

Stakeholders' Perceptions of an English for Occupational Purposes Course

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Abstract: As the business world is becoming increasingly global and competitive, most business organizations require employees to have good employability skills. In order to ensure employees are equipped with relevant employability skills, the industry turns to higher education for assistance. One initiative of higher education institutions is to offer English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses. This study was undertaken to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of English for Occupational Purposes course for students of Economics and Management Science based on internal stakeholders' perceptions. A multi-method approach was adopted and triangulation of methods comprising survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed. A total of 177 respondents consisted of undergraduate students, instructors and academic administrators of the EOP course participated in the study. The findings of this study revealed that the students, instructors and academic administrators, in general were satisfied with the EOP course. However, there were shortcomings that need to be addressed, particularly related to methods of teaching and oral and written communication skills related to job application.

Key words: English language proficiency • Employability • English for Occupational Purposes • Higher education institutions

INTRODUCTION

In a context of considerable changes in the labour market and higher education sector, discourses of employability have become increasingly dominant. As the business world embraces the global market and values the competitive edge, most business organizations require employees to possess more than industry-specific technical knowledge. Today's workers must also possess the soft skills of critical thinking, problem solving and effective communication. [1], in examining graduate employment issues points out that employers are concerned by the lack of employability skills exhibited by entry-level job applications. He accentuates that employers consider it the responsibility of educational institutions to develop such skills. Similarly, [2] advocate that in order to produce workers with these new work skills, the industry needs to turn to higher education for assistance. Higher education institutions have responded by partnering with the industry to address

the issue [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Both parties expect that general education courses provide the platform for students to develop their soft skills. By the same token, technical-based faculties are expected to place more emphasis on learning these skills in their courses in addition to mastering the technology of the industry [11].

With this partnership, higher education institutions are anticipated to produce employable graduates and graduates themselves are expected to continually develop their personal skills, qualities and experiences in order to compete in the graduate labour market [2]. In spite of the efforts, employers are concerned that employees still lack the required employability skills to perform at the workplace. There is a growing number of graduates who are ill-equipped to face the complex challenges of employment in the job market [3]. This clearly indicates the need for a study to investigate higher education institutions' initiatives in enhancing students' employability skills to meet the demands of the industry.

One of the initiatives undertaken by higher education institutions is to offer English for Occupational Purposes course. The main purpose of the EOP course is to equip students with the necessary English communication skills for employment purposes. Considering the concern demonstrated by the industry, it is timely that a study is conducted to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the EOP course. This paper presents the findings of a study to examine the internal stakeholders' perceptions of such a course.

Research Objective: The objective of this study is to investigate internal stakeholders' perceptions of English for Occupational Purposes course. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are the strengths of the EOP course as perceived by the internal stakeholders?
- What are the weaknesses of the EOP course as perceived by the internal stakeholders?

Literature Review: Employability is defined as graduates' ability to demonstrate essential skills and attributes that will help them to function effectively in an organization [12]. Employability is also defined as the ability of a person to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment [13]. The literature on employability highlights the importance of different employability skills in determining one's success at the workplace [14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

A study commissioned by the European Commission in 2006 reported that thousands of European companies lose businesses and miss out on contracts as a result of their lack of language skills [16]. In Australia, a study by Monash University showed that more than one-third of foreign students graduated from Australian universities with very poor English skills. According to the study, all graduates tested had enough command of the language to cope in most situations but were still not capable of conducting a sophisticated discourse at a professional level [17]. Similarly, only 25 per cent of the graduates in India secure jobs [18]. Although the candidates are technically qualified, many are unsuccessful because they fail to get through the interview stages due to lack of oratory skills in English. In the Canadian context, its poor track record in skill development was being blamed for the labour shortages [19]. Specifically, 38 per cent of 16 to 25 year olds do not have reading and math skills to be able to take on the

complex tasks required in most good jobs. Even though the immigrant population arrive with higher academic qualifications than the typical Canadian (45 per cent have a university degree), they are not able to apply their knowledge because of language and cultural barriers. About 55 per cent of 26 to 35 year-old immigrants have low literacy skills in English or French.

Several studies on employability among Malaysian graduates have reported the importance of generic employability skills over basic academic skills. In a national study in 2008, only 55.1% of 175,806 graduates were employed within six months of graduation [20]. It was also highlighted that the graduates were not able to impress employers during interviews because they did not have the right skills such as presentation and communication skills in English. In addition to communication skills, Malaysian employers look for experience, personal characteristics, attitude, ethics values [21, 22, 23]; research, computing, numerical and higher order thinking skills [24, 25, 26].

The majority of employability studies conducted in Malaysia; however, have explicitly emphasised the importance of English language proficiency at the work place [27, 28, 29, 30, 25, 31]. Many employers are hesitant to hire graduates due to their poor proficiency in English, although they are highly qualified academically [22, 24]. In a study on the English language needs of employers in Malaysia, for example, 83% of the respondents rated English language competency as being equally important or more important than specific technical, occupational, or academic knowledge and skills associated with a candidate's academic degree [26].

Poor English language competency has hampered graduates of Malaysian higher education institutions to present ideas and explain issues orally, in writing and in group discussions; to write reports, project papers, proposals and minutes of meeting; to convey ideas spontaneously in impromptu situations; and to negotiate, lead and manage [26]. Correspondingly, [32] found that employees looked for candidates who have the abilities to generate and express ideas verbally, give presentations, write reports, speak fluently, good command of grammar and persuasive skills.

Communication Skills in English at the Workplace: Many studies have been conducted to investigate communication skills in English required at the workplace. A few studies have indicated that employees demand workers who are more proficient in productive skills

(speaking and writing) over receptive skills (listening and reading) [21, 22, 33, 34, 30, 35, 36]. The literature has also identified oral communication skills as the most important and extensively used at the workplace [37, 38, 22, 30, 26, 33, 36]. [26] (p. 20) maintain that:

Although all the four languages skills are important skills for the workplace, these skills are not reflected in the English language skills assessed in the recruitment process by industrial sectors in Malaysia.

About 70% of the English language skills assessed in interviews were based on speaking skills, while 30% were based on writing skills [26]. Oral communication skills are also the most vital skills for job success and promotion [33, 39, 21, 22].

It is important to note that although the industry sector focuses on productive skills, this does not deemphasize the importance of teaching receptive skills as well as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in vocational English courses. In fact, the suggestion that EOP programmes should give special attention to these skills has been substantiated by findings of numerous studies [40, 41, 24, 31, 26]. [41] for example, asserts that there are still problems involving the listening skill at the workplace. There is a tendency at times for some executives, supervisors and workers to talk more and fail to listen and not comprehend the notions of listening and hearing. Moreover, productive skills will only come about in unison with proper grammar, acceptable pronunciation and effective listening and reading skills [26].

Employers in the business sectors have also reported specific oral and written communication sub-skills that graduates should possess [42, 31, 26]. The following oral communication events and practices have been listed as the most frequently used at the workplace: teleconferencing [41, 36]; telephoning [38]; informal work-related discussions [24, 43, 36]; chairing and speaking in meetings [44, 38]; oral presentations and public speaking [44]; interviewing [37] seminars and exhibitions [38]; and networking for contacts for advice and information, [45, 24].

Although oral communication practices were often the preferred form of communication, the literature has uncovered the fact that writing is very important to business employees. This is because all business transactions need to be documented. Data elicited from business specialists and employers highlights the following written business communication situations:

exchange of written messages (letters, faxes, telexes and emails), writing assessment and progress reports, quotations, informational and instructional memos, sales and product and marketing proposals [38, 45, 36, 30]. The findings of a study by [36] maintained that most frequently employed written communication events at the workplace were writing and proposal writing skills. [45] added that the ability to present sustained and persuasive written arguments involving circumstance, authorship, textual production and intended audience is highly sought after attributes in graduates.

Additionally, there have been a few studies which presented various practices that were not identified as a clearly defined oral or written communication event. These include reading professional journals and other publications, oral as well as written translations, note taking skills, handling customer complaints, conflict resolution skills, negotiation skills, persuading skills and promoting one's own strengths and abilities [37, 42].

Several studies have also indicated that employers seek employees with the ability to use technology effectively at the work place to enhance job output [46, 43, 47]. [47], for instance, states that workplace communicative literacy involves face-to-face communication and other tools of communication such as the Internet, iPod and mobile phone. [43] maintain that graduates are required to possess skills in using and adapting to new technologies.

Other studies mention the importance of effective methods of instruction in enhancing students' interactions and practice in the classroom such as using process and project-oriented design models [48]; hands-on practices, internship programmes, real document samples, case studies from companies' daily operations [49, 26]; and collaborative writing [36]. Increasingly, studies have also indicated the value of teamwork [50, 51, 43, 36, 25] and work experience in real-world business for EOP course instructors [30, 52, 49].

English for Occupational Purposes: English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) refers to the type of English taught for students to use in their respective professions [53, 46, 54]. According to [54], (p. 129), English for Occupational Purposes is:

The portion of the curriculum which prepares students for gainful employment in occupations ranging from low-skilled to sophisticated jobs in technical fields.

[53] illustrate that the teaching process of any kind of language for occupational purposes should take as a starting point the analysis of four traditional skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) within an appropriate context, in particular, at the workplace. Furthermore, they subscribe to the idea that an effective syllabus or the content of a particular course must attempt to overcome the deficiencies of the program. Another important element is the use of authentic material so that the learners can apply the skills in the actual working world. This is supported by Ellis and Johnson [55]. Examples of EOP courses include English for Technicians, English for Secretaries, English for Doctors and English for Business.

There have been a number of studies conducted on EOP course evaluation in Malaysia. Three studies were on EOP programmes at the polytechnic level. The first study was conducted by [56] on the syllabus of English for Commercial Programme for commerce students. He found that there was a mismatch between the skills taught in the classroom and the skills needed for specific jobs. [57] conducted a similar study at another polytechnic and found that the teachers believed that skills like academic reading and writing were the most important, whereas students believed that skills such as social English were more significant. [58]'s study on English for Technical Purposes for engineering students concluded that the success of any language syllabus is not actually reflected by the number of distinctions scored by students in examinations, but their ability to communicate and use language effectively at the workplace.

Two studies on EOP courses were conducted at the International Islamic University Malaysia. [59]'s study on the EOP course for students in the Faculty of Human Science concluded that, in general, students were satisfied and benefited from the materials and content of the EOP course. She also suggested that the content of the course be further improved by splitting the course into two semesters' work so that additional activities could be incorporated. This is to ensure that students are provided with sufficient hands-on activities to use the language in real situations. [60] focused on the evaluation of course materials of the EOP course for engineering students and found that the teaching materials, in particular, the course objectives were satisfactory to some extent. She also found that the students did not have sufficient time to practice and complete course requirements related to spoken communication skills.

[61] also conducted a study on an EOP course for engineering students at the diploma level. She found that the students were satisfied with the emphasis on writing and speaking skills. Furthermore, the course was sufficient in preparing students to enter the labour force. She also recommended that the EOP course emphasised technical presentation and technical writing skills. She also highlighted that university students' English language proficiency need to be considered before exposing them to the course. This implies that students need to acquire a certain level of language proficiency before they are allowed to undertake an EOP course at the tertiary level. The review of literature seems to indicate that many studies on EOP programmes focus on engineering students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design: A multi-method research approach was adopted to address the objectives of the study. The research design comprised quantitative and qualitative methods of scientific inquiry using a triangulation of sources comprising internal stakeholders; namely, students, instructors and academic administrators and triangulation of methods comprising survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These self-report methods are legitimate in course evaluation [62, 63, 64].

Participants: [63] suggest that different stakeholders should participate in program or course assessment because a programme assessor cannot provide a comprehensive account of a program on his own [63]. The internal stakeholders in this study were 177 undergraduate students, 9 instructors and 2 academic administrators. The academic administrators were course and curriculum coordinators.

In general, more than two thirds of the students were females (70.6 %), while about one third were males (29.4 %). The ratio reflects the overall gender ratio in Malaysian higher education institutions. Most of the participants' age ranged from 21 to 23 years (54.8%), while 41.8% were between the ages of 23 to 25. More than two thirds (89.8%) of the respondents were Malaysians. The remaining 10.16% were foreign students from 12 different countries. Students' Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) ranged from 3.1 to 3.5 (45.8%) and 2.5 to 3.0 (41.2%). Only 5.1% were below average.

There were six female and three male instructors who participated in this study. One instructor was a PhD holder (11.1%), six had obtained Master's degrees in teaching English or education (66.7%) and two (22.2%) had obtained a Bachelor's degree. The majority (88.9%) stated that they had at least nine years of experience in teaching English, while only one respondent (11.1 %) had between 5 to 9 years of experience. As far as teaching EOP courses is concerned, four instructors (44.4%) stated that they had between 5 to 9 years of experience and about one third (33.3%) had more than 9 years of experience. The remaining (22.2%) had 2 to 5 years of experience teaching EOP courses. Of the nine instructors teaching the course, just over two thirds (66.7 %) stated that they had some experience working in business organizations, while 33.3% claimed they had not.

With regards to receiving training in teaching EOP courses, eight instructors stated they had received training, whereas only one claimed he/she had not. When asked to specify how they received training in teaching EOP courses, seven of the nine instructors answered through in-service workshops and two added they had gained training from attending conferences or as part of their Master's programme. It is interesting to note that one of the participants stated he/she was the trainer for EOP courses at other institutions.

The academic administrators (course and curriculum coordinators) in this study were females, holding a Master's Degree in teaching. Both indicated that they had more than 9 years of teaching experience. However, in terms of teaching EOP courses both stated that they had between 5 to 9 years of experience.

Instrument: Students' and instructors' questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed to answer the research questions. The student's questionnaire was divided into two main parts. Part one consisted of the demographic profile and part two focused on 9 problem statements and 8 solution statements related to the course. A Likert scale with a four point rating (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Disagree, 4=Strongly Disagree) was used. The lecturer's questionnaire was divided into two parts; demographic and open-ended questions. An interview protocol based on [65]'s framework of question types was employed to elicit information from the academic administrators.

The English for Occupational Purposes Course: The English for Occupational Purposes course is the '*object*

of evaluation' [66], (p. 4). The EOP course is specifically designed to equip undergraduate students of the Faculty of Economics and Management Science at the International Islamic University Malaysia with the necessary English language skills to function effectively in the working environment. The objectives of the course are to enable students to apply business communication skills and use different language forms in verbal and written communication at the workplace. EOP courses are also offered to students of other disciplines such as Engineering, Information Communication Technology and Science.

The course is compulsory for all final year students of the respective disciplines. It is a three credit hour core course with six contact hours per week. The syllabus for the EOP course in this study focuses on speaking and writing skills with a secondary emphasis on listening, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The duration of the course is 14 weeks with a total of 84 contact hours (face-to-face). Assessment of students is based on continuous assessment which includes oral presentations, written assignments, projects and role plays as well as a final written examination at the end of the semester.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented based on the data gathered through questionnaires and interviews. Data is reported and analyzed based on the following research questions:

- What are the strengths of the EOP course as perceived by the internal stakeholders?
- What are the weaknesses of the EOP course as perceived by the internal stakeholders?

Students' Perceptions of the EOP Course: Table 1 presents the analysis of nine statements related to the EOP course. When students were asked whether the course content was too theoretical (statement 1), 60.56% expressed disagreement. With regards to difficulty of the course content due to student's low English language proficiency (statement 2), an overwhelming majority (83.6%) of the students indicated their disagreement with this statement. For statement 3, 89.2% of the students indicated their disagreement that "the course content is not related to my specialization", which clearly indicates that the majority of students believed the course was related to their specialization.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of the EOP course

Problems	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
1. The course content is too theoretical.	9(5.1%)	61(34.5%)	95(53.7%)	12(6.8%)
2. The course content is difficult because of my low proficiency (level) in English.	3(1.7%)	26(14.7%)	115(65%)	33(18.6%)
3. The course content is not related to my specialization	1(0.6%)	18(10.2%)	93(52.5%)	65(36.7%)
4. The course does not offer student enough exercises and resources for practice.	17(9.6%)	72(40.67%)	78(44.06%)	10(5.64%)
5. The course does not interest me.	1(0.6%)	18(10.2%)	96(54.2%)	62(35%)
6. There is not enough time to do assignments or projects.	4(2.3%)	98(55.4%)	46(26%)	29(16.4%)
7. The lessons are two long (2 hours) and I cannot remain focused.	28(15.8%)	100(56.5%)	41(23.2%)	8(4.5%)
8. The course does not help me improve my speaking skills.	10(5.6%)	35(19.8%)	105(59.3%)	27(15.3%)
9. The course does not help me improve my writing skills.	6(3.4%)	29(16.4%)	93(52.5%)	49(27.7%)

In terms of the course not being able to offer enough exercises and resources for practice (statement 4), student's answers were divided. While 50.27 % of the students agreed with the statement, 49.7 % indicated their disagreement. This result may be an indicator that while the course does offer resources and exercises for practice, these resources are not sufficient for all learners. 89.2% of the students pointed out that they did not agree with statement 5, that "The course does not interest me."

With regards to the time provided to do assignments (statement 6), students were also divided in their opinions. About 42.6% disagreed that the time allocated for assignments was not enough, while 57.3 % claimed there was not enough time for students to do all assignments.

Additionally, 72.3% of the students indicated their agreement that the lessons were too long and they could not remain focused during class time (statement 7). 74.6 % of the students believed that the course has helped them improve their speaking skills (statement 8), whereas 80.2% indicated the course also helped them improve their writing skills (statement 9). These responses imply that the EOP course has helped students improve their writing skills more than their speaking skills. In general, the EOP course received favourable response from the students with the exception of the method of instruction and the time allocated per lesson.

Instructors' Perceptions of the EOP Course: The opinions of instructors of the EOP course are shown in Table 2. The responses are classified into four elements of the course; the course curriculum and materials, skills and practices, practical applications and time. While course instructors considered time as a weakness of the course, the course curriculum and materials, skills and practices and practical applications were considered as both strengths and weaknesses of the course. Table 2 indicates that nearly 44.4% of the course instructors believed the course allowed students to gain exposure to

the actual working world prior to entering the workforce. This was mainly through gaining new skills necessary for employment. As mentioned by Respondent (1):

The course serves as a platform for the student to get in touch with another important aspect of becoming a successful career man or woman in language.

Respondent (5) Also Added:

It enables the students to be aware of the important skills they need to master before joining the workforce.

Less than half (44.4%) of the instructors said that the course allowed for practical or hands-on application of what is taught in the classroom. Respondent (6) overtly stated that,

The course permits students to build their knowledge and gain practical experience. It offers them with opportunities to gain field experience.

In contrast, 55.5% of the instructors considered lack of practical application of some language components as a weakness. This was mainly due to the fact that there were too many items to be covered in the course and not enough time for practice. The comment made by Respondent (8) was indicative of the above:

There is not much time for practice. I think students should be given more time to have hands-on experience, i.e., conducting meetings, writing letters, public speaking etc.

This finding reflects the opinions of students who were also doubtful of whether the course offered sufficient practice for all language components.

Table 2: Instructors' perceptions of the EOP course

Strengths Categories	N (%)	Weaknesses Categories	N (%)
Practical Application		Practical Application	
• Exposure to real working world.	4 (44.4%)	• Limited Hands-on experience due to time limits	5 (55.5%)
• Hands-on experience through field trips.			
• Exposure to corporate world.			
Course Curriculum and Materials:		Course Curriculum and Materials:	
• Comprehensive curriculum	3 (33.3%)	• Outdated materials.	3 (33.3%)
• Useful skills and trainings for the workplace,		• Contents covered in Faculty courses	
• Up-to-date and varied materials.		• Inadequate incorporation of technology.	
Focus and practices of Communication sub-skills:		Focus and practices of Communication sub-skills:	
• Writing sub-skills of CSR and business letters and memos.	3 (33.3%)	• Oral communication sub-skills 'of interviewing, negotiation and public speaking.	3 (33.3%)
• Simulated activities.		• Written communication sub-skills' of resume (CV) writing and job application.	
• Independent and knowledgeable learners			
Time Constraint:			
		• Insufficient time	3 (33.3%)

In terms of course curriculum and materials, lecturer's responses suggested that the course was comprehensive and exhaustive in that it covered many skills required by the industry. Some respondents pointed out that the course materials were up-to-date and varied and were capable of developing personal qualities as well as useful skills in learners. As indicated by Respondent (1):

The course provides students with useful skills and trainings needed at the workplace, materials are up to date and varied.

On the contrary, three instructors (33.3%) regarded the curriculum and materials to be among the weaknesses of the course. Some aspects of the course were considered to be outdated and not kept abreast with the new technological developments. Others were believed to be irrelevant to current situations. While for some items, the instructors were of the view that they were a mere repetition of what was offered by other faculty courses. This was emphasized clearly by Respondent (3) who stated:

The course is susceptible to new information, development etc. which may lead to constant revamp of syllabus.

In the same way, Respondent (6) points out:

Some of the things may also be redundant with other courses offered by the Faculty.

With regards to the skills emphasised in the EOP course, the instructors' responses, similar to the students,

reported that the EOP course emphasized writing business letters, Corporate Social Responsibility report, minutes of meeting and business proposals. Furthermore, 33.3 % of the instructors believed that there was a lack of emphasis on certain skills which are crucial for preparing students for the workplace. Lecturer's maintained that because the course highly emphasized writing over speaking, some oral communication skills were neglected, particularly those related to recruitment purposes. This is evident in Respondent (8)'s comment:

I would say the weakness of this course is its lack of oral activities such as public speaking and interviewing skills.

Similarly, Respondent (9) Adds:

CV, interviewing skills and public speaking were among the speaking practices neglected in the course.

As far as course duration (time) is concerned, instructors' responses showed that although there were several topics to be covered in the course, there was not enough time to present these items to students and to allow them to practice the items adequately. As a result, some course components may have been explained briefly, while many others were not taught at all. Respondent (7) maintains:

Time is a major problem. I think one semester is too short for the students to really benefit from the course".

Likewise, Respondent (3) States:

Time constraints...not enough time to teach skills such as writing CV/resumes, job application letters, negotiation and presentation skills.

These findings compliment those of students' responses in which a large majority of the students also claimed that there was not enough time for them to complete assignments and projects.

Academic Administrators' Perceptions of the EOP Course: The perceptions of academic administrators were categorized into six elements; teaching methodology, components of the course, time, instructors, students and cooperation of the faculty. Overall, the academic administrators regarded the teaching methodology and components of the course to be favourable. Issues related to course duration, instructors, students and cooperation of the faculty, however, were not received favourably. The academic administrators regarded the method of teaching as one of the strengths of the course. They believed that the course was very student-focused and gave ample practice to students. Respondent (A) stated:

I would say that it is very well, at least I would say most of the time it's very student-focused. The students have to do a lot of, you know ... application of what they learn.

This finding contradicts instructors' and students' opinions that there is a lack of practice and hands-on experience in the course. A possible explanation to the different opinions provided by stakeholders may be attributed to the lack of communication between.

Another positive aspect of the course is that the topics covered in the course were closely related to the student's field of specialization. Respondent (A) pointed out that:

What students do is very much related to the Faculty. For example, writing the CRS proposal is very relevant today and some of the students may not even be aware of it. Interestingly, students say they have learned a lotThey find it to be relevant to whatever they are doing so that's the good thing.

The Academic administrators' stated that students had different proficiency levels of English and were mainly very weak in terms of their general English language proficiency, which consequently made it very

difficult for the instructors to deal with the mixed ability groups. These opinions were not shared by the students. This suggests that there may be other causes as to why students found the course difficult and accordingly, further investigation needs to be carried out.

With reference to time, academic administrators, similar to course instructors, were aware that there were a lot to be covered in a short period of time. They pointed out that one of the weaknesses of the course was that there were many course requirements to be fulfilled in a limited period of time. As mentioned by Respondent (B):

We need to cover a lot of things in a short period of time. Even though we have like six contact hours with the students, it can still be insufficient given to different things that we have to try to help them with.... for example, writing letters... there are so many types of letters.

Instructors' lack of experience and knowledge in business related topics was also considered a major weakness. It was felt that instructors did not have sufficient training or background knowledge on teaching English to business students. This was emphasized by Respondent (A) who claimed:

Another weakness is that instructors teaching the EOP to the business or economic students do not have sufficient training or knowledge. Very few of us, I would say have experience working with business organizations or have studied a little bit of business.

As mentioned earlier in the document analysis, this answer contradicts those provided by the instructors who claimed that they have sufficient knowledge and experience working in the business world, which possibly suggests the need for more communication between the two groups of stakeholders (course instructors and academic administrators).

Lack of communication between EOP instructors and the Faculty of Economics and Management Science was yet another weakness of the course according to one of the academic administrators. Respondent (A) stated that:

Another thing that I think can actually make the course very interesting and maybe differentiate it from any other courses here at the university is if we can work closely with the Faculty itself. At the moment there is a lack of collaboration with the Faculty...We try our best and the students work very

hard. For example, this semester they had to visit a company, investigate on the problems that the company has, think of a solution to the problems and write a proposal. What happens is that after all that hard work the students do not have much opportunity to show this to the people from the Faculty.

In summary, although all three internal stakeholders had different ideas and opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the course, there were a few issues which were shared among them. The common perceptions of the strengths of the EOP course among the three groups of internal stakeholders were the course's emphasis on spoken and written communication skills and its relevance to the student's field of specialization. Common perceptions of the weaknesses of the course were related to time constraints and hands-on experience of the course contents. Issues relating to methods of teaching, students' English language proficiency, teachers' experience in working in the business world and cooperation of the faculty were also regarded as areas of concern reported by some of the stakeholders. It is suggested that all issues be further explored in terms of their nature and causes and that priority should be given to common problem areas.

Internal Stakeholders' Recommendation:

Students' Recommendation: Table 3 presents the analysis of the student's recommended solutions for the EOP course. The first item revealed that the students did not want the content to be changed as 66.1% disagreed with the statement. About 64.4 % of the students suggested that more time should be given to students to do their assignments.

Moreover, 85.3 % of the students indicated that they wanted more practice on language skills. An overwhelming majority (83.6%) of the students disagreed that the course should be divided into two semesters, while 83.6% of the students believed the course should be more practical.

In terms of the duration of the course, 83.6 % of the students suggested that the course should be less than two hours per class meeting. About 59.8% of the students agreed that the course should include an internship program. In terms of the teaching methodology, 93.7% of the students suggested that the course should be delivered in a more fun and interactive way.

Instructors' Recommendation: The instructors' recommendation for the EOP course, as shown in Table 4

can be divided into five categories; namely, duration of the course, revision of the course, addition of skills and practices, incorporation of hands-on practices and course upgrading. Unlike students, the analysis of data for the instructors shows that 33.3 % suggested that the course should be extended to two semesters. About 33.3 % of the instructors also claimed it was necessary for the course to be revised and upgraded to meet the needs of the business industry. Instructors' responses were in support of the necessity to conduct a needs analysis and to refine the teaching focus of the language items of the course.

Another suggestion was to provide additional practices on writing and speaking skills, particularly public speaking, interviewing and resume writing. Additionally, 11.1% of the instructors pointed out that the course should incorporate the use of new technology in teaching and learning and provide sufficient hands-on practice. The latter finding supports the opinions of students since 83.61% of the students also indicated that the course should focus on practical applications of the contents.

Academic Administrators' Recommendation: Similar to students and instructors, academic administrators also provided solutions for the improvement of the course. These recommended solutions are divided into four categories, which are course components, time, hands-on practice and instructors' training. Most of the recommended solutions were associated with the weaknesses of the course. With regards to course components, as recommended by the instructors, one of the academic administrators suggested that the course be revised to make it more relevant to the needs of the industry. This was explicitly stated by Respondent (B):

I assume revising the course could help remedy its problems.

Respondent (A), on the other hand, believed that finding a solution to upgrading the course with the needs of the industry was impossible since the course cannot incorporate any additional components due to time constraints. This is clearly stated in the answer given by Respondent (A):

When we look at the course it's interesting that people always say oh! Why don't we add this to the course why don't we add that ...we do not have the chance to take things out, but add more into the course...That is the problem...

Table 3: Student's recommended solution for the EOP course

Possible Solutions	Strongly Agree		Strongly Disagree	
	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
1. The content of the course should be changed.	5 (2.8%)	55 (31.1%)	109 (61.6%)	8 (4.5%)
2. More time should be given for students to do assignments and prepare materials.	25 (14.1%)	89 (50.3%)	57 (32.2%)	6 (3.4%)
3. More language skills practice should be provided through the course.	42 (23.7%)	109 (61.6%)	23 (13%)	3 (1.7%)
4. The course should be divided into two semesters because the content of the course is too much.	11 (6.2%)	18 (10.2%)	82 (46.3%)	66 (37.3%)
5. The course should be more practical.	48 (27.1%)	100 (56.5%)	19 (10.7%)	10 (5.6%)
6. The course lessons should be less than two hours per meeting.	51 (28.8%)	97 (54.8%)	22 (12.4%)	7 (4%)
7. The course should include an internship program.	30 (16.9%)	76 (42.9%)	46 (26%)	25 (14.1%)
8. The course should be delivered in a more fun and interactive way.	76 (42.9%)	90 (50.8%)	8 (4.5%)	3 (1.7%)

Table 4: Lecturer's recommended solutions for the EOP course

Solutions	F (%)
• Extension of course to two semesters	3 (33.3%)
• Comprehensive review of the course	3 (33.3%)
• Focus on language skills	
• Systematic needs analysis	
• Prioritise language items and assessment methods	
• oral communication sub-skills of public speaking, oral presentation, interview	
• written communication sub-skills of CV writing	2 (22.2%)
• More practical exposure with the corporate world	1 (11.1%)
• Incorporate new technology	1 (11.1%)

Recommendation related to time constraint was also highlighted. While there are several components which need to be added to the course, there is not enough time to cover all these components. Respondent (B) maintains:

I don't really know how to overcome the problem of time that's because it's always the issue of oh this is useful.

When asked what he/she thinks of dividing the course into two semesters, Respondent (B) answered:

We do not have that problem but the students would have that problem. The faculty would have that problem because as it is now, people are saying 6 hours per week just to learn English?

Concerning hands-on practice, as recommended by students and instructors, both academic administrators suggested that the course should allow for more practical application of the course components taught. Respondent (B) states:

Allowing students to gain an authentic connection with the corporate world will definitely increase their motivation and help them learn better.

With regards to the instructors' content knowledge, both academic administrators suggested that workshops and training programmes should be organised to expose instructors to business-related topics. As suggested by one of the respondents:

It would be great if we have time to expose the instructors to a lot of things which are business related."

In summary, the internal stakeholders recommended several solutions for the improvement of the course. It is important that issues that are common among the three groups of stakeholders, which are time constraint, revision and practical application of the course, be given priority in subsequent investigation and when the course is reviewed.

Stakeholder's Overall Satisfaction with the EOP Course: Students and instructors were also asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the EOP course (Table 5). An overwhelming majority of the students reported that they were satisfied with the course (87%). Only a small percentage of students (1.1%) were 'slightly dissatisfied'. None of the nine instructors indicated their dissatisfaction with the course. The majority of instructors (77.80 %)

Table 5: Internal stakeholder's satisfaction with the EOP course

Level of Satisfaction	Students (%)	Instructors (%)
Very satisfied	35 (19.77%)	1 (11.1%)
Satisfied	119 (67.23%)	6 (66.7%)
Slightly satisfied	21 (11.86%)	2 (22.2%)
Slightly dissatisfied	2 (1.1%)	0 (0%)
Not satisfied	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Very satisfied	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	177	9

claimed they were '*satisfied*' and one respondent (11, 1%) stated he/she was '*very satisfied*'. The remaining two respondents (22.2%) stated that they were '*slightly satisfied*'. The academic administrators indicated that they were happy with the course although they felt there were still rooms for improvement. As mentioned by Respondent (A):

So yea, I would say, we try our best and I think at the moment I am quite happy with it.

Likewise, Respondent (B) Answered:

I think the course has proved to be successful. It's just that of course there is always room for improvement and you know things can be made better of course, but when language is concerned, things can be improved but time is also needed.

Overall, the three groups of stakeholders felt they were '*satisfied*' with the course. Of all the respondents in the study (177 students, 9 instructors and 2 program providers), only two expressed that they were '*slightly dissatisfied*' (1.06%). These findings further support results of the two questionnaires which indicated that the stakeholders had perceived the EOP course favourably.

DISCUSSIONS

The main objective of the study was to investigate the perceptions of three groups of internal stakeholders; the students, instructors and academic administrators regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the EOP course, which was designed for students' of economics, business and management. The majority of the stakeholders were satisfied that the overall course contents focus on communication skills in English at the workplace. They were also contented that the EOP course emphasized wide-ranging oral and written communication sub-skills. It is hardly a surprise to discover that a majority of the students mentioned that the EOP has helped them to improve their oral and written

communication skills. The findings of this study are supported by findings of other studies [21, 22, 33, 42, 34, 30, 35, 36]. This finding is supported similar studies by [59, 60].

Some of the weaknesses perceived by the stakeholders relate to teaching methodology, lack of time to complete assignments and projects, insufficient use of new technology, absence of programme review, too many topics to cover, lack of corroboration with the Faculty of Economics and Management Science, inadequate hands-on experience, lack of emphasis on job-application related skills and instructors' limited experience working in real-world business organizations.

A key issue uncovered in this study is inadequate hands-on experience. This is likely due to time management problems as suggested by the instructors; either the lack of time or inability to divide the time appropriately among the components of the course. The EOP course is conducted six hours per week. In theory, the instructors have ample time to cover the course contents. Thus, there might be other reasons that can help explain the issue. The findings of the study indicate that this may due to the method of instruction employed by lecturers. Although the course outline implies the use of a student-centered teaching through interactive exercises and practices, students' responses in the questionnaire indicated they were not satisfied with the delivery of the course. While 93.7% indicated that the course should be delivered in a more fun and interactive way, 83.6% stated that the course should be more practical in nature. Moreover, 72.3% of the students indicated that the lessons were too long and they could not remain focused during this time. These findings suggest the course was either too theoretical or the teaching methodology used did not motivate the students to learn or remain focus in the class. Findings of several studies have suggested different methods of instruction in enhancing students' interactions and practice in the classroom such as process and project-oriented design models [48]; hands-on practices, internship programs, use of real document samples, case studies from companies' daily operations [49, 26]; and collaborative writing [36]. Other studies have also suggested the use of technology in teaching and learning to provide sufficient hands-on practice including the Internet, iPod and mobile phone [46, 43, 47].

The lack of practice for students should convince academic administrators to adopt a student-centered approach in order to boost student's English language competency and self-confidence [26] (p. 201):

When students are not given sufficient practice to present orally, write multiple drafts of business letters or role play job interviews...students generally produce a substandard performance and the scenario is likely to be repeated during actual job interviews."

They further added [26] (2020):

It is disconcerting to observe that many English language programmes seem to employ a teacher-centered approach in dealing with employability modules such as business writing, public speaking or job interviews, thus rendering insufficient opportunities for students to actually demonstrate their ability to perform in English".

Another important issue observed in this study concerns instructors' experience working in real-world business organizations. While 60% of the instructors stated they had experience working in business organizations, academic administrators believed that instructors' lack of experience and knowledge in business-related matters to be one of the major weaknesses of the course. As respondent (D) claimed:

Very few of us, I would say have experience working with business organization or have studied a little bit of business ourselves.

These findings suggest that experience working in a business organization is inadequate to warrant instructors to teach EOP courses and that training the instructors would be a much more realistic and beneficial solution. As suggested by one of the academic administrators (Respondent B):

It would be great if we have time to expose the instructors to a lot of things which are business related.

This finding is corroborated by findings of other studies [30, 52, 49].

The instructors also highlighted the lack of emphasis on job application skills such as interviewing, negotiation, public speaking, resume (CV) writing and job application letters. The rationale provided by the academic administrator for the exclusion of job application skills is the lack of time. Even though the academic administrators

rationalized that it was difficult to include all topics within the specified time frame, there is an urgent need to prioritize the contents to ensure that the needs of the stakeholders are met. This effort will also curtail the problem of lack of time for students to complete course assignments and projects.

The issues of hands-on experience, time constraint, teaching methodology and instructors' real-world experience revealed the need for more communication among between instructors and academic administrators to ensure that the three groups of stakeholders are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the EOP course and work towards a common goal in improving the course. It is suggested that a curriculum review be conducted so that all other issues be further explored in terms of their nature and causes.

CONCLUSION

One of the initiatives of higher education institutions is to offer English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) course with the goal of equipping students with relevant employability skills. The findings of this study revealed that the three groups of internal stakeholders were satisfied with the EOP course, particularly the course's emphasis on spoken and written communication skills. The findings imply that the EOP course does meet the expectations of the internal stakeholders. However, there were common perceptions of the weaknesses of the course such as time constraints, practical application of course contents, methods of teaching and instructors' working experience in the business world. A curriculum review is expected to provide the programme provider with a sound platform to enhance the effectiveness of the EOP course.

Findings of the study will help increase the body of knowledge that is available in terms of course design, content and teaching methodology, particularly pertaining to Business English. Knowledge from the findings will also provide program providers with the basis for making decision about refining the programme; justifying the approaches used and determining the program's worth. With this knowledge, curriculum experts can help develop policies and practices to improve the quality and standards of the course in the future.

Finally, the findings of this study can only be taken as an indicative of a broader issue that needs more extensive and specific investigation in future studies. As this study is restricted to one particular faculty in one

particular institution (IIUM), it cannot claim to be an exhaustive one nor one that is representative of Malaysian universities in general and, therefore, will not give the overall conclusion to the effectiveness of the course in Malaysia.

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