

# COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Carol S. Wright  
Ashley A. Hall

## Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to understand how college students perceive the importance of communication skills in the workplace and to gain a better understanding of how students perceive their own communication skills. Research questions were: 1) How confident are students in their communication skills? 2) How important do students perceive communication skills to their future careers? 3) Do students believe the basic business communication course helped improve their communication skills? Pre- and post-surveys were administered to a convenience sample of online and face-to-face students enrolled in a sophomore-level undergraduate business communication course. Findings showed students believe they have effective oral and written communication skills, they believe the course helped them improve their communication skills, they believed those skills are important to their future careers, and their perceptions were that the course was beneficial. Communication skills are crucial skills employers seek in new hires and findings can inform instructors how students perceive their own communication ability.*

*Keywords: business communication; business education*

Most people will agree that communication skills are important in any career field. Obviously, some fields rely on different types of communication more than other fields, but all require communication competency in some form. When someone is hired, this person is not isolated from others and allowed time to improve skills before interacting with others. Instead, Ortiz, Region-Sebest, and MacDermott (2016) found that new hires should already have good communication skills because what they do is “a significant factor in the company’s overall performance” (p. 327). Accepting this assertion about the value of effective communication in new hires, why do many universities require business students to only take one business communication course?

Research studies reported different perspectives on the course in the last 18 years. For example, Wardrope (2001) reported that business department chairs across the U.S. required a business communication course 76% of the time and almost 50% of these were a junior-level course. In these courses, written skills were four of the five top important skills taught. Russ (2009) reported that 53% of business communication courses were offered at the upper level, and written communication was the most covered topic. Sharp and Brumberger’s 2013 study reviewed course syllabi posted on university websites found that 73% of

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Carol S. Wright is Assistant Professor at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX.  
Ashley A. Hall is Assistant Professor at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX.

courses are offered at the upper level, 71% of schools require at least one business communication course, and 38% of courses focus on both written and oral skills. Moshiri and Cardon's (2014) national survey found there have been few changes in the course in 40 years. Writing tends to be the focus of the course with 93% of instructors including writing assignments. Similarly, Wright and Bayless' (2016) survey of faculty found that only one basic communication course is required by 69% of institutions whose faculty contributed to the survey. Of these classes, they are usually offered at the sophomore or junior levels.

### **Statement of Problem/Purpose**

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) regularly reports that employers want new hires to have strong communication skills. According to a recent NACE survey of employers, 80.3% said written communication skills were valued and 67.5% noted that verbal communication skills were desired. In addition, 54.7% of the employers desired new hires to have strong interpersonal skills (NACE, 2017). The purpose of this study was to investigate how college students perceive the importance of communication skills in the workplace and to gain a better understanding of how the students perceive their own communication skills. This study focused on these research questions:

1. How confident are students in their communication skills?
2. How important do students perceive communication skills are in their future careers?
3. Do students believe the basic business communication course helped improved their communication skills?

### **Literature Review**

There is much discussion among various groups about the most needed skills for recent graduates. The soft skills that are needed tend to be the focus. Indeed (2018) defines soft skills as a personality trait of which communication and interpersonal skills are a subset. Employers often look for candidates that exhibit these skills. Robles (2012) further explains, "soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors – rather than technical aptitude or knowledge. Soft skills are the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (p. 457).

Clokie and Fourie (2016) studied the basic communication course at a regional university to see if its curriculum aligned to the communication competency needs of local employers who often hire its graduates. The findings from this study are similar to other published international studies and show that graduates are lacking in writing skills. The study found that the curriculum was congruent with employer needs, but "the learning does not seem to always translate from the classroom to the workplace" (p. 458). Their conclusion found that the one required communication course was not sufficient to meet the needs of employers.

Robles (2012) conducted a study of the soft skills needed for employees which found that 100% of business executives in the study indicated that communication was considered very important or extremely important for an employee. A more recent study of employers by Ortiz, Region-Sebest and MacDermott (2016) reviewed oral communication skills most valued by recent hires. Respondents in this study reported that new hires spent almost 60% of their day communicating with customers, colleagues, and supervisors. The most common skills used were using proper grammar, team communication, conversing, attending meetings, and using the telephone.

A report published by Fast Company showed recent graduates were confident in their skills in that “87% of recent graduates feel well prepared to hit the ground running after earning their diplomas, only half of hiring managers agree with them” (Dishman, 2017, para. 2). One of the top skills these graduates needed was writing proficiency. Specifically, writing, speaking, and critical thinking were mentioned as essential to accomplishing goals. Similarly, Bauer-Wolf (2018) presented information on the NACE Job Outlook Survey, which showed this same disconnect between employers and employees. Employers felt that only 41.6% of recent graduates were proficient in oral/written communication skills, whereas 79.4% of students felt proficient. Staffing company Adecco (2018) reported on the skills gap. Its survey of 500 U.S. senior executives showed that they believed 44% of Americans lack soft skills that include communication ability, and 54% of these executives believed the education system does not effectively teach these necessary skills for the job.

This skills gap is not a new development. Many reports are showing similar findings. A study by Hart Research Associates (2015) reported written and oral communication skills as some of the most important, and these are more important than what the individual earned for a major. Among other skills, 85% ranked oral communication is very important and 82% ranked written communication as very important. Of students, 78% ranked oral communication as very important and 75% ranked written communication as very important. However, employers report that students are not well prepared for skills that include written and oral communication abilities. In fact, only 30% of employers think recent graduates are well prepared. For oral communication, 28% of employers think graduates are well prepared, but 62% of students think they are. For written communication, 27% of employers think graduates are well prepared, but 65% of students think they are.

## Methodology

This study utilized a convenience sample of students who were enrolled in a sophomore-level business communication course. Using descriptive statistics, the findings will report the quantitative responses from students concerning their perceptions of their skills at the beginning and end of the course and compare how these perceptions may have changed. This course was selected due to its focus on both written and spoken communication skills and its inclusion in the university’s

core curriculum. The learning objectives of the course include planning, writing, and revising business messages in written, oral, and visual formats. Course assignments include writing letters, memos, and emails; researching and writing an analytical report; delivering an oral presentation; completing objective exams; and working with others in a team. Because it is in the core, students in a variety of majors take the course so this study was able to investigate student perceptions that extend beyond College of Business students.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researchers' university approved this study. To gather data, pre- and post-experience surveys were utilized, and data was collected in the Spring 2018 semester. Pre- and post-surveys were used to better understand how students' perceptions might have changed after taking the business communication course. There is an emphasis on how communication skills are necessary in the workplace throughout the targeted course. A future study will investigate the employer's perception of new hires' communication skills and compare them to the students' perceptions found in this study.

Students enrolled in face-to-face sections of the course were given paper surveys. The same survey was distributed electronically for online students. At the end of the data collection period, 373 pre-experience surveys were received and only 227 post-experience surveys. A majority of the respondents (91%) were traditional college aged students (18 – 22 years old). Approximately 46% of those who completed the surveys were sophomores; however, the sample included every classification. All six colleges at the university were represented in the study.

Information gathered from the paper copies of the surveys were entered into Qualtrics online survey software. Qualtrics provided raw data and descriptive data for each questions. The researcher presented the descriptive data compare the pre-test and post-test results.

## Results

An initial review of responses from the surveys indicates that students are confident in their written skills with over 95% reporting that they are at least average in their writing abilities. Similarly, students were confident in their oral communication skills, although over 10% ranked their skills as below average.

This survey asked students to rate their written and oral communication skills separately. Over half of the study participants rated their written communication skills as Excellent or Good (60.59% in the pre-experience survey and 70.92% in the post-experience survey). However, a lower percentage rated their oral communication skills at the Excellent or Good level (55.62% in the pre-experience survey and 65.04% in the post-experience survey). These findings are shown in Figure 1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Student Rankings of Their Communication Skills**

	Written Pre-Survey	Written Post-Survey	Oral Pre-Survey	Oral Post-Survey
Excellent	6.97%	11.01%	11.50%	14.60%
Good	53.62%	59.91%	44.12%	50.44%
Average	34.85%	26.43%	32.62%	30.97%
Below Average	3.49%	1.76%	9.09%	3.54%
Poor	1.07%	0.88%	2.67%	0.44%

Although a small percentage, fewer students ranked their communication skills in the below average or poor categories at the end of the semester. When considering these two categories, written communication skill perceptions improved from 4.56% to 2.64%, and oral communication skill perceptions improved from 11.76% to 3.98%. Having a lower percentage of respondents indicate that their written and/or oral communication skills are Below Average or Poor after taking a business communication course is encouraging and a finding that will be further elaborated on in the next section.

After asking about their perception of their own communication skills, students were asked the importance of communication skills in the workplace. Over 95% of students indicated that both written and oral communication skills were important and they needed these skills upon graduation. Approximately 65% of survey respondents indicated that written communication skills are “Very Important – I need to have these skills when I graduate.” While 6% rated the skills “Needed, but these can be learned on the job” in the pre-experience survey, that percentage fell to 3% after completing the business communication course. In the post-experience survey, students rated oral communication skills as more important than written communication skills in the workplace. Over 80% of respondents indicated that oral communication skills are very important, as compared to only 65% who ranked written communication skills at that level.

The survey also asked participants to rank the following communication skills in order of importance in the workplace: interpersonal communication, written communication, oral communication, and nonverbal communication. The following ranking was most often reported. 1) Interpersonal communication, 2) oral communication, 3) written communication, and 4) nonverbal communication. Student respondents believed that interpersonal communication (interacting one-on-one) was the most important communication type, followed by oral communication.

Participants were asked which communication type they feel is their strongest. In both the pre- and post-experience survey, interpersonal was selected most often and nonverbal was chosen as the strongest communication type the least. Written

and oral communication were chosen with about the same frequency, though oral communication slightly exceeded written communication.

Similarly, respondents were also asked to identify their weakest communication type. In the pre-experience survey, oral communication was chosen over 40% of the time and was 12% higher than the next category – written communication. In the post-experience survey, oral communication was still the most frequently selected answer choice (36%) but written communication was only 5% behind. Of those who completed the post-experience survey, nearly 96% felt that completing the business communication course prepared them “to some degree” or “to a great degree” to be an effective communicator.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Through this study the researchers sought to better understand how students rate their own communication skills as well as the importance they placed on those skills in the workplace. This study answered the following questions:

1. How confident are students in their communication skills?
2. How important do students perceive communication skills are in their future careers?
3. Do students believe the basic business communication course helped improved their communication skills?

To answer research question #1, survey results showed that the majority of students felt they were at least Good, or effective in communicating orally and in writing. In addition, the vast majority (96%) felt the business communication course helped them improve their communication skills to some degree.

To answer research question #2, student responses to the survey were reassuring as student responses showed that 95% felt it was important they need communication skills by their graduation date. Although a sophomore-level class, these students seemed to understand the importance effective communication skills would have on their future careers. They felt their skills were adequate at this point, which was encouraging. It was also reassuring that these students felt that this required writing course was helping prepare them for their future careers. As a class that many students dread to take when they hear it is *writing intensive*, students do see the value received. Research question # 3 can also be answered affirmatively: the business communication course is a beneficial course. Respondents’ perceptions improved after exposure to the business communication course which included multiple writing and speaking assignments. By providing students additional opportunities to hone their writing and speaking skills across the entire undergraduate curriculum, students’ skill level may improve and they may feel more confident in their abilities to communicate effectively in the workplace.

As business educators, we have a responsibility to prepare our students for the workplace and ensure they have the necessary skills to both get hired and succeed

in their job. Communication skills are routinely cited as crucial skills employers seek in new hires. Results from this study can be used to inform instructors on how students perceive their own communication ability. As cited by Robles (2012), communication skills, as part of soft skills, are critical and should be approached as investing in our students' futures by providing opportunities to develop these skills.

This results of this study show that our students are, overall, confident in their ability to communicate well; however, published research shows that students are not as proficient as they would like to think (Adecco, 2018; Bauer-Wolf 2018; Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Dishman, 2017; Robles, 2012). This inconsistency is disheartening; however, students' confidence in their own abilities is a motivating factor. As presented by Bandura (1997) and cited by Mascle (2013), "people must believe that they have the power as well as the capability to act" (p. 223). In other words, having confidence in one's communication ability is one of the main factors that help people communicate better. As educators, we can help our student improve their communication abilities by building their sense of self-efficacy. We can do this by giving our students many opportunities to develop their skills by giving occasions to write in multiple contexts, providing meaningful feedback, and offering encouragement (Mascle, 2013).

### **Limitations of the Research**

Results from this survey are limited in that many respondents did not complete the post-survey because the survey was given at the end of the semester and many instructors did not administer it. This limited the ability to fully compare the results during the course of the semester. Although the sample size was relatively large, at 373 at 227, responses were limited to one semester. Other limitations of the study include unvalidated items in the questionnaire because they addressed student self-efficacy of their skills. The student responses between the pre-tests and post-tests also do not account for differences in teaching styles and effectiveness. The differences were analyzed as a collective whole instead of isolating responses by instructor.

### **Future Research**

Repeating the study in another semester would provide dependability and increase the chances for transferability. These results are also limited in transferability because all data was collected from the same organization. Duplicating the study at another institution would provide insight into a broader perspective from students. Future research should also be done to compare employer perceptions of new hires to recent graduates' perceptions of their communication competencies.

Future research could also include a more in-depth analysis of student responses. The study would be improved by analysis that takes into account moderating variables such as differences in instructional style and intended career path. In addition, analyzing results by college could provide meaningful insights

if a sufficiently large sample could be gathered from each college within the university.

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