
3	Adaptability; flexibility	4.55
4	Decision making	4.45
5	Interpersonal skills	4.45
6	Knowledge required in specialization	4.43
7	Planning and organizing	4.42
8	Collaboration; teamwork	4.24
9	Written communication skills in English	4.22
10	Technical skills	4.19
11	Oral communication skills in English	4.19
12	Creative thinking; innovation	4.16
13	Social responsibility	4.13
14	Leadership skills	4.08
15	Global business awareness	4.06
16	Analytical thinking	4.04
17	Information gathering skills	4.01
18	Observational skills	4.00
19	Professionalism	3.88
20	Information technology	3.87
21	Information locating skills	3.79
22	Multicultural awareness	3.59
23	Volunteerism	3.38

Interestingly, survey results seemed to indicate that students demonstrate awareness of the importance of soft skills. The 5 skills that received the highest ratings of importance for future employability as perceived by students (work ethics, critical thinking/problem solving, adaptability/flexibility, decision making, and interpersonal skills) fit into the category of transferable generic skills that go beyond academic subject knowledge or more specific technical skills taught in tertiary educational institutions. For decades, employers have stressed the importance of soft skills, and the literature in this area is well-documented (Jackson, 2013). Studies that explore student perceptions regarding the importance of soft skills are less numerous; however, a cursory review of research in this area has revealed several interesting findings. According to a study of 1046 business undergraduates in Australia, “employability skill development” received greater prominence in the eyes of the students as compared to “hard skills”. To illustrate, the skills of working effectively with others, communicating effectively, problem solving, self-management, and thinking critically received higher ratings of perceived importance by business students than the skill of analyzing data and using technology (Jackson, 2013). Similarly, a study of business majors in the UK indicated that students perceived

group work and group presentations as effective tools in the development of “personal transferable skills” (Shah, 2013). In this study, students freely admitted that they did not always enjoy working in groups but did acknowledge its usefulness in providing real-world skill development, a further indication of the perceived importance of soft skills in the 21st-century workplace (Shah, 2013). Finally, Haddad and Marx (2018) reported survey results of American students majoring in agricultural studies who completed internships as part of their undergraduate degree program. When asked what skills received the greatest opportunities for development, students responded with several soft skills receiving the most attention, such as communication, problem-solving, lifelong learning, professional ethics, and leadership. Even though students did not rate themselves highly competent in the area of problem-solving, they did state that their metacognitive ability to perform realistic self-appraisal on their skill sets was greatly enhanced (Haddad & Marx, 2018).

Student level of satisfaction with how in-demand skills are taught in the English for Business classroom

Next, students were asked to rate their level of satisfaction on these same 23 skill areas to the degree that students are provided opportunities to hone these skills through the various course assignments. Again, a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “very satisfied” (score of 5) to “not satisfied” (score of 1) was used to gather responses. Mean scores were utilized to rank relative levels of perceived satisfaction and these results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 Scale mean score for satisfaction of opportunities to develop employability skills

No	Skills	Mean Score (Satisfaction)
1	Collaboration; teamwork	4.27
2	Planning and organizing	4.01
3	Oral communication skills in English	4.00
4	Written communication skills in English	3.99
5	Information gathering skills	3.93
6	Work ethics	3.87
7	Interpersonal skills	3.85
8	Leadership skills	3.83
9	Critical thinking; problem solving	3.82
10	Decision making	3.67
11	Knowledge required in specialization	3.65
12	Social responsibility	3.64
13	Adaptability; flexibility	3.58
14	Creative thinking; innovation	3.58
15	Analytical thinking	3.57
16	Information locating skills	3.55
17	Global business awareness	3.47
18	Observational skills	3.46
19	Volunteerism	3.43
20	Multicultural awareness	3.33
21	Information technology	3.30
22	Technical skills	3.27
23	Professionalism	3.26

Several observations can be made regarding the results in Table 2 pertaining to students' perceived levels of satisfaction with opportunities for skill development in the English for Business course. Students felt that they were provided with plentiful opportunities for skills development of collaboration/teamwork and planning and organizing. In the course, prominence is given to a Problem Based Learning (PBL) component that involves the development of a proposal for a nonprofit organization. Students work in groups of 3 or 4 members over the course of the semester researching shortcomings in the provision of basic humanitarian needs, and through the information that is gathered and analyzed, engaging in PEST and SWOT analyses to determine an opportunity to fulfill these needs through a sustainable nonprofit organization. Development of the rationale, vision and mission statements, organizational structure, expected sources of funding and expenditures, and formulation of the nonprofit's significance and recommendations, round out the project. Opportunities to develop oral and written communication skills in English also showed higher levels of satisfaction, which is not surprising given the in-class attention provided to class discussions, presentations, and the further development of individual writing skills, namely expository and persuasive writing with regard to business case studies. The remaining skills that make up the top 10, namely, information gathering skills, work ethics, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, critical thinking/problem solving and decision making, are again all present in the group work PBL project which receives fully one-third of the time devoted to in-class instruction. Research in this area offers a cautionary tale for instructors and curriculum planners alike. According to Cooke and Moyle (2002, cited in Carvalho, 2016), students fully perceive PBL to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. This is echoed in Sherwood (2004, cited in Carvalho, 2016), who finds that students do agree with the idea that PBL can provide improved problem solving and self-directed learning skills. However, the crucial issue for practitioners is implementation. While students do agree in theory that PBL hones a multiplicity of soft skills, to what degree these skills are enhanced is a matter for debate. As stated by Carvalho (2016) soft skill development is not an automatic result of an experiential learning opportunity. Having said that, it cannot be denied that the literature is rich in the advantages of PBL as a tool to augment one's transferable or employability skills (Salam, 2018).

The English for Business III course at Sultan Qaboos University is divided into three components: academic reading skills, academic writing skills, and Problem Based Learning. The reading and writing skills component utilizes business case studies to supply content that is meaningful and relevant both in the context of Oman and overseas. Both global and local business and economic issues are discussed. Through the course of class discussions, reading and writing tasks, and visual media clips, students have the opportunity to identify, analyze and evaluate a range of issues that for-profit and nonprofit organizations face in the world today while enhancing their competency in business language skills. Case studies make use of such business themes as strategy formulation and implementation, vision and mission statements, marketing in the context of different industries and locales, as well as cross-cultural advertising, human resources, corporate culture, and social media branding and communication. As mentioned earlier, the Problem Based Learning component of the course focuses on social entrepreneurship in the form of developing a proposal for a

nonprofit organization. Three sub-components of the PBL project are utilized here: a group report, a group presentation, and three reflective writing assignments. The reflective writing assignments are meant to gauge students' perceptions of their own growing metacognition through the stages of the PBL research component and focus on themes such as problems with teamwork and how these problems are addressed. Finally, student interaction with digital platforms is a key component of teaching and learning in English for Business course. Course materials are available for students to access on a Moodle course page. The course Moodle website includes such components as course learning outcomes, a course outline, suggested timelines for the completion of the stages of the project, a discussion forum, academic vocabulary quizzes, links to web-based resources to assist in the design of their nonprofit organization proposal, videos that illustrate course content, assessment rubrics, and reflection assignments related to the process and outcomes of group work. The Moodle discussion forum provides an opportunity every week to interact with the instructor and other students on issues related to common business themes, such as the elements of corporate strategy, how to formulate and write vision and mission statements, business terminology, and academic vocabulary, and other issues of importance.

Now, moving to how students felt about these course components, students were asked to evaluate 13-course components in terms of perceived usefulness for acquiring the 21st-century skills of critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from “very useful” (score of 5) to “not useful” (score of 1) was employed, and mean scores can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 Scale Mean Score for Usefulness of Course Components

No	Skills	Mean Score (Usefulness)
1	PBL teamwork	4.12
2	In class discussion	4.06
3	Vocabulary quizzes on Moodle	4.01
4	Reading comprehension questions for case studies	3.76
5	Presentations	3.61
6	PBL research	3.55
7	Lectures	3.44
8	PBL report	3.43
9	Writing assignments with international focus	3.42
10	PBL videos	3.34
11	Reading assignments with international focus	3.24
12	PBL reflection writing	3.21
13	Moodle discussion forum	2.95

A couple of observations can be made here. Again, we can see that students place much value on the usefulness of teamwork skills. This tends to argue in favor of the proposition that students understand the importance of soft or transferable skills. However, it is perhaps a little surprising that students attributed a low level of usefulness to PBL reflective writing since this type of writing is designed to foster the development of one's metacognitive skills – indeed a transferable skill. One possible

reason for this might be that the purpose and benefits of reflective writing are not sufficiently communicated to students, resulting in students' lackluster enthusiasm for these tasks. Paterson (2017) makes a similar point in a study of university students in Uzbekistan. When the cognitive benefits of certain types of class assignments, especially those not associated with traditional educational classroom tasks, are not clearly communicated to students, it is not altogether surprising that students might be somewhat dismissive of these tasks. Teacher enthusiasm for the task is not enough (Paterson, 2017).

Students' free-text responses that involved their comments and suggestions with regard to the course and its possible improvement were mostly brief. The responses were both in the English and Arabic languages. The whole corpus of free-text responses as identified using Test Analyst software was comprised of 3120 characters (including spaces), 2484 characters (without spaces), 568 words with the lexical density of 47.1831, and 21 sentences.

The content of students' free-text responses reveals that they appreciate the course design and delivery. Yet, they "frame on purpose" since similar to students in other educational contexts they want "to improve their career prospects" (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013, p. 9). Some of the study participants mention concerns about whether their skill set will match the employment requirements. As one of the study participants verbalized it, they "are afraid to face the future and work in economic jobs" (S3). This finding echoes with the results of the studies on students' employability anxiety in other contexts, for example, in a study by Lairio and Penttinen (2006) who examined how much thinking Finnish university students had done about their future career and future transition from academic life to the world of work. As for the English for Business course learning environment, student self-perceived expectations were probably the main reasons for their suggested possible changes in teaching and learning in relation to in-demand 21st-century skills. In spite of acknowledging the existing opportunities to develop oral and written communication skills in English and showing overall higher levels of satisfaction with these skills teaching in English for Business classroom, one common theme that emerged in students' free-text responses was related to English oral communication skills with the word "speaking" and the phrase "speaking skills" to be among the top most frequently used phrases. To illustrate, one student noted the importance of "focus on speaking" (S10) and "giving students more opportunities to speak with each other" (S8) in English for Business classroom.

This comment echoed in other students' responses. The second common theme, as the analysis of student free-text responses demonstrated, appeared to be about the localization of teaching resources, e.g. case studies, articles in the textbook, additional reading materials. For example, in the opinion of one of the study participants, "the course can be improved by changing the articles in the textbook and making it more about the companies that are related to Omani market" (S7). According to this participant, this will be helpful for students to better understand "how the companies in the local market are working" (S7). Students also believe that the English for Business classroom should be more learner-centered and "more practical" (S13) while featuring "cooperation between teacher and student based on technological devices" (S9). As explained by one study participant, they prefer to be treated as "future

businessmen and women and not as students” (S12). This finding reiterates earlier studies emphasizing that the “learning process today still uses a teacher-oriented approach” (Satriani & Emiliap, 2012, p. 11). According to Satriani and Emiliap (2012), “teachers transfer their knowledge to their students actively, meanwhile, their students, like an empty bottle continually get filled with various kinds of knowledge, which sometimes they do not understand” (p. 11). This necessitates enhanced teacher sensitivity and searches for more effective ways of improving students’ involvement in the English for Business course which, in addition to the emphasis on skill areas’ alignment, will lead to the development of ideas and content knowledge, critical thinking, and creativity.

4. Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine Omani tertiary education students’ understanding of the in-demand 21st-century skills and their development in the dimensions of these skills. The data was obtained using a bilingual English and Arabic questionnaire administered online and involved Omani university students taking an English for Business course. The study was limited in scope since survey participation was voluntary; respondents self-selected.

The findings revealed that students understand the importance of 21st-century skills for future employability. According to students, they are provided with plentiful opportunities for skills development of collaboration/teamwork and planning and organizing. Opportunities to develop oral and written communication skills in English also showed higher levels of satisfaction, as well as information gathering skills, work ethics, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, critical thinking/problem solving, and decision making. In addition, PBL teamwork, in-class discussions, and vocabulary quizzes on Moodle were responded to by students in a positive way.

According to students’ framing of the English for Business course teaching and learning practices, more modifications and adaptations are needed for in-demand skill set development and nurturing. These involve more learner-centered teaching approaches, interactive and experiential instruction with a special focus on speaking and the use of technology.

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