

A Target Needs Analysis of the Written Communication Skills for Students of *Writing for Professional Purposes* Course

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Abstract

The great demand for business communication skills among graduates has urged universities to develop Englishbusiness communication courses, which lie under the domain of 'English for Specific Purposes'. This paper aims to conduct a 'needs analysis' of *Writing for Professional Purposes* course students at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It is part of a study which aims at gathering pertinent information from multiple sources including students, graduates of the *Writing for Professional Purposes* course, employers, and an ESP teacher. Hutchinson and Waters' model of needs analysis used in the present study to explore the perceptions of graduates of the course on the course students' target needs with regards to written business communication skills. The results demonstrate that a few written business communication skills such as writing emails, resumes and reports are highly important in today's workplace. Thus it is vital for students of *Writing for Professional Purposes* course to be prepared with the needed written business communication skills. The study indicates that generally the course is in line with the students' target needs.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; written business communication skills; needs analysis; target needs; necessities; lacks, wants

Abstrak

Keperluan kemahiran komunikasi perniagaan dalam kalangan graduan telah mendorong universiti membangunkan kursus kemahiran komunikasi perniagaan bahasa Inggeris, yang terletak di bawah 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP). Kertas kerja ini menganalisis keperluan pelajar kursus *Writing for Professional Purposes* di Pusat Pengajian Ilmu Kemanusiaan, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Ia adalah sebahagian daripada suatu kajian yang melibatkan pengumpulan data berkaitan dari pelbagai sumber termasuk pelajar kursus, bekas pelajar kursus, majikan dan guru ESP. Kertas kerja ini akan melaporkan persepsi bekas pelajar kursus, yang sedang bekerja di pelbagai tempat kerja, tentang keperluan sasaran pelajar kursus berdasarkan model analisis keperluan Hutchinson dan Waters. Dapatan menunjukkan beberapa kemahiran komunikasi perniagaan penulisan seperti emel, resume, laporan dan sebagainya sangat penting di tempat kerja. Oleh itu, kursus *Writing for Professional Purposes* mesti memberi penekanan terhadap kemahiran komunikasi perniagaan penulisan yang diperlukan. Kajian ini menunjukkan secara amnya kursus ini selari dengan keperluan sasaran pelajar.

Keywords: Bahasa Inggeris untuk tujuan tertentu; kemahiran penulisan komunikasi perniagaan; analisis keperluan; keperluan sasaran

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the expansion of technology have significantly influenced all businesses around the world; therefore, business communication skills have come to a significant position in every profession. Businesses need to communicate with the rest of the world in order to survive and make progress. Being recognized as the international language, English language carries the responsibility of lingua franca in the international business

communication. Victor (1992, p.249) emphasised the importance of business communication skills stating that "it is probably better to have mediocre technical skills and excellent international business communication skills than to have excellent technical skills and poor international business communication skills".

Although spoken communication skills are required in many aspects of a job, the importance of written communication skills cannot be ignored, since spoken communication skills are not enough to respond to all communicative needs within the

workplace (Kuen, 2001). The increasing need for having proper written business communication skills has led universities and colleges to offer written business communication courses which lie under the domain of *English for Specific Purposes* (ESP, hereafter).

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.21) “ESP is an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners”. Many researchers believe that needs analysis is the cornerstone in any ESP course (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Kaur, 1993; Brown, 1995; Dudley Evans and St. John, 1998; Jordan, 1997; Shuib, 2005; Chen, 2006; Jiajing, 2007; Al-Tamimi and Shuib, 2010). Needs analysis can be defined as “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities” (Richards *et al.*, 1992, p.242-243).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) proposed a very comprehensive learning-centred approach to needs analysis by making a basic distinction between “target needs (i.e. what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and learning needs (i.e. what the learner needs to do in order to learn)” (ibid: 54). ‘Target needs’ refers to “what knowledge and abilities will the learners require in order to be able to perform to the required degree of competence in the target situation” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p.60). They classified target needs into three groups: “necessities, lacks and wants” (ibid: p.60). ‘Necessities’ refers to the skills that are required to be achieved in order to perform effectively in the target situation, while ‘Lacks’ refers to the language deficiencies of learners, dealing with what learners already know about the target language, and ‘Wants’ is determined based on the tendency of learners on what they may like to receive from the target language course (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

1.1 Empirical Studies in International Context

A number of studies were conducted to examine business education in different universities by studying different groups including students, faculty members, and business professionals. For instance, Jiajing (2007) investigated an international business course at Guilin University, China. She believed that the offered ESP course did not meet the learners’ needs since it only emphasized language forms. Thus, she proposed a new ESP course framework which could fulfil the learners’ future communication needs. According to her, the objectives of an ESP course should be identified based on the learners’ present and future needs.

Zhu (2004) inspected assignments in business courses by studying the skills that learners needed to complete at the University of South Florida. The researcher tended to find out the students’ target needs and also to achieve an understanding of logical preparations in business courses. The results demonstrated that to perform successfully in the business writing, students have dual roles: “as business people, the professional role, and as learners, the institutional role” (ibid: 130). The researcher also suggested that school and professional forums should not separate from each other, but be integrated and co-existent.

Bacha and Bahous (2008) took a different approach from Zhu (2004) and studied the writing needs perceived by business students and faculty members at the Lebanese American University. Throughout the study, the students’ language proficiency, the importance of language skills (especially writing skills), students’ writing needs, and the role of faculties of English and Business in improving students’ writing skills were investigated. It could be derived from the findings that there was a discrepancy between students’ and faculty members’ perceptions regarding what writing tasks are necessary, but both groups

believed that cooperation between faculties of English and Business is necessary to develop an effective business writing course.

On the other hand, Jackson (2005) investigated business education itself in Hong Kong aiming to examine the status of learning and teaching multidisciplinary education in a business setting with the purpose of evaluating the current business courses, their relevance to the learners’ needs as well as offering helpful recommendations for probable changes. The study revealed that a wide range of students are not proficient in English language, and this lack varies with regards to the time and also areas of specialization. She explained “the importance of seeking input from business faculty so that the genuine needs of students can be identified and addressed in well-designed, discipline-sensitive business communication programs” (Jackson, 2005: 293). She also suggested that collaboration amongst institutions can improve the state of teaching and learning of business English which leads to more comprehensible and appropriate courses.

Jiang’s (2011) study is unique in the sense that it outlines an English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) course for a Chinese international trade company in order to meet the trainees’ and the company manager’s needs. The results depicted that the design of an ESBP course should include a combination of suitable methodologies. The researcher also found out that to design a successful ESP course, relying on the needs analysis, the course designer should use appropriate syllabus, materials, teaching methodology, and course evaluation.

1.2 Empirical Studies in Malaysia

A number of studies have been carried out to examine the teaching of business English in Malaysia. For instance, Baharum *et al.* (2007, p.33) stated that Business English courses in Malaysia are not able to fulfil the students’ target needs since their language syllabus and learning materials are “non-interactive and lack stimulation”. They suggested a Scenario-based learning by using animated pedagogical agents (APA) in order to provide opportunities for the learners to “engage with authentic situations and tasks” in teaching business English (Baharom *et al.*, 2007: 33). They concluded that applying the mentioned approach in teaching business English can prepare a comprehensive and helpful environment to fulfil the learners’ actual needs.

Shuib (2003) also looked at learner’s needs by exploring what communication skills employers expect employees to have in different business contexts. The data was gathered from 120 job advertisements in Star Newspaper in June 2000. The advertisements were categorized into job types including managerial, clerical, professional, and sales and their requirements were examined. It was concluded that communication skills were necessary in all these four types of jobs. He concluded that the jobs and the tasks involved are highly related to the types of language and communication skills expected.

Goh and Chan (1996) have taken a deeper look at the issue of communication skills of learners by investigating the importance of English language use in Malaysian workplaces. The study was conducted to attain information on the target requirements of the potential employees in order to provide them with proper skills, confidence, and efficiency in using English language. The results suggested that English language is an essential factor in their jobs. It was also perceived that the potential employees need to be proficient in various sub skills among which speaking was recognized to be of the highest importance for the employees.

Kuen’s (2001) study, on the other hand, reported on both written and spoken communication events and skills used and

needed by sales personnel in an owner-managed group of companies in Malaysia. It was noted that communicative events could be divided into two channels; spoken and written. Kuen (2001) concluded that “grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence” would undoubtedly develop the competence of sales personnel. She noted that in order to perform effectively in the business context, sales personnel need to have various communication skills in English.

As it is observed, there is a gap in the literature regarding business English examining students’ target needs in Malaysia. The studies which were reviewed mostly looked upon business communication skills in workplaces by examining working adults. They investigated business English use, skills required in working contexts, and industry’s expectations of employees. Thus, the current study is significant since it is amongst the first studies carried out in Malaysia to explore university students’ needs.

1.3 Writing for Professional Purposes Course at the School of Humanities, USM

Writing for Professional Purposes course is an optional, one-semester course taught at the School of Humanities. The course has been offered for more than 10 years to major and minor students in English Language Studies degree program. Majority of the students are from the School of Humanities while a few are from other schools such as School of Management and School of Communication. The students’ job prospects are quite diverse ranging from administrators, marketing executives and educators. Despite the diversity of academic background, all of them share the same aim in pursuing the course: to enhance their written business communication skills.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Considering globalization and developments in technology and communication, employability skills in each country have undergone some fundamental changes to fulfil international market needs. To attain such a goal, Higher Education in each country is responsible to provide individuals with necessary skills for their future occupation. Thus, academic centres need to provide courses which help students develop proper employability skills that will satisfy industries’ needs. The importance of English language communication skills is also apparent in Malaysian context. The National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 published by MOHE, Malaysia revealed that employers are not satisfied with fresh graduates since many of them lack prerequisite employability skills amongst which poor command of English language skills is the most important one; the blueprint illustrated that local graduates are highly competent in their specialist areas, but are not proficient in English language communication skills (MOHE, 2012). Plus, in an interview with a university lecturer, it was mentioned that Malaysian employers are not happy with the graduates’ proficiency in English language skills especially written communication skills and that the students themselves find writing skills are the most difficult ones to acquire.

A preliminary interview with a consultant on business communication revealed that most graduates have problems with the written form of communication. She also believed that graduates do not use the proper tone to suit different writing situations and they tend to follow the bad communication practices of senior colleagues. Thus, communication courses need to prepare students, who are future employees, for the communication challenges they need to face in their future job. Omar *et al.* (2012) studied the graduate employability skills based on four major criteria: qualification, academic score, experience

and specific soft skills in Malaysia. They reported many scholars in Malaysia concluded that university graduates suffer from lack of sufficient soft skills which can affect their in the workplace.

Hence, further studies are needed to determine the important skills that graduates need to be equipped with at universities and colleges in order to get prepared for their future occupation.

In the area of Business English, many studies have been carried out which mostly address teaching of business English and general status of English for business purposes (Jiajing, 2007; Zhang, 2007; Zoucheng and Lifei, 2011). Several studies have been conducted to analyse written business communication skills most of which are not even recent (Kuen, 2001; Seshadri and Theye, 2000). In this regards, Someya (1999, p.2) expressed that “relatively little serious research existed in the area of EBP (English for Business Purposes) and, as a result, we actually know surprisingly little about language usage and performance in international business contexts”.

The current study aims at examining target needs of students attending *Writing for Professional Purposes* course at the School of Humanities, USM to find out what they need to acquire through the course so that they can fulfil the communication related needs of industries. (The findings of the study reveal the most frequent and the most important skills (necessities) in the real working) contexts as perceived by the graduates of the course. Furthermore, it can be used as a guideline to improve the course, providing course designers and teachers with information on the students’ target needs, leading to improvements in the graduates’ employability skills by taking into account the skills which are necessary for students’ target situation.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The present paper aims to determine the frequency of written business communication skills used by the graduates of *Writing for Professional Purposes* course in the workplace and the graduates’ perceptions of the importance of written business communication skills for students of *Writing for Professional Purposes* course.

■ 2.0 METHODOLOGY

Triangulation method of data collection has been applied to discover the students’ writing needs at the School of Humanities, USM. Polit and Hungler (1999) defined triangulation of data collection as making use of multiple methods of data collection and interpretation in order to achieve a clear picture of reality. In Triangulation method, qualitative and quantitative methods should be considered “as complementary rather than as rival camps” (Jick, 1983, p.135).

2.1 Participants

The respondents of the present study are former USM students who have undergone the *Writing for Professional Purposes* course at the School of Humanities. 30 graduates of the course were required to fill out a questionnaire, and five of them were interviewed in order to find out their perceptions of the students’ necessities with regard to written business communication skills in their workplace. The respondents were within the age range of 22 to 31, holding Bachelor’s, Master’s, or PhD degrees. They were mostly working as teachers or lecturers in different schools and universities. Other respondents were employees of various companies in Malaysia, working as administrators, officers, executives, sales managers, negotiators, etc.

The graduates were chosen in order to attain their views on written business communication skills in the workplace. Their experiences, taking the course and working in real situations allow them to evaluate the course and its relevance with the target situation and to reveal various aspects related to written business communication skills in the target situation.

2.2 Instruments

The instruments used for the purpose of data collection in the current study include questionnaires and interviews; questionnaires and interviews are regarded as the most significant instruments for data collection (West, 1994) which are used by many researchers. The questionnaires used for the purpose of the current study are designed based upon Hutchinson and Waters' framework of needs analysis which includes necessities, lacks, and wants. The questionnaires distributed among the graduates of the course included three sections aiming at determining the 'necessities' of the course students. The two other components of the framework were excluded since they are more relevant to current students than the graduates of the course.

Section A is concerned with the respondents' background information including age, gender, designation, years of working experience, and academic degree. Section B is comprised of three subsections; the first subsection addresses the frequency of using various written business communication skills in the workplace; the second subsection is concerned with the frequency of internal and external types of communication in the workplace; finally, the third subsection focuses on the frequency of using written communicative functions in the workplace. The graduates were asked to choose from a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*) to provide information on the frequency of applying written communication skills in the workplace.

Section C is developed to determine the importance of various types of written business communication skills and communicative functions in the workplace as viewed by the graduates. Like section B, section C includes three subsections; the first subsection included various written business communication skills and the graduates were required to determine their importance in the workplace. The second subsection asks about the importance of internal and external types of communication in the workplace and the third subsection is concerned with the importance of four communicative functions in the workplace. The graduates were supposed to choose from a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not Important*) to 5 (*Very Important*) to provide information on the importance of the studied written communication skills in the workplace. The data from questionnaires distributed were analysed through calculating the mean score of each question and having it compared with other mean scores.

Furthermore, interviews were arranged to function as a supplementary source of information and to help correlate the data gathered from the first source or the questionnaire (Yin 1994). For this reason, from the 30 graduates who filled out the questionnaires, five were selected to be interviewed in order to

triangulate the findings with the data gathered through the questionnaires.

The interview questions were formulated based on the following themes:

- The frequency of written business communication skills in the workplace
- The importance of written business communication skills for students to learn
- The graduates' perceptions of the course which they attended
- The recommendations offered by the graduates for probable improvements of the course pertaining to written business communication skills

It should be mentioned that the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in order to reduce the number of probable errors, misunderstandings, and bias of the researchers. Recording the interviews, the researchers listened to the answers for a several times and transcribed them for the purpose of conducting a content analysis of the transcriptions.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Quantitative Findings

As previously mentioned, the study benefited from both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires distributed among graduates who have undertaken the *Writing for Professional Purposes* course. The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed in terms of mean scores. The respondents were asked to choose from a five-scale continuum ranging from: 1. *Never* to 5. *Always*, to report on the frequency of applying the below mentioned written business communication skills and communicative functions in the workplace. Table 1 illustrates the mean values which depict the respondents' responses.

Table 1 The frequency of applying written business communication skills and communicative functions in the workplace

	Mean Score (n=30)	
The frequency of using different written communication skills at the workplace	Writing informal emails	4
	Writing instructions	4
	Writing formal emails	3.76
	Writing resumes	3.60
	Writing reports	3.53
	Writing memos	3.53
	Writing minutes	3.03
	Writing official notices	2.86
	Writing business letters	2.83
	Writing contracts	2.66
	Writing company brochures	2.53
The frequency of engaging in external and internal communication at the workplace	Writing sales-related materials	2.36
	External communication	4.23
The frequency of using written communication for different communicative functions at the workplace	Internal communication	4.16
	Informing someone of something (E.g. letters of announcement)	3.73
	Getting information from someone (E.g. letters of enquiry)	3.70
	Getting someone to do something (E.g. sales letters)	3.46
	Expressing your attitude about something (E.g. complaint letters)	3.46

The data gathered through the questionnaires revealed that among the various forms of written business communication skills, 'writing instructions' and 'writing informal emails' are the most frequently used in different working settings with a mean score of 4. The second and third most frequent skills, suggested by the respondents, refer to 'writing formal emails' and 'writing resumes' with the mean scores of 3.76 and 3.60, respectively. This clearly indicates that these skills are used by the employees on a regular basis. It is also evident that 'writing memos' and 'writing reports' both with a mean score of 3.53 rank as the fourth skills which are frequently applied by the working graduates. 'Writing minutes' with the mean score of 3.03 ranked fifth which means that it is less frequently used at work compared to the above mentioned skills. The least frequent skills reported are 'writing official notices' (mean score: 2.86), 'writing business letters' (mean score: 2.83), 'writing contracts' (mean score: 2.66), 'writing company brochures' (mean score: 2.53), and 'writing sales-related materials' (mean score: 2.36) being seldom used in the workplace.

The second subsection focused on examining how often the graduates communicate internally and externally at the workplaces. External communication refers to the kind of communication that employees have with the stakeholders outside

the organization including customers, clients, other companies and so on; while internal communication is concerned with communicating within the workplace, e.g. with colleagues, the employer, etc. Based on the answers given by the respondents, both internal and external types of communication were found to be often used with mean scores of 4.16 and 4.23, respectively.

The third subsection of the questionnaire examined the frequency of using the written form of communication for different communicative functions. As the analysis revealed 'getting information from someone' demonstrated to be the most frequent communicative function in the graduates' workplaces with the mean score of 3.73, followed by 'informing someone of something' (mean score: 3.70). 'Getting someone to do something' and 'expressing attitude about something' have been recognized to be of the same frequency in the workplace (mean score: 3.46).

Finally, items in section C of the questionnaires gathered the graduates' perceptions on the important written communication skills that students need to learn. The respondents were asked to provide their responses through selecting from a five-scale continuum ranging from: 1. *Not important* to 5. *Very important*. Table 2 illustrates the results obtained from section C of the questionnaires.

Table 2 The importance of applying written business communication skills and communicative functions in the workplace

	Mean Score (n=30)	
The importance of written business communication skills in the workplace	Writing resumes	4.73
	Writing reports	4.53
	Writing formal emails	4.53
	Writing instructions	4.46
	Writing business letters	4.30
	Writing informal emails	4.13
	Writing official notices	4.10
	Writing minutes	4.10

	Writing company brochures	3.96
	Writing memos	3.96
	Writing sales-related materials	3.93
	Writing contracts	3.93
The importance of written Communication types in the workplace	External communication	4.76
	Internal communication	4.66
The importance of written communicative functions in the workplace	Informing someone of something (E.g. letters of announcement)	4.73
	Getting information from someone (E.g. letters of enquiry)	4.60
	Getting someone to do something (E.g. sales letters)	4.60
	Expressing your attitude about something (E.g. complaint letters)	4.60

As observed in the table, ‘writing resumes’ was regarded as the most important skill for students to learn with the mean score of 4.73, followed by ‘writing reports’ and ‘writing formal emails’ being of the same significance, based on the respondents’ viewpoints (mean score: 4.53). Besides, ‘writing instructions’ (mean score: 4.46), ‘writing business letters’ (mean score: 4.30), and ‘writing informal emails’ (mean score: 4.13) were found to be the third, fourth, and fifth most important skills perceived by the graduates, respectively. As reported by graduates both ‘writing official notices’ and ‘writing minutes’ with the mean score of 4.10 were the following important skills for the students of the course to learn.

The respondents’ answers depicted that ‘writing company brochures’ and ‘writing memos’ are of the same level of significance with the mean score of 3.96. The least important skills viewed by the respondents were ‘writing contracts’ and ‘writing sales-related materials’ with the same mean score of 3.93, yet recognized as important skills for the students to learn through the course. The last part of each subsection included an open-ended question asking about other skills which had not been addressed by the questionnaire; ‘writing formal letters’ was suggested by one of the graduates as being important for the students to learn. Furthermore, ‘writing newsletters in corporate websites’ and ‘writing annual reports’ were mentioned by the respondents being recognized as very important skills.

With regards to the internal and external communication, it was understood that both types of communication are of a great significance in various workplaces. The findings illustrated that external communication (mean score: 4.76) was regarded more important than internal communication (mean score: 4.66). For the third subsection, the respondents opined that all communicative functions were important for the students to be prepared with for their future jobs. ‘Informing someone of something’ was found as the most important function perceived by the respondents of the study (mean score: 4.73). ‘Getting information from someone’, ‘Getting someone to do something’ and ‘Expressing attitude about something’ were demonstrated to be of the same level of importance for the students to learn with the mean score of 4.60. Another function suggested by one of the respondents in the open-ended part of the subsection was ‘communicating with the third party especially foreigners’ which was regarded as a very important function for the students of the course to become equipped with.

3.2 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings refer to the data collected through a second source of information considered for the process of data collection of the present study; interviews were conducted to provide a supplementary source of information and to help corroborate the data obtained from the questionnaires (Yin, 1994). Consistent with the results achieved through questionnaires, interviews revealed that graduates found written business communication skills to be very important for their present occupation. The following sentences are the respondents’ direct quotes which suggest the significance of written business communication skills. In order to assure confidentiality, a code, R1 to R5 was assigned to each of the respondents of the interviews.

The respondents were quite aware of the significance of written communication skills in the workplace. In this regards R1 stated that:

“If you write wrongly, you will not receive any response and as a result, you will be ignored in your workplace. In order to be an effective and successful employee, you need to be exposed to proper written communication skills”.

According to the respondents, internal and external communication is equally important at the workplace depending on the job type. Writing cover letters, emails, preparing slides for lectures, writing papers, resumes, and writing reports were usually used by them in their work places. The answers of the respondents revealed that if the graduates want to have a job in future, the first step they should take is writing resumes.

R2: “The graduates, in order to apply for a job, need to have the skill of writing effective resumes. Resumes are very important since they are your first impression to your future employer.”

R5: “I need to be equipped with proper communication skills like writing resumes, if I am looking for a new development in my career.”

Writing business letters was also recognized to be very important in the graduates’ workplace in order to inform and also to persuade others. The types of business letters which were mostly used by the graduates included persuasive letters to convince others to do something or to believe in what they do;

positive letters to inform someone of something and to exchange knowledge; and routine letters which follow the same templates in order to inform about the upcoming events and invitations. They mentioned that the formatting of letters which they learnt through the course was really important for successful communication.

R4: "The Course enlightened me about what skills are essential. One of the essential skills was formatting letters for the purpose of preparing effective and useful letters."

Although writing letters is regarded as one of the most important means of communication in today's workplaces, four of the respondents considered emails as the fastest form of communication which is effective and widely used at the workplaces.

R3: "Looking at the kind of trend in today's globalized era, emails are very important. In the business world, emails are very effective method of communication."

R4: "Emails are faster, more effective, and more relevant which can enhance the working nature of communication process."

Emails are used by the graduates in order to inform someone about something, welcome someone, make an appointment, exchange knowledge, contribute to knowledge bank, get information about something, and get advice from counterparts. For writing proper emails, the respondents recognized formatting, word selection, proper vocabulary, grammar, and the English language proficiency are very essential requirements that the graduates need to possess.

The respondents found the *Writing for Professional Purposes* course very useful for their present job. The course was fulfilling and satisfying enough leading them to successfully communicate in their workplace. One of the graduates of the course who works as a lecturer in the field of English language studies stated that:

R3: "Writing for Professional Purposes course was really helpful for me. Based on the skills I gained here, I can teach written communication skills to my students, in the same way and with the same format I was taught."

R2: "The course is very relevant in the sense that you cannot skip from the reality of communicating in writing, whether it is in the formal or informal context."

Based on what has been observed in interviews, although the course is inclusive and offers necessary skills, there is still a room for improvements. They proposed that it would be much better if the course was open to everybody not just to the English major or minor students since all the students with different fields of study like Bahasa Malaysia, geography, management, etc. need to learn how to write and communicate properly. They suggested that the course to be made compulsory rather than an optional course so that all students have to take the course. It was also recommended that the course can be more practical to help graduates to perform more effectively in the workplace.

R5: "Students needed more hands-on practice, not just trying to digest the format; it should be more practical with the hands-on practices in producing the kind of particular effective letters and emails."

As mentioned, the course included most business communication skills such as letter writing, report writing, and the writing of minutes, emails, etc and the graduates believed that the

course plays an important role in preparing the students for their future job, although there is still a room for improvements in the course content and methodology.

■4.0 DISCUSSIONS

The studies reviewed earlier demonstrated that ESP courses especially in Malaysia are not able to prepare the students with proper communication skills as Wu (2012) confirmed the weakness of graduates in English language skills because the lack of practice. Omer *et al.* (2012) also affirmed that graduates' lack of proficiency resulted in a high level of unemployment in Malaysia. However, the findings of this study illustrated that the skills included in *Writing for Professional Purposes* course are helpful, providing the students with effective written business communication skills needed for their job as recognized to be important by earlier studies.

The results achieved through graduates' questionnaires and interviews demonstrated the importance and frequency of written business communication skills and communicative functions in the graduates' workplaces. The results are in line with the findings of the previous studies such as Seshadri and Theye (2000) in which they found good writing as a very fundamental factor. The graduates' responses revealed written business communication skills are widely used in today's workplaces; therefore, it is really necessary to learn them if doing well in the workplace is expected. They recognized different types of written business communication skills such as writing formal and informal emails, reports, instructions, reports, etc. as the most frequent skills. It is worth mentioning that most graduates of the course examined through this research hold teaching and educating positions in different academic settings. Therefore, the skills that are relevant to teaching positions are recognized to be more important. Apparently, graduates ranked the most frequent skills in their workplaces as the most important ones for students to acquire. For example, writing formal and informal emails, giving instructions, and writing reports that are more frequently used in the workplace are regarded as more important compared to other skills. Interesting to note is 'writing business letters' is not frequently used at the workplace but it is ranked as an important skill. This shows that although the graduates do not write business letters often, they are aware of the importance of this skill in many business-related jobs. Thus, they recognized 'writing business letters' as an important skill to be taught to students. The results are consistent with the findings of Goh and Chan's (1996) study in which writing routine letters and memos are considered as very important, as well as with Kuen's (2001) study which concluded writing letters, memos, reports, and proposals are very important forms of written communication skills. Generally, it is important for students to be prepared with the necessary skills which will definitely be useful for their future workplace communication (Jiajing, 2007).

Writing letters, emails, reports and other types of written business communication were among the most frequent and most important skills mentioned by the respondents in this study. As mentioned earlier, these skills are included in the course content; thus, it can be concluded that the course is in accordance with the requirements of today's workplace. The course has taught the right skills which will help to prepare the students with sufficient skills needed for their future written communication tasks. However, there is still a room for improvements as the graduates suggested other skills need to be covered by the course. These skills included 'writing formal letters', 'writing newsletters in corporate websites', and 'writing annual reports'. It was also mentioned that 'communicating with the third party especially

foreigners' is another important factor which should be included in the course content.

Furthermore, both external and internal types of communication were demonstrated to be frequently used and also important for students to learn. The results depict that external communication is slightly more important than internal communication. Since, external communication involves communicating with the stakeholders from outside the company including companies and customers from other countries, students need to get prepared with the requirements of the international market regarding written business communication skills. There should also be an emphasis on the cultural factors which vary across countries. In accordance with this issue, Zoucheng and Lifei (2011, p.23) mentioned that students need to "possess global vision, pioneering and innovative spirit, and intercultural communication skills". The results are also in accordance with Cowling's (2007) study in which the integration of cultural aspects to the lessons is suggested. In this regards, Wang (2011) proposed a case-based method to enhance students' intercultural communication competence.

Finally, the respondents gave recommendations for improving students' written business communication skills to get them prepared for their future occupation. They suggested that the course be open for all students from different fields of study and be a compulsory rather than an optional course. This way, all students can acquire the communication skills that they need for their future jobs.

The findings of this study is consistent with Zhu's (2004) findings which demonstrated that in order to be successful in their learning, students need to have dual roles: professional and institutional roles. To achieve this, the studied course needs to be more practical by using authentic texts introducing real business environment in the class as well as getting up-dated with new trends in written business communication. Like many other studies (Yan Wu, 2012; Edwards, 2000; Zhu, 2004), the respondents of this study recommended that the course be more practically conducted; this, according to the respondents, can improve students' functions in their future jobs. In this regards, Wu (2012) proposed a task-based approach that students can experience real working situation. In line with this, Edwards (2000) mentioned that using recent and international authentic texts can help students experience a more real atmosphere.

Overall, in order to improve students' business communication skills, there should be close cooperation between educational centers and the industry. According to Omar *et al.* (2012), the method and materials of the course should be in accordance with the communication demand of the job and international market. In addition, to improve graduates' employability skills, a close cooperation between the Higher Education Institution and industries is needed. Zhu (2004) also recommended that educational and professional forums should not work in isolation, but be integrated.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study was conducted in order to determine the English writing target needs of *Writing for Professional Purposes* course students. The present paper reported on the perceptions of graduates who have undertaken the mentioned course. The questionnaires and interviews were designed to find out what written business communication skills are necessary and used more often by graduates at the workplaces.

With respect to the importance of English language as a lingua franca for business communication, written business communication skills seem to be of great significance in today's

globalized world. In order to communicate globally, all graduates need to learn how to communicate with the rest of the world in business context. This justifies the significance of emergence of written business communication courses in universities and colleges to accommodate the students with the required skills in the industry.

The results demonstrate that the most frequent and the most important skills in the students' future jobs. These skills included writing emails, business letters, resumes, reports, memos, etc. Since teaching these skills is included in the course, it can be concluded that the course content of the *Writing for Professional Purposes* course is in accordance with the target needs of students as mentioned by the graduates. However, the graduates suggested the course contain other skills such as writing newsletters and annual reports in order to fulfil the industry's needs. External and internal communications were also recognized as very important; furthermore, external communication was found more important than internal one which highlights the importance of cultural factors in addition to the format and content of writing. The communicative functions including informing, persuading, and getting information from someone together with expressing attitudes were also found to be significant for students to learn as they are frequently used at the workplace.

The findings of this study present what skills students of *Writing for Professional Purposes* course need to learn in order to function effectively in the workplace. The study took into account the views of the graduates since they are among primary stakeholders of the course who have undergone the course and experienced real work condition; therefore, they are able to explain the target needs of the course students regarding written communication skills.

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