



Omani Graduates' English-language Communication Skills in the Workforce: Employees' Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper reports an exploratory investigation into the importance that employed Omani school and college graduates believe English-language communication skills have for their workplaces and the difficulties they face when using these skills in a work environment. The study involved the administration of a 4-part questionnaire to 321 participants who had graduated from Omani schools and colleges and who were employed in organizations around the country. Results indicate that participants identified almost all skills and skill areas featured in the questionnaire as either vital or essential for their jobs, even though they claimed that they largely lacked the English language skills, or linguistic competencies, necessary to successfully use these in work situations. They also reported struggling with dealing with customers and colleagues from different sociocultural backgrounds in English. Implications of these findings for education and employment in Oman are discussed.

Keywords: Communication skills, Oman, Employability, English

1. Introduction

Within the developing Arab Gulf country of Oman, English has assumed a central role in the public education system since it was first implemented on a nation-wide scale following the start of the country's "modern" era in 1970. English in Oman is officially supported as a language that allows Oman and Omanis to effectively communicate with the outside world and is seen as central to the country's continued development. Since the opening of the first university in the sultanate in 1986, English has been the dominant language of instruction for all science-based specializations, in addition to many other specializations in the humanities, in tertiary institutions across the country. English was first introduced at the school level from grade four onwards from 1970 to 1997/1998 and, from 1998/1999, the gradually-implemented Basic Education system prescribed English classes from grade one (Issan & Gomaa, 2010).

Because the Omani government deems the learning of English as important for the nation's youth to successfully compete and participate in a multicultural society and globalized world, a large portion of Oman's resources is allocated to the teaching and learning of English in schools and at the tertiary level (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010). As a result of this focus, one of the nine elements for Oman's development in the 2020 Oman Vision document from the Ministry of Development (1997) is the improvement of teaching and learning English in the Basic Education system (Rassekh, 2004, cited in Jabur, 2008, p. 36). This need is based on not only the importance of gaining communicative competence in the language as a gatekeeper to professional and academic success, but also on the dramatic increase in the number of students studying English across all levels. In particular, the number of Omani students studying English in formal education settings has increased from 1,000 in 1970 to 600,000 students in 2001-2002 (Oman Cultural Office, 2006, cited in Jabur, 2008, p. 2), with this number probably remaining at similar levels today (Ministry of Education and the World Bank, 2012). Such an increase reflects both the spread of public education in the country and the high demand for English in Oman due to its links to academic and professional success (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Altbach, 2010).

However, despite the large-scale investment the government has made to improve students' English language skills, school and college graduates are often reported as lacking proficiency in English to the extent that it is an obstacle to their employability (Alrawas, 2014). For example, Al-Issa's (2014) study of law graduates revealed that their limited English language competence hindered their chances of finding suitable employment. Similarly, 72% of student respondents in Al-Lamki's (1998) study considered a lack of English language skills to be an obstacle to getting a job in the private sector for Omanis. These students expressed a concern that they were disqualified from applying for such jobs because of their limited English-language communicative skills.

Although there may be a number of important reasons why Omani graduates are leaving their school and college studies with limited English-language communicative skills, comprehensive research into the issue is still in its very early stages. For instance, one recent study by Al-Mahrooqi (*under submission*) examined employers' perspectives about the English-language communicative skills they believed were necessary in the Omani workforce and whether school and college graduates possessed these skills. Although employer participants in that study indicated both the importance of these skills and their graduate employees' somewhat satisfactory development of them, it failed to examine whether employees themselves believed that they had developed these skills to the level demanded by the workforce. This current piece of exploratory research seeks to address this by examining the importance that currently-employed Omani school and college graduates believe English-language communicative skills have for the workforce and the difficulties they encounter when using these skills in a work situation. In order to achieve this, a 4-part questionnaire was administered to 321 participants.

2. Literature Review: Communicative Competence

Communication is the process by which people use words, sounds and behaviors in order to exchange information and reach a common understanding. The ability to do this effectively by synthesizing the necessary skills and the underlying system of knowledge that people bring to their interactions has been described by authors such as Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) as "communicative competence". Communicative competence suggests that it is not enough to learn how to use the language correctly in terms of grammatical rules, but that learners must also understand how to use the language appropriately. This competence is connected with what Hymes (1972) describes as the "attitudes, values, motivations concerning language, its features and uses, and integral with competence for, and attitude toward, the interrelation of language with the other code of communicative conduct" (pp. 277-278).

Hymes (1966) coined the term communicative competence with a particular concern for the way competence and performance relate to linguistic competence. Hymes, according to Bagarić and Djigunović (2007), maintained that communicative competence is not only "an inherent grammatical competence but also... the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence" (p. 95).

In 1972, Savignon identified communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (p. 277). Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) extended this definition by describing communicative competence as an underlying system of knowledge and skills that is necessary for communication to occur. Widdowson (1983) focused on linguistic and sociolinguistic principles in defining communicative competence, and characterized it as the ability to apply knowledge in order to create meaning. Chen (1990) defined communicative competence as the ability to continue communication to achieve a desired outcome, while Bachman (1990) described it as consisting of both knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge in context.

Components of communicative competence include strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, linguistic competence, discourse competence, and pragmatic competence. Van Ek (1986) characterizes the first of these, strategic competence, as the ability to recognize and mend breakdowns in communication and to avoid misunderstandings and gaps while using language in context without any difficulties. Canale and Swain (1980) add that strategic competence is comprised of an understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies employed to deal with communication breakdowns when encountered. This can be conceived of as the ability to convey a message effectively even when gaps in language knowledge occur that could potentially hinder communication. Nordquist (2015) defines sociolinguistic competence as knowing how to appropriately use and respond to language by taking into account such factors as the context, setting, topic, relationships among speakers and so on. Canale (1983) states that context largely informs the norms and expectations of the communicative event. Sociolinguistic competence overlaps with socio-cultural competence which was first introduced by Van Ek's (1986) contention that, as every language is situated within a socio-cultural context, speakers must be sufficiently familiar with that context to communicate successfully.

Linguistic, or grammatical, competence involves knowledge about grammar, syntax and semantics. This knowledge is mostly subconscious for native speakers but is often explicitly acquired when learning a second or foreign language. Arāja and Aizsila (2010) define linguistic competence as the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances that have been formed according to language rules. Canale and Swain (1980) add that this competence involves knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, semantics, and so on – or what Canale (1983) describes as the language's code of knowledge. Canale continues that discourse competence involves the mastery of the rules applied to achieve meaning in a spoken or written text. Discourse competence is important for achieving cohesion and coherence during communication, and requires the use of the core language skills in addition to knowing how to construct and combine large chunks of text so that different parts contribute to a coherent whole. The final component of communicative competence discussed here is pragmatic competence which has been identified as the ability to employ language appropriately across different social situations (Lenchuk & Ahmed, 2013).

As the above highlights, communicative competence consists of a number of aspects, each of which is associated with specific skills and abilities. The realization of this competence becomes even more difficult to achieve in multi-cultural settings where people bring a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds and linguistic competences into communicative events. This is a characterization that could be readily applied to both Omani society and to workforces in the country.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The following research questions were posited:

1. How important do currently-employed Omani school and college graduates believe English-language communicative skills are for the workforce?
2. What difficulties, if any, do these graduates face when using English-language communicative skills upon entering the workforce?

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

3.2.1 Questionnaire

To address these questions, employees were administered a 4-part questionnaire. After constructs and potential items suggested by the literature were identified, the researchers designed a questionnaire that was aligned with both the literature and the study's aims. This questionnaire was then validated by a panel of six professors not directly involved in the study. Items were examined for concerns related to relevance, concept coverage, clarity, and accuracy of structure, while areas of repetition and the placement of items in certain skill areas were also explored. This process resulted in the exclusion of a number of items from the questionnaire and the rephrasing of several others to improve their clarity, coverage and so on. Given the potentially sensitive nature of some of the concepts covered by the questionnaire, such as employability and self-reported language competence, positively-worded items were employed even if this did increase the potential for acquiescence bias.

Part A of the questionnaire elicited participants' demographic details including gender, age, specialization, GPA and so on. Part B asked participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert response scale how important they believe 71 English-language communicative skills across the 7 areas of general interpersonal skills, linguistic skills, pragmatic skills, professional communication skills, psychological aspects of communication, strategic competencies, and team work are for their jobs. Part C asked respondents to add to a blank table any communication problems they faced upon entering the workforce. Part D required respondents to respond to a series of seven items regarding their organizations' attitudes towards English and English-language communication skills on a 5-point Likert response scale.

3.2.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 321 participants who were recruited after the researchers and/or their research assistants contacted organizations around the country to inform them of the nature of the study and to ask for volunteers to complete and return the questionnaire within the data collection window. 51.3% were female and 48.7% were male. The majority of participants (77.2%) were aged between 25 and 35 years old, with 17.9% between 36 and 45, and the remaining 4.8% being 46 years or older. Around half of the sample (52.6%) was employed in the private sector, while the other 47.4% worked in the public sector. Around 71.8% of participants had travelled abroad, with these participants listing a wide variety of destinations including countries in Europe, North America, the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia. Arabic was the dominant home language of 79.2% of respondents, although 7.1% stated that they used both English and Arabic at home. Reflecting Oman's cultural diversity, other languages spoken by participants at home included Swahili, Baluchi, Armenian, Bengali, Indonesian, Tamil, Urdu, Lawati, Filipino, and Mararao.

Although 28.9% of participants did not mention their GPA upon graduation, around 50.6% stated that their GPA ranged between 2.70 and 3.69, while 20.5% said their GPAs ranged between 1.70 and 2.69 (a GPA of 4.00 is the highest attainable in the Omani education system). Participants had studied more than 160 tertiary-level specializations, with the most popular of these being English (6.7%), management (6.4%), accounting (5.4%), IT (4.5%) and HR (3.2%). Around 29.2% of participants were employed at Sultan Qaboos University – the only public university in Oman - with the next most represented groups working for Al Baraimi University College (4.8%), Parsons International Company (2.6%), Sohar University (2.6%) and the Intercontinental Hotel (2.2%). More than 90 other companies and/or workplaces were represented by the sample, with these ranging across a variety of fields including media and telecommunications, transport and aviation, education, hospitality, human resources, mining and construction, and electricity and gas.

4. Data Analysis

In keeping with the exploratory nature of the research, the quantitative data arising from the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive analysis. This analysis focused on means and standard deviations for each of the seven skill areas explored, in addition to each of the questionnaire items themselves. Responses to Part C were grouped in terms of themes and then tallied to offer an overall percent of the number of times they were mentioned across participant responses. In order to ease interpretation of mean values for questionnaire Part B (not important–vital) and Part D (strongly disagree–strongly agree), response bands consisting of increments of approximately 0.79 (starting from the lowest possible value of 1.00) for each potential response were calculated. As a result, response categories were interpreted as follows:

- Vital/Strongly Agree if 4.20-5.00
- Essential/Agree if 3.40-4.19
- Very important/Neutral if 2.60-3.39

- Important/Disagree if 1.80-2.59
- Not important/Strongly Disagree if 1.00-1.79

4. Results

Demographic details gathered on Part A of the questionnaire are outlined above. Part B of the questionnaire required participants to indicate on a five-point response scale how important they consider 71 English-language communicative skills across 7 categories to be. The means of the seven skill areas all fell within the essential response range (see Table 1). The area that received the highest mean was psychological aspects of communication ($M = 4.18$), followed by team work ($M = 4.10$), professional communication skills ($M = 4.07$), linguistic skills ($M = 4.05$), pragmatic skills ($M = 3.99$), strategic competencies ($M = 3.93$), and general interpersonal skills ($M = 3.86$).

Table 1. Importance of skill areas

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological Aspects of Communication	4.18	0.84
Team Work	4.10	0.77
Professional Communication Skills	4.07	0.72
Linguistic Skills	4.05	0.74
Pragmatic Skills	3.99	0.77
Strategic Competencies	3.93	0.83
General Interpersonal Skills	3.86	0.83

Table 2 indicates that, of the three items related to psychological aspects of communication ($M = 4.18$), participants believed one to be vital and the remaining two to be essential. The skill participants believed to be vital for their organizations was “feeling confident of one’s ability to communicate with others” ($M = 4.35$). The remaining two items – “feeling completely at ease when engaging in communication with others” ($M = 4.11$) and “feeling at ease when asking for necessary clarification” ($M = 4.08$) – were both considered to be essential for participants’ organizations.

Table 2. Importance of psychological aspects of communication

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological Aspects of communication	4.18	0.84
67. Feeling confident of one’s ability to communicate with others	4.35	0.94
65. Feeling completely at ease when engaging in communication with others	4.11	0.90
66. Feeling at ease when asking for necessary clarification	4.08	0.91

Table 3 demonstrates that team work ($M = 4.10$) was considered to be the second most important skill area for organizations. Of the five items related to team work, four were considered essential while the remaining item was deemed vital. The skill that fell within the vital response range was “communicating collaboratively in a team” ($M = 4.34$). Two teamwork skills related to collegial communication and conversation – “communicating and having good working relationships with colleagues” ($M = 4.14$) and “participating appropriately in group conversations” ($M = 4.06$) – were considered essential for the workforce. The remaining essential teamwork skill was “empathizing with others’ positions” ($M = 3.89$).

Table 3. Importance of teamwork

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Team work	4.10	0.77
7. Communicating collaboratively in a team	4.34	0.97
38. Communicating and having good working relationships with colleagues	4.14	0.87
49. Respecting other people’s opinions even if they are different from your own	4.07	0.92
8. Participating appropriately in group conversations	4.06	0.94
41. Empathizing with others’ positions	3.89	0.96

Of the 18 items associated with professional communication skills ($M = 4.07$), only two were considered vital (see Table 4) while the rest were believed to be essential. The two items participants believed to be vital for their organization were “effective written communication writing legibly, logically, and concisely” ($M = 4.38$) and “effective oral communication in English speaking clearly and directly” ($M = 4.37$). Of the remaining sixteen skills participants believed were essential, six were related to various aspects of oral communication and making presentations. These were “verbal negotiation skills” ($M = 4.16$), “contributing effectively to discussions of important topics” ($M = 4.03$), “expressing new ideas logically and clearly” ($M = 4.03$), “having effective presentation skills” ($M = 3.98$), “persuasive skills” ($M = 3.96$), and “being able to use appropriate gestures and body language when communicating with others” ($M = 3.94$).

Three of the professional communication skills participants believed to be essential for their organizations were related to job seeking and employment readiness. These were “being well prepared for the job market in terms of communication skills” ($M = 4.16$), “interacting effectively in a job interview” ($M = 4.16$), and “writing an effective CV” ($M = 4.15$). Two items related to interacting with clients were also considered essential - “interpreting accurately clients’ needs and wants” ($M = 4.08$) and “communicating alternatives to clients” ($M = 4.04$). Two other items employees believed to be essential were related to conflict resolution. These were “resolving a conflict or disagreement” ($M = 3.98$) and “responding to complaints” ($M = 3.96$). The remaining professional communication skills considered essential included “ability to communicate using different media e.g. speaking on the phone, texting, voice messaging etc.” ($M = 4.09$), “being skillful in using English in competitive situations” ($M = 4.02$), and “making arrangements for trips, meetings etc.” ($M = 3.75$).

Table 4. Importance of professional communication skills

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Professional communication skills	4.07	0.72
3. Effective written communication writing legibly logically and concisely	4.38	0.88
2. Effective oral communication in English speaking clearly and directly	4.37	0.93
6. Verbal negotiation skills	4.16	0.90
68. Being well prepared for the job market in terms of communication skills	4.16	0.91
70. Interacting effectively in a job interview	4.16	0.91
71. Writing an effective CV	4.15	0.91
44. Ability to communicate using different media e.g. speaking on the phone texting voice messaging etc.	4.09	0.88
4. Interpreting accurately clients’ needs and wants	4.08	0.94
5. Communicating alternatives to clients	4.04	0.98
37. Contributing effectively to discussions of important topics	4.03	0.92
47. Expressing new ideas logically and clearly	4.03	0.89
9. Being skillful in using English in competitive situations	4.02	0.99
24. Resolving a conflict or disagreement	3.98	0.97
40. Having effective presentation skills	3.98	0.93
11. Persuasive skills	3.96	0.97
53. Responding to complaints	3.96	1.01
39. Being able to use appropriate gestures and body language when communicating with others	3.94	0.96
64. Making arrangements for trips meetings etc.	3.75	1.15

Table 5 indicates that participants believed all linguistic skills to be either vital or essential for employment in their organizations ($M = 4.05$). Of the 17 skills featured, participants maintained that three were vital. The item that was considered most important was “proficiency in English” ($M = 4.46$), while the “ability to write emails” ($M = 4.38$) was also considered vital. Other skills related to writing that participants believed were essential included “expressing opinions and ideas in writing” ($M = 4.14$), “ability to write letters” ($M = 4.13$), “writing brief notes” ($M = 4.07$), and “writing reports, proposals, meeting agendas and minutes” ($M = 3.97$). The final linguistic skill participants believed to be vital was “reading and understanding English texts independently” ($M = 4.33$).

Of the 14 remaining linguistic skills participants believed were essential for their organizations, two were related to dealing with people from different cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. These were “being easily understood by people from different backgrounds when speaking English” ($M = 4.08$) and “understanding and accurately using idiomatic expressions” ($M = 3.91$). Closely related to these oral communication skills, though taking a far more general approach to this area of linguistic ability, are two other items that were considered essential – “asking questions” ($M = 4.03$) and “beginning and ending a conversation” ($M = 4.00$).

Employees believed that two linguistic skills related to conflict resolution – “possessing language related conflict resolution strategies” ($M = 3.98$) and “giving negative feedback in a positive way” ($M = 3.94$) – were also essential. Summarizing and paraphrasing skills were also considered essential linguistic skills as seen in the means recorded for the following items - “summarizing other people’s ideas” ($M = 3.91$) and “paraphrasing and restating other people’s opinions” ($M = 3.89$). The two linguistic skills that received the lowest means though that still fell within the “essential” response range were both general linguistic skills that could be related to speaking or writing. These were “comparing and contrasting ideas” ($M = 3.87$) and “describing people, places, objects and processes” ($M = 3.79$).

Table 5. Importance of linguistic skills

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Linguistic Skills	4.05	0.74
1. Proficiency in English	4.46	0.89
26. Ability to write emails	4.38	0.88
69. Reading and understanding English texts independently	4.33	0.93
27. Expressing opinions and ideas in writing	4.14	0.92
25. Ability to write letters	4.13	0.93
48. Being easily understood by people from different backgrounds when speaking in English	4.08	0.88
28. Writing brief notes	4.07	0.90
32. Asking questions	4.03	0.91
52. Beginning and ending a conversation	4.00	0.97
10. Possessing language related conflict resolution strategies	3.98	0.93
31. Writing reports, proposals, meeting agendas, and minutes	3.97	1.00
46. Giving negative feedback in a positive way	3.94	0.92
29. Summarizing other people’s ideas	3.91	1.00
35. Understanding and accurately using idiomatic expressions	3.91	0.95
30. Paraphrasing and restating other people’s opinions	3.89	0.99
19. Comparing and contrasting ideas	3.87	0.94
60. Describing people places objects and processes	3.79	1.01

Of the 17 items related to pragmatic skills ($M = 3.99$), Table 6 indicates that only one was considered to be vital while all remaining items received means placing them within the “essential” response range. This was for the item “using polite language with others” ($M = 4.34$). Employees highlighted the importance of all pragmatic skills in this area, with each of the following items considered essential: “knowing how to make polite requests” ($M = 4.07$), “giving others a chance to express their ideas and then responding when appropriate” ($M = 4.05$), “knowing how to politely refuse requests” ($M = 3.98$), “interrupting appropriately” ($M = 3.96$) and “distinguishing between formal and informal language and using what is appropriate in a given situation” ($M = 3.94$).

Items related to interacting with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds were also considered essential. These included “understanding people with different backgrounds, values, skills and abilities” ($M = 4.11$), “communicating with people who have different backgrounds, values, skills and abilities” ($M = 3.99$), and “being sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences” ($M = 3.95$). All pragmatic skills related to dealing with conflict were considered essential. These included “knowing how to apologize when making a mistake” ($M = 4.05$), “responding to criticism appropriately” ($M = 4.01$), “objecting and making counter arguments” ($M = 3.79$) and “issuing a complaint” ($M = 3.69$). The remaining pragmatic skills regarded as essential for participants’ organizations were “expressing agreement with someone else’s ideas” ($M = 4.00$), “asking for suggestions” ($M = 3.93$), and “giving suggestions and making recommendations” ($M = 3.92$).

Table 6. Importance of pragmatic skills

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pragmatic Skills	3.99	0.77
13. Using polite language with others	4.34	0.96
14. Understanding people with different backgrounds, values, skills and abilities	4.11	0.89
17. Knowing how to make polite requests	4.07	0.91
21. Knowing how to apologize when making a mistake	4.05	0.90
50. Giving others a chance to express their ideas and then responding when appropriate	4.05	0.935
45. Responding to criticism appropriately	4.01	0.898
22. Expressing agreement with someone else's ideas	4.00	0.907
20. Communicating with people who have different backgrounds, values, skills and abilities	3.99	0.93
23. Expressing disagreement politely and assertively	3.99	0.92
16. Knowing how to politely refuse requests	3.98	0.95
51. Interrupting appropriately	3.96	0.98
15. Being sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences	3.95	0.99
18. Distinguishing between formal and informal language and using what is appropriate in a given situation	3.94	1.00
54. Asking for suggestions	3.93	0.96
55. Giving suggestions and making recommendations	3.92	0.97
57. Objecting and making counter arguments	3.79	1.09
62. Issuing a complaint	3.69	1.13

Table 7 indicates that none of the four items related to strategic competencies were considered essential ($M = 3.93$). The items participants believed to be most important for their organizations were "listening and note taking" ($M = 4.02$) and "asking questions for clarification" ($M = 4.00$). The remaining two strategic competencies participants regarded as essential were "finding other ways to communicate intention, ideas or emotions when lacking words" ($M = 3.85$) and "knowing how to change the topic to redirect discussions or conversation to a new issue" ($M = 3.84$).

Table 7. Importance of strategic competencies

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Strategic Competencies	3.93	0.83
33. Listening and note taking	4.02	0.87
42. Asking questions for clarification	4.00	0.88
34. Finding other ways to communicate intention ideas or emotions when lacking words	3.85	0.99
43. Knowing how to change the topic to redirect discussion or conversation to a new issue	3.84	1.00

General interpersonal skills ($M = 3.86$) was the area participants considered least important, although Table 8 nonetheless indicates that all skills featured were still considered essential. The general interpersonal skill that received the highest mean was "engaging in everyday conversation" ($M = 4.08$), followed by "introducing oneself to others and introducing people to one another" ($M = 4.02$), and "greeting and saying goodbye" ($M = 3.99$). Two of the remaining items employees believed to be essential were "expressing regret" ($M = 3.78$) and "expressing sympathy" ($M = 3.65$). The final two general interpersonal skills were "refusing a request or an offer" ($M = 3.78$) and "giving invitations" ($M = 3.74$).

Table 8. Importance of general interpersonal skills

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
General Interpersonal Skills	3.86	0.83
36. Engaging in everyday communication	4.08	0.88
12. Introducing oneself to others and introducing people to one another	4.02	0.88
63. Greeting and saying goodbye	3.99	0.99
58. Expressing regret	3.78	1.05
61. Refusing a request or an offer	3.78	1.11
56. Giving invitations	3.74	1.09
59. Expressing sympathy	3.65	1.16

Part C of the questionnaire asked respondents to add to a blank table any communication problems they believed employees graduating from Omani schools and tertiary-institutions encounter when entering the workforce. Table 9 indicates that participants believed speaking English fluently and correctly (40.66%) to be the biggest problem encountered. This was followed by having a poor knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary and the difficulties associated with communicating with foreign staff and customers (both 14.26%). Writing emails, reports and memos (12.09%) and having a lack of self-confidence (5.50%) were also identified as potential communication issues for new Omani graduates.

Table 9. Communication problems experienced by Omani graduates

Communication problems	Percent
Speaking fluently and correctly	40.66%
Lack of grammar and vocabulary	14.26%
Communicating with foreign staff and customers	14.26%
Writing reports, emails, memos etc.	12.09%
Lack of self-confidence	5.50%
Computing skills	3.30%
Persuasion	2.20%
Raising opinions	2.20%
Team work	2.20%
Problem solving	1.10%
Respecting others' opinions	1.10%
Presentation skills	1.10%

Part D asked participants to respond to a series of seven items regarding their organizations' attitudes towards English and effective communication skills on a five-point response scale. Overall, respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with each of the statements presented in Table 10. The two items participants strongly agreed with were "Effective communication is a vital leadership skill in our organization" ($M = 4.48$) and "Employees with good communication skills can give our organization a competitive edge over other organizations" ($M = 4.46$). Participants agreed that "Effective communication in English is vital for administrators in our organization" ($M = 4.13$) and that "Job applicants who are proficient in English are more likely to be employed than those who are not proficient in the language" ($M = 4.08$). The three items that received means below 4.00, though which participants nonetheless agreed with, were "Employees who are proficient in English get better training opportunities" ($M = 3.73$), "Proficiency in English gives an employee a better chance of promotion and recognition in our organization" ($M = 3.85$) and "Job applicants who are effective communicators in English get better positions than those who do not have this skill" ($M = 3.91$).

Table 10. Employees' opinions about importance of English in their organizations

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
3. Effective communication is a vital leadership skill in our organization	4.48	0.75
4. Employees with good communication skills can give our organization a competitive edge over other organizations	4.46	0.76
7. Effective communication in English is vital for administrators in our organization	4.13	0.76
1. Job applicants who are proficient in English are more likely to be employed than those who are not proficient in the language	4.08	0.79
2. Job applicants who are effective communicators in English get better positions than those who do not have this skill	3.91	0.82
6. Proficiency in English gives an employee a better chance of promotion and recognition in our organization	3.85	0.89
5. Employees who are proficient in English get better training opportunities	3.73	0.89

5. Discussion

This exploratory study examined how important currently-employed Omani school and college graduates believe English-language communicative skills are for the workforce and what challenges, if any, they faced with these skills when entering the workforce. Participants claimed that all seven skill areas featured in Part B of the questionnaire were essential for their organizations. Moreover, they maintained that all 71 skills associated with these areas were either essential or vital, with the latter representing the most-frequently occurring response category. Examples of skills that participants assigned some of the highest means to included the “ability to write emails”, “effective oral communication in English speaking clearly and directly”, “being well prepared for the job market in terms of communicative skills”, and “using polite language with others”. Other skills respondents identified as vital included “communicating collaboratively in a team”, “empathizing with others’ positions”, “verbal negotiation skills”, “knowing how to apologize when making a mistake”, “giving suggestions and making recommendations”, “knowing how to change the topic to redirect discussions or conversation to a new issue”, and “giving invitations”.

In addition to the importance assigned to these items, responses to Part D indicated that participants agreed their organizations placed effective English-language communication skills at the center of leadership and that employees’ communication skills can contribute to their organization’s competitiveness. This is a belief that has been expressed by employees and employers in a variety of foreign and second language contexts around the world (see Thitthongkam, Walsh, & Banachattanasakda, 2010; Yoneda, 2008). Participants also claimed that employees with better English-language communicative skills tended to get better positions, received better training opportunities, and were more likely to get promoted. In this way, findings support the role of English as a gatekeeper to professional success in Omani society (see Charise, 2007; Denman, 2014).

However, despite the importance assigned to these areas, participants claimed that the skill groups of strategic competencies and general interpersonal skills, despite falling within the essential response range, were the least important of all skill areas. This could be argued to imply that participants may not sufficiently value those skills that can help them avoid communication breakdowns and misunderstanding in difficult communication situations (Van Ek, 1988). In addition, specific skills that received some of the lowest questionnaire means included the general interpersonal skills of “expressing regret”, “refusing a request”, and “expressing sympathy”; the strategic competencies of “objecting and making counter arguments” and “issuing a complaint”; and the professional communication skill of “making arrangements for trips, meetings etc.”. In terms of interpersonal competencies, it should be noted that Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) claim skills related to socio-cultural awareness, such as those of empathy and sympathy, are some of the hardest for L2 learners to acquire, and so their relative lack of importance here should not come as a surprise. Moreover, the relative lack of importance assigned to the strategic competencies of counter-arguing and complaining may be associated with the general cultural avoidance nature of Arab societies, with “saving face” often of greater importance in the Arab world than prevailing in an argument (see Hofstede, 1986).

In terms of the challenges associated with English-language communicative skills faced when entering the workforce, respondents maintained that the ability to speak in English fluently and correctly and their poor knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary – elements of what Arāja and Aizsila (2010) term linguistic competence – represent the biggest hurdles. This latter point is naturally a large area, and one that refers to not only grammar and vocabulary but also morphology, syntax, semantics and so on (Arāja & Aizsila, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980). This apparent struggle with linguistic competence may reflect issues with English language instruction in Omani schools and universities as

reported in the literature (Al-Busaidi, 1995; Al-Issa, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Roche, Sinha, & Denman, 2015). Limited linguistic competence may also be associated with the difficulties participants reported in communicating with foreign staff and customers. However, the importance of participants' sociolinguistic competence in successfully engaging with customers and colleagues in such a culturally-diverse society should also be taken into account (Nordquist, 2015).

Finally, perhaps not surprisingly considering the extent of these challenges within such a rich linguistic and cultural landscape, respondents claimed that their general lack of confidence when using English represented a significant challenge in their workplaces. This is an especially serious concern given the central role English plays not just in Oman's private sector, but also across wider Omani society (Al-Issa, 2007) and even in some public sector jobs. It may be for this reason that authors such as Alrawas (2014) and Al-Lamki (1998) highlight participants' beliefs about the obstacle English represents to their employability. This is a situation that should be viewed as critical given both the high levels of official support for English within Oman and the relatively high levels of unemployment among Omani citizens despite programs of Omanization that seek to replace foreign workers with nationals.

6. Conclusion

The current study explored the English-language communicative skills currently employed Omani school and college graduates believe are necessary for the country's workforces in addition to the challenges they faced with these upon entering the workplace. Results suggest that employees, much like the employer sample of Al-Mahrooqi's (*under submission*) investigation, believed almost all skills and skill areas were important for the workforce. In fact, participants claimed that every skill in the questionnaire was either vital or essential for their jobs, thereby supporting English's key role as a gatekeeper of employability and professional success in Oman. Despite the importance attached to these skills, however, employees claimed that they often lacked the English ability, or linguistic competencies, necessary to successfully use these communicative skills in their jobs and that they also struggled with dealing with customers and colleagues from different sociocultural backgrounds. This is an important issue as the Omani government's increasingly strong push for the Omanization of the workforce by replacing expatriate labor with citizen employees is strongly predicated on the ability of the education system to produce graduates with the skills that the private and public sectors require. Perhaps one of the most important of these skills, as discussed above, is the ability to communicate effectively in English – a supposition supported by findings reported here.

In this way, the current exploratory research appears to offer support to the beliefs expressed by Al-Harathi's (2011) participants that, due to the strong link between English and employability in Oman and the apparent failure of the education system to equip learners with communicative skills in the language, the school and college curricula should be reformed to better equip learners in these areas. Recent reforms that have aimed to achieve this include the introduction of the Basic Education system at the school level and the introduction of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority standards for foundation English at the tertiary level. However, as these reforms are yet to result in improved English outcomes, it is important for administrators and instructors to focus on aligning teaching more closely with the English language communication needs of the local job market. It is also necessary that genuine efforts are made across the education system to replace traditional teacher-centered methods with student-centered, communication focused approaches. By taking such actions, it may be possible for the education system to more completely address the English-language communication needs of Oman's workforce, thereby enhancing school and college graduates' levels of employability.

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