

## Skill-based ESP Classroom: Teaching for Preserving and Enhancing Oman's Comparative Advantages in an Era of Economic and Digital Transformation

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### Abstract

English for Specific Purposes oriented inquiry spans different territories and domains (Basturkmen, 2013). Firmly established in the English for Specific Purposes teaching and learning practice developed in Oman's tertiary education, this paper explores a skill-based teaching approach ascribable to its far-reaching partnership with Oman 2040 vision initiative, and 21st-century educational thinking and planning for the future. In particular, while debating current issues related to economic and digital transformation, it aims at examining student skill development in the context of an English for Specific Purposes classroom using Omani tertiary education students' self-perceived responses. Students responded to a survey that investigated perceptions of transferable skill importance, self-efficacy, and opportunities for improvement. The results reveal that adaptability/flexibility, time management, oral communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving are the most essential student perceived transferrable skills concerning their future employability and professional success; however, the perceived opportunities to use and improve these skills as well as satisfaction with the ability to use them in the course vary, and, therefore, should be addressed when considering further development of the English for Business course curriculum and its delivery. As an outcome of this study, English for Specific Purposes program providers and educators will have a better understanding of the students' skill-sets and provide their students with the tools and strategies they need to learn and thrive in English for Specific Purposes courses effectively.

**Keywords:** Digital transformation, English for Specific Purposes classroom, Oman, tertiary education students, 21st-century educational thinking and planning

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## Introduction

The necessity of incorporating 21st-century skills into the curriculum is a prevalent notion in contemporary education (Farrah, 2020). Increasingly, research indicates that employers value the transferable skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration (Gaston et al., 2010, as cited in Farrah, 2020, p. 13). Problematically, fresh graduates are often seen to lack the employability skills of effective communication and time management (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al Muzzamil, 2017). Accordingly, theorists and practitioners are arguing in favor of incorporating transferable skills training into all courses at every educational level (Rus, 2020). To illustrate, it has been argued that one of the paramount objectives of education is not only to impart to students the discipline-specific skills and knowledge that are needed to thrive as productive members of society, but also to equip them with lifelong learning skills, and in particular, soft skills (Di Pardo, 2019; Rus, 2020). This is increasingly urgent since the world has been on the cusp of the Fourth Industrial Revolution over the last decade, and by implication, graduates deficient in soft or transferable skills may find their career prospects increasingly limited due to advances in AI and other technologies (Schwab, 2016, as cited in Di Pardo, 2019, p. 148).

The world of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has also been impacted by this unavoidable and genuinely global technological reality (Rus, 2020). Although there is no one agreed-upon definition of ESP, many theorists and practitioners would characterize it as having specialist language that focuses on a target environment of academia or a particular occupation (Basturkmen, 2019, as cited in Bayram & Canaran, 2020, p. 1647). Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, as cited in Munir, 2019, p. 5) contend that ESP instructors play the multiple roles of teachers, course designers and materials writers, collaborators, evaluators, and researchers. Further, ESP courses generally have the following elements in common: the content and objectives of an ESP course are set by the needs of the learners; in other words, needs analysis plays a prominent role in the course and materials design (Munir, 2019); additionally, course materials are often not ready-made, resulting in ESP instructors adapting and designing many of their own materials (Bayram & Canaran, 2020). This second point can be a challenge for language instructors since they are not content specialists (Tomlinson, 2003, as cited in Bayram & Canaran, 2020, p. 1648). Furthermore, since ESP instructors typically teach language courses that utilize topic-specific content, they must present this content in meaningful ways to learners, thereby making use of pedagogical knowledge (Bayram & Canaran, 2020).

ESP courses are currently taught at institutions of tertiary education worldwide (Kirkgoz & Dikilitas, 2018, as cited in Bayram & Canaran, 2020, p. 1647). Educators everywhere, including ESP instructors, are encouraged to move away from the traditional information-based teaching approach to a more skill-based and even attitude-based educational system (Rus, 2020). Indeed, ESP instructors are in a privileged position in that they assist future professionals in learning how to “communicate in a foreign language in a specialized working environment,” which is profoundly related to the “interconnected society of the 21st-century. The goal of an ESP teaching project would therefore be that of helping people adapt to creative endeavors, social interaction, imaginative solutions, and critical thinking” (Rus, 2020, p. 339). For example, in Oman’s tertiary education, the ESP teaching and learning practice utilizes a skill-based teaching approach ascribable to its far-reaching partnership with Oman 2040 vision initiative, and 21st-century

educational thinking and planning for the future. However, in the current context of economic and digital transformation, there is a need for extending an ESP inquiry to explore how ESP classrooms can provide broader skill-sets and job-specific capabilities.

### **Economic and Digital transformation and ESP**

The world today is on the precipice of “the Fourth Industrial Revolution” or Industry 4.0, in which influential economic and technological trends stand to transform every aspect of peoples’ lives. It will change how we work, how we become educated, how we communicate, how we shop, how we experience leisure, and indeed how countries will meet these new challenges and thrive or fail to adapt to these challenges and experience potentially disruptive forces (Universities UK, 2018).

The concept of “transformation” refers to “an act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed” (Transformation (1), 2020, n.p.). It “implies a basic change of character and little or no resemblance with the past configuration or structure” (Transformation (2), 2020, n.p.). Aimed at performance improvements, transformations have currently set off as an imperative across global and local economies “shaping as comprehensive changes in strategy, operating model, organization, people, and processes” (What is transformation, 2020, n.p.) in an environment “in which digital has become paramount” (Crespo, 2017).

Digital transformation involves several significant changes, including the changes to business culture (What is digital transformation, 2020), business models, and skills that can ensure successful management of these changes while making soft skills essential in this context (Crespo, 2017). Among the features of Industry 4.0 are the following (Schwab, 2017, as cited in Universities UK, 2018): cloud technology and mobile internet will lead to greater efficiencies for consumers, but with the potential to disrupt a multitude of current jobs; advances in computing power; the internet of things and big data, which will lead to an unprecedented ability to design systems and services; and robotics and automation with the potential to disrupt a multitude of current jobs across all sectors of the economy. The *Future of Jobs Report 2018* echoes these transformational economic and digital forces. It states that in the first few years of the 2020s, at least 70 percent of corporations worldwide intend to fully or partially adopt the following five technologies (World Economic Forum, 2018): big data analytics, app and web-enabled markets, the internet of things, machine learning, and cloud computing. Further, *The New Work Order* report speaks of three unstoppable economic trends that will have an enormous impact: (1) automation, in which robots or some form of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will replace millions of routine transactional jobs; (2) globalization, which has been characterized by the shifting of manufacturing and service positions to markets abroad; and (3) collaboration, in which traditional full time, permanent jobs are being replaced by what can be called “flexible workers,” who, due to advances in technology, work for potentially multiple employers simultaneously without geographic limitations (Foundation for Young Australians, 2017). There have been technological revolutions before, but Industry 4.0 could be a game-changer since “unlike previous industrial revolutions, where policymakers and educators have had decades in which to respond, with the fourth industrial revolution, this may simply not be an option” (World Economic Forum, 2016, as cited in Universities UK, 2018, p. 7).

These influential trends are not forecasting the demise of the need for human beings in the workforce; instead, they are signaling the importance of the possession of skill-sets that are difficult to automate. The OECD *Future of Work and Skills Report* (2017) suggests that employees who possess “soft skills,” also known as transferable skills, will fare best in the changing world of work. This skill-set includes, but is not limited to, abilities such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and self-organizing (Deming, 2015, as cited in OECD, 2017). Allen, Teodoro, and Manley (2017, as cited in Payton & Knight, 2018, p. 2) echo this phenomenon. They assert that even in an increasingly automated and digitized workplace, there will always be a need for globally transferable skills that not only include the well-known skills of collaboration, adaptation, and critical analysis, but also a new category of skills that could be called “non-automatable skills,” such as “skills for learning,” “skills for adding value,” and “social platform skills” (Payton & Knight, 2018).

Notably, a large body of research confirms that skill development is one of the areas that needs support for rapid economic growth and technological change (Baird, 2016; Malik & Venkatraman, 2017). Gone are the days when an individual could work in a particular career for decades by only relying on the content knowledge learned in school. A report by the *World Economic Forum* (2016, as cited in Rainie & Anderson, 2017) stated that “changes in educational and learning environments are necessary to help people stay employable in the labor force of the future” (p. 2). Learning throughout one’s career is now seen as a necessity. To keep up with the changing world of work, 87 percent of workers believe that they must continually develop new job-related skills as they advance through their careers (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). Indeed, one of the characteristics of working and thriving in Industry 4.0 will be the necessity to continuously adopt new knowledge and new capacities (Beier, Ullrich, Niehoff, Reißig, & Habich, 2020). This perspective is supported not only by research or business communities but also by educational systems. For example, empirical research in the context of tertiary education in Oman indicates increased interest in 21st-century skill development and enhancement as well different approaches, techniques, and strategies that can be used to enhance students’ skills and close the skills gap. When these issues are studied, quite often the ESP classroom inevitably becomes the setting of the research (Tuzlukova & Heckadon, 2020).

### Importance of Transferable Skills

Research detailing the growing importance of transferable skills can be found both online in popular business publications, and in the research literature that deals with tertiary education, critical thinking and problem-solving, and the demands of our increasingly interconnected and globalized workplaces. The importance of transferable skills in the 21st-century workplace necessitates incorporating these skill-sets into the educational curriculum. Haste (2001, as cited in Shum & Crick, 2016) points out that many employers feel that university graduates, though seen as capable in terms of displaying content knowledge, fall somewhat short in the ability to take responsibility for their learning and often struggle when confronted by new real-world challenges. Further, both the OECD report on the future of education and skills, *Education 2030* (2018, as cited in Androutsos & Brinia, 2019, n.p.) and the European Commission’s *Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Life-Long Learning* (2018, as cited in Androutsos & Brinia, 2019, n.p.) assert that there is a gap between current education methods and current and future societal requirements. Transferable skills will become increasingly significant as societies

try to adapt to the forces of economic and digital transformation. Indeed, UNESCO, in its agenda for 2030, even lists transferable skills as crucial both for workplace adaptation and societal sustainability (Androutsos & Brinia, 2019). It is through the possession of transferable skills that individuals can best manage uncertainty and novel, complex situations that are prevalent in an era of increasingly rapid economic change (Shum & Crick, 2016).

Online business magazines have stressed the importance of transferable skills through recent surveys. For example, Forbes magazine published the top ten skills wanted by employers (Adams, 2014): (1) the ability to work in a team structure; (2) the ability to make decisions and solve problems; (3) the ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization; (4) the ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work; (5) the ability to obtain and process information; (6) the ability to analyze quantitative data; (7) technical knowledge related to the job; (8) proficiency with computer software programs; (9) the ability to create and edit written reports; and (10) the ability to sell and influence others. Here we can see that six of the ten skills are generic, transferable skills. Similarly, a 2016 LinkedIn survey of 291 hiring managers in the United States revealed that 59 percent of these managers perceived shortcomings in the average candidate's possession of "soft skills" (Berger, 2016). Further, the top ten soft skills that managers felt were most crucial for an employee's career success over the long term were (Berger, 2016): communication, organizational skills, teamwork, punctuality, critical thinking, social skills, creativity, interpersonal communication, adaptability, and having a friendly personality.

### Transferable Skills Frameworks

The research literature is rich with multiple frameworks that categorize, organize, explain, and give examples of transferable skills, otherwise known as "soft skills" (Robles, 2012), "generic skills" (Webb & Chaffer, 2016), "employability skills" (Jackson, 2013), and "global skills" (Payton & Knight, 2018).

Let us examine four frameworks and then compare them to discover and summarize commonalities. First, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (QAA, 2008, as cited in Webb & Chaffer, 2016, p. 349) specified eight generic skills that employers felt were necessary for a successful career (see Table 1). Second, Robles (2012) identified the top ten soft skills as elucidated by business executives (see Table 1) that are crucial for career success in the workplace. Third, the World Economic Forum's *The Future of Jobs Report 2018*, detailed ten transferable skills most sought-after by employers (see Table 1). Finally, a report entitled *Transferable Skills in the Workplace: Key Findings from UK Employers* (2019) lists results from a survey conducted by the City of London Corporation that aimed to specify both transferable and technical skills that were most prized (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Recent frameworks listing sought-after transferable skills*

Skill No	QAA (2008)	Robles (2012)	WEF (2018)	City of London (2019)
1	Ability to work in groups	Communication	Analytical thinking/innovation	Oral communications
2	Communication skills	Courtesy	Complex problem-solving	Collaboration/teamwork

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3	Critical evaluation	Flexibility	Critical thinking	Initiative
4	Ability to analyze problems and draw conclusions	Integrity	Active learning	Problem-solving
5	Independent learning	Interpersonal skills	Creativity/originality	Organizational skills
6	Ability to locate, extract and analyze data	Positive attitude	Attention to detail	Adaptability/flexibility
7	Numeracy skills	Professionalism	Emotional intelligence	Autonomy
8	IT skills	Responsibility	Reasoning/problem-solving and ideation	Written communication
9		Teamwork	Leadership	Critical thinking
10		Work ethic	Time management	Resilience
11				Creativity
12				Analysis/evaluation skills

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## Study

Contemporary research in ESP has emphasized the need for extending ESP inquiry and moving beyond traditional perimeters (Basturkmen, 2013). Through “focusing research on the interfaces between teaching, discourse, and culture and by drawing on diverse research methods” (Basturkmen, 2013, p. 27), it also inspires inquiries in other territories and domains, including an ESP-oriented inquiry in skills’ development and enhancement that utilizes recent skills frameworks.

This study explores student skill development in the context of an ESP classroom using English for Business Omani tertiary education students’ self-perceived responses. In particular, it involved *English for Business III* students at Sultan Qaboos University. The *English for Business III* course is offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies, which aims to hone students’ business English and related competencies. According to the 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). It emphasizes the productive English skills of writing and speaking, as well as business vocabulary acquisition through case study readings. Course-related teaching and learning strategies involve classwork, individual essays, presentations, and small group problem-based learning (PBL) activities and tasks. Interactions with a Moodle online learning management platform involve activities such as discussion forums, online language quizzes, and interactive

digital content as well as independent work of the students who explore a variety of business and economics-related topics and themes.

### Methodology

A survey regarding English for Business students' self-perceptions of transferable skills was compiled using transferrable skills frameworks. A qualitative approach was employed to choose skills that reflected the following informal criteria: (1) the skill appeared in more than one of the four frameworks (see Table 1), and (2) the skill was easy to understand from the point of view of students, obviating the need for extensive definition or explanation. After thoughtful consideration, the following skills (listed in alphabetical order) were selected for student survey development: adaptability/flexibility, analysis/evaluation, creativity/innovation, critical thinking, independent learning, interpersonal skills, IT skills, oral communication, organizational skills, personal social responsibility, problem-solving, teamwork, time management, and written communication.

The survey was administered using the Google Forms platform. It was conducted during the spring 2020 semester during the coronavirus lockdown, when courses that had started with face-to-face teaching during the first half of the semester moved online. Internet connectivity was poor in some areas of rural Oman, which may have limited the potential number of students who could respond. Nevertheless, 36 Omani students did respond. All respondents were business majors at Sultan Qaboos University. 52.8% (n = 19) of the respondents were female and 47.2% (n = 17) were male. Approximately 70% of the respondents were either 19 or 20 years old. The remainder were aged 21 to 23. As the *English for Business III* course is taken in the second year of a four-year degree, most students have not chosen their business specialization yet (77.7%). Among students with a chosen major, accounting has the largest number (8.3%), followed by information systems (5.5%), economics (2.7%), operations management (2.7%), and finance (2.7%).

### Results and Discussion

In terms of the perceived importance of transferable skills, students were asked to rate 14 skill areas on a five-point Likert scale from "very important" (score of 5) to "not important" (score of 1). The mean score of each skill area was calculated and used to rank its relative perceived importance. Results appear in Table 2.

Table 2. *Scale mean score for perceived importance of transferable skills*

No	Skills	Mean Score (Importance)
1	Adaptability/flexibility	4.47
2	Time management	4.42
3	Oral communication	4.42
4	Critical thinking	4.36
5	Problem-solving	4.32
6	Organizational skills	4.31
7	Teamwork	4.31
8	Independent learning	4.28
9	Creativity/innovation	4.25
10	IT skills	4.25
11	Personal social responsibility	4.25

12	Written communication	4.17
13	Analysis/evaluation	4.11
14	Interpersonal skills	4.04

When asked to rate transferable skills' perceived importance in relation to students' future careers, adaptability/flexibility came out with the highest mean rating at 4.47. It was followed by time management (4.42), oral communication (4.42), critical thinking (4.36), and problem-solving (4.32), rounding out the top five skills. Interestingly, oral communication (4.42) was deemed to be somewhat more important to students than written communication (4.17), which ranked near the bottom.

Next, students were asked to rate the same 14 skill areas regarding their perceived opportunities for usage and improvement in the *English for Business III* course. Again, a five-point Likert scale was utilized to discover which skills received the most attention in the course, whether intentional or unintentional on the instructors' behalf, according to student expectations. Results appear in Table 3.

Table 3. Scale mean score for perceived opportunities to use and improve transferable skills in the course

No	Skills	Mean Score (opportunities)
1	Teamwork	4.43
2	Independent learning	4.36
3	Written communication	4.35
4	Interpersonal skills	4.33
5	Critical thinking	4.28
6	Organizational skills	4.10
7	Personal social responsibility	4.07
8	Problem-solving	4.07
9	Time management	4.04
10	Oral communication	3.99
11	Adaptability/flexibility	3.90
12	Analysis/evaluation	3.81
13	IT skills	3.81
14	Creativity/innovation	3.78

When asked to evaluate the extent to which the *English for Business III* course provides opportunities for practice and development of transferable skills, the results (in Table 3) indicated that teamwork (4.43) received the highest rating. This finding was most likely due to the attention given in the course to a four-member Problem-Based Learning project. This was followed by independent learning (4.36), written communication (4.35), interpersonal skills (4.33), and critical thinking (4.28). On the other hand, students felt that adaptability/flexibility (3.90), analysis/evaluation (3.81), IT skills (3.81), and creativity/innovation (3.78) received the fewest number of opportunities for practice and development.

Finally, students were asked to rate their relative sense of satisfaction concerning their proficiency in the employment of these same 14 skill areas. A five-point Likert scale was used to weigh relative to each other most satisfied to least satisfied skills. Results appear in Table 4.

Table 4. Scale mean score for satisfaction of transferable skills

No	Skills	Mean Score (satisfaction)
1	Independent learning	4.50
2	Critical thinking	4.38
3	Organizational skills	4.35
4	Personal social responsibility	4.31
5	Interpersonal skills	4.26
6	Analysis/evaluation	4.25
7	Creativity/innovation	4.25
8	Teamwork	4.24
9	Time management	4.22
10	Written communication	4.19
11	IT skills	4.17
12	Problem-solving	4.14
13	Adaptability/flexibility	4.11
14	Oral communication	4.10

Students were asked to engage in self-evaluation in terms of their perceived competence to use and apply these transferable skills at present. Students were most self-satisfied with their competency regarding the skill of independent learning (4.50). This was followed by critical thinking (4.38), organizational skills (4.35), personal social responsibility (4.31), and interpersonal skills (4.26). The skills that students were least satisfied with in terms of perceived competency were written communication (4.19), IT skills (4.17), problem-solving (4.14), adaptability/flexibility (4.11), and oral communication (4.10).

The results of the study demonstrate a maturity in students' responses that not only involves valuing highly the skills that are required to be successful in the future but also critically reflecting on their abilities to use them. For example, the perceived importance of adaptability/flexibility was the highest according to students' overall response with a mean score of 4.47 (See Table 2 for more information). This result corroborates with the list of skills that are considered vital for professionals to keep up with rapid transformations in the job market, and include adaptability that involves constant learning and un-learning, tech-savviness, leadership including the ability to inspire and collaborate, customer service, and emotional intelligence or the ability to be aware of one's own as well as others' emotions (Dhal, 2020). It also supports the findings in the research by Alshare (2018) that "organizations increasingly seek individuals who are flexible in terms of what they can offer the organization and who can easily acclimatize to different situations" (n.p.). However, students' perceived satisfaction in their competency of the skill of adaptability/flexibility, though highly rewarded by them, scored lower than other skills (4.11). Similarly, their perceived opportunities to use and improve the skill of adaptability/flexibility in the English for Business course scored relatively low (3.90).

Porta, Anderson, and Steele (2013) contend that "being efficient on a daily basis can have profound implications on your overall productivity and satisfaction" (p. 240). Accordingly, the skill of time management is highly-regarded in terms of its perceived importance by students (see Table 2).

One concerning observation can be made upon comparison of the three skills-ranking questions. The only skill that ranked in the top five in terms of perceived importance that also ranked in the top five in terms of perceived opportunities for use in the course, and had a high level of perceived self-efficacy was “critical thinking.” The other four skills that were seen by students as the most important (adaptability/flexibility, time management, oral communication, and problem-solving) did not appear in the top five of either opportunity for use in the course or perceived self-efficacy. Most worryingly, the two skills that impart a sense of face validity to the *English for Business III* course, namely written communication skills and oral communication skills, ranked in the bottom five in terms of students’ self-confidence and self-efficacy (see Table 4 for more information). One can conclude that either explicitly or implicitly, students will probably not be fully satisfied with the course overall when evaluated in terms of students’ satisfaction with the development of their 21st-century transferable skills. Taking the skill oral communication, for example, Student 1 commented: “*Focus more on speaking skills; I noticed that most students can read and write in English but they can’t speak well.*” Furthermore, Student 4 commented: “*slightly improved some skills*” (authors’ emphasis). Here, student 4 might be implying that skill improvement occurred, but additional skill development would be welcome. Another student might be possibly echoing the point. When asked how the course could be improved, Student 5 stated: “*by giving the students more activities in class*”.

In light of these results, two broad suggestions can be made: first, educational institutions, and by extension course instructors, need to be mindful of the notion that transferable skill instruction should be intentional – both in curriculum design and day-to-day classroom activities; as stated by Felix and Selvin (2018) “soft skills have become very important in the present job industry, but they are routinely ignored in educational institutes” (p. 56). In other words, transferable skill instruction should not be a side effect of a particular course, but rather it should be explicitly incorporated into the learning objectives. Second, the importance of needs analysis should be adhered to, to the degree that it is possible. Long (2005, as cited in Malicka, Guerrero & Norris, 2017) contends that a critical first step in the design of ESP courses should be a task-based needs analysis that comprehensively narrows in on the types of tasks that learners need to be able to perform *outside of the classroom in real-world 21st-century settings* (authors’ emphasis) along with the language features associated with these real-world tasks.

## Conclusion

The results of this study have demonstrated the importance of serious consideration given to ESP course design and implementation to ensure the development of critical skill-sets for future employability. They have proved an important point; in an era of economic and digital transformation, teaching and course design should focus more on real-world tasks and needs, and provide students with the tools and strategies needed to learn and thrive in ESP courses effectively. The results have also made it clear that adaptability/flexibility, time management, oral communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving are the most essential student perceived transferrable skills concerning their future employability and professional success; however, the perceived opportunities to use and improve these skills as well as satisfaction with the ability to use them in the course vary, and, therefore, should be addressed when considering further development of the ESP curriculum and its delivery.

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