

English communication skills for employability: the perspectives of employers in Bahrain

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Abstract

Whilst English remains the language of global commerce, the role and outcomes of English language provision in English-medium higher education institutions in the Arab Gulf countries remains central to any discussion on graduate profile and the employability of graduates in the global marketplace. This paper describes the findings of research into English workplace communication skills amongst a sample of Bahrain employers and students at Bahrain Polytechnic. Using a mixed methods approach, data was gathered through telephone interviews, student workplace simulations and employer focus groups. Findings show that generic employability skills, channelled through English as a second or additional language, are highly valued by Bahrain's employers. In particular, students need to market themselves as confident, knowledgeable individuals during the recruitment process and after recruitment, continuing to operate successfully in the sociolinguistic culture of their company. Consequently, it is concluded that English language training in higher education programmes needs to move from purely linguistic and degree-related content areas to a broader remit of English for communication purposes that covers both specialised discourse fields and broader generic employability skills and competencies.

Introduction

It has been claimed that the 'Arab Spring' was to some extent driven by employability demands (British Council, 2013). In so far as this is the case, it highlights the close relationship between higher education and the socio-political/ socio-economic context in which it operates in the region and foregrounds the importance of producing work-ready graduates in the coming years.

Despite the centrality of higher education to the economic and political well-being of countries in the region, the relationship is not clearly defined or universal, and the role of higher education in the Arab Gulf states as an agent for social, political and economic change, continues to be discussed and debated (Mazawi, 2010). In particular, questions as to what the labour market requires and whether higher education institutions are adequately preparing students with skills that match those labour market requirements continue to be at the forefront of discussion. Unfortunately, although research has shown that Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have been "the most strategic and proactive in establishing employability agendas" nationally and institutionally (British Council, 2013, p. 6), the frequent claim from employers remains, in the Gulf region and more widely, that a disconnect exists between their expectations and their satisfaction with graduate quality (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; McLean, 2010; Qian, 2007; Moreland, 2005). As recently as June 2015, such sentiments were further reinforced in the first

employer-led analysis of the gap between employer needs and graduate skills in Bahrain (Higher Education Council, 2015).

However, it must be said that employers, beyond a general request for high levels of English, are often vague as to exact needs or measurement of such levels. This paper is a response to this; it reports on research carried out by Bahrain Polytechnic's School of Languages with a sample of nine Bahraini employers and potential employers to more clearly define the nature and range of English communication skills required of Polytechnic graduates attempting entry into the Bahraini job market.

Context

The island Kingdom of Bahrain is situated in the Arabian Gulf. Bahrain Polytechnic was established by Royal Decree in 2008 to address the need for a skilled Bahraini labour force that would support and contribute to economic growth and diversification (Bahrain Polytechnic, 2013). The Polytechnic delivers applied, professional and technical qualifications with the aim of supplying confident, competent and work-ready graduates to meet the economic and community needs of the country. Most programmes and many services are delivered through English.

Bahrain Polytechnic programmes, qualifications and courses in the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of Engineering, Visual Design, Web Media and ICT (EDICT) are developed in consultation with business, industry, professional bodies and international education and training institutions and are recognised for the quality of the work-ready graduates delivered to the market. Delivery of these courses centres on problem-, project- and practicum-based teaching and learning strategies (Bahrain Polytechnic, 2013). A third Faculty, the Faculty of Humanities, delivers English support courses in Foundation and degree programmes in addition to Foundation courses in Mathematics, Information Technology and Personal Academic Learning. It also delivers electives and National Requirements as well as non-academic staff English support courses through a Language Centre.

Initial research within Bahrain, prior to establishment of the Polytechnic in 2008, found that industry had consistently identified "poor English language capability" (Polytechnics International New Zealand, 2007, p.5) as one of a number of deficiencies in new graduates entering the workforce, alongside critical thinking, problem solving and group work. This is not an isolated finding. Across the Gulf region some 80% of students leaving secondary education will have to go into bridging or foundation programmes in order to raise core subject skills to levels appropriate to enter degree level study (Carroll, 2007).

During an internal review of English provision at the Polytechnic in 2012, employer focus groups identified English competency at the Polytechnic as a 'unique selling point' to employers. However, these employers had broad concerns about entry level graduates from across higher education institutions in Bahrain, identifying a lack of adequate communication skills and in particular, adequate writing skills (Bahrain Polytechnic at this time had not yet graduated its first cohort of students). In these focus groups, core communication skills were identified as inter-alia, making presentations, taking part in technical discourse, confidently explaining and justifying actions, processes and decisions to co-workers and line-managers and communicating effectively across a multi-cultural/ multi-national workforce.

As an extension of this review in October 2013, approval was gained from the Polytechnic's senior management to carry out more finely grained research to identify the nature and scope of the English workplace communication skills required by employers or potential employers of Polytechnic graduates. The findings of this research are set out and discussed below.

The first section reviews the literature around employability and communication. The second sets out the methodologies used in the study whilst the third reports and analyses the findings.

Literature review

Employability

Though there is continuing confusion as to the scope, concepts, classifications and definitions of 'employability' amongst employers, government agencies and academics, there is sufficient overlap and consensus of core elements to provide a foundation for discussion, (Harvey, 2001; Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011; Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

Yorke and Knight (2003), identify employability as

a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations

This is a definition also recently adopted by the British Council (British Council, 2013). Lowden et al., (2011) break this down when claiming that employers expect graduates to not only have degree level technical and discipline competencies but also 'a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities' (p. vi). These transferable skills - also classified as 'soft' 'key', 'core' or 'generic' (McLean, 2010), including communication skills, are referenced by many authors and to some employers at least, are of more value than a higher education degree in itself (Archer & Davison, 2008; Lowden et al., 2011). This viewpoint however, is countered by, for example, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009, Foreword) which claims that soft skills should not be seen as a substitute for specific knowledge and technical skills but rather as something that "can make a difference between being good at a subject and being good at doing a job".

The notion of employability as simply being good at a job is contested by Yorke (2004), Yorke and Knight, (2006) and the Confederation of British Industry (2011), who observe that the achievements, understandings, personal attributes and ability to transfer skills should not only benefit individuals but also the workforce, the community and the economy. Elsewhere, Rothwell and Arnold (2007), amongst others, cite ambition, awareness of opportunities in the labour market, positioning of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) and labour market demand for people in the students' field of study as measures of employability. Work experience, internships and extra-curricular activities are also seen as valuable and for some, meeting the requirements of professional bodies is crucial, whether through a degree or otherwise (Lowden et al., 2011).

To summarise, contemporary definitions of employability emphasise

the acquisition of skills and attributes that allow the individual to secure and maintain employment, to develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to a new sustainable employment if required. This involves possessing particular knowledge, skills and attitudes *with an ability to deploy them and market them to employers*. (Lowden et al., 2011, p. 6).

Critically for this paper, employability involves not just acquiring the knowledge, skills and attributes that are important for gaining employment, but the ability to market these skills and demonstrate them to potential employers and furthermore, to demonstrate how they meet the needs of the local, national

and international economic and social communities. This is articulated in the UK Council for Industry and Higher Education's website (CIHE, cited in Lowden et al., 2011, p. 5), whereby

there is a growing emphasis by employers on the need for graduates to demonstrate a range of competencies which will equip them for work *in a global environment, in different countries, in multi-cultural teams*, be innovative and enterprising and have strong language skills.' (p. 5, emphasis added).

Interestingly, this view does not appear to be confined to Anglophone cultures or to mature, post-industrial economies. Although evidence is limited for the Gulf context, similar conclusions have emerged across the region, for example in Bahrain (Mishra, Alseddiqi, & Pislaru, 2009), the United Arab Emirates (El-Sakran, 2012; Al Shayeb, 2013), Oman (Tuzlukova & Al-Mahrooqi, 2010; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012) and Saudi Arabia (Baqadir, Patrick, & Burns, 2011). A recent welcome addition is the comprehensive research carried out by Bahrain's Higher Education Council that examines the graduate skills required by industry and employers in the country (Higher Education Council, 2015).

Of particular resonance for the Gulf region is the UK Council for Industry and Higher Education's emphasis on the need for 'strong language skills' (including for native speakers of English), a requirement echoed amongst Bahraini employers in the founding research for Bahrain Polytechnic. To further underline this, the British Council, in its recent survey of young people, employers and institutions in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, state that

the biggest reported skills gaps were in language, communication, problem-solving and interpersonal skills. (British Council, 2013, p. 4)

This is supported by a more recent study which emphasized that foreign languages were seen as critical despite generally "very low proficiency" standards of English language proficiency across the region (Education First, 2014).

This section has established that recent literature connects employability to communication and, by extension, to strong language skills. This emphasis on communication is in turn linked to a wider context of internationalisation of economies and workforces. The next section explores more fully how English language skills fit into understandings of what constitutes communication skills amongst Bahrain employers.

Communication

English language proficiency and the application of communication skills to the world of employment remain central to any discussion on employability in the Gulf (Tuzlukova & Al-Mahrooqi, 2010), with employers often giving equal status to effective communication skills, alongside specialist subject knowledge (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Graddol, 2007; McLean, 2010; Archer & Davison, 2008; Lowden et al., 2011; Al Shayeb, 2013).

Most, if not all, higher education institutions in the Gulf will espouse some model of transferable, generic, core or soft skills similar to those cited in the previous section. At Bahrain Polytechnic these are articulated in a set of Employability Skills drawn from work in Australia (Allen Consulting Group, 2006). These Employability Skills are:

1. Communication
2. Teamwork
3. Problem Solving

4. Initiative and Enterprise
5. Planning and Organisation
6. Self-Management
7. Learning
8. Technology

At first glance, the natural focus of English language skills research and therefore this paper is likely to be contained within the first Employability Skill, 'Communication'. This is defined by the Polytechnic as a student being able to 'Communicate effectively in ways that contribute to productive and harmonious relationships across stakeholders' (Allen Consulting Group, 2006, p. 14).

Bahrain Polytechnic is an English medium institution with the majority of instruction and assessment carried out in English. For most students, English will be a second or additional language thus a graduate may have developed the higher order cognitive skills necessary to process information and problem solve but not necessarily the linguistic skills necessary to articulate these processes to potential employers through oral and written channels. Further, a lack of linguistic confidence may manifest itself in weak performance in interviews or workplace situations that require second or additional language communication.

Communication can be seen as an application of first or second language literacy, that is for example an ability to produce clear, structured written work; to possess effective listening and questioning skills; to demonstrate effective negotiating and persuasion skills; and to establish networks and share information across a range of technologies (Confederation of British Industry/ National Union of Students, 2011; Keller, Parker, & Chan, 2011; McLean, 2010; Al Shayeb, 2013). These applications of literacy can critically extend into the job seeking process where potential employees seek to impress potential employers through the creation of CVs tailored to the company or the role, demonstrate background research into the company (Lowden et al., 2011; British Council, 2013) and broadly establish 'cultural fit' (Hager, 2006). The idea of cultural fit links to notions of pragmatic and socio-pragmatic competence whereby, firstly, it is highly advantageous for a graduate to demonstrate discourse to fit the conventions of the employment field: for example, an engineering graduate in an interview should *sound* like an engineer. Secondly, it is also beneficial for a graduate to be able to develop a sociolinguistic competence that allows him/ her to adapt to changing registers of politeness, formality or cultural appropriacy within the multi-national business setting.

In summary, graduating students need to be able to brand themselves as confident, motivated, interested and knowledgeable even before entering the workplace. They need to demonstrate they 'fit' and are therefore able to contribute to 'productive and harmonious relationships' within the workforce. Thus, communication is once again demonstrated as being interlinked with personal attributes.

Earlier research into the requirements of Bahraini employers operating in the wider multi-national/ multi-cultural contexts of business in Bahrain had pointed towards English language skills being critical to the success of communication and therefore to business and to employment of graduates. The next section describes the methodology used to gather data from a sample of employers/ potential employers in Bahrain that would lead to a more nuanced understanding of required communication skills.

Methods

The School of Languages worked with a Bahraini marketing strategy company to gather data on required communication skills with the aim of improving services to the Polytechnic's 'clients', that is to say the students and employers and ultimately, the wider community. The company (ACKSolutions) was able to use their Bahraini client base to access nine companies representing a range of private and public, large, medium and small enterprises across the key sectors of financial services; manufacturing; transport and logistics; marketing and communications; and real estate. Such access would not normally have been open to the Polytechnic or would have required further significant resources. Data was gathered in three phases.

Phase 1

Firstly, companies representative of potential employers for the graduates of the six Degree programmes offered in the Polytechnic (Business, Logistics, Engineering, Information Communication Technology, Web Media, and Visual Design) were identified using data from the Faculties concerning student placement into internships and workplace projects. Initial contact was made by phone. It was not always possible to pin large companies down to talking about specific skills relating to, for example, electrical engineering or visual design, as access was frequently channeled through generic Human Resource departments. Nevertheless, nine companies were identified across a range of public and private, large, medium and small enterprises broadly representing different business sectors. These companies identified themselves as willing to take part in an initial telephone interview.

Two broad areas and sub-areas were identified through needs analysis conducted between the School of Languages and the consultancy company:

1. Workplace communication culture:

- 1.1. The extent of multi-nationalism within the company and the prevalence of English or Arabic as the medium of communication.
- 1.2. Communication modes and the main channels of communication e.g. email, face-to-face, memos, meetings.
- 1.3. The extent of on-going training carried out by employers (if any) to further develop communication skills.

2. Workplace communication challenges:

- 2.1. What issues arise around the employment of graduates or non-graduates into the company?
For example, a lack of work readiness or the criticality of certain skills.

The first broad area, 'workplace communication culture', established the appropriacy of the research theme (English communication skills) for any contacted company by identifying the communication culture of the company i.e. whether corporate communication was English only, Arabic only or a mix of English and Arabic. Further questioning provided details of the English and/or Arabic communication genres (for example, newsletters, customer contact, presentations, reports or e-mails), which could assist in planning employee/student simulations and in future curriculum design for the School of Languages. As the purpose of the research was to enhance the English language curriculum, Arabic communication styles and genres were set aside for research purposes.

The second broad area, 'workplace communication challenges', aimed to provide data on which communicative competencies potential employers looked out for in order to distinguish stronger from weaker candidates entering the job market or taking up work placements. Again, the aim was to link this data to enhancing English curriculum design and provision within the Polytechnic and to support students even before they reached the workplace.

Semi-structured telephone interviews based on the above topic areas were conducted to provide baseline data. Interviews were recorded and transcribed into field notes; and findings from these telephone interviews were used to shape the second phase of data gathering.

Phase 2

Following the telephone interviews, simulation scenarios were set up to assess students' abilities to deal with sample workplace scenarios that had been identified by employers in Phase 1.

Simulation participants were drawn from all majors and ranged from fourth year students about to graduate, through third year students who had completed industry projects or work placement, to students in first or second year English for Specific Purposes (ESP) support courses. In all, seven focus groups were held using six workplace scenarios or simulations. The simulations required participants to a) outline their methodology, thinking and approach in responding to the prompt (thereby demonstrating through language the cognitive processing/ critical analysis required to deal with the situation), and then to b) draft a text that would be used to communicate the requirements of the task to an appropriate audience. Further details on this task are given below and in the Appendix.

Phase 3

In the third phase of the research, two focus groups were held with employers. In these, the employers were asked to evaluate sample student responses to the task. The employers were given a rubric consisting of five criteria:

1. Appropriateness of the medium chosen
2. Format/ layout of the response
3. Achievement of the task; i.e. the extent to which all necessary information was provided.
4. Appropriateness of register; for example, the degree of formality, politeness or directness.
5. Accuracy of the language used; e.g. grammar/ vocabulary

Employers graded the students' response in each criterion as 'not appropriate', 'acceptable' or 'very appropriate'. This was done at an individual level. Finally, again at the individual level, the employers benchmarked the student responses by stating whether they would accept the standard of work in their organization or not. Participants then collectively discussed findings and wider issues relating to communication skills.

An example of a task, student response and employer focus group evaluation is given in Appendix 1.

Findings

Findings are grouped under the dimensions emerging from the data gathering phase.

Workplace communication cultures

Multi-nationalism and English/Arabic as medium of communication

Communication cultures vary considerably across employers. For example, an airline company required employees to have high levels of English to communicate with external and internal contacts. A logistics company reported that as it had multi-national employees, English was the main language of communication but it also recognized the importance of Arabic when dealing with government clients. A manufacturing company reported that only employees that work with 'externals' (i.e. contacts outside the company) are expected to have formal English training, though it noted that customer complaints are almost entirely handled in Arabic, perhaps reflecting the client base, and that internally, there is a mix of Arabic and varying degrees of English proficiency. In contrast, a social media marketing company expressed a need for 'perfect' English and Arabic as employees will be representing their clients on the word-wide web.

Communication tasks and main channels of communication

From the telephone interviews and focus group sessions, seven core communication tasks emerged:

1. Dealing with externals and internal clients/contacts through emails, letters and so on (for example: enquiries, complaints, briefs, proposals and requests).
2. Contributing to presentations.
3. Dealing with externals such as clients, suppliers or government bodies, face-to-face (for example: greetings, enquiries, requests or complaints).
4. Carrying out research and data collection.
5. Presenting information in written and graphic forms.
6. Preparing for interviews, for purposes of recruitment, client briefing or media interviews.
7. Proactively engaging in work processes and problem-solving.

The prioritization of these tasks varied across differently sized companies, economic sectors, customer and staff profiles and communication cultures. For example, an international bank uses emails for information that needs to be recorded and a newsletter for anything that needs to be communicated company-wide. A national energy company uses a memo for official news. In another company, face-to-face communication is always preferred and emails are used only for facilitating business decisions. One company provides templates for employees to use and adapt for electronic communication and provides an accompanying communication style manual. Where employees are required to create a generic written proposal, it is expected that employees are able to gather and curate data and present this in a reader- friendly format that is attractive and clear to a potential client; however, each company surveyed had a very specific method and layout for creating a proposal. Bullet points or numbering in emails is commonly used to explain content rather than paragraphs, but again there are important variations across companies.

In general, new graduate employees are not expected to have extensive work experience (though this is highly valued). However, they should be able to demonstrate transferable skills: they should be able to take examples of projects/ assignments and communicate how what they have learnt can apply to a work context, and demonstrate a willingness to develop.

On-going communication training carried out by employers

Smaller firms in particular rely on the interview process to gauge English language competence, or may use a probation period to evaluate skills and competencies. In contrast, larger companies may take further steps to ascertain linguistic proficiency. For example, an airport services company requires new employees to take proficiency tests and they are then enrolled in courses appropriate to their job role. A second company, also connected to airlines, sends recruits to an assessment centre for testing in verbal reasoning, presentation skills and verbal communication.

Workplace Communication Challenges

Employer expectations (emailing and CV's)

In terms of pre-employment, perhaps the most significant finding for the Polytechnic is the view that Polytechnic graduates are competing for employment not so much with other graduates from local tertiary education institutions, but with young Bahrainis returning from tertiary education abroad. This viewpoint was offered by a recruiting company and found support amongst industry participants sitting in the same focus group. As one participant stated:

With the industry that we are in, Bahraini students are competing against peers that studies [sic] abroad for higher education. (Communication company representative).

This finding is closely related to a second expectation; that all job applicants should demonstrate a strong 'personal brand' in order to land an interview. This self-branding needs to be evident through the whole recruitment process, from sending out appropriate emails and positioned-tailored CVs to prospective employers, through to interview contexts. Applicants are expected to project a profile of confident, articulate people, able to translate academic learning to job-related realities and to leave a memorable impression on the prospective employer through language proficiency, body language and attitude.

However, examining the simulation emails produced by students, it is clear that many applicants do not self-brand or tailor applications to specific targets. As a focus group participant noted:

This is similar to hundreds of introductory emails that we have received. There is nothing that particularly strikes interest. (Marketing company representative).

Another participant, from a social media marketing background, commented that in eight years of business, the company had only received one CV via email that it considered appropriate or ideal (though candidates had been interviewed despite this).

Many applicants just send their CV with a blank message. It seems many students in Bahrain are lacking in employability skills that should be used to get them a job. (Social-media marketing representative).

Post recruitment challenges

Once in employment, two further challenges to full engagement in the working culture of the organization were identified by potential employers. These centered specifically on English language communication abilities and are identified as firstly, language register and language proficiency, and secondly, workplace engagement and language proficiency.

Language register/ language proficiency

Participants identified a lack of understanding of language register, coupled with low levels of language proficiency, as key concerns for graduates. One focus group participant summarized the key issue as:

There seems to be a gap in fresh graduates' abilities to professionally communicate – to find out who they are talking to and approaching them in an appropriate way. (Social-media marketing representative).

This was particularly highlighted in emails, which were identified as the gateway to customers and frequently the first point of contact between the company and potential customers. Examining workplace simulation emails, one employer identified the following concerns:

[It is] too informal to be addressed to a manager. The tone could be mistaken as rude. (Employer response to simulation email).

Another stated:

It would be better to say 'regret any inconvenience' rather than 'sorry'. (Employer response to simulation email).

And a third:

With new employees, it seems the English they learn is limited when it comes to a business context. For example, a sentence will end with '!!!' or '???'', which employees do not realize makes the message seem aggressive. (Employer response to simulation email).

Email may often be seen as a fast and immediate form of communication, but it would be a mistake to consider it as an informal channel. Degrees of formality and informality of address remain critical in emails as they remain still in letters and other forms of business communication. Graduates clearly need to understand this.

Workplace engagement/ language proficiency

The second challenge centres on the expectation that employees can engage in the workplace through communicative ability. Firstly, employers require employees to demonstrate critical thinking/problem solving and workplace engagement *linguistically*. Not only do employers want employees who can engage with a problem, analyse it fully, understand the context, and move from general idea to specific response so as to arrive at an appropriate and meaningful conclusion but they want employees that can articulate these critical and analytical processes to others in English and in written or oral form. Assessing the completed simulated tasks, employers highlighted that

There is a gap with being able to articulate ideas in a business context and clearly categorizing their thoughts into a structured paragraph with clear points. (Employer response to simulation).

The answer is missing the link. The student has a good response, but there is nothing to build a relationship upon. It is missing the consultancy factor. There should be more question asking rather than just providing information. (Employer response to simulation).

The biggest problem [...] is procedure. They [the students] need to be sure to consider what is causing the misunderstanding and to address the actual problem rather than solve the issue for the customer. (Employer response to simulation).

Secondly, employers also link workplace engagement with English language proficiency when stating that successful employees are able to use functional English to ask for assistance or clarification from a colleague, and when necessary, to formulate apologies or offer explanations and justifications. This functionality is also seen as important when working within teams as it allows employees to adapt to the

organizational culture and become active and accepted members of the organization. One focus group member claimed:

Students who are not assimilating to the work culture are generally those that are not completely comfortable communicating in English. They do not actively participate in brain-storming, they are not proactive to solve work issues. For instance, a task will be given and they will not follow up to their managers for feedback. (Communication company representative).

Another stated:

Students need to be proactive and read and learn as much as they can. There is a noticeable difference in students that are informed and seek out information. (Communication company representative).

Discussion

Summary

Bahrain Polytechnic's mission is to produce 'professional and enterprising graduates with the 21st Century skills necessary for the needs of the community locally, regionally and internationally' (Bahrain Polytechnic, 2013). This aligns with contemporary views that employability should consist not only of individual achievements, attributes and understandings but of benefit to the workforce, the community and the economy (Confederation of British Industry/ National Union of Students, 2011).

Though soft skills are not a substitute for specific subject knowledge or technical skills, they can "make a difference between being good at a subject and being good at a job" (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009, Foreword) and create productive and harmonious relationships. Soft skills, in conjunction with the development of strong language skills, viewed as critical for the young people of the MENA region (Education First, 2014), allow graduates to market themselves to employers, to fit harmoniously into the culture of an organisation and develop within a particular job (Lowden et al., 2011) locally and globally.

This research demonstrates that the opinions of Bahrain employers mirror the international literature review above. Significantly, these findings also overlap with the large-scale recent research into industry and employer graduate skills carried out in Bahrain by the Higher Education Council (Higher Education Council, 2015). These findings are neatly summed up by The Council's General Secretary, who clearly states that

employers no longer pay for what graduates know but for what they can do with their knowledge. (Higher Education Council, 2015, p. 9)

and further observes that the lack of soft skills in graduates is problematic.

Taken together, these findings point towards Bahraini employers remaining part of the global economic community and sharing common problems. By extension it suggests that graduates of the Polytechnic should not just be employable in the local market but internationally. This is brought into sharp focus when considering that 28 percent of Bahrain's population is aged between 19 and 29 (Roudi, 2011) and that consequently, the need to compete for jobs is intense, and the need to compete against Bahrainis who have studied abroad and gained cross-cultural sociolinguistic competence only heightens that intensity.

Beyond general employability skills, this research confirms for the Bahrain context what has been noted elsewhere: that a 'one size fits all' pedagogical delivery of employability concepts is unavailable (Pegg,

Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012). Different employers require different skills, or more accurately, similar skills but in varying degrees and combinations.

More significantly, findings reveal that in general, larger companies with international clients require greater levels of English language proficiency and sociolinguistic competence (broadly, the ability to adapt communication to the context and relevant social or cultural conventions), whereas companies with a more national outlook are more likely to operate in both English and Arabic. Smaller companies, especially working in services (such as recruitment, media or consultancy) are more likely to operate in English-only environments and require employees to fully adapt to this workplace culture.

Impact on the curriculum

Where do these findings leave the language curriculum designer? Traditionally, English for Specific Purposes curricula at Bahrain Polytechnic have focused on delivering courses that support students' understandings of the content they encounter in degree specialisms. For example, *English for Engineering* may help students to understand an engineering text by facilitating the learning of relevant vocabulary, or relevant writing genres, coupled with a skills-centred approach that uncovers the common reasoning and interpreting processes that underlie all language regardless of the surface discourse (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

However, the findings of this research suggest that strong subject knowledge is not enough. Language tutors have to play a more substantial role in preparing graduates linguistically for the pre- and in-employment stages of their careers. However, their role should not work in isolation; the responsibility for developing curricula that meet all the needs of employers is an institutional one. As already noted, Bahrain Polytechnic students have internships and workplace projects that introduce them to the real world work environment. There is also a robust link to employers who have representation on the Curriculum Advisory Committees. Further, the Polytechnic operates a Career and Employment Centre offering non-mandatory individual programmes to support and develop pre-employment skills and employment opportunities (for example, CV and workplace learning preparation) and there is a Writing Centre and Language Centre to support students and staff in developing competencies and skills.

These existing activities can be further enhanced through language experts developing not just the pragmatic competence necessary for graduates to join a linguistic and cultural community but also two further sociolinguistic areas. The first of these would examine how graduates can use language to brand themselves (British Council, 2013) and successfully win employment. The second would examine the sociolinguistic competence that reflects social relations, politeness conventions, and varieties of language in different contexts (The Common European Framework, 2012).

The task of the curriculum designer is to blend these two together by focussing less on the goal of English communication as a native-speaker norm (with a focus on accuracy, for example) and instead focus more on English as a lingua franca for communication in the global, multi-cultural context, to develop in students a communicative literacy (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Bilbow, 2006; The Common European Framework, 2012; Confederation of British Industry/ National Union of Students, 2011). This is the next challenge for the Polytechnic and the School of Languages, and work is well underway to re-focus the current curriculum towards meeting the institutional ethos embedded in Problem Based Learning and the development of academic and employability related communication skills.

Conclusions

Failure to engage with internal and external stakeholders appropriately and competently is a risk for any organization operating in multi-cultural or multi-national contexts and underscores the requirements for pragmatic and sociolinguistic communicative training of students.

This research has presented two key findings. Firstly, the needs of Bahraini employers match those of the international community in the 21st Century: those seeking employment must have not only the subject knowledge required, but also the communication skills and cognitive strategies necessary to operate harmoniously and productively within the organization. Secondly, the research has described something that is less well reported in the literature: the notion that even before gaining employment, job-seekers have to brand themselves to stand out from the pack and appear as confident, well-informed individuals able to communicate to their worth to potential employers.

Both findings support the mission of Bahrain Polytechnic to develop work-ready graduates. However, the findings also place a spotlight on the role of English provision in ensuring that students are not only competent to deal with degree-level content, but also able to promote themselves linguistically and sociolinguistically to gain and hold employment.

The implication of these findings is that contemporary provision of English language services within Higher Education Institutions in Bahrain cannot ignore the demands from employers for graduates that have not only technical knowledge related to their degree fields but the sociolinguistic capacity to deal with colleagues and clients to further organisational aims.

Though meeting these needs is an institutional responsibility, English curricula designers are well placed to develop the necessary understandings and proficiencies required and the findings of this research will allow them to target core skills which may traditionally have lain outside the language education perspective of Higher Education. Responding successfully to this challenge will reinforce Bahrain Polytechnic's graduates' ability to brand themselves – and by extension, brand the Polytechnic as well – with the skills and attributes required by potential employers. Though this research has focused on Bahrain, it is felt that similar research across the Gulf would provide valuable data for curriculum designers and institutions with a mission to produce work-ready graduates.

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Appendix

Scenario 3

Task: You work in the office of the CEO of your organization and they have asked you to draft a company-wide memo. The company has recently changed its working hours from 7.30am-2pm to 8.00am to 3pm in order to accommodate clients better and this will be taking effect from next Sunday [the working week runs Sunday to Thursday in Bahrain]. What would you do?

Sample respondent solution:

Methodology:

This depends on the nature of organization and what means of communication they have. Based on my organization, the company is very large and there are many job positions. The company uses various means of communications including notice boards, emails, SMS, meetings, and phone calls. Logically, I cannot set up a meeting for the whole organization, nor call each individual to let them know about this change. Instead, I will use all other three methods: SMS, email, and notice boards. I will also make sure to send the SMS more than once to the whole organization (probably 4 times over a course of 1 week), just to remind them. I will also send a message on the Thursday before the Sunday the working hours is due to change.

Sample respondent drafted message:

Email:

Dear Employee,

The working hours of (company name) will change from 7:30 AM – 2 PM to 8:00 AM – 3 PM, and this is to better accommodate our clients, effective next Sunday (with date here). All notice boards will have a memo to help remind you of this change, and we will be sending regular SMS messages this week with this information. Have a lovely week!

[Writer's name]

SMS:

Working hours will change to 8 AM - 3 PM starting Sunday 24th November, 2013. Thank you.

Notice Boards:

Starting from Sunday 24th of November, [company name] working hours will be from 8 AM to 3 PM. Have a nice day :-) !

(This will be formatted nicely and in big letters to catch attention)

Employer Focus Group Response

| The response for this task was: | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|---|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | Total |
| Appropriate medium for the message that needs to be delivered (e.g. letter, memo, email, text etc.) | 1 | 3 | x | 4 | 1 | x | x | x | x | 9 |
| Appropriate format (layout) | 2 | 3 | x | 3 | 1 | x | x | x | x | 9 |
| Achievement of task (i.e. all information contained) | 0 | 3 | x | 4 | 1 | x | x | x | x | 8 |
| Appropriate tone (i.e. degree of formality, politeness, directness) | 1 | 3 | x | 2 | 1 | x | x | x | x | 7 |
| Accuracy (grammar, vocabulary) | 1 | 3 | x | 4 | 1 | x | x | x | x | 9 |
| I would accept this in my organization: | Yes | 2 | No | 2 | | | | | | 42 |

Additional Comments

- Communication of this needs more attention and should be written more carefully. It is a very casual memo to come from the CEO's office.
- Reasons for the changes are not explained.
- The format should be more formal and provide the rationale first before the message.
- This answer does not consider that the employees are technically working more.